

Readings

Old Testament: Ezekiel 11:17–21

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 4:1–6

Gospel: John 19:1–16

Sermon Resources

Cyril of Alexandria writes:

We cannot acquit Pilate of his complicity in the iniquity of those who committed this impious crime against Christ. Pilate shared their responsibility inasmuch as when he might have delivered and rescued him from the madness of his murderers, he did not merely refrain from releasing him but even gave him up to them to be crucified. (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, John 11–21*, 306)

The procedures of Christ's Jewish trials violate in twenty-seven ways the criminal code found in the Mishnah *Sanhedrin*. For example, the night session on the eve of Passover was irregular in both the time of day and the proximity to a holy day.

In 1967, in South Africa, Dr. Christiaan Barnard performed the first human-to-human heart transplant on a dying man. Although that man lived for only eighteen days following the transplant, today the average patient survives about fifteen years. On the other hand, when God gives us a new heart, how long will we live? That would be forever!

Though a new heart costs us nothing, it costs Jesus everything. For us, He walked *the Via Dolorosa*, the way of sorrows, on His way to Calvary. Jesus gave His back to those who whipped Him, His face to those who beat Him, His head for the thorns, and His body and blood for the life of the world. He did it all for us—to give us a new heart.

Sermon

“I saw a woman today who finally became hard as wood all over.” A French doctor named Guy Patin wrote these words in 1692. This is the first clinical description of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, or FOP, a disease that slowly and irreversibly turns people into solid bone. The disease imprisons the entire body—back to front, top to bottom. Ligaments, tendons, and muscles solidify as the body becomes as hard as cement. The rogue gene of FOP has one goal—slowly harden the body until it's dead.

We're in a sermon series called Witnesses to Christ. Today, we meet Pontus Pilate. Pontus Pilate is one of the most notorious people in history. He's right up there with Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Osama bin Laden. If Pilate's name was announced at a baseball game, the crowd would begin booing and throwing beer cans. The Apostles' Creed includes these words: "born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Pontus Pilate had an acute case of spiritual FOP. Only in Pilate's case, the gene went straight to his heart—back to front, top to bottom. Spiritual FOP has one goal—slowly harden our hearts until we're spiritually dead.

But we don't notice it at first, do we? At first, our priorities are just a *little* mixed up. But then, very slowly, and before we know it, we stop praying, we stop repenting, and we stop trusting Jesus. Then the day comes when words such as Jesus, Holy Communion, Bible study, Baptism, worship, Easter, and salvation have no impact upon us whatsoever. That's because spiritual FOP has one goal—*slowly* harden our hearts until we're spiritually dead. Pilate knows.

According to a Latin inscription found in 1961 on the Mediterranean coast, Pontus Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea for ten years—from AD 26 to 36. Pilate was from a middle-class family. Don't forget that, it's huge. *Pilate was from a middle-class family.* Pontus Pilate served the Roman army in Germany. One year, while on leave in Rome, he married an *upper-class* Roman woman named Claudia Procula. Claudia was the granddaughter of Caesar Augustus—the Roman emperor. The granddaughter of Caesar Augustus the Roman emperor? *Pilate was in!* Because of this connection, Pontus Pilate got a position he would never have gotten in any other way. What position did Pilate get? Governor of Judea. That's Pilate's past.

The posse—led by Judas Iscariot—arrests Jesus on Thursday night. Jesus then stands trial before Annas, Caiaphas, and finally before the Sanhedrin—the Jewish Supreme Court. They accuse Jesus of blasphemy because blasphemy was punishable by death. There's one problem, though. The Jews can condemn a man to death, but they can't carry it out. Before Jesus can be executed, the Jews must get whose consent? *Pilate's.* That's his part. Famously and for the ages, that's Pilate's part!

That's what John says. "Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning" (John 18:28). They brought Jesus to the Roman fortress Antonia. It's about 6:00 a.m. And they're all there. The chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, all of them. And they have Jesus right where they want Him. Soon they will have Pilate right where they want him.

Pilate asks a few routine questions—such as “What’s this man done wrong?” The Jews don’t answer directly. Why? Because there’s no Roman law against blasphemy. The Jews can’t say, “This man claims to be the Messiah,” because Pilate would just wave his hand and that would be that. After all, Roman history tells us that Pilate didn’t like the Jews. Pilate didn’t understand the Jews. And Pilate didn’t waste his time in religious debates with the Jews! Pilate’s heart was becoming harder by the minute.

Pilate questions Jesus. He asks, “Are You the King of the Jews?” (John 18:33). The all-important word here is *king*. *King* means one thing to the Jews—Messiah. It means something else to the Romans—military ruler. Jesus answers Pilate, “You say that I am a king” (John 18:37). This means “Yes, I’m a king, but not the kind of king you’re thinking of.”

The chief priests want to confuse Pilate into thinking that Jesus is a revolutionary leader, and thus a threat to Rome. It doesn’t work, because Jesus tells Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Then He tells Pilate, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice” (John 18:37). Pilate cynically says, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Pilate’s heart is becoming as hard as cement.

Pilate has Jesus scourged, just short of death. But the crowd wants more. They want Christ killed. And so the Jews play their trump card.

They say to Pilate, “If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend” (John 19:12). Pilate knows exactly what they mean. The Caesar, the king, named Tiberius at the time, was sick. He was always suspicious and often violent. Suetonius—a Roman historian—tells us that Tiberius could turn on his underlings and be a savage. Tiberius wouldn’t like getting news about a riot in Judea, especially when Judea’s governor was appointed only because of family connections. And Pilate was, after all, just *middle class*.

The Jews blackmail Pilate, pure and simple. And it works. If the choice had been between Jesus and the Jews, Pilate would let Jesus go. But that’s not how the Jewish leaders frame the issue. Their blackmail makes it a choice between Jesus and Rome. This is Pilate’s predicament. *The Jewish blackmail makes it a choice between Jesus and Rome*. People will do many things to save their job, their status, their reputation. People will do many things to save their skin. They will even crucify an innocent man.

Pilate asks, “Shall I crucify your King?” (John 19:15). This King isn’t the military type—looking for a battle. No. This King is the suffering and bleeding type—looking for us. He is the King who cleanses sin-stained hearts. The King who heals deep brokenness. The King who calls us out of darkness and into

His marvelous light. The King who triumphs over death. The King who knows the exact place and time of His execution and still goes there anyway—*all for us*.

The chief priests answer Pilate, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). Things are getting out of hand. A Jewish riot would end Pilate’s political career. So he caves in. Pilate has Jesus executed. Nailed to a cross by His hands and feet, lifted up to hang, suspended between heaven and earth. Why did Pilate do it? His heart had become as hard as Mount Rushmore.

Do you see Pilate’s pattern? “What’s in it for me?” That’s what we see throughout John 18–19. “What’s in it for me?” That’s Pilate’s pattern. Pilate is climbing the ladder of success. Pilate cares only for himself and is trashing everyone who gets in his way.

That’s a pattern we follow more often than we care to admit. We’re all, finally, not that much different from Pilate. “What’s in it for me?” It’s a recipe for a hard heart. And a hard heart is like a wrecking ball. It mangles marriages, it kills kids, and it finishes off families and friends. *Spiritual FOP is killing us*.

Is your heart hard? Is it callous? insensitive? indifferent? dead? It’s not too late! Your heavenly Father will create in you a clean heart, a new heart, a heart that is spiritually alive. He’ll mold your stony heart back into life. This is His promise for you in Christ Jesus. Ezekiel 11:19: “I will give them one heart. . . . I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.” God will take away our stony, stubborn heart and give us a tender, responsive heart. What’s it mean? It means our heart will beat again! Amen.