

John 18:28-40 “Is He King?”

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We left off last week in our study of John's Gospel with Jesus standing strong in front of the high priest while Peter's falling before a servant girl.

We know from other Gospel accounts that Jesus is then examined hurriedly by the Sanhedrin, that's the Jewish ruling council, convicted of blasphemy, and then now this morning rushed to the Roman governor Pilate.

And we get in this encounter another study of contrasts. Jesus and his kingdom up against the kingdom of this world.

And the question before us in this passage is, is he king? I know many people who enjoy the show, Is It Cake?

[1 : 12] If you haven't seen it before, contestants bake cakes to look like everyday objects, including the Mona Lisa. That's an everyday object, of course. church.

And at the end, you have to look at them carefully and you have to see if you can decide which one is really cake and which one is not.

Before, finally, they cut into it, that's what he's doing here, to find out what it's made of. Is it cake? So this passage, is he king?

It may challenge some of our ideas of what we think kings and kingdoms look like, of power and control. Look carefully at this interaction and see if you can spot the true king.

We pick up the reading of God's holy word at verse 28 of John 18 at what's now nearing six o'clock Friday morning. Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters.

[2 : 22] It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters so that they would not be defiled but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said, what accusation do you bring against this man?

And they answered him, if this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you. Pilate said to them, take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.

The Jews said to him, it's not lawful for us to put anyone to death. This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered, do you say this of your own accord or did others say it to you about me?

And Pilate answered, am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done? Jesus answered, my kingdom is not of this world.

[3 : 30] If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, so you are a king.

Jesus answered, you say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.

Pilate said to him, what is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him.

But 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? Jesus, they cried out again, not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. Pray with me. God, would it be that in this room today every knee would bow before the true king?

[4 : 45] That every heart here would delight in the king? By your spirit, would you work in us to that end?

Because we bow to lots of other kings and kingdoms. And we need your help. And we thank you for your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. As the sun rises here in Jerusalem on this Friday morning, the Jewish leaders find themselves in a complicated position.

They are in a hurry to finish Jesus off. Passover is ramping up. Tomorrow is the Sabbath. And the religious leaders, they're worried about how many people are starting to flock to Jesus.

They might lose what little freedom and control Rome allows them to have if the people get too stirred up. So they want Jesus dead and his followers snuffed out once and for all.

They want to deal with this guy. And for that, they need the help of Roman power. See, Rome gave the Jews some freedom. They allowed them to handle a lot of their internal issues on their own.

[6 : 04] Even the occasional stoning or two for things that got really bad. But only Rome could crucify. And isn't that exactly what would take care of Jesus and his followers?

His whole movement at the same time it would be taken care of. The so-called Messiah would be dead and with two extra nails in his coffin. Anyone crucified is cursed, right?

So no one would follow him anymore. And secondly, this upstart pretender to the throne, so far from liberating Jews from Rome, will be defeated by the power of Gentile Rome.

Can you imagine? Clearly no Messiah to follow here, they think. This will do it. So, the Jewish leaders take Jesus to Pilate.

Only they can't go inside the seat of Roman power, can they? Because they don't want to be ceremonially unclean from a Gentile house and not be able to eat the Passover feast that they're in the middle of partying about, right?

[7 : 19] Verse 28. Isn't that ironic? They're so careful with their religious ritual, while at the same time so careless with the heart of their religion right there in front of them.

They're outside the house to stay clean, while the one who would make them clean is inside. They want to celebrate Passover.

It's a feast about deliverance by Yahweh and into relationship with Yahweh, and they want to celebrate it without Yahweh. The I am himself in the flesh.

See, religious people sometimes dispense with Jesus so that we can relate to God on our own terms, our own ways.

The Jewish leaders feel well on their way to God already. So this Jesus saying, He is the way, that must be a distraction. I'm very familiar personally with this way of relating to God.

[8 : 34] Church attendance, checking off Bible readings day by day, coloring within the lines in my life. To be honest, it sometimes seems easier to control those things than to have Jesus mess with the darkness in my heart.

Even if he promises he's going to clean it. Just keep going and talk about Jesus some, you know, I mean, Christianity equals drop by church sometimes and tip your cap to God before some meals, but don't get too close to him, you know.

It might be uncomfortable. He might disrupt things. And we see here that religious ritual does not save, but it can blind us from true spirituality.

We might even miss Jesus. Confused religious people stuck outside. But Pilate comes out to them. What's the charge against Jesus? He wants to know. Well, their only established charge was blasphemy, and they knew Pilate wouldn't care about that, so they skirted the truth.

[9 : 53] Hey, listen, don't worry about the charge. Trust us. This guy's trouble. He'll create problems for you, Pilate. If you don't take care of him, just do it. Twisting the truth to get what they want, right?

They thought Pilate would go for it. Pilate won't buy it. Deal with him yourselves. Take him back. But that's a problem for the Jews, isn't it?

Because what do they want with Jesus? They want Jesus executed, crucified, cursed. They'll work the situation to get what they want from this representative of power here.

Problem for them is they have significantly misunderstood, underestimated Jesus. In fact, just notice the dynamic going on here.

While the Jewish leaders and the Roman power broker, while they argue about who's got the power, who will call the shots about Jesus' death, their back and forth, who is actually in control?

[11 : 07] Look at this. Verse 32. All this back and forth between the Romans and the Jews, this was to fulfill the word Jesus had spoken.

To fulfill what Jesus said about how he would die. Do you see this back and forth? This just a manifestation of what a kangaroo court this is?

I mean, not only are they breaking all sorts of rules, but the accused seems to be the judge. He's the one in control. So the Jews are convinced that crucifixion is the way to stomp down the Jesus for Messiah movement once and for all, to remove Jesus from the hearts of his followers.

Jesus is convinced crucifixion is the way he will be enthroned in the hearts of his followers. As lifted up means hung on a cross.

He draws, he says, all people to himself. He's told us he will buy that, give life to everyone who believes in him.

[12 : 21] Do you see that as a very, very different kind of king? Isn't it? Is a king though? Dear friends, I want to say this to you before we move on.

That you can trust. That you can trust to be in control in the worst times. This seems like his low point. And he is in control.

He is in control of whatever cross you're bearing right now. Whatever uncertainty you're facing this week, he is in control no matter what it looks like from your seat.

Don't be confused. He's got you. Well, Jesus is going to confuse Pilate too. Pilate also misunderstood Jesus because he knew about power and we know a lot about Pilate from history. He was practical. He was pragmatic. Pilate, whatever needed to be done to stay in power, to keep the peace, keep the Jews just happy enough not to rebel and just humbled enough that they wouldn't forget who was really in charge.

[13 : 34] Pilate decides to ask Jesus himself, are you the king of the Jews? Apparently that's the basic idea he took away from the crowd outside.

Well, that is a hard question to answer without context. If by king, Pilate means a king who will lead a Jewish uprising, rebellion against Rome, then no, he's not.

But if by king, Pilate means the promised Jewish Messiah, anointed one who will rescue his people, then yes. Pilate means. So Jesus seeks to clarify which one Pilate means.

And Pilate's very clear. He knows which one he's talking about. He misses, by the way, that Jesus doesn't threaten local Pilate, but does rival the power claimed by Caesar as divine Lord.

If Jesus is Lord, that's the problem for Rome. But Pilate responds, I don't care about your little internal Jewish religious squabbles.

[14 : 46] I want to know if you'll cause me problems. If you're gonna mess with my life, if you're gonna threaten my power, that's all I'm checking out here, Jesus. For many who are irreligious, I think that's their issue with Jesus.

One such friend said to me not long ago, if Jesus is king, it changes everything about my life. He can ask anything of me.

It's easier to dismiss him as an imposter, to live without God, than to have him boss me around. That's honest.

Maybe you feel more or less that way. You may not be wrong about what it means for changing your life if Jesus is king, but is there any chance that it would be changed for the better?

Is there any chance he would be a better king than you would or I would? Maybe a chance he'd be more than a boss. He will be different.

[15 : 55] That's for sure. Keep listening to him as he talks about his kingdom, his rule and reign. Listen to what his kingdom is like. Verse 36.

Jesus says, my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews, but my kingdom is not.

From the world. This, y'all, is really the crux of the contrast here. Jesus is highlighting with very unusual and intentional language, my kingdom.

The particular rule that I exercise is different from what you're used to. That's what he's saying. In fact, my kingship is unlike anything else in this world.

You're totally unfamiliar with what I'm talking about, Pilate. See, it's not of this world, is it? That means it didn't start within this world.

[17 : 02] Its origins are different. Where'd the power come from? He's talking about a divine source of power outside this world.

Just think about that for a minute. That's gonna change things, isn't it? If you don't have to manipulate and curry favor and campaign to get power from other people, if you've got another

source, that changes things.

If you can lead from below, like washing people's feet, and even if you're misunderstood, it's okay. It means the values of Jesus' kingdom are different.

The goals are different. But the realm over which he rules is different. He's looking to amass not land, but lives. He's wanting to gather not soldiers, but souls.

He gives us one specific example of what's unique about this. Unlike the kingdoms of this world, Jesus and his followers don't have to fight, do they? For control. They don't have to accumulate the most money, collect the most votes, win the most arguments.

[18:17] It's not what it's about in his kingdom. I'll just tell you, side note, this is why we as a church don't support one particular political party.

Okay? I mean, we like parties here, right? Especially the kind with cake and ice cream. I love parties like that. But this, Jesus' kingdom is not even third party.

It is above all parties. And that's really important because it means that he challenges, in this case, for us, Republicans and Democrats. He challenges us to examine our goals, our methods, inviting conservatives and liberals to find hope and strength in one place in the power of a God who's been at work in this world long before the American experiment even began and who's going to continue reigning long after the last president of the United States.

He says, rejoice! The Lord is king! Right? His kingdom shall not fail. He rules over earth and heaven, over death and hell, over all nations, over you, over me.

He's the king. There's one king. So maybe we start asking ourselves, okay, I got it. Jesus is, he's otherworldly and maybe if he is so otherworldly, is he like one of those religious gurus, one of those philosophical thinkers who just wants for his followers to escape this world, to ignore the earth, to avoid the people and the communities around them?

[19:55] Is that what Jesus is all about? Well, no. Again, Jesus' kingdom is quite different. Pilate, for his part, is just glad Jesus finally admitted to being a king, right?

Finally, we're getting somewhere. So you are a king! Jesus said, this response is a way of saying, yes, yes, let me explain.

You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.

voice. The king from another world has come into this world, right? In fact, he sends his followers into this world too.

Remember, he just prayed about that in John 17. While his kingdom didn't start from within this world, it also does not stay away from this world.

[21:01] We are told to pray for his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We are to put on the armor of God not for physical warfare, right?

Read the armor. What it's about is for spiritual warfare, for prayer, for salvation being spread, for truth being proclaimed. Isn't that what Jesus says here it's about?

Let me tell you why I was born, why I came into this world to which I do not belong, to bear witness to the truth, not to twist it to my own comfort, power, pleasure?

No. To reveal the true king, true power, the true God. Isn't that what John has been telling us all along that Jesus has come to do?

To show us in the flesh, in the body of man, what it looks like for the true God to live. He's showing us God in the flesh.

[22:03] So now we know what the true king is really like. So listen, part of being kingdom people, if you're called to be one of Jesus' people and to be about his kingdom, part of that is being people of truth everywhere, right?

Opposing lies, defending truth, fighting distortion. It matters wherever you do it. I love how theologian Albert Walters says it.

In the name of Christ, distortion must be opposed everywhere, in the kitchen and the bedroom, in city councils and corporate boardrooms, on the stage and on the air, in the classroom and in the workshop, by the way, in the leader you dislike and in the party you love.

Everywhere, creation calls for the honoring of God's standards. Everywhere, humanity's sinfulness disrupts and deforms. Everywhere, Christ's victory is pregnant with the defeat of sin and the recovery of creation.

Where do you get to declare in word and deed Christ's victory, his truth? Where has he sent you to be about his truth? What is truth?

[23 : 23] I don't know if Pilate is giving up, maybe, or if he's personally really intrigued by Jesus' unique description of his kingdom and this personal invitation he just received.

Everyone who's of the truth listens to my voice. What's he inviting Pilate to do? He's sitting right there staring at him. Pilate, listen. Listen. You can know the truth himself.

That's the irony. Pilate's staring him in the face, the one who has said, I am the truth. And Pilate's wondering what truth is. But he doesn't even consider an answer from Jesus.

He asks this question and instead he just walks back outside with the Jewish crowds now gathering around his house. Verse 38.

After he said this he went back outside to the Jews and told them I find no guilt in him. He's finished with his trial, his questioning.

[24 : 34] He's understood enough to know that Jesus is not a threat to him. And he's got an idea now, right? Passover. The celebration of freedom. The release of one Jew.

I see, Pilate sees it all coming together. But 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?

They cried out again, not this man but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber.

A robber. An insurrectionist. A rioter. Mark tells us in his gospel that Barabbas had actually committed murder as a part of the insurrection so you can understand why some translators translate this word terrorist.

This is a bad dude. I think that Pilate really believes they're going to pick Jesus to be released. He's their king after all. He reminds them, right?

[25 : 41] He's trying to help them out here. Pilate wanted this innocent man off his hands and off his conscience. But remember that even religious people at times dispense with Jesus so we can relate to God our own way.

We do that. Religiously sometimes. Or in this case, violently. the choice of Barabbas is pretty clearly not one for truth and godliness, is it?

They're not picking their new chief priest. He was a robber. Choosing Barabbas over Jesus is a choice for power, violence, outrage, rather than suffering, humility, and sacrifice.

The people's choice. The crowds have started to gather. What choice are they going to make? Which one is the real king?

Not Jesus, but Barabbas. Now it shouldn't happen that way with God's people, right?

[27 : 10] We should know better. We just learned that his kingdom doesn't find hope and political power and might and fighting. We sing not with swords loud clashing or roll of stirring drums but deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom.

comes. But we have this tendency to forget, don't we? Like Peter did just a few hours ago when he pulled his sword out in the garden.

Like so many who fought bloody crusades under the banner of the cross. Listen, the teachings of Islam make sense with protracted religious wars.

of the teachings of King Jesus do not. And it's as though Jesus says here so powerfully, if you want to know what my kingdom is like, look how my followers act.

it will be the proof that my kingdom is not of this world. Can we be honest with ourselves this morning?

[28 : 24] What do we tend to think will advance Jesus' kingdom most effectively? Strength or weakness? Promotion of self or protection of others?

Truth or expediency? See? we love power, don't we? I love winning.

Don't you? Isn't it tempting to think might makes right? It just feels right. right. In contrast to that line of thinking Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor in Germany last century, said, Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power.

Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.

That's a good challenge. where do we fall prey to the ease of aligning with power? Where do we think God's kingdom will advance if we just back the right horse, right?

[29 : 44] The one with the physical strength, the worldly resources to rival Rome, we're going to get them with the right guy? Where do we try to advance the cause of Christ with the weapons of this world?

Do you remember when God's people wanted a king the first time? What was so important to them? What were like things at the top of their list? They wanted a guy who looked the part, didn't they? And Saul was handsome and he was a head taller than the rest of them. They wanted a guy who would stand tough against the Philistines and Saul was a mighty warrior.

Until he ended up cowering before Goliath, passing his kingly armor to a much smaller, less experienced young man, David, whose only qualification was that he trusted God.

God saw his heart. David's performance was far from perfect. but while man looked at the outward appearance, God looked at the heart and saw a king who would in battle and even in repentance lead God's people after God.

[31 : 14] And here they have another such king. He's so different, isn't he? It's almost hard to recognize.

Could that be the king? He's not desperate for power and he's not afraid of those wielding it either. He's not promoting himself but he keeps promoting others.

He's not concerned primarily with outward appearance but he is very concerned with the heart.

Could this be the real king? If we cut into him, if we cut him open, what's he made of?

what we find is a heart not for self but for God and his people. Probably the most unusual thing about this king Jesus, he is not here first and foremost to boss you around.

If that's what you've heard, it's not the Jesus you read about here. Nor is he here to catch you letting him down and abandoning your post. Nor is he here to check your resume to see if you're worth keeping around.

[32 : 28] It's what the kings of this world do. They demand that their subjects give their lives to protect their king.

This king gives his life to protect his subjects. He's going to the cross in place of Barabbas.

In place of all God's people. In place of you. In place of me. That's the choice that this king makes.

We watch him make that choice. He's got two kinds of kings he could be. There's two kinds of kingdoms he could rule over. There's two ways to power for him.

And the choice that king Jesus makes is not to hold on tightly to power and glory while you might slip away out of his hand. No. He makes the choice to let go of power and glory to come and grasp tightly onto you and never let you go.

[33 : 43] That's your king. Even as the crowds shout for the release of Barabbas and they prepare to celebrate the Passover feast they shout crucify him for Jesus and the Passover lamb prepares for the slaughter for their very sins.

God I want to ask you this morning is he your king? He only becomes your king.

He only climbs onto the throne of your heart by climbing onto the cross in your place. God this night

he was betrayed he took bread he broke it and gave it to his followers as I ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take and eat this is my body given for you in your place do this in remembrance of me and in the same way after supper he took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins drink from it all of you for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes you say he's my king if Jesus is your king come run back under his protection again today he's the kind of king who gives his life for you so you can trust him for whatever you're facing today come taste that see that he's good but maybe you're not willing today to bow the knee to king

Jesus maybe you're holding on to something that the king says is sin but you want it anyway and you don't want to let go maybe you have thought you like the idea of Jesus but what you've seen from his followers is so distasteful to you that you have decided you no longer want to be associated with him at all if that's the case for you don't come to these elements this morning and take bread and wine but we invite you to come to Jesus listen to what's so wonderful about Jesus as king that even when his followers get it confused when they forget what his kingdom is really about they come running back to him he's the only one who gets it right even and especially in those moments where we blow it we run to him that's all of us who've forgotten who the real king is let's run back to him together now

I invite you whether you come to this table this morning or not to come to the true king whose reign is marked by his giving his life for you rather than demanding that you give your life for him let's pray and we'll celebrate him together Jesus what a different kind of king you are and we're so grateful might we revel in your love rejoice in your truth find our joy in your promised hope thank you for being our king and thank you for giving your life use these elements to remind us we can trust you today and every day we ask in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org