

“PORTRAITS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE (#6):  
THE TRIAL OF JESUS”

(Luke 23:1-12)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 4-17-11 AM]

--I--

1. [BOTH SERVICES (9:30am MSG; 11am NRSV)] Read Text: Luke 23:1-12 and Pray.
2. How many of you have ever either attended or been involved in a court trial in some way? If you have (and it's *not* your career), you know that it can be a very stress-filled experience.

A--Well, the legal system of first-century Palestine that we read about in today's scripture was just as stress-filled – it was very different from our own, but it's purpose would have been the same: ...to establish (through testimony and evidence) the guilt or innocence of the accused, and (if guilty) to determine an appropriate punishment.

B--So, today as we conclude our series Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, I want us to explore the story of Jesus' Trial in Luke 23, and what it might teach us about our practice of Christian faith today.

3. Now, we call it the “Trial” of Jesus, but more accurately it's *three trials*: the two we read about in today's scripture where Jesus appears first before Pilate, and then Herod; and the story right before this where he appears before the Jewish Sanhedrin earlier that evening.<sup>1</sup>

A--Today's reading, of course begins with the Sanhedrin bringing Jesus before Pilate, and accusing him (in Verse 2) essentially of different examples of the *one* charge of “sedition/treason against Rome.”<sup>2</sup>

B--Now, many scholars have looked at these charges and concluded that they were total fabrications from start to finish – that since all they had against Jesus was the *religious* charge of blasphemy, they concocted these *political* charges to get Pilate to do what they themselves had no authority to do: ...*execute* him.<sup>3</sup>

C--And yet, in my mind at least, the idea that these charges were *completely* made up doesn't really make sense.

1--Think about it: Luke tells us that Pilate sentenced Jesus to death *after* the Jerusalem crowd shouted for Barabbas to go free and for Jesus to be crucified.

2--But *WHY*? Did Pilate order Jesus' death *only* because of historical precedent? Or was he really afraid of open revolt if he *went* against the wishes of this crowd?

(a) Historical references about Pilate seem to suggest *not* – that very year he'd already put down several revolts in the city.

(b) And he was, after all, a powerful Roman governor, and (from we know about him), a smart, courageous man who wasn't about to be swayed by the guile of the Jewish religious leaders, or the threat of mob rebellion.<sup>4</sup>

3—And so, if Jesus *wasn't* guilty, then *why* did Pilate go ahead and allow the crucifixion? <sup>5</sup>

D—Could it be that – at least from *Pilate's perspective* – there *was* enough truth to these charges to warrant a conviction of treason/sedition?

–II–

4. Let's **look briefly at some of the evidence against Jesus** from his own life & ministry. <sup>6</sup>

A—First, remember Jesus' close association with John the Baptist, who Herod (in today's story) felt was politically dangerous – well, being that Jesus was considered to be John's successor, you can understand why Herod assumed that Jesus was a threat, as well. <sup>7</sup>

B—Consider also that Jesus was not only from the region of Palestine known as Galilee, but that that was where he carried out most of his ministry.

1—Well, in that time Galilee was a known to be a hotbed for political discontent and nationalism – it bred people who became notorious terrorists of the day.

2—For example, it was in Galilee that the violent “Zealot” movement had been established several decades before to carry out a “holy war” against Rome – the very fact that Jesus was *from there* made him suspect in Pilate's eyes (Verse 5).

3—And, of course, let's not forget that Jesus' Disciples were from this “hotbed” region as well, and that several of them either *were* Zealots, or had nicknames with politically subversive overtones (e.g. Simon “the Zealot” & Simon Peter *bar-jona* / “terrorist”). <sup>8</sup>

5. What's more is that the scriptures tell us that Jesus came preaching “*the kingdom of God.*”<sup>9</sup>

A—Now, that may sound harmless to us today, but in that day and time that phrase was commonly used to signify the overthrow of the existing political/social order, and those who used it were usually considered revolutionaries.

B—And in support of these suspicions, throughout the gospel of Luke we find examples of Jesus' actions *directly* confronting the power and authority of the state – like his famous saying about taxes to Caesar, <sup>10</sup> and his overthrowing of the moneychangers' tables in the Jerusalem Temple. <sup>11</sup>

C—And then (as we heard earlier), when Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we today call “Palm Sunday,” he entered as a conquering king would have done, and in fact, the people even hailed him as such <sup>12</sup> – from a Roman perspective, Jesus actions on Palm Sunday were virtually a proclamation of open rebellion, & a direct challenge to the authority of Rome.

D—My point is that Pilate didn't really need the Sanhedrin to *fabricate* political evidence against Jesus – there was already enough out there to make him at least *appear to be* the seditious leader of a dangerous new revolutionary movement.<sup>13</sup>

6. So what, then, does any of this have to do with you & me? **What does this “Trial of Jesus” teach us about our practice of Christian faith today?** Let me suggest two brief things:...

–III–

7. First of all, I think it reminds us that **there's a cost to being a follower of Jesus** and to living by the will and ways of God.

A—You know, when Jesus did and said what he felt God was honestly calling him to do and say, he and his actions were often misinterpreted and misunderstood – they offended some people, caused others to hear what they *wanted* to hear, and in the end, some of these well meaning things got him killed!

B—Too often today I hear people who seem to think (and preachers who even preach) that Christianity is an easy religion that promises health, wealth, prosperity, and blessing to anyone who'll simply *believe* in Jesus.

C—But, today's story illustrates that just the opposite is true: ...that living & practicing a truly Christian life is difficult, often goes against culture, and is sometimes plainly *offensive*.<sup>14</sup>

1—And while we Christians here in America may not experience sentences of *physical martyrdom* like some other Christians do around the world today...

2—...There *are*, nevertheless, other "sentences" that we do experience: the emotional struggle that comes when we choose *not* to do certain things the rest of the world says is okay; the verbal derision of others when we stand up for our beliefs; the loneliness of being ostracized when we try to follow our God-inspired conscience.

D—In other words, the trial of Jesus reminds us that following the will and ways of God can sometimes carry a high price – that real Christianity is difficult and *costly*.

8. And the second thing I think Jesus' trial teaches is **the importance of** our *public* life matching our *personal* faith – of **our behavior matching our beliefs**.

A—We've already seen today that the evidence against Jesus' was irrefutable, even to Pilate:

1—Without question, he *was* a king (the King of kings and Lord of lords);

2—He *did* include even radicals as some of his disciples;

3—And yes, he came preaching the "*kingdom of God*" on earth – never mind that people *misunderstood* what that really meant;

4—The point is: his words and actions *matched* who he and others claimed him to be.

B—Can the same be said of you and me? Can others see our faith by our actions & behaviors? Or are we just “closet Christians” who look and smell good on Sundays, but who never let others see our faith outside of church?

C—You see, whatever else can be said about today’s story, it at least teaches us that *Jesus’* faith wasn’t fickle or hypocritical in any way – it’s fruit was evident in a very *public* way, and that *our faith* should be, as well.

1—It should show in what we do to help others, in our lifestyles, morals, and ethics, in how we treat our spouse, children, and parents, employees, and neighbors.

2—So, by the “evidence” of your own words and behaviors, how evident is your Christian faith to those around you?

–IV–

9. You see, more than simply being a legal process that condemned Jesus to death, the “*Trial of Jesus*” invites us to examine the authenticity of our *own* practice of faith, as well.

A—It reminds us of *the costliness of following God*, ...

B—... and invites us to consider whether our faith is mature enough for *our behaviors to match our beliefs* – for our “walk” to match our “talk.”

10. So, how authentic is *your* faith?

11. [PRAY]

12. [BEFORE BENEDICTION: As you leave in silence, I invite you to ponder this question: *If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Read Luke 22:66-70.

2. Specifically, the three charges listed in Verse 2 are: (#1) “perverting the nation” (e.g., encouraging rebellion against Rome); (#2) forbidding the payment of taxes to the Roman emperor, and (#3) claiming to be a king (the Messiah).

3. The argument here is that since the Jews no authority to carry out death sentences on their own, and since blasphemy wasn’t a capital crime in Roman eyes, the Jewish Sanhedrin concocted these political charges not only to get Pilate to try the case, but to make their evidence so compelling that Pilate *had* to execute Jesus.

4. Bible scholar Pierson Parker has this to say about Pilate: “*Certainly Pilate was not more lenient toward Jesus than he is here pictured. A harsh man, he had more than once so flouted Jewish sensibilities that bloodshed had ensued. During the Passover, Jewish patriotism was at fever pitch, and the governor would [have been] especially on the alert to suppress any sign of rebellion*” (Parker, “Trial of Jesus,” Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 4, p. 698).

5. In Verse 4 Pilate himself says, “*I find no basis for an accusation against him.*” Again in Verse 9 where Jesus appears before Herod Antipas, the implication is that while Herod finds Jesus amusing, he doesn’t find anything in him worthy of death.

6. For a more detailed description of the examples below, See S.G.F. Brandon’s classic work The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth (New York: Dorset Press, 1968), pp. 140-150.

7. Read Luke 13:31.

8. For example, Simon “the Zealot,” Simon Peter “Barjona” (“terrorist”), and James and John “Boanerges” (“sons of thunder”). Some believe that Judas Iscariot may have also belonged to the Zealot movement. Read Luke 6:12-16; and Mark 3:14-19.

9. Read Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:2, 11, 27 & 60; 10:9 & 11; 11:20; 16:16; 17:21.

10. Read Luke 20:22-25 and Luke 23:2.

11. Read Luke 19:45-48.

12. Read Luke 19:28-40. John 6:15 even lists another time when the people tried to make Jesus king.

13. As S.G.F. Brandon summarizes, “*These actions, it must be appreciated, were planned and initiated by Jesus himself, and supported by his followers and the people, who believed him to be the Messiah, the Son of David, and the divinely designated King of Israel. It was dynamic political action of a revolutionary kind, and it constituted a direct challenge to the Roman government of Judea, and to the Jewish authorities responsible for domestic affairs*” (Brandon, p. 147).

Consequently, all the gospel writers go to great lengths to exonerate both Jesus of any charges against him, and Pilate from the death sentence itself (perhaps because they were embarrassed by the scandal of the crucifixion, and because it represented a stumbling block for some of the Gentile Romans who they were trying to convert at that point in history). Brandon argues that “*the later Gospel writers [e.g., Matthew, Luke & John] were not really describing the trial of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, despite the apparent historical setting of their accounts. They were explaining away an embarrassing involvement of the incarnate Son of God with the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate*” (Brandon, p. 150). What’s more is that those same writers seemed intent on instead placing the blame for Jesus’ crucifixion on the Jewish authorities.

14. It’s true that in the end it is fulfilling, in that we are doing the will and ways of God, but it never promises us material wealth, blessings, or even physical health up front.