

The Lord's Civil Trial Before Pilate and Herod

Luke 23:1-25

Luke 23:1-7: Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate. 2 And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." 3 Then Pilate asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" He answered him and said, "It is as you say." 4 So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no fault in this Man." 5 But they were the more fierce, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place." 6 When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked if the Man were a Galilean. 7 And as soon as he knew that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

Background Notes

Our Lord Jesus was tried at two separate trials. The first was His religious trial before the Jewish authorities, and the second was His civil trial before the Roman authorities. Each trial had three phases. The three stages of the Lord's religious trial included His time before Annas, the former high priest, and then His time before Caiaphas, the high priest, and then finally His time before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. John 18 covers the Lord's hearing before Annas, the former high priest and Caiaphas' father-in-law. Annas still carried some weight in the priestly circles.

In the second half of Luke 22 we looked at the second and third stages of our Lord's religious trial: His hearing before Caiaphas, and then before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. Under the authority of Rome, the Sanhedrin did not have the power to carry out the death penalty, so they brought the Lord before Pilate for a civil trial that is recorded in Luke 23. The Jewish authorities were united in their sinful desire to have the Lord killed: *"Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate."*

The Jewish authorities leveled these false charges against the Lord.

1. He misled the nation. That accusation was patently false.
2. He told the people not to pay their taxes. The Lord had said just the opposite. *"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Luke 20:25.*

3. He was proclaiming Himself as King. By that accusation they meant to convey that Jesus was a threat to Rome. This was false, and this was made quite clear in John 18 where we have the detailed conversation between Pilate and the Lord.

The Lord claimed that He was the King of the Jews, and Pilate understood that He was not talking about a kingdom of this world that would be an immediate threat to Rome, so Pilate declared the innocence of Christ. *“So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, “I find no fault in this Man” (v4).* This was the first stage of the Lord’s civil trial.

However, when Pilate heard that the Lord had had an extensive ministry in Galilee, he sent Jesus to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at this time. This was Herod Antipas, who was the ruler, under Rome, over the Galilee area. Whether Pilate was trying to unload the problem of dealing with Jesus, or just simply looking for confirmation that Jesus was innocent, we don’t know. Our Lord’s hearing before Herod was the second phase of His civil trial.

Doctrinal Points

1. Herod confirmed the innocence of Jesus.

Verses 8-12: Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him. 9 Then he questioned Him with many words, but He answered him nothing. 10 And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused Him. 11 Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate. 12 That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other.

Herod Antipas was one of the sons of Herod the Great, who was the ruler at the time of the Lord’s birth. (Remember, Herod the Great was called “great” because of his massive building achievements – but he is never called “great” in the Bible! He’s the ruler who ordered the babies of Bethlehem to be killed, in his attempt to do away with the Lord.) Herod Antipas was the Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded, and he is the Herod that the Lord called “that fox” (Luke 13:32).

Herod was very glad to see Jesus because *“he had desired for a long time to see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him” (v8).* But Jesus answered him nothing. Herod had silenced the voice of God to him when he killed John the Baptist, and thus he lost his chance.

The true heart of Herod is revealed in verse 11, when he and his soldiers treated the Lord with contempt, mocked Him, and sent Him back to Pilate dressed, as a joke, in a gorgeous robe. To Herod, this was an occasion of amusement and

entertainment, but indirectly it confirmed the innocence of the Lord. Herod certainly would not have treated the Lord as a joke if he had thought that Jesus was really a serious threat, or that guilty of any of the charges made.

So the communication from Herod to Pilate was that Jesus was innocent. Herod confirmed Pilate's decision that *"indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him."* Herod confirmed the innocence of Jesus.

2. Pilate declared the innocence of Jesus.

Verses 13-25: Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, 14 said to them, "You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; 15 no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him. 16 I will therefore chastise Him and release Him" 17 (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast). 18 And they all cried out at once, saying, "Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas"— 19 who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder. 20 Pilate, therefore, wishing to release Jesus, again called out to them. 21 But they shouted, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" 22 Then he said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go." 23 But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And the voices of these men and of the chief priests prevailed. 24 So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. 25 And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

In verses 13-25 we have the third stage of the Lord's civil trial, before Pilate once again. Three times Pilate declared the innocence of Jesus, in verses 4, 14, and 22. Verse 4: *"So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no fault in this Man."* Verse 14: *"You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him."* And verse 22: *"Then he said to them the third time, 'Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him.'"*

Matthew's Gospel tells us that Pilate's wife also declared the innocence of Jesus, based on a dream that God ordained for her to experience. Matthew 27:19, *"While he [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, 'Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.'"*

Even though the Lord was completely innocent, Pilate yielded to political and crowd pressure. He released Barabbas, who was a known criminal and guilty of insurrection and murder - and he had the Lord punished by scourging. Why? For what crime? Talk about injustice! Pilate had declared Jesus innocent. Scourging by Roman whip was known to kill some men. For Pilate to sentence an innocent man to be scourged by Roman soldiers was a terrible perversion of justice and reveals Pilate's ruthless character.

As if the terrible scourging wasn't enough injustice, because of continued political pressure, Pilate yielded to the crowd's demand for the Lord's crucifixion. In light of all of the unjust treatment and perversion of justice, it is significant that Pilate declared the innocence of Jesus in no uncertain terms.

Practical Application:

Examine the "bottom line" of your friendships!

Verse 12: *"That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for previously they had been at enmity with each other."* Pilate and Herod had been enemies - but now they became friends. The basis for their friendship was their contempt for Jesus, and their unjust treatment of Jesus. Both Pilate and Herod testified to the innocence of the Lord, but then they proceeded to pervert justice by showing contempt for the Lord by having Him mocked, mistreated, scourged, and finally crucified. What a terrible basis for friendship!

Today, many non-Christians are at odds with one another on various issues, but they are united in their stand against the Bible and against Christ as the only way of salvation.

There is a practical lesson here for Christians as well. What is the bottom line for your friendship with fellow believers? Is it your love for the Lord, His Word, and the family of God? Or is the basis of your friendship with other believers your dislike of your church leaders, and you enjoy getting together to complain? Or is the basis of your friendship with other believers contempt of some fellow believers because of the way they dress? Or raise their kids? Or even the way they praise the Lord?

Are your Christian friends the faultfinders and complainers? Let's make sure that the basis for our friendships isn't a **negative** reason. Examine the bottom line of your friendships!