

Chapter 111: Rendering a Verdict

Matthew 27:11–26

There is a reason that we confess in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate," since Pilate alone made the final decision to crucify Jesus. Yet, in Matthew 27:11–26, we see how conflicted Pilate was about the decision, finding Jesus innocent at multiple points. While Pilate had a unique role to play in history, there is an analogy for the verdict that Pilate eventually had to render and the necessity for each person to come to personal faith in Jesus. Although separated from Pilate by millennia, geography, and our position, nevertheless, like Pilate, *every person must render a verdict about Jesus.*

Amazed by Jesus (Matt. 27:11–14)

Now that Jesus has been delivered to Pilate bound (Matt. 27:2), the Roman prefect begins his interrogation. The chief priests and the elders bring the accusations that they had developed during their own trial as the Sanhedrin (v. 12), but everything rests with Pilate. Pilate alone has the power to take Jesus' life, or to preserve it. Yet, as we will see, Pilate is unwilling to make the choice between Jesus' life and death. As Hendriksen observes, "from the start he wanted to avoid the necessity of making a definite decision regarding Jesus."¹ Pilate may have been the one under whom Jesus suffered, but this responsibility is clearly not something that he desired to have.

Jesus, then, stands before Pilate as Pilate questions him (v. 11a). Before we examine the question posed to Jesus here, it is important to take in the extraordinary nature of this scene. Calvin describes the shocking nature of this moment well:

Though it was a shocking exhibition, and highly incompatible with the majesty of the Son of God, to be dragged before the judgment-seat of a profane man, to be tried on the charge of a capital offense, as a malefactor in chains....So then, the Son of God *stood*, as a criminal, before a mortal man, and there permitted himself to be accused and condemned, that we may *stand* boldly before God....For if we recollect how dreadful is the judgment-seat of God, and that we could never have been acquitted there, unless Christ had been pronounced to be guilty on earth, we shall never be ashamed of glorying in his chains.²

This single verse symbolizes the gospel as a whole: Jesus stood condemned before the judgment seat of Pilate, so that we might be justified before the judgment seat of God. Indeed, it will be Jesus

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 949.

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:274–75.

himself who will one day “sit on his glorious throne” to judge all the nations” (Matt. 25:31–32).³ In this shocking, offensive, unjust scene, we have the power of God unto our salvation.

In this moment, Pilate poses what seems to be the most important question so far as his own investigation was concerned: “Are you the King of the Jews?” (v. 11b). To whatever degree Pilate did not wish to condemn Jesus, this question touched upon an issue that he could not overlook; namely, a claim to rival the throne of the Roman emperor.⁴ This charge seems to be the result of what happened when the Jews “took counsel against Jesus to put him to death” (Matt. 27:1). Of all the charges that the Jews brought against Jesus, they knew that Pilate would need something actionable in the court of Roman law. This charge, then, put Pilate in a “difficult position,” since the emperor would “show no mercy” if he “condoned treasonable activities” and also if he did anything “too harsh.”⁵ This point helps to explain why Pilate wanted nothing to do with this trial or this prisoner.

Jesus’ answers did not give Pilate much to work with. In response to Pilate’s question of whether Jesus is the King of the Jews, Jesus responded ambiguously: “You have said so” (vv. 11c). This is the third time that Jesus has responded in this way: first to Judas, regarding whether he would be the one to betray Jesus (Matt. 26:25), then to Caiaphas, as to whether Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 26:64).⁶ In Judas’s case, Jesus’ answer cut through Judas’s hypocrisy, but with enough ambiguity to permit Judas to believe that Jesus might possibly not be onto him. To Caiaphas, Jesus’ answer may have begun with an equivocating answer (“You have said so”), but then moved on to a sufficiently clear statement (“But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven”) to allow Caiaphas to rest his case. Now, Jesus’ answer seems designed to leave Pilate in his dilemma of deciding whether Jesus was truly guilty of any charge worthy of death.

While the chief priests and elders ramp up their accusations, Jesus rests his own case. He does not speak again until he cries out to his Father on the cross (Matt. 27:46). Jesus’ silence prompts Pilate to ask whether he wishes to speak (v. 13), and then, when Jesus still does not answer—“not even to a single charge”—Pilate is “greatly amazed (v. 14). Matthew puts tremendous emphasis on Jesus’ silence through this whole ordeal. Once again, Calvin draws out great spiritual significance from this action: “Christ was silent, while the priests were pressing upon him on every hand; and it was, in order that he might open our mouth by his silence. For hence arises that distinguished privilege of which Paul speaks in such magnificent terms, (Romans 8:15,) *that we can boldly cry, Abba, Father*; to which I shall immediately refer again.”⁷

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1051.

⁴ “But it is the term ‘king’ which is deliberately sensitive: a Roman governor dare not ignore a claim to political leadership among the Jews, whose last official ‘king’ was Herod, now replaced by the direct rule of the Roman prefect of Judea. And Jesus has given the Jewish leaders a sound basis for this charge by his acceptance of the title ‘Messiah,’ underlined by his ride up to the city proclaimed as the ‘son of David’ (21:9), the ‘king’ predicted in Zech 9:9–10. ‘King of the Jews’ is thus an appropriate translation of Jesus’ messianic claim into language a Roman governor could understand and must take seriously.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1048.)

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 699.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 700.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:274–75.

Pressured about Jesus (Matt. 27:15–23)

In the next scene, Matthew records another of Pilate’s attempts to sidestep making a decision regarding Jesus. Apparently, there had been a tradition where Pilate released for the crowd a prisoner during a feast (v. 15). In an attempt to lead the crowd toward requesting Jesus’ release, Pilate offered the crowd the choice between Jesus and a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. There is an interesting text-critical issue surrounding the name of Barabbas, since a few high quality Greek manuscripts tell us that Barabbas’s first name was also Jesus. Many text critics believe it most likely that “Jesus” had been a part of Matthew’s original manuscript, but acknowledge that there is relatively little “external support” (i.e., relative few manuscripts contain the name).⁸ If the name was indeed original, then the contrast drawn between Jesus and Jesus Barabbas is even more striking. As the NET translation has vv. 16–17, “At that time they had in custody a notorious prisoner named Jesus Barabbas. So after they had assembled, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, *Jesus Barabbas* or *Jesus who is called the Christ?*” This contrast is even more pointed since the meaning of “Barabbas” is “Son of the father” a common enough name in the ancient world, but a name that happens to contrast with Jesus’ own affirmation of being the “Son of God” (Matt. 26:63–64).

In other words, the question Pilate poses is, “Which Jesus do you want? The notorious criminal (who is the son of some father), or the one who is called the Christ (who is the Son of God)?” The point of this contrast is partially to highlight the “flagrant injustice” of these proceedings: Jesus “is treated as a condemned criminal, is placed beside another of the same kind, and the people are to make a choice between the two.”⁹ More than that, Calvin also highlights the cosmic nature of this contrast: “as God had appointed him to be a sacrifice (κάρθαρμα) to atone for the sins of the world, he permitted him to be placed even below a *robber* and *murderer*...for Christ was sunk into the depths of ignominy, that he might obtain for us, by his humiliation, an ascent to the heavenly glory: he was reckoned worse than a *robber*, that he might admit us to the society of the angels of God.”¹⁰

In vv. 18–19, Matthew gives us two more important pieces of information about Pilate’s mindset. First, Pilate perceived that the Jews had delivered Jesus up out of envy, bringing the legitimacy of their charges into question (v. 18). Second, Pilate’s wife had given him an ominous warning: “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream” (v. 19). Hendriksen perceptively notes that Pilate’s wife gave him the wrong recommendation by urging him to have “nothing” to do with Jesus: “He should have been brave enough and fair enough not only to pronounce Jesus ‘Not guilty,’ which, in fact, he did again and again, but also *to acquit him!*”¹¹

Yet, when Pilate asks the crowd which of the two criminals to release, the chief priests and elders

⁸ Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 56. See also Blomberg: “Although the external evidence for accepting these readings as original is relatively weak, it is hard to imagine anyone creating this potentially embarrassing parallel if it were not true (whether or not Matthew actually wrote it in his autograph).” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 411.)

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1089.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:282.

¹¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 954.

had already directed the crowd how to answer—not only “to ask for Barabbas,” but also to “destroy Jesus” (v. 20). The crowd does not gravely pass over Jesus in favor of Barabbas, but they demand Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate is surprised by this, and, rather than insisting that it be Jesus who is released, he again appeals to the crowd, attempting to reason with them: “Why? What evil has he done?” (v. 23a). In response, the crowd only “shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’” (v. 23b). Hendriksen observes the extraordinary number of times that Pilate pronounced Jesus innocent in addition to this passage (Matt. 27:24; Mark 15:14; Luke 23:4, 13–15, 22; John 18:38; 19:4, 6), and writes, “by means of Pilate it was God himself who declared his Son’s complete innocence, his perfect righteousness.”¹²

Washing Hands of Jesus (Matt. 27:24–26)

At this point, “Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning” (v. 24a). What he does next is extremely important in the narration of Jesus’ crucifixion: “he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves’” (v. 24b). While there may be some basis for washing one’s hands in pagan practices, it is most likely that Pilate did this according to Jewish customs (e.g., Deut. 21:6).¹³ By this, Pilate parallels the actions of the chief priests in response to Judas in two ways. First, the response of Pilate, “see to it yourselves,” is an echo of what the chief priests had said to Judas when he was conscience-stricken: “What is that to us? See to it yourself” (Matt. 27:4).¹⁴ Second, Pilate’s action to wash his hands with water in order to clear him from any bloodguilt parallels the concern of the chief priests to avoid bringing the blood money of Judas into the temple treasury (Matt. 27:6). The chief priests obsessed about ceremonial regulations, while Pilate wanted to distance himself from the responsibility of condemning Jesus. In both cases, however, their actions pretend that the infinite moral guilt from crucifying Jesus can be cleansed by external washings.¹⁵

The crowd, however, adopts a different attitude by embracing responsibility for the blood of Jesus: “And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” (v. 25). The crowd has become so convinced that Jesus is evil that they believe that demanding his death will be to their credit and to the credit of their children. Now, this line has been taken in the past as justification for persecution of the Jews, but that is a misinterpretation and abusive application of the passage. Blomberg is really helpful in qualifying the exact extent of the scope of this statement:

Clearly the crowd is not condemning their entire race. All of Jesus’ followers at this stage were also Jews, and the crowd does not refer to them. What is more, only a small subsection of even the uncommitted masses is involved. “On our children” does not refer to all Jewish people for all eternity but reflects a formula of corporate solidarity and a strong protestation of the crowd’s innocence (cf. Lev 20:9–16). In fact, the rhetoric of this verse has been shown

¹² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 955.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1095.

¹⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 412–13.

¹⁵ “...for how could a few drops of water wash away the stain of a crime which no satisfaction of any kind could obliterate?” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:287.)

to be relatively mild by ancient standards. Moreover, even though the people’s plea asks God to judge them if they are wrong, this does not imply that he will heed their request any more than he did with Peter’s self-anathematization in 26:74. The only way to generalize about responsibility for Jesus’ death beyond the actual group of people present in this scene is to indict all humanity, as Christians in their more theologically sober moments quickly recognize. Matthew may in fact be drawing a parallel between the crowd and the disciples. Just as one of the Twelve “betrayed innocent blood” (27:4), so now one segment of the uncommitted populace also turns out to accept the blame for “his blood.”¹⁶

We should also remember that Peter specifically indicted the crowds for this crime five weeks later on the day of Pentecost: “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan of and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23). When the crowd was “cut to the heart” over their sins, Peter preached to them the gospel of the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ, and those who believed were saved (Acts 2:37–41).

Finally, although Pilate has up to this point tried hard to avoid entanglement in this case, he makes his authoritative decision: “Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified” (v. 26). Although the scourging exceeded the physical torment that began when the Sanhedrin and their guards spit in Jesus’ face and struck him (Matt. 27:67), this beating would have been brutal: “The whip was the dreaded *flagellum*, made by plaiting pieces of bone or lead into leather thongs. The victim was stripped and tied to a post. Severe flogging not only reduced the flesh to bloody pulp but could open up the body until the bones were visible and the entrails exposed.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is only the beginning of Jesus’ torments on the way to his crucifixion, which we will read about in the next section. In all this, Calvin’s words are important:

The supreme and sole Judge of the world is placed at the bar of an earthly judge, is condemned to crucifixion as a malefactor. . . . A spectacle so revolting might, at first sight, greatly disturb the senses of men, were it not met by this argument, that the punishment which had been due to us was laid on Christ, so that, our guilt having now been removed, we do not hesitate to come into the presence of the Heavenly Judge. Accordingly, the water, which was of no avail for washing away the filth of Pilate, ought to be efficacious, in the present day, for a different purpose, to cleanse our eyes from every obstruction, that, in the midst of condemnation, they may clearly perceive the righteousness of Christ.¹⁸

Hallelujah, what a Savior!

¹⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 413–14.

¹⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 639.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:287–88.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus “stand” before Pilate (v.11a)? Why did Pilate ask Jesus whether he was “the King of the Jews” (v. 11b)? Why do you think Jesus responded by simply saying, “You have said so” (v. 11c)? Why did Jesus remain silent under the rest of the accusations brought against him (vv. 12–14)? How close to faith—and how far away—was Pilate when he “was greatly amazed” at Jesus’ behavior while on trial (v. 14)?
2. Who was Barabbas (v. 16; Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19; John 18:40)? Why does Pilate offer the crowd a choice between Barabbas and Jesus (v. 17)? How did Pilate perceive the “envy” of the religious leaders (v. 18)? How close to faith—and how far away—was Pilate’s wife in her advice to Pilate (v. 19)? What did Pilate expect would happen in the choice between Barabbas and Jesus? What is the danger of rendering our verdict on the basis of others?
3. How does Pilate’s statement, “see to it yourselves,” parallel the response of the chief priests to Judas (v. 24; Matt. 27:4)? How does Pilate’s hand-washing ceremony to rid himself of Jesus’ bloodguilt parallel the concern of the chief priests about the uncleanness of the blood money (v. 24; Matt. 27:6)? How does the embracing of Jesus’ blood by the crowd parallel Judas’s concern over his betrayal of innocent blood (v. 25; Matt. 27:4)? What do these parallels suggest?
4. With which of these wrong responses to Jesus (amazed by Jesus, pressured about Jesus, washing hands of Jesus) most closely parallels your own struggles with faith? Have you genuinely trusted in Jesus, or only come close, while keeping him at arms’ length from you? What would change if you truly entrusted yourself to Jesus? How do Jesus’ actions in this story show you how eminently trustworthy he is for you?