

A Different Sort of King (John 18:28-40)

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Words are tremendously powerful. Stop and think about all the different sorts of things we labor accomplish through our words. On the positive side, we inform, request, encourage, warn, persuade, correct, rejoice, entertain, comfort, grieve, and love, to mention just a few of our verbal goals. On the negative side, we belittle, criticize, discourage, mock, hurt, manipulate, and oppress. As King Solomon observes in Prov 12:18, "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

The words we speak or write don't just exist. We're always aiming to get something done through them. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the satisfaction of our desires is in view. Jesus put it memorably in Matt 12:34, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." What I want to see happen will determine what I say with my mouth or write with my hands.

The human authors of Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are no different. They wrote with a particular aim in view, an intended effect sovereignly ordained and governed by God himself. And that means whenever we read the Bible, we need to not just ask, "What is it saying?" but, "What is the author seeking to accomplish? How are these words meant to affect what we think, feel, or do?" The Gospel of John is no exception.

Jn 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." That's both John's goal in writing and exactly what the Spirit is seeking to accomplish through him.

The Lord, the Divine Author, wants us to experience the life and joy reserved for those who believe Jesus is infinitely more than a historical person. He's the Christ, the Son of God. But what do those titles actually mean? John 18:28-40, no less than the rest of the gospel, is John's way of double-clicking on Jesus' identity so we can know him for who he is and trust him accordingly.

He's not just telling us what happened. He's doing it in a way that highlights the very details we need to grasp what it means for Jesus to be "the Christ," the anointed

Son of God, and trust him accordingly. In this case, John records the details of his Roman trial in a way that helps us recognize Jesus is the Lamb of God, who establishes the kingdom of God, by declaring the truth of God, as a substitute for sinners. Let's look at each one of those elements.

1) JESUS IS THE LAMB OF GOD

In John 18, the Jewish Feast of Unleavened Bread or Passover is at hand. It's an annual, seven-day festival in Jerusalem commemorating the decisive act of divine redemption in the Old Testament - Israel's deliverance from slavery in the land of Egypt.

The Lord sent ten plagues against Pharaoh and his people. The last was the worst. An angel of the Lord went throughout the land and killed all the firstborn sons of Egypt, but the firstborn sons of Israel were spared. Why? Because the Jewish families killed lambs without blemish and painted their blood above the door of their homes in obedience to the word of the Lord. Ex 12:23, "For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you."

The Egyptians sent them away so quickly afterward that they didn't even have time to leaven their bread. Hence the name of the festival, which the Lord commanded Israel to keep so that she might remember her need for a Savior and his power to save. In Jesus' day, it was one of the most spiritually significant weeks in the Jewish calendar. It's also the very week Jesus was arrested.

V. 28 opens with the Jews leading Jesus from the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, to the Roman governor's headquarters, ruled by a military prefect named Pilate. But they scrupulously avoid entering the actual praetorium "so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover." They believe that entering a Gentile dwelling will make them ceremonially unclean, unable to worship at the festival, so they wait outside for Pilate to come to them.

It's a sobering illustration of just how corrupted our consciences are apart from God. They try to maintain an outward show of holiness while flagrantly violating the most basic tenets of biblical justice, condemning an innocent man, Jesus, on spurious charges.

They are consumed with the finer points of human righteousness while completely disregarding the righteousness that matters most in God's sight.

We do the exact same thing, friends. We reduce the law of God to a list of behavioral rules we can readily keep. Don't drink. Don't swear. Stop for old ladies at the crosswalk. Tithe when the offering basket comes around. Like Bible verses on Facebook. Stand for the national anthem. Vote for the right candidates. And attend church on Sundays.

It's possible to do all of that, friend, and completely neglect the weightier matters of loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. The Lord isn't deceived, but we deceive ourselves. We deceive ourselves into thinking that because we're being "a good Christian" in all these areas that our selfishness with the rest of our money, our bitterness toward our spouse or children, our sexual sin, or our lack of affection for God or gratitude for the gospel isn't a big deal.

We convince ourselves we're a good person, a real Christian, by pointing to all the "right" things we do that don't really cost us anything or force us to face the gap between who we are on the inside and the perfect holiness God requires in every area of life. We never come to terms with our rebellious desire to be an authority unto ourselves instead of submitting to the authority of God. We quiet our conscience by recalling the apple pie we baked for the neighbors.

I'm not saying honoring the Lord in the little areas of life doesn't matter. I'm saying the spiritual hypocrisy the Jews demonstrate by scrupulously maintaining their ceremonial purity while manipulating the entire legal system to unjustly condemn the Son of God is a case study in the poverty of man-made righteousness. Heed the warning. Don't fool yourself into thinking that because you can point to one area of your life where you're doing the "right" thing that you're innocent before the throne of God. Not one of us is righteous, not even one. We all need a Savior.

By sending Jesus inside, the Jews remain clean and Jesus becomes unclean. In the process, what do they unwittingly confirm? That Jesus is the Passover Lamb to whom the festival pointed all along. He bears the defilement of our guilt, our injustice, our uncleanness on the cross, so the Lord's judgment might mercifully pass over us. Their sin ultimately illustrates the gracious exchange of the gospel.

Pilate eventually forces them to admit the real reason they brought Jesus to him. They want him killed. V. 31, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." The Romans reserved the right of capital punishment for themselves. The Jews needed Pilate to find Jesus guilty for him to be crucified. At this point, it can seem like Jesus is a political pawn, shuttled back and forth between the powers that be. But John recognizes the deeper reality. It's all going down exactly as Jesus said it would.

Back in Jn 12, he promised his disciples he would be lifted up to die on a cross. He's using even the political division and corruption of his day to accomplish his sovereign will. He's the same God today, friends. As the Lamb of God, Jesus lays his life down not as a hapless victim, but of his own accord.

2) JESUS ESTABLISHES THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In v. 33, Pilate brings Jesus inside for interrogation. "Are you the king of the Jews?" he asks. It's a loaded question and likely reflects the language of the charge the Jews levied against Jesus. After all, the Roman could care less about religious squabbles. They cared a great deal about political stability, suppressing insurrection, and deposing self-proclaimed "kings" who threatened the supreme authority of Caesar.

Jesus' immediately makes the issue personal. V. 34, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Are you asking for your own sake, or because the Jews told you to? Even when he's under the gun and facing imminent death, Jesus is on mission, lovingly pressing Pilate to confront his own belief about God.

Jesus' question turned Pilate into the defendant. He immediately tries to reassert his authority in v. 35. "Am I a Jew?" Don't make this about me, Jesus. I'm not a Jew and I could care less who the "king" of the Jews is supposed to be. There's one king in my book and it's Caesar. This is about what your own people think of you and want from me as a result. So let's cut to the chase. What did you do to get yourself handed over to me for a death sentence? Are you threatening the imperial authority?

Look at Jesus' answer in v. 36. "My kingdom is not of this world." The kingdom Jesus describes, and over which he rules, is the kingdom of God. And it does not consist, at least not yet, of a visible reign on earth like what the Romans enjoyed or Pilate

himself for that matter. It's a spiritual kingdom in the heavenly places. To use Jesus' words from the gospel of Matthew, it's the kingdom of heaven, invisible to the natural eye but not one bit less real.

It's why Jesus says in Jn 3:3, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Unless the Holy Spirit opens your spiritual eyes to perceive God's holiness, your sinfulness, and the saving sufficiency of Christ, the kingdom of God, the joy of living under his redemptive rule, will remain invisible to you. It will sound like a great big joke, a fairy tale at best.

But when the Spirit moves in our hearts and we respond to God's free offer of salvation by trusting Jesus to give us life instead of trying to create life for ourselves, a miracle occurs. We're taken out of the kingdom of his world, the realm of slavery to sin and death, and into the kingdom of God, the realm of joy, and life, and holiness.

Indeed, I have a kingdom, Pilate, but it's not of the Roman sort. It's not a kingdom of this world, maintained by human swords and spears, forcing men to begrudgingly submit to one another against their will. It's not secured through constitutional amendments, congressional legislation, marches on Washington, or Supreme Court appointees, as beneficial as those things can be. It's of an immeasurably greater sort, wrought by the Spirit of God, compelling men to joyfully embrace and wholeheartedly submit to the authority of God by transforming them from the inside out.

And to prove his point, Jesus adds, "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews." But I haven't raised an army. I haven't sought to stir up the masses. Why not? Because my kingdom is neither inaugurated nor maintained through human striving. We need to remember that my friends, in our friendships, our parenting, our politics, and our church life.

Whenever you find yourself pushing, pressing, or fighting, whether verbally or physically, to make someone believe what you know wants them to believe, or do what you think God wants them to do, wherever you are laboring with the crushing weight of trying to bring God's kingdom to pass, know you are laboring in vain.

If you don't apologize to your brother right now you are grounded for life! Unless you start listening to me like the caring husband you're supposed to be, I'm getting a divorce. I won't talk or go to Community Group with you until you admit that what you posted on Facebook last night is hurtful and wrong. I know you told me you're not interested in Christianity, but I'm going to keep arguing until you realize your reasons for unbelief are completely irrational.

Trying to do God's job for him never works, not only because God is too jealous for his glory, but because we are utterly powerless to change the hearts of men. We do not establish God's kingdom. Jesus does. We do not build God's kingdom. Jesus does. Wherever self-sufficient striving is masquerading as an altruistic concern for the kingdom of God we need to humble ourselves and acknowledge the truth. We're not seeking God's kingdom at all. We're seeking our own and need to repent.

The kingdom of heaven advances in all its life-giving beauty through situations that look and feel like massive setbacks in the kingdom of this world. Not only was being "delivered over" to the Jews not a problem. It was the very act of wickedness, Jesus used to accomplish his saving work in accordance with his perfect wisdom.

There is no human injustice, act of oppression, or experience of suffering on planet earth that can stop Jesus from establishing his kingdom or accomplishing his good work in our lives. We're part of a heavenly kingdom that "cannot be shaken" (Heb 12:28), that no power on earth can threaten or destroy. Our life is now "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). And the essence of his kingdom is not health, wealth, and prosperity in this life. It's far better. It's the joy of intimate relationship with the King of Heaven, both now and in the world to come. It's a reality Jesus alone brings to pass. So how does he do it?

3) JESUS REVEALS THE TRUTH OF GOD

When Pilate responds in v. 37, "So you are a king?" Jesus demurs. He knows what Pilates' worldly concept of kings and kingdoms falls woefully short of the kingdom of God. It doesn't come to pass through human striving, Pilate. It comes to pass like this. V. 37, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth."

He affirms the reality of his humanity. He really was "born" as a man. He affirms the reality of his deity. He came "into" the world because he had eternally existed apart

from the world as the one who created the world. And he came to earth for a specific reason: to “bear witness to the truth.” Jn 1:18, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

Jesus reveals the truth of God through the nature of his person and the character of his work, culminating at the cross where his manifold excellencies come most fully into view. The cross confronts us with the truth of God’s justice. He does not leave the guilt of our sin unpunished! And the cross confronts us with the truth of God’s mercy. He takes the punishment we deserve upon himself! The truth to which Jesus came to bear witness is chiefly the glorious truth of the gospel.

When Jesus speaks of his mission to “bear witness” to the truth, to the word of the gospel, he’s not leaving the kingdom theme behind. He’s filling the “king” language Pilate’s using with radically new meaning. “My kingdom is not from the world, and thus I do not establish my kingdom or exercise my rule the way the kings on earth do – through servants who fight for them. I establish my kingdom and exercise my rule through the life-giving power of my Word.”

The Word of God isn’t just something that exists out there in spiritual space like an encyclopedia on a shelf. It’s more than available information. It’s how God exercises his power in the universe. When he speaks, things happen. Stars appear. Storms are stilled. Demons flee. Dead men walk out of tombs.

The Word of the gospel is no different. It doesn’t just inform us of God’s power to save. Through the regenerating work of the Spirit, it changes us from the inside out. The gospel makes us love God where we once hated him. The gospel makes us want to confess our sins where we once hid them. The gospel makes us want to honor God with our bodies because we know he purchased us at the cost of his own blood.

By bearing witness to the truth of the gospel, to the saving power of his life and death, Jesus establishes God’s redemptive rule, he brings his kingdom to pass in the hearts and lives of his people. And his truth-telling work forces every one of us to make a decision: Will we believe Jesus or not? Will we embrace the truth he proclaims about our need for a Savior and God’s provision in Jesus, or will we persist in our stubborn way, convinced we’re good with God because we didn’t walk into the praetorium during Passover.

Once again, Jesus makes it personal. V. 37, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Friend, whether you listen to Jesus isn’t a morally neutral issue, an inconsequential choice where no matter what you decide, it’s all good. No. Whether you listen to Jesus or not determines whether your life is built on the truth or built on a lie.

Truth is not found by looking within yourself. Truth is found by listening to Jesus. You will never know the real God or the real you by listening to your voice. You will come to know the real God and the real you by listening to Jesus. At which point Pilate throws the postmodern flag a few thousand years before it’s time. V. 38, “Pilate said to him, ‘What is truth?’”

There’s a deep irony in the one person charged by Rome with determining the truth in Jesus’ situation writing off the very concept. Maybe he thinks truth is an irrelevant matter of philosophical speculation. Maybe he thinks there are so many versions of the truth it must be unknowable. Here’s what Pilate failed to grasp. The truth isn’t a “what.” It’s a “who.”

The truth is the revelation of the character and ways of God in the person and work of his Son, born as a man to rescue us from our sins. It’s not an esoteric, unknowable idea or a quest without a destination. It’s a person. It’s Jesus, the Lamb of God, who establishes the kingdom of God by revealing the truth of God and his power to save. And he does it all by becoming a substitute for sinners.

4) JESUS IS THE SUBSTITUTE FOR SINNERS

John repeatedly uses Pilate’s words to affirm the Lord’s absolute innocence. In v. 37, he goes back out to the Jews and declares, “I find no guilt in him.” If Pilate were a man of integrity, at this point, the legal case should be dismissed, and Jesus exonerated. But he’s not ruled by the truth. He’s ruled by a thirst for political power.

He recognizes the Jews vehemently disagree with his verdict. So he give them an option that maintains Jesus’ guilt without putting him to death. It’s a “save face” kind of offer. A political savvy option, designed to curry a measure of favor with the people. V. 39, “You have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” Pilate doesn’t actually believe Jesus is a king of any consequence. If anything, calling Jesus “the

King of the Jews” a subtle dig at their political impotence and the folly of their charge against him.

John carefully records the people’s reply in v. 40, “They cried out again, ‘Not this man, but Barabbas!’” Who was Barabbas? John informs us at the end of v. 40 that he was a convicted robber. Matthew refers to him as a “notorious prisoner.” Mark adds he was a “rebel,” an insurrectionist who “committed murder,” likely part of a guerilla band who terrorized Romans and wealth Jews alike in the countryside. In contrast to Jesus, this man is profoundly guilty on multiple counts.

The people’s response reveals they’re not at all concerned about truth or justice at all. They despise Jesus, especially his claims to divine authority. They would rather pardon and release a convicted terrorist than exonerate him. It’s a picture of the depth of our collective enmity toward God as sinners. Whether we are black or white, a member of the majority or the minority, our deepest innate allegiance is not to truth or justice but to our own authority. And we’re more than willing to discard both truth and justice, if need be, to maintain our independence from God.

They chose a man whose name, Barabbas, literally means “son of the father” over Jesus, the true Son of the Father. They chose a man who was utterly guilty over a man who was perfectly innocent. They chose a robber instead of the Good Shepherd. It’s a picture of what we all do whenever we reject Jesus for what the world offers. We’re choosing what will ultimately steal, kill, and destroy us. It’s the insanity of sin.

The exchange couldn’t have been more shocking. But it wasn’t an accident. It was ordained by God and directs our attention to the very heart of the gospel. As the Lamb of God, Jesus doesn’t establish the kingdom of God by fiat. He becomes a substitute for sinners. The innocent one is condemned. The guilty one is set free.

If you want to behold the love of God, friend, look here. Look at Jesus allowing a murderous crowd to trade him for Barabbas. And then consider, that is exactly what he’s done for you. He is not like the kings of this world who fight to preserve their life. He’s a different sort of king. A King who gives us life by laying down his life.

CONCLUSION

How are you responding to Jesus, not in years past, but right now? Are you listening to Jesus' voice? Are you paying attention to the Word of the gospel and the claim it makes on your life as a sinner who needs a Savior? Or are you scurrying around trying to maintain your own righteousness or establish God's kingdom for him? The humility we need to trust Jesus to bring his redemptive rule to pass in us and around us comes in two ways.

First, recognize the poverty of your good works to commend you to God. Confess to the Lord where you, like the Jews, have tried to cultivate your own righteousness in achievable areas instead of honestly dealing with the deeper sinful desires in your heart. Confess your need for a Savior.

Second, rejoice in the utter sufficiency of Jesus' work on your behalf. Rom 5:8, "While we were still sinners," while we were still resisting the truth like Pilate, eminently guilty like Barabbas, blind to the glory of God like the jeering crowd, "Christ died for us." He's done all that is necessary to make you right with God. Christianity isn't about you doing more for God. He's done it all, friends.

That's the good news of the gospel, friends. That's the message of Christmas. Jesus is the Lamb of God, who establishes the kingdom of God, by revealing the truth of God, as the substitute for sinners. None who hope in him will be disappointed, and whoever comes to him will never be cast out. This is the Word of the Lord to us. May it not return void.