

# **First Serve**

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Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 15:1-15

Topic

Pontius Pilate is pressured  
into condemning Jesus to be crucified

Title

*"Pilate Error"*

## Introduction

"Pilot error" is a term used to describe a decision, action or inaction by a pilot or crew of an aircraft determined to be a cause or contributing factor in an accident or incident.

Pardon the bad pun, but I want to 'hijack' the term, and apply it to Pontius Pilate. He is forever associated with his grave error.

Knowing that Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing, Pilate caved to the crowd and condemned the sinless Son of God first to a vicious scourging, and then to death by crucifixion.

Mark's account of Pilate emphasizes a title given to Jesus - "King of the Jews."

It occurs here for the first time in his Gospel, but it does so three times in our passage, and a total of six times in this chapter.

Pilate marveled at the dignity of the King, but he caved to the din of the crowd. It causes us to ask these two questions of ourselves: #1 Do You Marvel At The Dignity Of Your King?, and #2 Do You Cave At The Din Of The Crowd?

## #1 Do You Marvel At The Dignity Of Your King?

(v1-5)

Jesus certainly did not look like much of a king, standing before Pilate. After the early morning arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus was assaulted by one of the officers of Annas, the former high priest. Then, being tried by Caiphas, the son-in-law of Annas and the current high priest, Jesus had been blindfolded and struck repeatedly by members of the Sanhedrin and their officers.

He must have been bruised and bloodied.

We should also take into consideration that Jesus was rather common looking. The Bible never gives any physical description of Him. The closest thing we get to a description is in Isaiah 53:2, where we read, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him." Isaiah adds that Jesus would grow up like a plant out of dry ground with no form of kingly majesty.

Several times in His ministry He was able to slip away into a crowd without being noticed. He didn't stand-out in any way.

Jesus' appearance was just like that of any other Jewish man.

His appearance was about to change. After Pilate was through with Jesus, He would barely look human.

Isaiah predicted this, too, saying, "His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness" (Isaiah 52:14).

He may not look like the King of the Jews, but after observing Jesus through His ordeals, Pilate would be described as "marveling" at Him.

Pilate would be struck with a sense of wonder at the dignity of Jesus.

Mar 15:1 Immediately, in the morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council; and they bound Jesus, led Him away, and delivered Him to Pilate.

Mark is very concise. He omits many details. Since his words were God-breathed, we want to be careful to follow Mark's train of thought without getting distracted by historical details from the other Gospels that he doesn't include.

It's important we know the whole story; and that we realize what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us is absolutely true, historically. Nevertheless each of them edits the details so that God the Holy Spirit can apply the text to our hearts.

Each Gospel tells the story in a way that is designed to do what only the Bible can do: discern between your soul and your spirit, to bring you spiritual life and insight for living it.

The chapter starts with the word "immediately." The Jewish authorities couldn't wait to be rid of Jesus. They were first in line at Pilate's place.

It seems as though our political leaders can't wait to be rid of Jesus. No prayer in schools... No posting of the Ten Commandments in government buildings... No Nativities on public land... Drop the word "God" from the pledge, and the words "In God we trust" from our money... No invocations at City Council meetings.

They think they have Jesus "bound" by political correctness. He remains King no matter the efforts of the ungodly to dethrone Him.

Pilate governed the areas of Judea, Samaria, and the area south as far as the Dead Sea to Gaza. As prefect he had absolute authority over the non-Roman citizens of the province. He was responsible to the Roman governor who lived in Syria to the north.

The Sanhedrin must involve Pilate because, as a subjected people, they no longer had the power of capital punishment. If Jesus was to be executed, it had to be by Rome.

As Christians in America, we sometimes feel like a subjected people, having what we deem our "rights" taken away. I suggest true power, spiritual power, rests with us.

I believe we should do all we can, participating in the political arena, to stand for righteousness. Vote; sign the petitions; call your elected officials. It makes a difference in a free society.

*But do not ever depend upon those things.* They are no substitute for the power of the Gospel to transform lives, and through those lives, to transform society.

We are losing on many fronts, legally. The long-term solution remains the Gospel, and getting people saved.

Evangelism is not an afterthought. More saved individuals means more political impact.

Mar 15:2 Then Pilate asked Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" He answered and said to him, "It is as you say."

The Sanhedrin had pronounced Jesus "Guilty!" of blasphemy for claiming to be their Messiah, and for claiming to be equal with God.

Pilate, representing Rome, couldn't care less about a charge of religious blasphemy. So what did they tell him about Jesus?

Pilate calls Jesus "King of the Jews" because the Sanhedrin accused Jesus of trying to lead a political rebellion against Rome.

That's something that would get Pilate's attention.

When Pilate sees Jesus, I think it's with something like sarcasm that he asks the Lord, "Are **you** the King of the Jews?" It was almost comical to Pilate to think that this seemingly powerless, nondescript, bruised and bloodied Jew, was capable of leading a revolution.

Jesus didn't look, or act, like any king Pilate had ever dealt with.

Jesus answered, "It is as you say." In other words, "Yes."

We know Jesus was the rightful King, the promised Messiah. He had come offering the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Jews in authority rejected Him, and thereby rejected the Kingdom from being inaugurated at that time.

There is a lot of confusion about the "the Kingdom of God." For example, some say we are in it now, but give no further explanation.

There **is** always a spiritual Kingdom, which is God's rule, in the heart of believers. It is an invisible, spiritual Kingdom. In this way, we *are* currently in the Kingdom.

It's also true that God remains in charge of history. He is always King above all the earthly kingdoms of men, and the current rule of Satan, who is called the Prince, and Ruler, of this world. It's biblical to refer to God's over-rule of history as the Kingdom of God.

There will also be the literal Kingdom, that will commence after Jesus' Second Coming when He will be physically present to rule from Jerusalem in Israel for one thousand years.

**Mar 15:3** And the chief priests accused Him of many things, but He answered nothing.

Jesus did not need to "answer" accusations because He had already given His testimony:

- The works He had performed for the last three-and-one-half years spoke volumes.
- So did His teaching, described as having a heavenly authority no one else on earth had ever demonstrated.
- His sinless private life prior to His public ministry was solid testimony, too.

Jesus doesn't need to "answer" accusations that are marshaled against Him any more today than He did then. While it's good and right for us to be ready to give an answer to those who have sincere questions, the answer is to surrender your heart to Jesus.

Mar 15:4 Then Pilate asked Him again, saying, "Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You!"

We might be sensing frustration in Pilate. Jesus' silence was making it hard on him to release the Lord.

I suggest that Jesus' silence *was* an answer. Jesus' dignity was His answer, communicated by His keeping silent in the face of false accusations.

Mar 15:5 But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled.

He "marveled," or it could be translated, "he was full of wonder," or "he was amazed."

Pilate had never interrogated a prisoner like Jesus. I can't help but think that Pilate had the sense that Jesus was the One in charge - not him.

There was a dignity about Jesus, as well as a mystery, and - I dare say - a veiled power.

At one point during His arrest in Gethsemane Jesus told Peter, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53).

Not only that, when they came to arrest Him, Jesus spoke, and all the soldiers and Temple guards fell backward.

That kind of power, just below the surface, can be sensed.

Mark's writing leads us to ask of ourselves, "Do **you** and I marvel at His dignity?"

*Of course we do!* Maybe not as much as we could, or should; but, as believers, He is our King, and we bow before Him.

Since that is true, let me suggest a devotional thought. In your sufferings; in your struggles; in the midst of your trials; Have you ever had the sense that Jesus was silent? Have you felt as if He was not answering your questions, or responding to your cries for help? Felt that He wasn't explaining the lesson you were supposed to be learning?

*Those things describe every suffering or struggle or trial I've ever had, or am having!*

First, Jesus only seems silent. In fact, He has already spoken, well ahead of time, so you need not fret or fear.

You know, probably by heart, at least a few of the things He has prerecorded for you:

1Pe 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;

1Pe 4:13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.

Jas 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,

Jas 1:3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.

Jas 1:4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

2Co 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

Rom 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Php 1:6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;

2Pe 1:11 for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We should have all those on a continual loop, so that we never think, even for a moment, that Jesus is silent.

Second, Jesus owes us no current, updated, personal explanation. He doesn't need to dignify us with an answer, beyond what He's already said.

Instead, we need to treat Him with the dignity He deserves by receiving His Word by faith.

**His silence is itself proof that He has given us all we need for life and for godliness.** He loves us too much to withhold anything we might need; therefore His silence establishes we already have everything we need.

We thus see Jesus in His dignity, in unveiled power, yet with a sense of mystery, in our adverse circumstances.

Let Jesus be King and know that you are His beloved subject. Walk by faith in His promises, and you will exhume a dignity like His.

## #2 Do You Cave At The Din Of The Crowd?

(v6-15)

Pilate's terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day was going to get a lot worse. He was going to get manipulated by the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, into making the mother of all political errors.

**Mar 15:6** Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested.

Pilate's headquarters were not in Jerusalem. He was in town because it was expected of him, as prefect, during Passover, when tens of thousands of Jews made pilgrimage to the Temple.

When and how this custom of releasing a prisoner developed is unknown. Mark's wording might indicate it was something Pilate had initiated during his tenure. If he didn't initiate it, he was careful to observe it.

Pilate's Passover pardon was going to become the most infamous ever.

**Mar 15:7** And there was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion.

"Bar" means *son of*. "Bar Abbas" means *son of Abbas*.

"Abba" is intimate for *father*. So BarAbbas is *son of the father*. Hold that information for a moment.

BarAbbas had been involved in some notable uprising against Rome, in which he and his men had committed murder.

It seems that BarAbbas was scheduled to be crucified, along with his colleagues, that very day. His colleagues were probably the notorious two thieves whom Jesus would be crucified between.

They were most likely members of the Zealots. The Zealots were a movement in first century Israel which sought to incite the people of Judaea to rebel against the Roman Empire and expel it from Israel by force of arms.

One particularly extreme group, perhaps a subgroup of the Zealots, was known in Latin as *Sicarii*, meaning "dagger men." Their policy was to kill Jews who opposed their call for war against Rome.

They would come up behind you in a crowded place, and repeatedly stab you, then be gone before anyone could react.

They would identify themselves as patriots, but in fact, were terrorists, by today's understanding.

Most Jewish citizens were opposed to the Zealots, and they especially opposed the Dagger Men, who might kill them for their lack of zeal against Rome.

Pilate had brought out the worst criminal, apparently thinking that no one in their right mind would call for his release.

Except that no one in the crowd had a "right mind." They were unrighteous, far from God, thinking only of the here-and-now, and not eternal life.

Mar 15:9 But Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"

Mar 15:10 For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy.

Pilate used the title to needle the chief priests. Little did he know how accurate he was.

On paper, it seemed foolproof. For one thing, BarAbbas was just as likely to kill the chief priests as he was any Roman. It was pretty clear Jesus posed no lethal threat to them.

For another thing, it was absurd that a crowd accusing Jesus of leading a rebellion would demand to be released to them someone who was actually guilty of leading a rebellion.

Mar 15:11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them.

Clearly Pilate underestimated both the influence and the envy of the chief priests. Incredibly, illogically, irrationally, the crowd called for BarAbbas.

Mar 15:12 Pilate answered and said to them again, "What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?"

Pilate was in a pretty pickle. BarAbbas must be released, but that didn't solve the Jesus problem.

Mar 15:13 So they cried out again, "Crucify Him!"

You've probably heard it said that the same crowd which shouted "Hosanna!" to Jesus a few days earlier now called for His death.

It was not the same crowd. I mean, think about it. There were literally tens of thousands of pilgrims in town. What are the odds the exact, same Jews were there?

It's likely that this crowd was especially interested in the Passover prisoner release. They were of a different mindset than those who had been following Jesus, supposing He was going to announce His Kingdom.

Besides, the chief priests were orchestrating all this, and probably had seeded the crowd with those sympathetic to their cause.

Mar 15:14 Then Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, "Crucify Him!"

Those are words of exasperation, and desperation. He had lost control.

Pilate never really had control of this situation; Jesus did. But any thoughts he might have entertained about getting his way were gone.

He was serving God's providence. Though making free decisions he was responsible for, God was providing for His plan in history, for Jesus to be crucified at the hands of Rome.

Mar 15:15 So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified.

There is some evidence in literature that the Roman scourging was called pre-death. Many individuals did not survive it. The subject was whipped with leather thongs embedded with pieces of bone or shards of metal. There was no limit placed on the number of lashes.

It was not uncommon for inner organs, e.g., the kidneys, to be exposed. Blood loss alone could be fatal. Shock was certain.

Remember earlier I pointed out that BarAbbas meant *son of the father*? You might recall an exchange Jesus once had with the religious authorities. They accused Him of being born from fornication, not believing in the miracle of the virgin birth.

Jesus responded by saying, "you are of your father, the devil" (John 8:44). The choice of the crowd nicely demonstrates the Jews were of their father, the devil:

- BarAbbas was a rebellious, thieving murderer.
- Satan is a rebellious, thieving murderer.

They identified with a rebellious, thieving murderer, rather than with the Son of the Heavenly Father, Who was full of grace and truth.

Pilate had to "gratify the crowd" for his own political position to remain intact. Though in power, and powerful, he was pressured by the din of the crowd to deliver an innocent man to death.

The question, "Do you cave at the din of the crowd?," might be a rebuke, if you know that you're compromising your testimony.

It's more likely a reminder to you that we are under a lot of pressure as believers.

If a powerful Roman prefect could be pressured and manipulated into delivering Jesus Christ to be crucified, then little 'ole you and me can certainly be pressured to deny Him.

We're pressured at home, by family... At work... In school... Out in public.

Some of it is political pressure, as the ungodly continue to pass laws against religious freedom. But mostly it is personal pressure from the ungodly all around us.

One way we set ourselves up to succumb to pressure is by *hesitation*. Pilate hesitated to act, taking time to calculate the political consequences.

In the Book of Acts, the Lord wanted Peter to take the Gospel to a Gentile household. Peter, in a vision, was told to accompany the men from Cornelius' house "without hesitation" (Acts 10:20 ESV).

If something is right, why hesitate? Thinking about its consequences can only weaken you. If there are consequences, then you must suffer the consequences, and stand strong upon the promises Jesus has given you in His Word.

Pilate next tried to *reduce* Jesus to someone less than He was. He tried to show that Jesus was no real threat, because He had no real power.

We can do that, too - reduce Jesus. We can do it, for example, by being careless in our walk and witness. If my family, or my colleagues, see nothing different about me, then I've reduced God's power to transform lives to something impotent.

Pilate succumbed to *fear*. He was afraid of losing his job. It may come to that for you and I. Sooner or later the ungodly draw a line in the sand that we simply cannot step across.

Captured and made slaves to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Daniel's three companions, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, settled-in to life in Babylon:

- They received new, Babylonian names. Their original names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Daniel's Babylonian name was Belteshazzar.
- They went to Babylonian schools, where they were exposed to a lot of weird, ungodly information.
- It seems likely, from clues and direct references in the Bible, that all of them were made eunuchs.

But they also knew when a line had been drawn that they could not cross:

- They refused to eat the foods offered to them, insisting on keeping the dietary laws Jews were subject to under the Law of Moses. They risked death for doing so.
- They refused to bow to the idol of King Nebuchadnezzar, for which they were taken prisoners, and thrown alive into a burning fiery furnace - and from which they were delivered by Jesus unharmed.

Later, held captive in the Persian Empire, Daniel continued to pray, openly, after a decree was issued making it illegal to do so. He ended up thrown into the lion's den, but survived.

I can't say where your line or lines will be drawn; nor mine. I can only hope that Jesus' love for me casts out the fear associated with it, so that we can take our stand, and give our testimony.

