

## **“Trial and Error”**

**John 18:28-19:16**

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Frankfort, Kentucky

March 26, 2017

This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible. It describes the unfair and cruel way Jesus was treated by the secular and religious leaders who were at odds over what his fate should be.

The religious authorities in Jerusalem had been upset with Jesus for some time. He, in turn, had been upset with them.

He saw corruption at the highest levels and exposed it. He held them accountable for their abuse of power and called on them to repent. He implored them to discern what was important to God and to build God’s kingdom on earth instead of theirs.

It had become clear to the religious leaders that Jesus’ prophetic voice had to be silenced. As the week progressed, they devised a plan to make this happen, and at first it worked as they hoped.

On Thursday night when most people were sleeping, Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was immediately taken to Annas ben Seth, the former High Priest who was the power behind the throne. After being interrogated by Annas, Jesus was shuffled off to the headquarters of the current High Priest, Caiaphas, where the Sanhedrin assembled and charged Jesus with blasphemy and treason.

Their plan hit a stumbling block, however, when they took Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate. Even though the Romans allowed the Jews a good deal of self-government, they were

forbidden to carry out the death penalty. The right of the sword belonged only to the Romans, making it necessary for the religious authorities to convince Pilate that Jesus needed die.

Persuading Pilate to bend to their demands turned out to be tougher than they thought it would be. I believe this was true for two reasons.

Pilate discerned the motives of the scribes and Pharisees and found them to be dishonorable. It was obvious to him this demand to have Jesus crucified was driven by hatred for a man who challenged their authority and condemned them for being corrupt. Pilate did not want to get embroiled in a religious tussle. He had nothing to gain by getting involved and taking sides.

Secondly, Pilate despised the Jews and saw this as an opportunity to humiliate them. By not granting their death wish and having Jesus crucified, Pilate would make it possible for Jesus to continue to be a thorn in their side. Pilate would enjoy watching the religious leaders squirm.

Pilate's internal struggle can be seen throughout this entire ordeal. At some point, though, I have to wonder if Pilate began to feel sorry for Jesus and genuinely tried to spare his life.

I don't know and suppose no one does. Whatever Pilate's motive was, he tried several times to secure the release of Jesus. It was only after the religious authorities threatened to undermine Pilate's relationship with Caesar, which was always fragile, that Pilate finally succumbed to their demands and had Jesus crucified.

Pilate's first attempt to set Jesus free occurred immediately after Jesus was presented to the governor in his palace. It was early in the morning, and Pilate probably did not want to be disturbed.

Quickly, he told the authorities to deal with this dispute on their own. When they refused to do this and insisted that Pilate order Jesus' crucifixion, he went back inside and interrogated Jesus.

Since that conversation focused on religious and theological issues, which Pilate had no interest in, he returned to the religious leaders to declare he found no basis for having Jesus crucified. Again, this decision met with persistent resistance.

At this point, Pilate thought he could put the religious leaders on the spot by agreeing to release a prisoner during Passover. When he gave them the opportunity to choose between Barabbas, a notorious criminal and murderer, and Jesus, to Pilate's surprise they chose Barabbas! When he asked them what should be done with Jesus, they shouted, "Crucify him!"

Before signing the order for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate instructed his guards to scourge Jesus as a final attempt to spare his life. When Jesus reappeared battered and bloodied wearing a crown of thorns and purple robe, Pilate appealed to the religious authorities for mercy. Surely, he thought, enough had been done to this man to placate their anger and to appease them.

Pilate was wrong. The rhetoric outside Pilate's palace intensified and the stakes increased. The religious authorities threatened to sabotage the relationship between Pilate and Caesar if Pilate did not have Jesus crucified. Reluctantly, Pilate gave them what they wanted to save his job.

Listen to the final portion of this discourse.

*"Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews.*

*But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"*

*"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.*

*"We have no king but Caesar," the Chief Priests answered.*

*Finally, Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.*

Historians tell us that Pilate was relieved of his duties soon after Jesus was crucified, and he was never heard of again. You have to wonder how this traumatic event and fateful decision changed his life.

What can we take away from this tragic story that can change the course of our lives? I pondered this for a considerable amount of time last week. Let me share some ideas for you to consider.

**The love Jesus has for us is immeasurable.** Receive it with a humble and grateful heart and share it everywhere you go.

Why would any human go through all that Jesus did that night at the hands of such corrupt and self-serving people? The only answer I can give you is that Jesus did this out of love, love for God and love for us.

Jesus was sent to this world to reveal the true nature of God, to confront injustice, to expose corruption, to offer an alternative vision for relating to people, to offer forgiveness to all who would repent and to encourage everyone to seek the will of God when making decisions. If this mission put him in harm's way and cost him his life, he was willing to pay the price. He would rather be crucified at the hands of his enemies than to be unfaithful.

What Jesus endured that night on our behalf reveals that love is willing to do the difficult. It is tough and resilient. It is brave and courageous. It is faithful and true.

It will not cut and run when the road becomes treacherous or the incline grows steep. It never takes the easy way out or looks for a reason to give up. It refuses to be swallowed up by hatred, bitterness or revenge.

Love stays focused, grounded and faithful even in the midst of adversity. As Paul wrote to the early believers in Corinth, "love never fails." (I Corinthians 13:8a)

There are times in all of our lives when we are called to love like this, and this may be one of those times for you. I truly believe the only way you can love people at their worst is with God's help. This challenge is bigger than you are. It is bigger than any of us.

The gospel calls us not merely to trade love with those who love us or those who are like us. It requires that we take love to a new height and give it away to those who have not earned it or don't deserve it. Listen to what Jesus taught his disciples.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”  
(Matthew 5:43-48)

I pray you will ask God to be with you this week as you interact with those you meet. You never know when you will be called on to give love away under the most difficult circumstances. Allow God to help you do this just as he did Jesus the morning he stood before Pilate and the religious authorities.

What can we take away from this tragic story that can change the course of our lives? **There is no shortage of people who will put pressure on you to do what is wrong.** Don't get swept up in a crowd and let fear overrule sound judgment as Pilate did.

Most people who want you to do something wrong will not give up easily. Evidently, you stand between them and something they want, and they are not going to go quietly.

They will work tirelessly to wear down your defenses and to nudge you along a path that leads straight to a dead end. Don't get caught in their web of deceit and destruction. Ask questions, seek the counsel of others and compare what they are asking of you with what you have been taught by those who truly have your best interest at heart.

Be the voice of reason in a crowd and offer a different perspective. Stiffen your spine and say no when necessary.

I know this is not easy, but rarely is it easy to do what is right in a world that values being served over serving, self-indulgence over sacrifice, deception over truth, greed over generosity, pleasure over principles, revenge over forgiveness, hate over love and arrogance over humility.

Doing right always comes with a price but so does doing wrong. The former leads to peace of mind, self-esteem and healthy communities. The latter leads to remorse, guilt and chaos. Ask Pilate and the ones who shouted, “We have no king but Caesar!” if you need proof.

There is a final lesson I want you to take from this text. **How you use power and authority will reveal much about the kind of person you are.** Make wise decisions.

How did the religious authorities use their power? They used it to get what they wanted.

How did Jesus use his power? On this day in particular, he used it to be a good role model, to stay focused, to remain faithful, to exercise discipline, to keep his composure, to confront evil, to stand up for the victims of injustice, to be the voice of the voiceless, to love his enemies and to refrain from retaliating.

Their use of power brought the worst out in them. His use of power brought the best out in him.

What does your use of power and authority bring out in you?