

Message #57

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John

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JESUS AND THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

JOHN 18:28-38

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The search for justice has been a big issue in the news in recent days. A couple of weeks ago the FBI revealed a college admission scandal involving an admissions counselor who orchestrated a scheme between 2011 and 2018 in which parents paid a total of \$25 million to get their kids into desired colleges. Coaches were bribed to take students into their programs. Test takers were paid to take SAT tests for students. Allegedly 750 families were involved. Parents may have been pursuing what they regarded as justice for their kids. But there has been almost universal outrage from the public about what is regarded as injustice.

This week Cook County prosecutors dropped the felony fraud charges against actor Jussie Smollet for his faking of a hate crime. He forfeited his \$10,000 bail and agreed to perform community service. He claims that justice has now been done and that his claims to innocence have been vindicated. The Chicago mayor and police chief have expressed outrage that injustice has been done. They point to the grand jury indictment and convincing testimony from two Nigerian brothers that they were paid to stage this hate crime. Police officers and many in the general public are still looking for justice in this case.

What garnered even more attention this week on the national stage was the release of the Mueller Report. President Trump and people on the political right claim complete vindication for the false charges about collusion with the Russians by the Trump campaign. Many of them are seeking justice by demanding charges against those who instigated the investigation in the first place. People on the political left are demanding details of the Mueller report and expressing concern about the undetermined charges of obstruction of justice. Most of the Democrats suspect that President Trump has committed other violations of the law and still needs to be brought to justice.

We humans have been created with an inner sense of justice. We have been given consciences that cause us to weigh right and wrong. But our sense of justice is clouded by our own experiences and our

own inclination toward self-centeredness. Our experience also teaches us over time that life itself is not fair. We seldom see complete justice accomplished in this life.

The search for justice is a key issue in the passage before us this morning. It provides us with an important lesson from Jesus about what our perspective should be in regard to justice, especially given the unjust world in which we live.

We have fortuitously reached the point in our study of John's Gospel in this Lenten season where Jesus is being brought toward the cross. Last week in #18 we saw that Jesus was brought before the high priest Annas. I pointed out that there were both religious and civil parts of the examination that Jesus faced. Each of those two parts had three phases. In regard to the religious trial, the Apostle John describes only the hearing before Annas. John hints at the other phases. But it is the other three Gospels that give us information about a hearing before Caiaphas, the current high priest and son-in-law of Annas, and a hearing before the full Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism. In #18 John skips over these latter two hearings and now moves the story to the initial hearing before Pontius Pilate.

I.

In vv. 28-32 of #18, which are found on p. 904 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that THE JEWS IN THEIR PURSUIT OF JUSTICE WANT JESUS DEAD. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE JEWS IN THEIR...) We have already seen in our study of John's Gospel that the religious leaders have wanted Jesus dead for some time. On two occasions Jesus has kicked merchants out of the temple. The temple was controlled by the high priests. Jesus called the business that they allowed there, and profited from, "a den of thieves."

Jesus also kept healing people on the Sabbath, which was a violation of the rules that the rabbis had established. Most of them belonged to the religious party called Pharisees. The high priests were part of the religious party called the Sadducees. Jesus did not fit the picture that either group had of the prophesied Messiah. Not only was Jesus claiming to be the Messiah, but even God Himself. This was blasphemy in the eyes of both groups. On a couple of occasions the Pharisees had tried to stone Jesus. Jesus kept getting away. But now they had Him under arrest.

After Annas, the former high priest, questioned him, Caiaphas did. Then, during the same night, and in violation of their own laws of procedure, the Sanhedrin questioned Jesus. Mark's Gospel (MARK 14:61) describes the outcome: "... **Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the**

Blessed?’ (MARK 14:62) And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ (MARK 14:63) And the high priest tore his garments and said, ‘What further witnesses do we need? (MARK 14:64) You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death.”

The religious leaders have determined that Jesus is a fraud, a blasphemer, and a false teacher. In their eyes, justice requires the death penalty. Such was the punishment which the Old Testament established for blasphemy. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Roman rulers allowed people in subjugated provinces to operate their own local governments, including their justice systems. Rome, however, reserved the right to administer capital punishment. The Roman government had to approve this punishment. Pontius Pilate was governor of the province of Judea. So these Jewish leaders had to get permission from him.

Verse 28 of our text reads, **“Then they [the religious leaders] led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor’s headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor’s headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.”** The original text actually says that the leaders led Jesus “from Caiaphas” to the governor’s headquarters. After the hearing before Annas, Jesus was taken to a hearing before Caiaphas. But then he was made to appear before the Sanhedrin. Caiaphas was the head of the Sanhedrin. So the reference, I believe, is to the taking of Jesus from the meeting with the Sanhedrin, which Caiaphas chaired.

The place where this meeting now occurs is called, in the original text, the Praetorium. This is the place where the praetor, one of the names for the position that Pilate held, had his headquarters. There are two possibilities for this location. (FORTRESS ANTONIA) Some have suggested that it was at the Fortress Antonia, which was on the northwest corner of the temple compound. A Roman military unit was stationed here during the Jewish feasts.

In recent years, the majority thinking of the scholars (HEROD’S PALACE) is that his headquarters was in Herod’s palace. This was on the west side of the city. Herod the Great had originally lived here.

The Sanhedrin may have waited until dawn to make an official judgment about Jesus. Perhaps this was a way for them to get around their own rules that prohibited them from having a trial at night. Many

scholars think that at this time the Sanhedrin had its meetings in the temple compound. So Jesus was taken to the Praetorium, wherever that headquarters was located. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There was nothing in the Old Testament that said that Jews could not enter the home of a Gentile without being defiled. This was one of the rules that the Pharisees had made up. But the requirement was that entering a Gentile place meant that a certain procedure had to be followed involving washings in order to make one clean again. It was the Passover. There were a variety of religious activities going on. These religious leaders didn't want to go through these procedures. It might mean that they could not observe the Passover that evening.

So the Jewish sense of justice required that Pilate had to come out to them. This must have been a bit offensive to the Roman governor. He was treated by these people as unclean, yet he was the ruler of the province and should have commanded greater respect. There is also a certain irony at work in that the Jews are concerned about violations of ceremonial rules that they have made up while they are in the process of having their own Messiah killed.

According to v. 29, **“So Pilate went outside to them and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this man?’”** Pilate apparently went out onto a balcony, or perhaps into the courtyard to speak to the religious leaders. He must have already received some kind of report from his own people about the military unit's participation in the arrest of Jesus in the previous evening. He may well have given permission for the Roman cohort to assist in the apprehension of this Jesus. So he had to know something about the Jewish concern about Him. But Pilate wants to hear details from them.

Verse 30: **“They answered him, ‘If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you.’”** There seems to be a disrespectful tone in this response. I get the impression that the Jewish leaders are looking for a quick OK from Pilate to kill this guy. Since Pilate may have given the OK for the previous night's operation, they seem to be expecting that Pilate will cooperate with them now.

But we read in vv. 31 & 32, **“Pilate said to them, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’ The Jews said to him, ‘It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.’ This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”** The sense of justice for the religious leaders is that Jesus has committed blasphemy. Justice requires the death penalty. The Old Testament law said that the proper means was stoning. Perhaps these leaders were hoping that Pilate would give approval for that. But now that he was requiring his own examination, this meant that Roman law was taking over. Administration of the death penalty by the Romans meant crucifixion.

The Apostle John recognizes that this is a fulfillment of prophecy that Jesus had made. For in two places in his Gospel he has recorded statements Jesus made about the means of his coming death. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 3:14) In #3 v. 14 Jesus told Nicodemus, **“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...”** Then earlier in this Holy Week the disciples heard Jesus say a similar thing. (JOHN 12: 32) In #12 v. 32 Jesus says, **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”**

The details are not explained in John’s Gospel. But it is clear from the other Gospels that the Sanhedrin wants Jesus killed because of His supposed sin of blasphemy. Such a religious concern is not important to the Roman governor. The Jews have to come up with an offense that would cause Pilate to order Jesus to be killed. Thus the Gospel of Luke (LUKE 23:2) records this: **“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.’”** Telling people not to pay their taxes will always get you in trouble with the federal government. Jesus didn’t really say that. But He did admit that He was a king, and that would be a concern for a government that would tolerate no other king than Caesar.

So the Jews with their perverted sense of justice want Jesus dead. From their perspective, He is an imposter, a blasphemer, a false Messiah, and an all-around trouble maker. He is a threat to their religious leadership. The truth was that they were about to have their own Messiah killed. Jesus was God in the flesh. Thus they were pursuing the greatest injustice imaginable. For Jesus was the only truly innocent and sinless and just man who ever walked on the earth. We humans can get messed up in our sense of justice. We have the ability to rationalize our own selfish motives and self-righteousness.

II.

In vv. 33-35 we find that PILATE IN HIS PURSUIT OF JUSTICE WANTS THE JEWS PUT IN THEIR PLACE. (II. PILATE IN HIS PURSUIT OF...) Pontius Pilate years earlier had married into the royal family. He married the daughter of the Emperor Tiberius. In 26 AD he was appointed by his father-in-law to be governor of Judea. (JUDEA) The capital of the Roman province was Caesarea. He showed up in Jerusalem for most of the Jewish feasts.

Historians describe Pilate as being weak and vacillating. He hid his flaws through stubbornness and brutality. The Jewish writer (PHILO QUOTATION) Philo says that his rule was characterized by this: **“corruptibility, violence, robberies, ill treatment of the people, grievances, continuous executions without even the formality of a trial, endless and intolerant cruelties”**

There are three incidents that stand out in his leadership of Judea. When Pontius Pilate first came to Jerusalem, his troops brought banners that had little busts of Caesar on the top of their poles. Religious Jews took offense at graven images of any person, especially a Roman ruler who claimed to be a god. When Pilate returned to Caesarea at the end of the feast, thousands of Jews followed him. For five days they showed up at his palace in protest. Finally, he met with them in the amphitheater. That amphitheater, in its rebuilt form, still stands today. There he ordered the Jews to stop with their protests or they would all be killed. The crowd of thousands of Jews promptly laid down in the stadium, prepared to die for their cause. Pontius Pilate decided that he had to back down. He removed the busts of Caesar from the banners when he went to Jerusalem.

Later, Pilate decided that he needed to update the aqueduct that brought fresh water to Jerusalem from springs south of Bethlehem. He took the money for this project from the temple tax that was paid by the Jews in fulfillment of Old Testament law to provide for support of the temple. That also produced a protest that turned violent. Roman troops intervened and Jews were killed. This prompted a rebuke of Pilate by Tiberius.

In a third incident, Pilate had gold shields made and placed in his headquarters in Jerusalem. Inscribed on them was a dedication to Tiberius. Tiberius was regarded by the Romans as a god. So the Jews complained about this. Herod Antipas was in charge of Galilee to the north of Judea. He warned Pilate to back down, but he would not. With Jewish support, Herod sent a letter to Tiberius about the situation. Tiberius responded by sending a letter to Pilate which told him to take the shields away. Tiberius told Pilate to stop violating Jewish customs. So Pilate was walking on thin ice in his relationship with Rome. These incidents also produced an anger in him toward the Jewish leadership. His sense of justice prompted him to look for opportunities to put the Jews in their place. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 33 in our passage we read, **“So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’”** Pilate is not inclined to rubber stamp the desires of the Sanhedrin. He does not want to be manipulated by them. He smells a rat. He knows that the Jews dislike the Romans. They resent their Gentile rule. Why would they be upset about a guy who is supposedly acting against Rome?

So Pilate is trying to figure out what is going on. The primary charge which the Jews have lodged is that Jesus is claiming to be a king. That has political implications which Pilate must consider. In his first question, the “you” in Greek is emphatic. Pilate and Jesus may have been speaking in Greek. The literal rendering would be: “You are the King of the Jews?” We would have to have been there to know the

exact tone of his voice. He could be saying that he is not impressed by the appearance of Jesus. He does not look like a king. It could be that he heard a report about the arrest of Jesus in the previous evening where the disciples did not fight back and that Jesus even ordered his disciples not to fight. Jesus was not acting like a rebel. So in what sense could Jesus be a king of the Jews when the religious leaders are rejecting Him?

Verse 34: **“Jesus answered, ‘Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?’”** Jesus is asking Pilate about the nature of his interest. Are you simply repeating the charge of the religious leaders, or do you have genuine interest in knowing who I am? Perhaps the Apostle John sees irony in this unwitting testimony of the Roman governor. To have Jesus executed, he will at some point have to acknowledge Jesus’ claim to be the King of the Jews.

The story continues in v. 35: **“Pilate answered, ‘Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?’”** This situation does not make sense. Why do the religious leaders want me to order your execution when you claim to be their king? What is it that you have done to get them so upset at you? What Jesus has actually done is to fulfill Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah.

According to the other Gospels, Pontius Pilate is beginning to see that the Jewish leaders are jealous of the power and influence and popularity of Jesus. Pontius Pilate dislikes these religious leaders. He would like to put them in their place. He is inclined to let Jesus off the hook. Matthew’s Gospel tells us that his wife had a bad dream that night about this Jesus. She sent Pilate a message to not hurt him. His sense of justice is to have Jesus released. But his primary interest is his own position. The most important thing is to keep his benefactor, the Emperor Tiberius, happy. Justice, in the end, is about what is right for Pilate.

Our sense of justice is often clouded by self-interest. For some parents, the right thing is to spend money to get my kid into a prestigious college. For Jussie Smollett, the right thing is to do what is necessary to show how evil those Trump backers are. For people responding to the Mueller report, the right thing is to support my political position, to either bring President Trump down, or to have him vindicated.

For some of us, real justice is to see our team win the Stanley Cup or the World Series or the Super Bowl. In my complete objectivity, I can tell you that real justice is to have the Green Bay Packers win the Super Bowl. As justification, I can point to the fact that they are the only major professional team that is owned by the community in which they are based. In regard to more important matters, such as social

justice, our pursuit of justice is colored by our political views and personal experiences and self-interest. Hopefully for us who are Christians, our sense of justice has a basis in God and His word. For some of us, real justice would be to see my loved one healed of his or her health challenge. Some of us wonder where justice is because we have lost a loved one. Is there a standard of divine justice? Is there some way to align our sense of justice with God's justice? The next section in our passage about Jesus points us in the right direction.

III.

In vv. 36-38 we see that JESUS IN HIS PURSUIT OF JUSTICE WANTS PEOPLE DELIVERED FROM SIN. ((PROJECTOR ON--- JESUS IN HIS PURSUIT OF...)) The Apostle John writes in v. 36, **"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.'"** The Apostle John includes Jesus' references to the kingdom only here and in #3 v. 35.

The Old Testament spoke of a coming earthly kingdom. The promise given to the Hebrew people was that they would eventually have a prominent role on the world stage. Jesus came as the promised Messiah. But His own people rejected His kingship. The other Gospels record that earlier in His ministry, it was clear that the nation was not going to accept His Messiahship. So Jesus began to speak of an interim form of the kingdom, a mystery kingdom, a spiritual kingdom. In this kingdom Jesus would rule over those who accepted His Messiahship. Jesus also told these followers that He would return a second time. This time He will come in judgment, and He will set up an earthly kingdom.

Here Jesus tells Pontius Pilate that His kingdom is not a threat to the governor or to Rome. His kingdom has a heavenly origin. It has a spiritual character. It is not now a political kingdom with a physical territory. The fact that His disciples did not physically defend Jesus is proof that this kingdom does not pose a physical danger to Rome or to Pilate. The governor has perhaps received a report about how the previous evening's arrest went down.

Verse 37: **"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.'"** Pilate is trying to figure out this Jesus. He speaks of truth. He claims to have come to reveal truth. Pontius Pilate has read the Greek philosophers who spoke of the ideal state. Such philosophers were the ivory tower, academic types. They were not rebels who posed a threat to political rulers. Jesus seems to be more like them than like political rebels and terrorists.

Jesus is making extraordinary claims. He hints at preexistence. He claims to have come into the world to reveal absolute truth. Those looking for the answers to questions about the meaning of life, those in whom God is working, will respond. In effect, Jesus is witnessing to Pilate. He is offering him the truth. He is pointing him in the direction in which he must go if he is to be connected with the God who is really there. The embodiment of truth is actually standing in front of him. This supposed judge, this man on the bench, is really the one is standing in the dock.

We find his response in v. 38: **“Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’ After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, ‘I find no guilt in him...’”** Pilate rejects the opportunity. He remains a skeptic. He is the postmodern man. Truth? What is truth? Is there any such thing? He remains the pragmatist. He is skeptical of any religious and philosophical claims. They may be nice ideas, but how can anyone know?

Still, Pilate declares that he finds Jesus innocent. The author John treats him as another witness to the claims of the gospel about Jesus. He is the sinless Son of God.

Jesus and His Heavenly Father are actually in charge of this unfolding drama. The Jewish leaders want Jesus dead, but they want that death to happen by stoning. That is the end point of their pursuit of justice. They have already made several attempts. But they have been thwarted. Perhaps that was still their desire here. But as we have seen, Jesus has on two occasions in John’s Gospel declared that He must be lifted up. He must be crucified.

Pilate wants the Jews put in their place. That is his sense of justice. To do that, his intention is to free Him. But that cannot happen either. Jesus must die--- to fulfill prophecy, to accomplish His Father’s purpose, to deliver people from sin.

Sin is serious. It demands punishment. The holiness and justice of God require it. Real justice means that everyone should go to hell. For we are all sinners. Real justice demands punishment for our sin. Only the God-man can provide an offering that will satisfy the just demands of the God who is really there. That offering is His life. He must die in the place of sinful humans. Only this sacrifice will satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God.

(JOHN 1:29) In #1 of this book we encountered this incident: **“The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”** Jesus must die on this day to accomplish that. It must happen at Passover to fulfill the picture that is present in the Old Testament feast.

He also must die by crucifixion, not by stoning. This is necessary to fulfill the prophecy made by Jesus. It is necessary to fulfill the Messianic prophecy in Psalm 22. It is necessary to fulfill the picture described in Deuteronomy #21 vv. 22 & 23. (DEUTERONOMY 21:22) There Moses described the Law of God, saying, **“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, (DEUTERONOMY 21:23) his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”** In God’s eyes we have all committed crimes punishable by death. We are subject to the curse of God. But Jesus has taken our place. He has become a curse for us.

To benefit from that sacrifice, we must put our trust in this Jesus. We must accept this sacrifice that He has made for us. We must receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life that He offers us.

We humans have a certain bent toward justice. For we were created in the image of God. We who are Christians are responsible to seek and promote justice. God and His Word are the standards that we are to apply in that pursuit.

At the same time, we must always be aware that our sense of justice is fallible. For we are still infected with sin. We can be led astray by our own selfishness and our own self-righteousness. We may be tempted to think that we always want justice, but what we really need is grace. We may think that we want justice, but what we need is grace. That is the bottom line for us in Lent. That is the message of Good Friday and Easter. The grace that we really need is available in Jesus.