

“The King of Heaven Appears Before Pilate”

Sermon based on John 19:7-16

Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI

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Introduction: People These Days Lack a Sense of Responsibility

The Apostle John once wrote: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Amen.

People these days suffer from a lack of responsibility. That's true, isn't it?

I mean: that's obvious in the case of people we see in the news—being tried in the courtroom, or at least in the courtroom of public opinion. Very often those people will make excuses for the crimes they committed; they don't want to be answerable for their deeds.

But people's lack of responsibility nowadays is obvious in a whole host of other ways, too. You know people who spend lots of money, but they don't want to be responsible for earning it. You know people who get themselves to be parents, but they don't want to be responsible for the hard work of raising their children. You know people who have made life miserable for others, but they're unwilling to bear the blame for it.

In contrast, the more I've read the Bible the more I'm impressed by the genuine sense of responsibility that true leaders have for their people. Moses displayed that when he pleaded with God for the forgiveness of the Israelites. David displayed that when things went wrong on his military missions, and he took full responsibility for it. Paul displayed that when he interceded with God on behalf of his congregations. These were men who were not only willing to be answerable for their own deeds, they also answered for the deeds of others.

Well, God's Word to us this morning has one man evading his responsibilities—and another man making himself answerable for the deeds of very many people. Comparing these two will make us very thankful for the extraordinary kindness of the one man. But along the way, we'll also learn a little bit about our own responsibilities.

Part One: Christ Fulfilled His Own Law ... To Forgive Our Sinfulness

God's Word to us today is John chapter nineteen, verses seven through sixteen. This is the last part of Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. And it's printed on the first inside page of the bulletin, if you'd like to follow along....

Now, you recall how the trial has gone so far. The Jewish leaders bring Jesus to Pilate and simply insist, “We need to get this man executed.” Then, they trump up some charges against him—chiefly that Jesus is a rival king to the Roman Emperor. Pilate finds that's not true. He also hears that Jesus is from up north, so he sends Jesus to the ruler from up north: Herod—and Herod also finds Jesus is not guilty. Then Pilate tries to release Jesus instead of Barabbas. That doesn't work. Then Pilate tries to satisfy the Jews by beating up on Jesus. That doesn't work.

And that's where we pick up the story. Finally, we have the Jewish leaders leveling with Pilate. We read: **The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law Jesus must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."**

And that, finally, is the issue here. The Jews didn't bring it up earlier, because they knew Pilate really didn't care about religious affairs. But they were getting desperate, so now they laid it on the table. “Pilate, in our Old Testament – in Leviticus

twenty-four, sixteen – it says we should execute blasphemers. Jesus is blaspheming. He claims to be God in the flesh. We know he's not. We've got to get him killed."

Of course, you and I know it's the Jewish leaders who were in the wrong. Since Jesus is God: born of God the Father, accomplishing God-ly miracles, and embodying God's love for people—since Jesus is God, he's not blaspheming when he claims to be the Son of God.

And yet—and yet, have you ever thought of it? What the Jewish leaders says here is really, literally quite true.... *The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law Jesus must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."*

See: the Jews did have a *law*—a law given by God. And according to that law, it's true: somebody did have to die—because of sin. It had been true for four thousand years then, and it has been true for six thousand years now. When Adam and Eve sinned, God killed a sacrificial animal to clothe them. When Job thought his children might have sinned, Job killed sacrifices in substitution for their death. The Israelites had an entire system of sacrifices, given by God: sin offerings, guilt offerings, fellowship offerings, whole burnt offerings—the Israelites had an entire system of sacrifices that needed to be killed for the people's sin.

But they also had a promise. They had a promise that someday the Son of Eve and God would come. Someday the Son of David and God would come. Someday – Isaiah prophesied it – the Son of a virgin and the Son of God would come..., and he would sacrifice himself, once for all, bearing responsibility for the sins of all people.

It is exactly true, then: Jesus did have to die – he had to die for us! – because he claimed to be and indeed is God the Son himself.

Part Two: God Took Responsibility ... To Forgive Our Sinfulness

Well, I'm sure Pontius Pilate didn't understand all this. But we still read: **When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid.** You see, Pilate was a pagan, but he wasn't a stupid pagan; he did know that there were realities more powerful than himself. So: **He went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus.** Pilate was hoping Jesus would give the name of an earthly city. That way Pilate could breathe a sigh of relief. But Pilate was afraid Jesus would, in fact, claim to be God himself.

Nevertheless, we read: **Jesus gave him no answer**—indicating Jesus was from nowhere on earth, but also indicating Jesus was willing silently to go through the suffering and death which was awaiting him.

So: **"Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"** Pilate was speaking with mixed emotions. On the one hand: there was incredulity; he couldn't believe Jesus wouldn't answer him—for Jesus' own self-preservation. On the other hand: there was a certain arrogance on Pilate's part; he wanted Jesus to acknowledge that, after all, Pilate was bigger and badder than Jesus was.

But **Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."** For his heavenly Father's sake, for Pilate's own sake, and for your sake and my sake: Jesus was putting Pilate in his place. Essentially, Jesus was saying to Pilate, "Oh, little man, don't forget it's God who has given you your authority, and it is God to whom you'll be answerable for your verdict."

"*You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above,*" Jesus says. And then he adds: "*Therefore the one who handed me over to you*" – and who is that? finally: the one "from above"; God! God is responsible for this turn of events, isn't he? – **"Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."**

Whoa! Whoa! Hold it right there! Does that mean that God is guilty of sin? No! God is the sinless and holy one. Well, then, does that mean that Jesus is wrong here? No! Jesus' Word is truth, and he was never wrong.

So, what is this saying? Well, think of it.... When God handed Jesus over to Pontius Pilate for execution, God was willing to appear like he was doing a world of wrong ... for a world full of sinners—such was his love for you and me!

I mean: What could look more wrong? – what greater guilt could there be? – than knowingly handing over an innocent man for execution? Yet, God did exactly that ... because he loved you and me!

Furthermore: What could look even more wrong? – what even greater guilt could there be? – than a father knowingly handing over his innocent son for execution? Yet, God did exactly that ... because he loved you and me so much!

So, think of it: If you're a parent, you know you'd do anything to protect your children. I've said –only half jokingly! – “You'd have to kill me ten times over to harm even one hair on the body of any of my four precious children!” And all of you who are parents think the same. I know that. But look at this! God: who had a perfectly innocent Son, who had an absolutely perfect relationship with his Son—God still handed over his Son to suffering, to hell, to death: such was his great love for you and me.

This is inexpressible compassion! This is incomprehensible mercy! This is superlative grace! That's how much God loves you!!!

Part Three: Christ Substituted His Innocence ... To Forgive Our Sinfulness

So, here's a completely innocent man, whom three times Pontius Pilate exonerates. So, how does he end up executed? Well: **From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar."** There was, pretty literally, a group of the “Friends of Caesar”. Membership in Caesar's fan club brought many benefits. But if you quit the fan club, some really bad things could happen to you. That's what Pilate was facing.

And the Jewish leaders continue: **“Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”** There's a veiled threat there. The Jews are saying, “We have connections enough, Pilate. If you let Jesus go, we'll let Caesar know. We'll tell him, ‘There's this guy, Jesus. He's a rebel and claims to be a rival king. And get this, Caesar: Pontius Pilate is a friend of the guy. We turned the guy in; Pilate let him walk free. Caesar, your highness, we respectfully suggest you deal with Pilate.’”

So: **When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out.** And listen how solemnly and completely the final proceedings and the verdict are announced.... **And Pilate sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha)**—there in the fortress on the west side of Jerusalem. **It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week** – it was Friday, April Seventh, Thirty AD (or some other such specific calendar date) – **about the sixth hour**—six AM. Finally, the trial hadn't taken long at all: the Jewish leaders were insistent, and Pilate was anxious.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews—both to tweak them and hoping to evoke some sympathy from them.

But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

Still a bit incredulous, and already exhausted enough from arguing: **“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.**

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered: a rare bit of Roman patriotism from the Jewish leaders, but only because they were more jealous of Jesus, and they considered him a bigger threat—and it was God's plan for it to happen this way.

And: **Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.**

So, there you have it: a perfectly innocent man—executed. Had he committed a crime, had he shown himself a sinner, he would have died for his own transgressions. But Jesus was utterly innocent—innocent of crime and innocent of sin. So, when Jesus died, he died for the misdeeds of others. He died for our wickedness and sinfulness.

Brothers and sisters: it was my covetousness and your lies, my lust and your hatred, my rebellion and your lack of interest in God's Word that Christ was bearing on his shoulders here. Those crimes are no longer yours; they're his. And his innocent verdict is no longer his; it's yours. And you are free eternally!

Conclusion: Good Leaders Exhibit a Sense of Responsibility

So, my friends: when the King of Heaven appeared before the earthly governor, Christ fulfilled his own law ... to forgive our sinfulness; God took responsibility ... to forgive our sinfulness; Christ substituted his innocence ... to forgive our sinfulness.

And fellow laborers: it's love like this which will empower us to do good work on our jobs—and forgiveness like this which will enable us to fix our faults. Fellow parents: it's love like this which will empower us to raise our children right—and forgiveness like this which will cover our many shortfalls. Fellow Christians: it's love like this which will empower us to take responsibility for our fellow Christians and fellow people—and forgiveness like this which will elevate them to eternal glory—just as Christ will do for us! Amen.

The Apostle John once wrote: *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* Amen.