

The one thing that makes it palatable for me to see the end of summer... is that football season begins. ... I love to watch college football. And if you are like me... there is one thing we expect every time we tune into a game. It is that the football referees will all be unbiased... right? ... None of us want to watch a game where the game officials could be influenced by fans... coaches... or the players themselves... right? ... Ironically... if we are at the stadium... we might try to influence them with our jeers or cheers... But truthfully we want unbiased refs.

Well... you might be a little dismayed... then... by a recent study I read about... that suggests football refs are often swayed by their surroundings.

Michael Lopez... a researcher and statistician at Skidmore College in New York... led a study that referees are much more likely to make calls that favor the team... whose coaches and players are on the sideline closest to the potential penalty.

Lopez analyzed five years of NFL games... including 1,400 penalty calls where the action happened close to one team's sideline or the other. One of the files he examined was whether referees called a late hit on a player. If one player is tackling another... you're allowed to do it while the opposing player is within bounds... but not if he's out of bounds. ... But the bodies are usually flying into one another near a sideline. And it all happens so quickly and the refs have to make a sudden judgment call.

Lopez measured how often these kinds of judgment calls go in favor of the team whose coaches are on the sideline... closest to where the potential

penalty is taking place. ... He found referees are much more likely to make calls that comply with what people nearest to them are demanding.

In short... even NFL refs often cave into social pressure.

In a moment... we are going to study a caving-in to social pressure... which has had the most profound consequences... than any example of conformity in world history. ... I am thankful that Pilate bowed to the pressure of the people... resulting in his consent for Jesus to be crucified... and you should be too. The crucifixion of Christ was the perfect fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and Jesus' Own predictions. Jesus HAD to DIE... at the hands of Gentiles (meaning Romans)... and by crucifixion.

The Jews did not execute by crucifixion. Roman Gentiles did. The Jews method for administering the death penalty... was by stoning a criminal to death. These are two different methods. When David wrote Psalm 22... crucifixion had not been invented yet... and no one had ever heard of Rome... or Roman methods. Yet... here is what King David wrote about Jesus' death... long before the existence of this cruel method of death:

**Psalm 22:14-16 (ESV)**

*I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—*

A few weeks before all this happened... Jesus Himself told of His death at the hands of Gentiles by crucifixion. ... Pilate's caving-in to social pressure was perfect fulfillment of prophecy...

**Matthew 20:17-19 (ESV)**

*And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."*

As we look at Pilate's decision to ignore his conviction... and to conform to the people's wishes... let me warn you ahead of time... that there will be a challenge for all of us. You see... even as Christians... we are all tempted to ignore our convictions... and cave-in to peer pressure. ... So we are going to talk about that... after we have examined the horrible circumstances... of this Roman governor's conformity.

This morning... as we read Matthew's account of the trial of Jesus by Pilate... we are impressed with the sovereignty of Jesus. ... There is no doubt about which of the two men... Jesus or Pilate... was sovereign; neither is there any doubt about who was really on trial. Pilate (and by extension – we) are on trial this morning. Will you make the right decision about Jesus... and will you stick by it under pressure...?

... ..

The strategy of the Jewish religious leaders became obvious when Jesus was presented to Pilate. ... You see... the religious rulers wanted to get rid of Jesus because of what they considered blasphemy. You remember that when the high priest put Him on oath and asked Him if He was the Christ... the Son of God... Jesus said that He was. ... And further... He said...  
*"From now on you will see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of*

*power, and coming in the clouds of heaven"* (Matt. 26:64). To the religious rulers - that was blasphemy... and they would have **stoned** Him on that charge... but Rome did not allow the Jews to carry out the death penalty. So they had to deliver Jesus to Pilate with a charge that would stick in a Roman court.

They did not tell Pilate that their charge against Jesus was blasphemy. The Sanhedrin told Pilate that Jesus was a threat to the Roman empire for three reasons (the most serious was that He claimed to be a king.) ... They said that Jesus was guilty of misleading the nation... forbidding the paying of taxes... and 3... claiming to be a king. We get clarity of this from Luke's presentation of this event.

**Luke 23:1-2 (ESV)**

*Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king."*

Treason against Rome was a crime that carried the death sentence. Pilate could not avoid this critical accusation on the part of the Sanhedrin. He would fail Caesar if Jesus was guilty of insurrection against Rome.

However... (Here's the interesting thing...) ... Up to this point... Jesus **never said** that He was the King of the Jews. The Sanhedrin had taken Jesus' claim to be the Son of God as a messianic claim. ... There is no doubt that the Jewish mind considered the Messiah to be its king. ... As a result... such logic led them to the conclusion that Jesus was saying that He was *the* King—the King of the Jews. (To them... it seems to be a

foregone conclusion... but I'm sure that they did not explain how they reached this conclusion to Pilate.)

Pilate was (himself) also embroiled in a political quandary. He was appointed to the precarious (unstable) position of prefect of Judea around A.D. 26... in the twelfth year of Tiberius. This was not an easy place to govern... because the Jews often had uprisings against Rome... and if they got out of hand... Rome would replace the prefect with another... causing him great shame. Pilate was the sixth Roman magistrate appointed by Caesar to govern this Jewish hotbed of rebellion. He despised the Jews.

Prior to this trial with Jesus... his arbitrary administration had already come very close to driving the Jews to insurrection on two or three occasions. On one occasion... the Jews were protesting the entry of the Roman garrison carrying the emblems of Caesar. To the Jews... these were a graven images... and they demanded the removal of these emblems from their Holy City. ... Pilate slaughtered many of the citizens who had not obeyed his edict to disperse and return to their homes. ... Now Caesar was watching closely to see if Pilate was able to govern well. Pilate was sort-of on probation. ... Therefore... Pilate directly questioned Jesus on this specific point of possible treason: "*Are you the king of the Jews?*"

### **Matthew 27:11**

Jesus gave a quick reply. Basically it was "yes... but with a qualification..." ... In the Gospel of John... we see what the qualification was. Jesus was not claiming a kingship that... in any way... would threaten Pilate... Caesar... or the Empire. ... What Pilate was thinking of

"kingship"... was in the **Roman** sense. ... Jesus is **not that** kind of a king. Jesus explained to the governor that His kingdom was not of this world... that He had no armies... that His followers did not fight. ... Rather... His kingdom was a reign of truth.

**John 18:34-37 (ESV)**

*Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."*

This conversation convinced Pilate that Jesus was not a dangerous revolutionary. "*I find no fault in Him*"... was Pilate's decision. But the Jewish rulers were insistent that Pilate condemn Jesus. They repeated their charges and... as they enlarged on them... mentioned that Jesus was from Galilee. When Pilate heard **that**... he saw a way out of his dilemma... since Rome was watching him... and Galilee was under **Herod's** jurisdiction.

Matthew did not record what happened next - the trial held before **Herod Antipas** (We read about it in Luke 23:6-12). Herod was the one who had murdered John the Baptist... and had (earlier) **threatened** to kill Jesus (Luke 13:31-32). ... Jesus was silent before Herod... All the king could do was mock Jesus and send Him back to Pilate. ... If Pilate had hoped to get rid of his delicate problem... he was disappointed.

**Luke 23:6-12 (ESV)**

*When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.*

Pilate wanted to solve the problem... while not making any definite decision about Jesus. ... As a Roman governor... he was pledged to uphold the law. But Pilate was also a politician... and he knew he had to get along with the people. ... Every decision Pilate made forced him to make another decision... until he was the prisoner... and was on trial himself.... He questioned Jesus further... but Jesus made no reply.

**Matthew 27:12-14**

Jesus' response was *not* normal. If one were innocent of accusations against him, the accused would usually offer some evidence of his innocence or at least protest the accusations loudly. Especially in this case, one would expect some defense from the accused since a guilty verdict would bring death.

He is once again fulfilling Scripture... in that His silence symbolizes Isaiah 53's suffering servant: "*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.*"

John Calvin wrote... “*Christ kept silence [then] to be our spokesman now.*”

But the comment about this... that really caught MY attention... is what the Apostle Peter (later) wrote in one of his letters. Here is the comment that Peter made:

**1 Peter 2:23 (ESV)**

*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

I must confess that the temptation for me was strong to abandon our passage this morning in Matthew and just concentrate on this one. There is a lot of practical instruction for you and I here. ... So let me just say... that this provides the key... for how you and I are to remain steady... and not cave-in to society’s pressure against our Christian convictions. (Remember that THIS is where we are headed in our passage this morning.)...

When we are reviled... because of our beliefs... we ***must not*** revile in return! We don’t get to do that. Christ exemplifies what our behavior is to be. ... We sometimes are rebuffed and reviled for our Christian convictions as a means to get us to cave-in... aren’t we...? But we cannot shout insults in return.

Please notice... I am not talking about situations where there is a threat of personal injury to you... and saying that you cannot defend yourself. As I pointed out two weeks ago... Jesus told His Own disciples that if any of them did not have a sword... to sell their cloak and go buy one (Luke 22:36.) They were to defend themselves... and I believe (within reason)... we are too.



Peter points to how Christ was able to be so reviled... without reviling in return. He says... Jesus entrusted Himself to almighty God the Father... Who will decide this matter entirely. ... Sometimes... you and I need to back off. We don't need to win every argument – even if our precious reputation is being trashed to others. (*He did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*)

Jesus stood before Pilate and said nothing. The governor was amazed by this response. Most men in this situation would be begging for their lives. Most men would be loudly proclaiming their innocence. Pilate could not believe that Jesus would say nothing to avoid the death penalty. If Jesus did not answer... Pilate would have to judge Him guilty.

But there was no *need* of His replying. He was innocent... and they offered no proof of guilt. Besides... His *appearance* was full evidence in His favor. He was poor... unarmed... without powerful friends... and alone. ... His life had been public... and His sentiments were well known – He loved people. (Pilate... who kept the pulse of of current affairs through many informants... would no doubt have know about Jesus.) ... So the charge had (on the face of it) the aspect of absurdity. It deserved... therefore... no answer. Jesus had (at one point) already explained to Pilate that His kingship was not a threat.

Pilate had to choose between two alternatives: (1) He could do the right thing and release this obviously innocent man, this King who posed no threat to the caesar of Rome. If Pilate released Jesus, he would run the risk of another uprising in Jerusalem and the dangerous possibility that the

caesar would learn of his releasing a man who claimed to be King. (2)  
Pilate could do the wrong thing and condemn Jesus to death.

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent... but Pilate was too big a coward to release Jesus... in the face of the determination of the Sanhedrin to have Him crucified. ... Then he remembered that it was a local custom for the governor to release a prisoner to the Jews at Passover time. Normally the people could choose whomever they wanted... but he had a brilliant idea: this year he would limit the choice. It so happened that he had "a notable prisoner" on hand, a man named Barabbas. Why not force the people to choose between Barabbas and Jesus?

### **Matthew 27:15-19**

The Romans were much given to premonitions... prognostications of soothsayers... dreams... and portents. According to Suetonius, both Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus were superstitious. Pilate must have been greatly troubled by the message from his wife... which must have made him want to release Jesus... but that would still leave him with a problem.

Pilate wanted to please the religious leaders in order to maintain peace in Jerusalem... but he knew Jesus was innocent... and there was this ominous premonition (that he could not easily dismiss.)

So he hit upon a solution to the problem. Since it was his habit to release a Jewish prisoner during the Passover celebration, he would offer the crowd a choice: Jesus; or a very notorious prisoner called Barabbas, who was guilty of murder, robbery, treason -- the whole bit.

Pilate thought that the crowd would certainly ask that Jesus be released -- the contrast between Him and Barabbas was so evident. Verse 16 says that Barabbas was "notorious." This means people knew about him. Barabbas was a rebel... a robber... and rabble-rouser. They knew what a despicable character he was. ... Jesus... on the other hand... had healed their sick... cleansed their lepers... exorcised their demoniacs... fed their multitudes... and raised their dead. Just days before... the people were shouting "hosannas" to Jesus when He rode into town. Jesus was a sensation... He was very popular to the people... Why wouldn't they select Jesus over a notorious criminal...?

Pilate's strategy was to foil the stodgy religious leaders (who he did not like)... and please the masses... letting himself off the hook with Rome -- all at the same time. Surely the people would choose Jesus...

Pilate was a very clever politician. He did not get to be the governor of Judea by accident. He knew EXACTLY what the religious leaders were up to... (they were acting out of jealousy and fear)... and Pilate thought that he had out-smarted them.

But... not-so-fast... Mr. Politician! (You see)... The religious leaders were equally as shrewd...

### **Matthew 27:20-23**

You see, the religious rulers were clever politicians themselves. They circulated among the crowd saying, "*Ask that Barabbas be delivered and Jesus be destroyed.*"

I have asked myself... *“How in the world would the religious leaders be able to persuade the crowd to reverse themselves from shouting ‘Hosanna’ and proclaiming Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah... (less than a week before)... to shouting ‘Crucify Jesus and release the horrible criminal (Barabbas.)”* That would take some genius persuasion strategy to flip them from one extreme to another. How would it have been possible? ... What words did they use? ... What arguments did they offer?

We don't know for sure. But stop and consider what the hopes of the common Israelite was – freedom from Gentile oppression! ... Perhaps they said, *"Men and brethren, what Israel needs is not a meek Messiah like this Jesus of Nazareth (who will not even defend Himself... and therefor intends to die)... No what Israel needs is a fighter who is willing to overthrow our oppressors. Barabbas was doing just that when he was arrested. He was trying to lead an insurrection... We need one who will teach us how to fight... **not** how to forgive. Barabbas is the man for us! Barabbas is our kind of king. Barabbas is a hero... a man's man. He's not afraid of Romans. Hail Barabbas!"* The priests urged the crowd on until they took up the chant, "Barabbas! We want Barabbas!" Such was the tremendous clamor.

Luke informs us that Pilate put this question to them *three times...* so anxious was he to release him. He affirmed that he had found no cause of death in him. ... Pilate was of strong conviction... that Jesus was innocent. But Luke goes on to say they were instant with loud voices demanding Jesus be crucified. They *urged* it. They demanded it with a popular clamor. ... And the weak-willed... insecure... cowardly governor... was ruled by the

people's court... so he caved-in. ... Pilate took the easy way – not the right way.

### **Matthew 27:24-26**

The wrong freedom-fighter was released... the wrong freedom-fighter scourged... the wrong freedom-fighter crucified... but God used all these wrongs to make *everything* right. “He who did nothing wrong was condemned for everything... so that we who have done everything wrong... would be condemned... for nothing.”

Call it the great exchange. ... Call it the joyous exchange. ... Call it whatever you like... so long as you recognize it as the greatest good news the world has ever known. (This was “a far, far better exchange” to do than anyone has ever done... because *that* substitution was necessary for yours and my sins to be forgiven.)

*Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent... but he did not stop the miscarriage of justice.* ... The handwashing was meant to show that Pilate did not consent to the crowd's wish... but the shot was his to call... not the peoples'.

If he did not consent... neither should he permit. Pilate comes across as a cowardly ruler who abdicated his responsibility. His only concern was with how all this impacted him. He lacked sufficient fortitude even to take his wife's advice and leave Jesus alone.

Part of the crowd's insistence was that they and their children would bear the responsibility of this decision. Verse 25 – “*His blood be on us and our children!*”

In less than forty years... their city and temple were overthrown and destroyed. More than a ***million*** people perished in the siege. Thousands died by famine... thousands by disease... thousands by the sword... and their blood ran down the streets like water... so that... Josephus (the historian) says... "*it extinguished things that were burning in the city.*"

Thousands were *crucified* — suffering the same punishment that they had inflicted on the Messiah. So great was the number of those who were crucified... that... Josephus says... they had to cease from it, "*room being wanting for the crosses...*"

To this day... also... this self-pronounced curse (in verse 25)... has remained. The Jews have been a nation scattered and peeled... persecuted almost everywhere. ... No single nation has suffered so much... and yet they have been miraculously preserved by God for the end times (when they will repent.)

... ..

But let me return to something I have been saying throughout... in order to drive home a point for us all to consider. *Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent... but he did not stop the miscarriage of justice.* He caved-in to social pressure. He acted as a coward!

Now let me be brutally honest.

The spirit of Pilate... often rises up in Christ's church today...

This year marks my 15<sup>th</sup> year as pastor of this church... and I am glad to say that we are a refreshing difference than other experiences I've had where the spirit of Pilate *did* exist. We are not immune to it... because we

are still sinful human beings... so I still want to talk about how it sometimes raises it's ugly head in churches today.

Churches are often faced with difficult decisions... where the Bible shows the proper way to handle it... but a strong personality in the church pushes for a different way. Soon a group of people surround that personality... and favor his or her solution - over what the Bible teaches. Personality (not the Word of God) makes the decision. There is a caving-in to social pressure... and a miscarriage of justice sometimes occurs.

Tom (not his real name) was a strong leader for 30 years in a previous church where I served... Tom would have dreams and follow his interpretation of those dreams – even if it went completely against Scripture. For example... it guided his unbiblical view about abortion... and how God leads His church. ... But Tom had a significant following of people... who... otherwise... affirmed a conviction that the **Word of God** is our authority for all matters faith... life... and ministry.

The social pressure of that church... was to decide all matters on the basis of Tom's desire. Why...? I once heard: "*When I was out of work... Tom and his wife fixed us dinner every night and helped us with a few bills.*" And I also heard: "*When my wife and I had marital struggles, Tom spent hours listening to us and giving us counsel.*" Tom would help settle newcomers... introducing them to important people of the community and making them feel special.

Tom was consistently helping people – which is not a bad thing. He showed them a loving concern... but people were **so** appreciative... that

they were willing to cave-in on their conviction of what is right... when it wasn't what Tom wanted.

(LISTEN) Let's not allow the spirit of Pilate to exist here. Let's be a people of conviction... following the Word of God... and not caving-in to ANY kind of social pressure!



