

“WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH JESUS?”

(Matthew 27:11-26)

How many of you have a hard time making decisions? I am one of them, at least when it comes to buying things. When I get online to look for something, I can easily get overwhelmed by all the different choices and options. One product looks good, but then you find another one that might be better and less expensive. Then you check out the reviews under the product and they're all over the map – some people love it and others say, “This is the worst thing I've ever purchased.” What do you do? Eating at a place like Subway can be hard on indecisive folks – so many decisions – what kind of sandwich you want? What kind of bread? Do you want veggies? Do you want mayonnaise and oil? Do you want to bundle it with a soft drink and cookie? If so, what kind of cookie do you want? It can be overwhelming.

A lot of decisions we make in life are fairly inconsequential, but other decisions carry far greater weight – such as where you go to college, who you marry, and what career you pursue. But there's one decision that is the single most important decision in life, and that is what you will do with Jesus Christ. It's a decision you can't avoid and what you decide not only determines the direction of your life here on earth, but it determines your eternal destiny.

This morning as we continue our study in Matthew 27, we are going to look at perhaps the single most indecisive person regarding Jesus who ever lived, Pontius Pilate. Pilate was like the soldier in the civil war who couldn't make up his mind which side he was on, so he wore a blue coat and gray pants and got shot at from both sides. Yet he would make a number of “indecisive decisions” that would haunt him the rest of his life.

In Matthew 27 Jesus is only hours away from going to the cross. After He's arrested in the dead of night in the Garden of Gethsemane, He quickly goes through three trials before the Jewish Sanhedrin – Israel's Supreme Court made of seventy men, plus the high priest. If they could, the Sanhedrin would kill Jesus themselves, but the decision to put someone to death lay in the hands of the Roman authorities, and the goal of the first three trials is to find some charge that will convince Rome to go along with their decision to have Jesus killed.

He's first is taken to Annas, the former high priest who is still seen as the main power among the Jews. Annas doesn't get much out of Jesus and sends him to the current high priest, Caiaphas, for trial number two. After several attempts at trying to pin some charge on Jesus, Caiaphas finally gets Jesus to declare that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, and immediately declares Jesus guilty of blasphemy. Just before daybreak – and this all happens very quickly – the Sanhedrin sentences Jesus to die for the crime of blasphemy. All that's left is for the Roman authorities to go along with their decision and give the final go-ahead.

Into the picture steps Pilate. We don't know a great deal about him except that he has served as the Roman governor over Judea for the past ten years. He lived in a beautiful seaside palace in Caesarea – about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem – but during the Jewish festival days, like Passover, he would come down to Jerusalem to tamp down on any disturbances that might arise among the tens of thousands of people who flocked to the city. That was the main job of a Roman governor – to keep things under control, to collect taxes and keep the peace. As long as Pilate did this, he was in good graces with the Roman Emperor.

But early Friday morning his peaceful world is turned upside down as Jesus is marched from the palace of Caiaphas to the judgment hall of Pilate. He's probably not very happy to be awakened, but this why he makes the big bucks – he's paid to make decisions. Pilate is the consummate politician, doing whatever benefits him and whatever keeps peace and order in the city.

He's no doubt very aware of Jesus and his popularity with the people, as well as the animosity the Jewish harbor against Him. Hopefully, he can have this hearing wrapped up in a few minutes and get on about his day. But in the end – in just a few short hours – Pilate will try at least four things to avoid making a decision about Jesus.

He begins the proceedings the same way he starts every trial. "Tell me the charge... why are you bringing this man before me?" The Jewish leaders don't really have a charge – at least not one that Pilate would care about. Their charge against Jesus is blasphemy, but Pilate could care less about blasphemy – that's a religious matter – all he cares about is politics and how Jesus' actions affect Rome.

The Jewish leaders know this and they accuse Jesus of being a dangerous rebel and a threat to Rome. Luke 23 says that they lay out three charges against Jesus... First, they accuse Jesus of encouraging people not to pay their taxes to Rome. This, of course, is a lie – Jesus never told His disciples to not pay taxes, in fact He told them to render unto Caesar what is Caesars. Second, they say that Jesus claims to be a king – the King of the Jews. Jesus did claim to be a king but, as He will later explain, His kingdom was not a political kingdom but a spiritual kingdom. Third, they claim that Jesus is causing riots all over the countryside. None of these accusations are true, but the Jewish leaders are throwing anything they can at Jesus to see if it sticks.

We pick up the story in verses 11-14 of Matthew 27... Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" That's what you are being accused of – of being some kind of a political king that threatens Rome. Is that true? "You have said so," Jesus replied. In other words, it is as you say. Yes, I am the king. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor.

Most people, of course, when they're accused of something they didn't do, are going to speak up and shout their innocence. But twice Matthew emphasizes that Jesus remains silent. He doesn't answer. Pilate is amazed. He's already picking up clues that all these charges against Jesus are trumped up and without merit. Why doesn't He defend Himself? Why isn't He standing up for Himself?

The answer is that it's time to go to the cross and nothing more needs to be said. Many times Jesus said, "My time has not yet come." But now the time has come. He's done all that the Father has asked Him to do – all that's left is the cross. He could defend Himself and successfully plead His case – He could have called down twelve legions of angels to annihilate His accusers and Pilate, but He has a greater purpose in mind. For the joy of seeing you and me be saved from our sin, He committed Himself to going to the cross. Even though He is bloody and bruised and bound, He's still in charge of His own destiny.

The first thing Pilate does to avoid making a decision about Jesus, is to hand Jesus back to the Jewish authorities. We read about this in John's gospel. "This whole case sounds to me like a religious issue for you Jews to settle. You judge Him yourselves and leave me out of it." But they quickly tell Pilate that they don't have the authority to execute anyone – which is what they have already decided must happen – and the case is shoved right back in Pilate's lap.

Luke's gospel tells us the second maneuver Pilate makes, and it comes as he's listening to all the accusations made against Jesus. He hears them say something about Jesus being from Galilee, and he says, "Did you say Galilee? Galilee isn't even in my region – it's in Herod's jurisdiction." And Pilate promptly sends Him off to Herod, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Herod was the one who had John the Baptist beheaded, and had always been intrigued with Jesus and welcomes an opportunity to see Him. But His time before Herod is brief. Herod peppers with several questions, but Jesus says nothing. Herod also wants Jesus to perform a miracle, but Jesus refuses. Herod then mocks Jesus by dressing Him in a kingly robe and sends Him right back to Pilate.

Pilate can't believe it. Here we go again. He looks at the Jewish leaders and says, "I've examined this man and find no basis for your charges against Him. And neither did Herod. This man has done nothing deserving of death." Three different times Pilate declares that he finds no fault in Jesus. One of the purposes of Jesus' trial, from a divine standpoint, is to show the sinless nature of Jesus. Jesus' life is scrutinized up and down and not a single blemish is found in Him. Even His enemies can find nothing to pin on Him. This is why Jesus is the only one who can bring us into a right relationship with God because, as fully human, He lived the life that you and I could not live. And by taking all of our sin upon Himself, He could represent us on the cross, and provide be the perfect sacrifice to reconcile we who are imperfect with a holy God.

Finding no fault in Jesus, the next thing Pilate tries to avoid sentencing Jesus to death is to give the Jewish people a choice. Matthew 27:15 says, "Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd." Every Passover Pilate, like the other governors before him, had a custom of releasing a Jewish prisoner as a gesture of goodwill to the people and to cover over any wrongdoing from the previous year. So, with this custom in mind, Pilate comes up with this idea to let the people decide which prisoner they will release. He hopes they will release Jesus, and if his plan works, he can release Jesus – which he clearly wants to do – without defying the will of the Jewish leaders. He can simply argue that he is carrying out the will of the people.

Verses 16-18, At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

The choice Pilate gives them is between two men named Jesus – Jesus Christ and Jesus Barabbas. Jesus was a common name in the day and meant "God saves." We find out from the other gospels that Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion against the Roman government. He is seen by the people as a political savior, trying to save Israel from the tyranny of Rome. The name "Barabbas" is a combination of two words – "bar" meaning son, and "abba" meaning father. means "son of the father." Here you have Jesus, the divine Son of God – and you have Barabbas, the human "son of the father." The choice could not be clearer.

We're told that Barabbas was convicted of murder and is in prison awaiting execution. In fact, the cross Jesus died on was likely the cross made for him, and the two thieves that died alongside Jesus were probably co-conspirators with Barabbas. Pilate is certain that the crowd will choose Jesus to be set free. It's a clear choice. Jesus has done absolutely nothing wrong, while Barabbas is a murderer. But Pilate's plan backfires, as we'll see in a moment.

In verse 19 Pilate is interrupted by a text message... he gets a message from his wife... While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

Dreams were given great significance in the ancient world, and God used dreams to warn people, such as when He warned the Magi to not return to Herod, and when He warned Joseph to flee to Egypt. Some have wondered if this dream was from God, and I tend to think that it was. God gave her a supernatural dream, just as He gave pagan kings Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar a dream. Through her dream Pilate's wife becomes convinced that Jesus is an innocent man, and the thought of Him being sentenced to death torments her. She sees only trouble for her husband if he goes along with the Jewish leaders and condemns Jesus.

Some early church theologians believed that Pilate's wife converted to Christianity. We don't know for sure, but it certainly seems possible. What do you suppose Pilate is thinking? It's clear that he already believes Jesus is innocent – He says so three different times. Now his wife warns him to not have anything to do with the bloodthirsty push to have Jesus killed. Pilate must feel torn, but his thoughts are interrupted by the reality of the moment.

Verses 20-21, But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. Pilate is stunned. Barabbas? Over Jesus?

To Pilate, Barabbas is a murderer, but to the Jews he is a hero. They longed for a strong, heroic savior to deliver them from Roman oppression, and they see Barabbas as that kind of leader. Five days earlier they welcomed Jesus as their king as He rode into Jerusalem. He awakened within them a hope and expectation that He was the long-awaited Messiah who could triumph over Rome and restore Israel to her former glory. They were all in for Jesus.

They shout, "Hosanna," which means "save us." They weren't asking Jesus to save them from sin and make them right with God, they were asking Jesus to save them from Roman oppression. "Fix our problems, Jesus, bring us utopia – bring peace and prosperity to our nation. You're the one who can do it." The crowd has the right person, but they didn't understand His mission. Jesus rode into Jerusalem not to save the people *temporally* from the Romans, but to save them *eternally* from their sins. He came not to rule over the *land*, but rule over their *hearts*.

But now they see Jesus standing helpless before Pilate, unwilling to make any defense or do anything a true king would do. And they turn on Jesus. When faced with a choice between a political savior and a spiritual savior, they choose Barabbas.

People are no different today. Some praise Jesus when life is smoothly going along, but when Jesus disappoints them – when He doesn't live up to their expectations – when He allows pain and hardships to enter their lives – they turn on Him. "This isn't what I signed up for," they say. "I want a savior who will fix all my problems." What they don't understand is that Jesus can fix their problems, but He doesn't fix the surface issues – He fixes the real, underlying issues. He doesn't just want to patch up your life, He wants to radically transform your life from the inside-out.

Part of the problem, we see in verse 20, is that the chief priests and elders work the crowd to “persuade” them to choose Barabbas. The people of Israel looked up to them and they carried great influence. The Bible says there will be a stricter judgment for teachers and leaders who are in positions of power. The religious leaders use their power and influence to sway the people to choose Barabbas.

Many studies tell us that in our culture there are a certain group of “elites” – quite small in number – but they hold enormous influence over what people think. They hold control of the colleges and universities, they dominate Hollywood and the media – and they hold the top seats of power in the corporate world. Also included in this small group of elites are the big tech companies that have a well-developed plan to influence what you buy, who you listen to, what you think, and who you vote for. And what all these elite influencers have in common is that they hold a worldview that leaves God out of the picture – they want you to believe that you don’t need a Savior, and that all the world’s problems can be fixed through human effort and not God’s intervention. They want you to choose Barabbas over Jesus.

There’s even a movement called “progressive Christianity,” that is actively seeking to draw believers from Bible believing, Christ-centered churches into a completely new version of Christianity that denies the authority of the Bible, that denies hell and a future judgment, and denies the need to be saved through the cross of Christ. They buy right into the world’s philosophy that we can save ourselves. We need to remain very vigilant in who is influencing us and trying to persuade us to a worldview that doesn’t choose Jesus.

The influential leaders of Israel work the crowd and persuade them to ask not for Jesus Christ, but for Jesus Barabbas to be released. Verses 22-23, What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah? Pilate asked. They all answered, “Crucify him!” “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

This past year we’ve seen the power of mobs, haven’t we, and how a group of peers can influence people to act a certain way that they normally wouldn’t if left to themselves. We all know how peer pressure works – if 98% of the crowd thinks one way, we don’t want to be the one that stands alone – we don’t want to go against the flow. This is why it’s important to live by convictions and not by polls. I love a statement made by Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas. He said, “I don’t have to wake up every morning and think, ‘what do I want to believe today.’ How I live is the direct result of deep convictions, not just trends that you can pick up through polling.”

By this time a mob mentality has taken over the crowd and they shout for Pilate to crucify Jesus. Pilate says, “Why? What crime has He committed?” Once a mob forms, people no longer think on a rational basis, but purely by their emotions. The scene is almost demonic. Out of love Jesus left the glory of heaven to save the people in the crowd from going to hell, but they shout and demand that He be nailed to a cross and die an agonizing death for doing nothing but loving the world.

In verse 24 Pilate attempts for a fourth time to avoid making a decision about Jesus... When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent and wants to release Him, but he’s more concerned about what releasing Jesus will cost Him. He was already in hot water with Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, and he doesn’t want a riot to break out and get Him into deeper water. So he caves to the public pressure and gives them permission to have Jesus killed.

But as he does, he follows a Jewish custom taken from Deuteronomy 21 where the people of Israel are instructed what to do if a person is found murdered and it was not known who the killer was. In order for guilt to not be placed on the community, the elders and judges of the town were wash their hands over a sacrificed heifer that represented the unknown killer and say, “Our hands did not shed this blood.” And by doing so the people would be absolved of shedding innocent blood. Pilate says, “Don’t lay any guilt on me – I am innocent of this man’s blood.”

Verse 25, All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!” What a thing to say! “We’ll take all the responsibility.” They did, and within a generation the city of Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 as judgment for Israel’s rejection of their Messiah.

Verse 26, Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Barabbas, the guilty one, goes free because Jesus, the innocent one, dies in his place. Imagine Barabbas sitting in his prison cell that morning with no hope of acquittal. He’s just a few hours from his crucifixion. He hears a crowd of people shouting something outside the prison. He thinks he hears his own name. Then a jailer comes, opens the door of his cell, and says, “You’re free to go.”

What happens to Barabbas is a beautiful picture of God’s grace. Like Barabbas, we’re all sinners and we all deserve to die. The Bible says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death.” Like Barabbas, we were dead in our sins, living without hope – until Jesus took our sins upon Him and died on the cross in our place. By placing your faith in Christ, you can walk free from your prison of sin in newness of life.

History says that a few years after his decision to have Jesus put to death, Pilate was removed from his office. Some sources say that he became an alcoholic and took his own life. He likely was haunted by his decision, and forever will stand as a reminder of the eternal consequences of indecision.

What will you do with Jesus? That is the question we all must answer. We must make a decision about Him because one day He will make a decision about us. One day every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. If you make the decision to trust Christ now, you have everything to gain. You will be forgiven and given eternal life. Christ will come into your life and transform you and make you a new person. And unlike Pilate, you will have no regrets.