JESUS, THE KING OF TRUTH

John 18:28–19:16a

Key Verse: 18:37

“ ‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”

Can you handle the truth? It’s a famous saying because, for many people, truth is hard to handle. Truth can be explosive. Truth can bring down powerful people and exalt somebody who seems like a nobody. Truth can revolutionize us and the world. But the trend today is to see truth as subjective. It’s “my” truth or “your” truth, something within oneself, not outside of us, and so, all truth is seen as relative. But the real nature of truth is to be both universal and unchanging, not subject to mere perceptions or feelings. In today’s passage Jesus is on trial before Pilate, and their conversation soon turns to truth. Both Pilate and the religious leaders have a hard time handling Jesus’ truth. But Jesus says he came to testify to the truth. He invites those on the side of truth to listen to him. What is the truth Jesus is talking about? Why are there “sides”? And what does he mean to “listen to” him? May God speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at 18:28. Jesus and these Jewish leaders had been up all night. The author John shortens the account of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin and highlights his trial before Pilate. It began in the early morning, probably around 6:00 AM. John gives us the detail that the Jewish leaders would not enter Pilate’s palace because they wanted to avoid ceremonial uncleanness and be able to eat the Passover. Why does he point this out? He wants us to see their obsession with religious ritual but blindness to their own inner evil. Sadly, many so-called religious people are still like this.

Look at verse 29. They refused to go inside the palace, so Pilate had to go outside to them, early in the morning. In history humans all over the world have been subject to mob rule. People got rid of others because they didn’t like them, or for their own selfish reasons. But the ancient Roman society developed a legal system that has lasted until today and influenced the whole world. In Roman law, to execute someone, there first had to be a clear charge, witnesses, and evidence. It was to put an end to mob rule. So this was the first thing Pilate asked the Jewish leaders: “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

How did they answer? Look at verse 30. It’s a disturbing answer. It’s assuming that just because they were able to capture Jesus and bring him to Pilate, he must be guilty. It’s also assuming that because they are the religious leaders, they must be right. It’s quite condescending, and devoid of any truth.

How does Pilate respond? Look at verse 31a. Why does he say this? He probably thinks they’re not telling him what the charges are because Jesus has not done anything to violate the basics of Roman law, such as murder, or violent rebellion, etc. Pilate entrusts them to handle Jesus.

What do they say to this? Look at verse 31b. It’s another shocking statement. They can’t articulate any clear charges, yet they’ve already determined that Jesus should be executed. It’s so harsh! Where did their desire to execute Jesus come from? In fact, they’d been wanting to kill Jesus for a very long time (5:18; 7:1,19,25; 8:37,40). Often during his ministry they’d tried to seize him or stone him (7:30,44; 8:20,59; 10:31,39). Jesus had shown them many great miracles from the Father and had explained very clearly why he was saying he was God’s Son (10:31–39). But they never listened. In fact, though they were religious leaders, they were not really listening to God or learning from him, either (5:37; 6:45). Jesus had said boldly that they couldn’t understand him because they were too used to listening to the devil (8:38,40,43,47). It tells us that for many people, the language of truth falls on deaf ears. People can get so used to lies, to being dishonest about their own motives, to holding onto their pride, that truth becomes evil to them.

Look at verse 31b again. This verse also tells us that under Roman rule, the Jews were not allowed to carry out the death sentence—they had to ask the Romans to do it. We should stop and think about this for a moment. The leaders of God’s people the Jews were now asking the Roman governor to execute the Messiah God had sent to them. It was the ultimate treachery, and I believe, the worst evil ever committed.

But the author John goes on to tell us something. Look at verse 32. To John, even in the midst of the blackest evil, God in his sovereign will was working out his own plan and fulfilling his word. Here, the point is “the kind of death” Jesus would die. What kind of death was it? We know it was death on a cross. But what a horrible way to die—naked and bleeding and cursed in public. It was total humiliation. Crucifixion was a form of execution perfected by the Romans and reserved for low-class people as a warning.

It says in verse 32 that Jesus had predicted this was the kind of death he was going to die. What had Jesus actually said about it? He said he was going to be “lifted up” like the bronze snake in the desert in the days of Moses (3:14). He said his enemies would “lift up the Son of Man” (8:28). He said that when he was “lifted up from the earth,” meaning the kind of death he was going to die, he would draw all people to himself (12:32,33). Lifted up on the cross Jesus would become the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). Though humanly it was horrible, this kind of death for Jesus was God’s wonderful salvation plan for us.

Look at verse 33. This is interesting. Thus far there has been no mention of Jesus being a king, but this is what Pilate asks first. Though the religious leaders won’t give him a straight answer about Jesus, Pilate is trying to get to the point. How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 34. Pilate as the Roman governor of Judea for the past four years had surely heard all about Jesus and his ministry. Pilate surely knew that the Jews were waiting for their promised Messiah, which meant, their king. Pilate surely knew many questions were swirling around Jesus. Pilate surely knew people were wondering if Jesus had come to be their long-awaited king. Pilate also surely could see that these Jewish leaders didn’t want Jesus to be their king.

Look at verse 34 again. Let’s think here about Jesus for a minute. In the other Gospels Jesus says very little to Pilate (Mt27:11ff; Mk15:2ff; Lk23:3ff). But here in John’s Gospel their actual conversation is recorded. When Pilate asks if he is the king of the Jews, Jesus says, “Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?” Does Jesus not know? Of course he knows. Then why is he asking? Is he trying to debate him? Of course not. Jesus is asking this question to help Pilate find his own personal conviction. In other words, he’s reaching out to try to help him. It’s surprising. Jesus is about to be executed, but he’s thinking about helping this most unlikely person, Pilate the Roman governor. Why? It’s because Jesus sees Pilate not outwardly, as a powerful person, or just as his enemy; Jesus sees him as a human being, created in the image of God, who has a soul, who has the possibility of being saved. We can learn a lot from Jesus.

How does Pilate respond? Look at verse 35. He’s irritated. He’s saying he doesn’t really care if Jesus is the king of the Jews or not, because he’s not a Jew. All he cares about is the charges. As a Roman governor, how can he have a trial without any charges? He presses Jesus to confess what he’s done in order to end up in this situation, rejected by his own people and chief priests.

How does Jesus answer? Read verse 36. These are profound words. Jesus spoke them only to Pilate. In one sense, Jesus is refuting the assumption that he would be leading a rebellion to set up his own kingdom (Mt26:55; Mk14:48; Lk22:52). In fact, in Luke’s Gospel the religious leaders blatantly bring this accusation against Jesus to Pilate (Lk23:2). But Jesus makes it clear here that this assumption is totally false. At his arrest Jesus proved it; he stopped his followers from fighting to prevent his arrest (18:10,11). Jesus says it now proves that his kingdom is not of this world. Pilate knew very well about the kingdoms of this world. Human kingdoms are always based on human power, on fighting for position, on force, and on some individual’s quest for personal glory. Human kingdoms are always flawed.

But Jesus’ kingdom is so different. He says, “My kingdom is not of this world…my kingdom is from another place.” His is not another predicable earthly quest for personal glory and power. When he fed the 5,000, people wanted to make Jesus king by force, but Jesus withdrew from them (6:15). When people were going up to the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, Jesus’ own brothers wanted him to go there, become a public figure and show himself to the world, but he refused and only went secretly (7:2–10). At the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem, people were again in suspense about whether or not Jesus would declare himself the Messiah and set up a glorious earthly kingdom (10:24). But he didn’t do what they expected.

Then what is his kingdom? Earlier Jesus said it’s the kingdom of God, and only those who’ve been born again can see it (3:3). It’s the kingdom of love, where God rules not just the Jews, but all people of the world (3:16). It’s the kingdom of light, where all kinds of darkness and evil are exposed and truth is revealed plainly (3:19–21). It’s the kingdom of the Spirit, where racism is gone and true worshipers are welcomed (4:23,24). It’s the kingdom where Jesus our Good Shepherd gives us life to the full and makes us one (10:10,16). It’s the kingdom of life, where he will wipe every tear from our eyes, where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Rev21:4). It’s the kingdom where all who believe are welcome, including even Pilate.

How does Pilate respond to Jesus’ words about his kingdom? Look at verse 37a. Pilate thinks he’s at least got something now, some charge to work with. But it’s not what he thinks. Read verse 37b. Jesus isn’t saying he’s a king, especially not in the way Pilate thinks. He’s not seeking any earthly position. Then what kind of king is he? He’s the king of truth. Kings usually aren’t so interested in truth; they’re more interested in their own power and glory. But Jesus was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. Not only is his kingdom different from worldly kingdoms, but also he is quite a different king.

To Jesus, truth is most important. But he’s not just talking about any kind of truth. What’s the truth Jesus came to tell us? It’s the truth about God. It’s the truth that he’s the eternal God, the source of all life (1:1–3). Though this God is invisible, Jesus makes him known to us (1:18). He’s the God who sees everything (3:21), the God who is truthful (3:33), the God who is Spirit (4:24), the God who can put his love in our hearts (5:42), the God who gives people his glory and his approval (5:44 6:27), the God who is trying to teach all people (6:45), the God who has his personal will for each person (7:17), the God who speaks (8:47), the God who shows his glory to those who believe (11:40), the God who has all things under his power (13:3), the only true God (17:3).

When he says he came to testify to the truth, Jesus is also talking about the true way of salvation. He said in 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” It means to accept the truth that I am a sinner and that only Jesus can save me and bring me close to God. It is not an abstract truth, but a reality. And it’s painful. It’s painful to admit that I am wrong, that what I’ve been doing is wrong, that I am helpless, that I am evil, and that there’s nothing I can do to change myself. But his truth is also beautiful It’s a beautiful truth to realize that Jesus can make me right, that Jesus can cleanse me of my sins, help me, change me, empower me, sanctify me, and make me a child of God. This is the truth Jesus wants us to accept and experience.

He also says that only those on the side of truth listen to him. Why are there “sides”? Basically, it’s because of the spiritual reality of light and darkness. Many people are in the darkness. In the darkness they’re under the control of the evil one, the devil. They’re deceived by him. They’re led astray from God by him. Those who are helpless slaves of sin are in darkness. But surprisingly, even very religious people like the chief priests can be in the same spiritual darkness. It’s the darkness of legalism and self-righteousness. In the darkness people believe all kinds of lies. In the darkness people are full of hate.

How can we get out of the darkness? The only way is to start listening to Jesus. Not just hearing, but really listening. Putting what he taught ahead of my own ideas, my own common sense, my own desires. This choice to start listening to Jesus means to start taking a side, to start standing up for the truth. It’s not my truth or some people’s truth or some group’s truth; it’s Jesus’ truth. We’d all like to hide and evade responsibility and discomfort, but ultimately, each person has to make a decision: to be on the side of truth, or to side against it. Listening to Jesus and following his truth is hard. It causes people to hate us. It leads us to follow Jesus’ hard example, including his great self-sacrifice and humility. But it leads us to his most beautiful and everlasting kingdom.

How does Pilate respond? Look at verse 38a. Pilate is cynical and disillusioned. He’s also being evasive. And as a politician he knows so well that everybody advocates their own spin on the truth for their own agenda. But the fact that he’s asking may suggest that even he might be seeking truth. It’s the only hope Jesus can offer him.

In the rest of today’s passage we see how Pilate repeats three times that he finds no basis for a charge against Jesus. He tries to compromise by offering to release Jesus for Passover, but the crowd asks for Barabbas. He tries to compromise by having Jesus flogged. But the chief priests and their officials are only thirst for his blood and shout, “Crucify, crucify!” Pilate is disturbed when he hears from the leaders that Jesus might be the Son of God. But Jesus comforts Pilate by letting him know that the chief priest is actually way more guilty than him. From then on Pilate tries to set Jesus free, but the Jews and their chief priests are too powerful for him, and in the end he hands Jesus over to them, mainly for his own job security.

Throughout this trial it’s repeated that Jesus is King. He’s rejected, flogged and hated, but he’s the real King. He’s the King of truth. What are we going to do with Jesus? We all have to make a decision. No matter who we are or how we’ve lived, he’s inviting us today to listen to him, and ultimately, to come back with him to his kingdom.