JESUS BEFORE PILATE

Matthew 21:1–31

Key Verse: 21:11

“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied.”

Does injustice bother you? Sometimes the comforts and pleasures of life numb us to the pains and outrage of injustice. What do we do about injustice? In today’s passage Matthew portrays the trial of Jesus, probably the greatest injustice that ever occurred. The religious leaders, Judas, Pilate, the crowd and the soldiers all treat Jesus so badly. Yet he remains quiet. There are many kinds of kings or leaders, some good, some terrible. If we dig deeply enough, we find that all of them are flawed in some way. But Jesus our righteous King was completely innocent, yet he was traded for a known criminal, betrayed, mocked and sentenced to die. It happened so long ago, and there’s nothing we can do about it. But as we reflect on who he is, what kind of king he really is, God’s grace floods into our souls. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

The religious leaders had had their own all night trial of Jesus, struggling to find something wrong with him. When he didn’t deny he was the Messiah, God’s Son, they assumed it was blasphemy. Now, early in the morning, without any sleep, they made plans to have him executed. They bound him and led him off to Pilate the Roman governor (1,2). Under Roman rule the Jews were not allowed to execute anyone (Jn18:21). So they concocted a clever plan to get Pilate to do it. Jesus was God’s precious Son, the promised Messiah, the One God had sent to them. But they handed him over to a godless civil leader, because they refused to repent. Even this was a fulfillment of Jesus’ words (20:19a).

In verses 3–10 Matthew spends much time discussing what happened to Judas Iscariot. Judas had betrayed Jesus to the religious leaders for thirty silver coins (26:14,15). Matthew the former tax collector was especially interested in stories of betrayal for money, for that was how he himself had earned a living before meeting Jesus. To Matthew, Judas’ story was so tragic. In the heat of the moment he had chosen to turn Jesus in to the religious leaders. Maybe he thought Jesus would finally fight back and establish a political earthly kingdom. But Jesus didn’t fight back; instead, he allowed himself to be condemned to death. When Judas heard the news, he was seized with remorse. He knew he had betrayed innocent blood. When we do something wrong and guilt overcomes us, we can do many tragic things, too. Judas tried to undo what he had done by returning the money to the religious leaders. But they just passed the buck back to him. They didn’t care about helping him at all; they just used him. They didn’t even care that he killed himself. They were only thinking about that it wouldn’t be right to put that betrayal money into the temple treasury. So they decided to use it to buy a burial field for foreigners. They were trying to be holy, but how phony they were! To Matthew their evilness was so hard to bear. But then, as he has done before, Matthew found the answer in Scripture (cf. 2:16–18). He found that even in their evilness, God was fulfilling his own plan. When we encounter evil in this world, we can get so angry and discouraged. But we need to trust that God is sovereign and is using all things to work out his own good purpose (Ro8:28).

We learn several things from Judas’ story. First of all, instead of being filled with remorse, we need to learn how to repent. As Apostle Paul wrote, worldly sorrow leads to death, but godly sorrow leads us to turn to God and leaves us with no regrets because it helps us experience God’s grace (2Co7:10). Secondly, we should never betray Jesus or his people. When faced with persecution sometimes people betray one another, even close loved ones, in order to save themselves. It was happening in the early church, and it still happens today. It may seem like a smart thing to do at the time, but it never ends well. Instead of betraying each other, we need to be defending and protecting one another, and supporting and encouraging each other. Thirdly, we need to be helping people suffering from guilt to come to Jesus and receive his grace that gives us life.

Look at verse 11. It’s interesting that this is the question Pilate asked Jesus: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Why did he ask that? How could that be a crime? No doubt the religious leaders had told him that Jesus was trying to set himself up as king against the rule of the Roman emperor Caesar. Romans were sensitive about nationals in occupied territories rising up against them. How did Jesus answer? He said, “You have said so.” It was the same thing he had said to the high priest when he asked him if he was the Christ, the Son of God (26:64a). Jesus didn’t fail to admit his true identity: he really was the King of the Jews. But he didn’t claim that for himself; he let other people conclude who he was.

Throughout this Gospel Matthew has been emphasizing that Jesus is our King. But he’s not the kind of king many would expect. Many leaders hide themselves in their own private luxury. But our King Jesus is “God with us” (1:23), in all our struggles and even in our loneliness. Many leaders use their power to threaten or abuse people. But our King Jesus is our Shepherd (2:6). Many leaders try to establish their own kingdom. But our King Jesus works for God’s kingdom. And his kingdom is totally opposite of the kingdoms of this world. In the world, the self-confident, the superficially happy, those who seek earthly wealth and pleasure seem blessed. But in the kingdom of our King Jesus, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, are blessed. In the world, the cruel, the corrupt, those who cause divisions, who protect themselves at all costs, seem blessed. But in the kingdom of our King Jesus, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted because of righteousness, are blessed (5:3–10). Many leaders plot to gain power, and after grabbing it, they worry a lot about their legacy. But our King Jesus taught us to pray that God would be glorified, that his kingdom would come and his will be done. He taught us to pray to depend not on ourselves but on God for all our needs, material and spiritual (6:6–13).

Many leaders are merciless. But our King Jesus practiced God’s mercy by being with those who were spiritually sick (9:12,13). Many leaders are egocentric. But our King Jesus is so mindful and compassionate towards those who are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (9:36). Many leaders are proud and tough because of their power and wealth, and burdensome to be around. But our King Jesus is gentle and humble in heart, and when we come to him he gives us rest for our souls (11:29). Many leaders get angry, bark out orders, and despise and ignore the helpless. But our King Jesus is quiet, and he patiently nurtures back to life who are like bruised reeds or smoldering wicks (12:18–21). Many leaders try to make themselves look powerful and glorious so that people will respect and listen to them. But our King Jesus is full of heavenly glory, and he’s the one we should be listening to (17:2,5). Many leaders are self-important. But our King Jesus is never too busy or important to welcome little children and those simple enough to come to him for his blessing (19:14). Many leaders want to be served by others. But our King Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (20:28). Many leaders get so consumed with their own burdens that they ignore the agonies of others. But our King Jesus always hears a cry for mercy and reaches out to touch those who call to him (20:30,34). Many leaders are hard to approach. But our King Jesus comes to us gently and humbly and is so accessible (21:5). Many leaders don’t really have a good reason to be in their position. But our King Jesus comes in the name of the Lord (21:9). Many leaders struggle to fight against their enemies. But our King Jesus depends on God to exalt him and to defeat his enemies (22:44). Many leaders are spiritually blind to tell who is good from who is bad. But our King Jesus knows who are his sheep and who are the goats (25:31,32). Many leaders insist on their own will. But our King Jesus agonized in prayer to do God’s will instead of his own (26:39). In summary, of course a king like Jesus would never try to overthrow an earthly kingdom.

Matthew emphasizes discipleship training in his Gospel. But what is discipleship training? It’s not just getting people to commit to some program or be doing certain radical things. Real discipleship is to be learning of Jesus and becoming more like him inwardly. The only way for that to really happen in our lives is when we’re often thinking about who Jesus is and what he’s like.

Look at verses 12–14. Matthew again emphasizes Jesus’ silence while being accused. Even Pilate was greatly amazed by it. It takes real strength of character to remain silent when we’re falsely accused. Such silence is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

In verses 15–26 Matthew recounts the story of how the criminal Barabbas was released but Jesus was sentenced to be crucified. Verse 20 tells us that it was caused by the manipulation of the religious leaders behind the scenes. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. Even his wife warned him she had a dream about it. Pilate knew the religious leaders were jealous of Jesus. He thought his clever suggestion to release Jesus would please the crowd. But Pilate underestimated the religious leaders’ capacity to manipulate people. When the crowd kept shouting for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate tried to wash his hands of the matter and let them take the blame. And the crowd ironically exclaimed, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” To accept Jesus’ blood for our forgiveness is a good thing, but in this case it meant to be guilty of shedding his innocent blood. Who is guilty of shedding the blood of Jesus? Judas? Pilate? The religious leaders? The crowd? We are. In our sinful nature we all participated in his crucifixion. But if we repent, the guilt of shedding his innocent blood turns into God’s amazing grace in our lives.

In verses 27–31 Matthew ends the trial of Jesus by including his abuse by the Roman soldiers. It was the height of injustice to treat holy and innocent Jesus like this. They mocked his kingship with the scarlet robe, the crown of thorns, the staff, the kneeling before him and the fake praises, “Hail, King of the Jews!” The stripping, mocking, striking on the head and spitting were so cruel and the worst forms of insult. But Jesus went through all of it for us. As his followers, we need to be willing to bear with all kinds of shame, humiliation and insult, too.

We all live in a world full of problems and full of injustice. But praise God who sent Jesus to be our King. He was silent in the midst of all kinds of injustice because he was quietly obeying the will of the Father. May God help us draw close to our King Jesus and become more and more like him.