

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: March 21, 2010  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“BY OUR HANDS? FOR OUR SAKE! PILATE”**  
**Matthew 27:11-14, 24-26**

☠ The thing about Pilate is, he knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he did it anyway. He intentionally condemned an innocent man to death.

👁 In his defense, he did not see the bigger picture. He did not recognize that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. Yet Pilate saw right through the false charges against him.

- The priests and elders accused Yeshua bar-Abbas (Jesus) of {Lk 23:2} **“subverting”** Israel, “[opposing] **payment of taxes to Caesar and [claiming] to be...a king”** – grave allegations, indeed: anyone judged guilty of such crimes would die a swift and painful death, no ifs, ands, buts, appeals, or delays. But Pilate **“knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him”** (Matthew 27:18).

- He met Jesus twice within a few hours. The first time he bluntly **“announced... ‘I find no basis for a charge against this man’”** (Luke 23:4). The second time he directly told the Lord’s accusers,

**“You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore,**

**I will punish him” (“I will have him flogged”)**  
**“and then release him”** (Luke 23:14-16).

- Next, when the mob called for Barabbas to be released and for Jesus to be killed, Pilate replied, **“What crime has he committed?”** (Matthew 27:23).

- In the end, Pilate **“took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this mans’ blood,’” he said...and handed him over to be crucified** (Matthew 27:24). He denied responsibility for his contribution to a blatant miscarriage of justice.

Pilate was convinced Jesus had committed no crime. Still, he sentenced him to execution on the most hateful instrument of torture yet devised.

It was by Pilate’s hand that Jesus died. He knew that what he was doing was wrong, but he did it anyway.

*Is my criticism of Pilate too harsh, or misguided?* This could be argued, on two grounds:

- For one thing, Pilate acted with God’s consent. He did what the sovereign LORD allowed.

- A few weeks before the governor took the stage Jesus himself said, {Jn 10:18} **“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”** Jesus is Master of his future.

- Then, at the moment of his arrest, He instructed Peter to put down his sword: {Mt 26:53} **“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?”**

No creature in heaven, on earth, or under the earth is capable of any action that the All-Knowing, Almighty King of the Universe has chosen to prevent. Pilate acted with God's consent.

○ For another, Pilate acted in fulfillment of prophecy, according to God's plan.

→ Jesus said, {Jn 10:18} **“No one takes [my life] from me...I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father.”** It is God's will that his Son gives up his life.

→ In Gethsemane Jesus asked Peter: {Mt 26:53} **“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?”** Then He added: **“But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”** (Matthew 26:54). This is probably a reference to Zechariah 13:7.

→ The crucifixion was not a failure, a defeat, a mistake, or “Plan B”. Jesus declared: **“[I] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give [my] life as a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:28). In sending Christ to the cross Pilate unwittingly fulfilled prophecy, thereby carrying out God's plan.

Don't both of these factors let Pilate off the hook? Don't they invalidate my criticism?

☺ By no means! God's consent in this case implies permission, not endorsement.

As for Pilate, he fulfilled prophecy despite himself. The divine plan never crossed his mind.

→ Scripture is packed with instances when our Sovereign LORD allowed sin, but in no way applauded it.

God even used wicked people to serve his righteous objectives, and consistently brought good out of their sin; yet, He never made them sin: {Jas 1:13} **“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”**

☑ Consider Joseph's biography in Genesis 37-50.

Joseph's older brothers hate him so intensely they plot his murder, but end up selling him into slavery instead. After many agonizing ordeals, Joseph is appointed the governor of Egypt, second in power and honor only to Pharaoh.

→ Years later, Joseph is reunited with his brothers. He says, {Ge 50:20} **“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”**

Did our God of love inspire their hatred? Did the Giver of Life plant the idea of murder in their hearts, or suggest they sell their brother into slavery?

Absolutely not! He who is perfectly holy took the ugly thoughts they had already imagined on their own, the twisted plots they had already concocted on their own, and the depraved deeds they had already done on their own, and orchestrated a good outcome.

☑ Or take Judas.

→ At the Last Supper Jesus foretold his betrayal, saying, {Mt 26:24} **“The Son of Man”** (He means himself) **“will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”**

There is never a hint that the traitor acted at God's direction. To the contrary, John 13:2 states that **“the devil ... prompted Judas to betray Jesus.”** Not only so, **“Satan”** actually **“entered Judas”** (Luke 22:3; John 13:27) before the betrayal. What is more, earlier in his ministry Jesus said, **“Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil! (He meant Judas)”** (John 6:70, 71).

Judas acted with the Lord's express consent. Even so, he is condemned for his transgression.

Likewise, the LORD allowed Pilate to sin. God even used the man's sinful choices to serve his righteous objectives. Still, that does not erase Pilate's guilt or relieve him of blame.

So why *did Pilate intentionally condemn an innocent man* to death, knowing it was wrong?

Scripture points to two reasons.

⊕ The 1<sup>st</sup> is fear.

- According to Matthew 27:24, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified after he sees that his effort to release him is **“getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar [is] starting.”**

- John 19:8 reports that at one point Pilate becomes **“even more afraid,”** a sign he has already been anxious.

Pilate has been the Governor of Judea since 26. His administration has already been defined by five incidents in which many Jews died because Pilate sent in troops to suppress their protests. All five incidents could have been avoided. They were provoked by Pilate's cultural insensitivity and heavy hand.

One more incident could mean the end of Pilate's career. That terrifies the governor.

☺ Reverent {Ps 19:9} **“fear of the LORD** {Pr 9:10} **“is the beginning of wisdom,”** {Pr 14:27} **“a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death.”** Reverent fear of God can inspire us to do good.

☹ In contrast, the {Pr 29:25} **“fear [of human beings] will prove to be a snare.”** Fear of others can intimidate us into doing what we know is wrong. Pilate sends Jesus to the cross because he is afraid.

⊕ The 2<sup>nd</sup> is loyalty to the kingdom of the world.

In John 18:37-38 Jesus says: **“The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”** **“What is truth?”** retorts Pilate.

He has no confidence that a person can discern truth or be **“on the side of truth.”** In all likelihood, he denies the existence of absolute, universal truth.

Nevertheless, the governor clings firmly to his particular convictions, such as:

- ✓ Power, status and money are the source of meaning and the measure of value;
- ✓ The strong survive, but the weak perish; and
- ✓ Truth comes {N.T. Wright} **“out of the sheath of a sword”** (“from the barrel of a gun”).

☑ To quote N.T. Wright, **“Pilate...can only see things from a this-worldly perspective....for a Roman governor,”** it boils down to **“my truth against your truth, my power against your weakness, my cross to hang your naked body on.”**

He has poured his life into the kingdom of the world. It is where he has stored up his treasure. It is where he has invested all his hopes and dreams.

The governor sends Jesus to the cross even though he knows Jesus is innocent because that is what the kingdom of the world demands.

Pilate has the chance to do the right thing, but he blows it because of his fear and loyalty to the kingdom of the world. He stands as a warning to us: for to the degree that you and I resemble Pilate, we will do the same thing.

It was by our hands that Jesus was crucified. And, it was for our sake. Thanks be to God!