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## THE VERDICT ON JESUS

Luke 23:1-12

By

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Luke Lesson 105

## The Verdict on Jesus Luke 23:1-12

Many of you have had the experience, as I have, of sitting on a jury. You probably didn't volunteer for the job, but you couldn't get out of it and so you fulfilled your civic duty. The case that I sat through was a drunk driving charge against a young woman. Since her blood alcohol level was .2 and the legal limit in California at that time was .1, I thought that it would just take a few minutes to convict her. A slam dunk! Boy, was I wrong!

We got into the jury room and one man, ignoring the law and the careful instructions of the judge, said, "I can drink that much booze and drive safely. I think she's innocent." Others chimed in the same sentiments. It took another man and I three hours to get across the simple point: The law is .1; she was at .2; she is guilty of breaking the law. But, still, there was one woman who would not vote to convict because she said that we should not judge anyone, lest we, too, be judged! Finally, as 5 p.m. drew near, I said, "Look, the woman is guilty. We are going to vote guilty so that we can all go home and not have to come back tomorrow!"

Sometimes we are forced to make a verdict on someone when we would rather not. But to make no verdict is to make a verdict. To be neutral is to take sides. Maybe, like jury duty, we didn't ask to be involved. It was thrust upon us. And now we are faced with a decision that we'd rather not make.

That was the situation that Pilate found himself in on that April morning, probably in A.D. 33. He hadn't even eaten breakfast when there was a clamor outside of his accommodations in Jerusalem. He didn't even want to be in Jerusalem, but he had to be there. He much preferred his seaside quarters in Caesarea, away from the center of Jewish religious life. He hated these stubborn, difficult-to-govern Jews. He didn't appreciate their religion. Why couldn't they be more tolerant and open-minded, like the Romans? But here he was, governor of Judea. He couldn't afford to stay away from Jerusalem over the Passover, when thousands of Jews flocked to the city. He had to maintain law and order. Grumbling

to his wife, he got out of bed and went to see what these pesky Jews wanted of him at this hour.

He found out that they had a prisoner whom they wanted him to judge right then. Pilate didn't want to be bothered and told them to judge Him according to their own law (John 18:31). But they wanted to put Him to death, and Roman law would not allow them to inflict capital punishment. And so without warning that morning, Pilate had thrust upon him the task of making a verdict on Jesus Christ.

Whenever a person comes in contact with Jesus Christ, no matter how inadvertent that contact is, whether he realizes it or not at the time, he is faced with the most important decision of his life. If he decides to investigate further and eventually to open his life to Jesus Christ, his life and eternal destiny head in one direction. If he ignores what he has heard, or ridicules or rejects it, his life and eternal destiny go in another opposite direction. To do nothing or to put off a decision is to decide. Neutrality is impossible. Thus,

Our verdict regarding Jesus Christ is the  
most important decision we will ever make.

That decision, for good or for ill, turns around and makes us. In Matthew's account of this trial, Pilate asks the Jews, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" (27:22). That crucial question is the most important question in life for each of us: What will you and I do with Jesus Christ? Our text portrays three main characters or sets of characters who made the fatal decision to reject Jesus Christ. Let's learn from their negative example.

1. The men who rejected Christ teach us lessons to avoid.
  - A. The Jewish leaders: Willful, knowing rejection of Christ.

These men had seen repeated evidence that Jesus was their Messiah. He had taught as no man had ever taught. He had done powerful, undeniable miracles to back up His claims. He fulfilled numerous prophecies in their Scriptures. But they willingly, knowingly rejected Him because He was a threat to their power and position. John 19:11 reports that Jesus told Pilate that the one who delivered Him up to Pilate had greater guilt. Pilate was guilty for what he did, but the Jewish leaders, and Caiaphas in particular,

had greater guilt. The worst decision possible is to hear about Christ, to know what He did, and yet to reject Him.

Among themselves, the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy, because He claimed to be the Son of God. But they knew that this charge would not get anywhere before the Roman governor, and they needed his approval to put Jesus to death. So they trumped up some charges that would be of concern to Pilate: that "this man" (a term of contempt) was misleading the nation, forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and calling Himself Christ, a King (Luke 23:2). The first two charges were patently false. The third was true, but not in the sense of which they were accusing Him. He was decidedly *not* leading a political revolution. In fact, that was one reason they had rejected Him as Messiah! They wanted a political Messiah, but Jesus had refused to take on that role. But now the accusation in this twisted form was useful and so they flung it at Pilate. In so doing, they were breaking the ninth commandment against bearing false witness.

Note that these men who were acting so wickedly against Jesus were not only religious men, but religious *leaders*. But religious involvement is not enough. Outward religion that does not touch the heart is no preventative against rejecting Christ. Not only were they religious leaders, but they were *unanimous* that Jesus had to go (23:1, "the whole body"). These were the Pharisees and Sadducees, who normally were at each other's throats. But they could come together in their opposition toward Jesus. The majority, even a unanimous majority of religious leaders, can be dead wrong.

Not only were they agreed, but they agreed *passionately*. They accused Jesus to Pilate (23:2) and when he said that he found no guilt in Him, they kept on insisting that Jesus was guilty (23:5). When Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, they followed and vehemently accused Him before Herod (23:10). But even though they felt so passionately against Jesus, they were passionately wrong. In their fury, they could take a strand of evidence here and a strand there and twist them into outright falsehoods against Jesus. But their strong feelings had clouded clear thinking. They were bound determined on one thing, to get rid of Jesus Christ.

Why were these men so strongly opposed to Christ? It was not that they had suddenly become patriotic toward Rome and felt

that Jesus was a threat to Roman sovereignty. Pilate could see that! Mark 15:10 tells us that he knew that the chief priests had delivered up Jesus because of envy. The Greek word refers to being jealous of another's success with the evil intent of bringing him down. The fact is, Jesus was a threat to the Jewish leaders' power and prestige. He confronted their sin. He upset their tables in the temple and threatened the profitable religious business they had going. He convicted them of their selfishness and rebellion against God.

The main reason that people knowingly, willingly reject Jesus Christ is that they do not want to give up their sin. They resent Jesus confronting their comfortable way of life. They like running their own lives and they do not want to yield to Jesus as Lord. And so, like these religious leaders, they are vehement in their hatred toward Jesus as Lord and Christ. They will do anything to get Him out of their lives. They will even invent and believe in lies.

#### B. Pilate: Compromising integrity to save himself.

Pilate governed Judea for Rome from A.D. 26-36. He was a politician in the worst sense of the word. His aim in life was to promote himself. He was always concerned with acting in ways that would be advantageous to his own position and image.

He did not like the Jews and they did not like him. Early in his rule, he had angered them by sending his soldiers into Jerusalem with military standards bearing emblems that the Jews regarded as idolatrous. When they resisted, he threatened to kill them. But they lay down and bared their necks for the sword. Pilate finally had to yield or risk open rebellion, which he could not afford. He lost face in the deal. He also outraged the Jews by taking some of their money from the temple treasury to finance an aqueduct. They rioted and many were killed, resulting in Pilate's receiving a scathing rebuke from Rome. Jesus referred to another incident in Luke 13:1-2, where Pilate had mingled the Galileans' blood with their sacrifices. So Pilate and the Jews had clashed frequently. He could not afford word of another incident getting back to Rome. Although he hated the Jews and knew that they were accusing Jesus out of envy, he had to placate them to save his own neck, even if it meant the death of an innocent man.

Luke abbreviates the exchange between Pilate and Jesus (see John 18:33-38). He simply reports Pilate asking, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (23:3). In Greek, "you" is emphatic, and so the sense may be an incredulous, somewhat sarcastic question. Jesus had already been beaten in the face and spit upon. He hardly looked the part of a King! So Pilate may have been saying, "So this is what the King of the Jews looks like, is it?" After examining Jesus, Pilate went out to the Jewish leaders and gave his verdict: "I find no guilt in this man" (23:4). Pilate did not see Jesus as a political threat to Rome's rule.

At this point, he should have dismissed the Jews, given Jesus military protection to get out of town, and the case would have been over. But the Jews kept insisting that Jesus stirred "up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee, even as far as this place" (23:5). When Pilate heard the word "Galilee," he got a bright idea. If Jesus was a Galilean, then He fell into Herod's jurisdiction. Since Herod was also in town for the Passover, Pilate could send Jesus to Herod and get rid of the case (an old political maneuver called "passing the buck"! ). At the very least, sending Jesus to Herod might serve to patch up a quarrel that the two men had been having over jurisdiction. It was a win-win situation.

But Herod did not relieve Pilate of the case. He made fun of Jesus, but he implicitly did not see Jesus as guilty of the charges or he would not have sent Him back to Pilate (23:15). When they brought Jesus back from Herod, Pilate was forced to deal with the angry demand of the Jews. You know the outcome; we will study Pilate further next week.

But for now, note that he was a man who was willing to compromise what he knew to be right when he was under pressure to save his own skin, even if it meant the death of an innocent man. Three times he told the Jews, "I find no guilt in this man" (23:4, 14-15, 22). But in spite of this, he finally caved in to pressure and granted the Jews' demand to crucify Jesus because he wanted to save his own career and position. In so doing, he incurred the guilt of crucifying the Son of God. Simply put, Pilate put himself ahead of Jesus. That mistake had eternally horrible consequences. It always does!

There are many who make the same fatal mistake. They come into contact with Jesus. They sense that He is right, that He speaks the truth. But they know that if they follow Him, it will cost them. If they always tell the truth and are honest about financial matters they might not get that promotion. If they take a bold stand for Christ others might think that they are weird and not like them. Let's face it, you just can't make it in the business world if you don't cut some corners. So they yield to pressure and compromise what they know inwardly to be right and true.

C. Herod: Curious interest without repentance.

Only Luke includes the story of Jesus being shunted off to Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who had slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem. Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. This is the Herod whom John the Baptist had reproved because he had dumped his first wife and married his brother's wife, Herodias. She hated John and to keep her at bay, Herod put John in prison. But he also feared John, knowing him to be a righteous man. He often listened to John talk about spiritual matters (Mark 6:20). Then came the fateful day when Herod got drunk at his birthday party and rashly promised the daughter of Herodias up to half of his kingdom because he enjoyed her sensual dancing. She asked for John's head on a platter and Herod reluctantly complied so as not to lose face before his dinner guests.

After this, when Herod heard of Jesus' preaching and miracles, he was haunted by his guilt, thinking that perhaps John had risen from the dead. Jesus called Herod a fox (Luke 13:32), referring to his crafty cowardice. Herod had wanted to see Jesus for a long time because he was hoping to see some sign performed by Him (23:8). Now, finally, he got that chance. From his conversations with John, Herod knew all the right questions to ask. He found theology fascinating, and he wanted to hear what this famous teacher would say to his intelligent questions. But it was as if He were deaf! The longer Jesus refused to respond, the more foolish Herod looked in front of his men. His anger began to build. But rather than explode, the cunning Herod began to mock Jesus. "Did You run out of miracle power today, Jesus? If You're a King, where are Your men? What happened to all those fisher-

men followers of Yours?” Someone came up with a kingly robe, which they draped on Jesus, adding to the laughter and scorn.

Herod pictures for us a person who likes to dabble in spiritual matters, but has no intention of applying it personally so as to repent. He had sinned in committing adultery and wrongful divorce. When John confronted him, he should have repented and sought God's forgiveness. Instead, he yielded to his wife and put John in prison. But he still liked those theological discussions with John. Then he got drunk, lusted, and boasted in front of his dinner guests. It would have been too embarrassing to repent at that point. Off came John's head and Herod's conscience was seared.

But he still found spiritual matters fascinating. He was like people who find Bible prophecy interesting, but they never seem to make the connection that Bible prophecy is predicting their own doom if they do not repent. So Herod wanted to see Jesus. Think of the interesting dinner stories that Herod could tell if he saw Jesus do a miracle or two! He was curious about Christ, but when Christ's silence burned into Herod's conscience, he was not willing to repent. Instead, he diverted his guilt by pouring contempt on the Son of God.

It's easy to sing, "I want to see Jesus." But we need to realize that any time a sinner sees Jesus, he is going to be confronted with the need for repentance. It's interesting to sit around and discuss theology, but all sound doctrine leads to repentance and growth in holiness. While we find Herod's contempt and mocking of Jesus vulgar and repulsive, do we not treat Jesus with contempt when we make Him less important than the stupid TV shows that we give hours to watching? Do we not treat Jesus with contempt when we put our business ahead of Him? Most of us would jump at the chance that Pilate and Herod had that day, of a personal interview with Jesus Christ. But such an interview only benefits us if we respond with repentance. Pilate and Herod had the chance of a lifetime, to become friends with Jesus. Instead, they rejected Jesus and became friends with each other.

Herod teaches us not to dabble in spiritual matters. Don't treat Jesus as an interesting subject to discuss or as a sideshow to see Him perform. "Step right up, watch Jesus heal the sick!" If you treat Jesus as anything less than the Son of God who gave

Himself for your sins, and you use theology as an interesting topic to dodge the need for repentance, you are treating Him with contempt. That was Herod's fatal mistake. He, Pilate, and the Jewish leaders all rejected Christ for different reasons. They teach us to beware, lest we fall into the same fatal errors.

2. The Christ whom they rejected shows us why we should repent and trust in Him.

As Paul so eloquently put it, "although [Jesus] existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8). Note three things:

A. Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing.

Three times Pilate proclaimed Jesus' innocence (23:4, 14-15, 22). Jesus' mistreatment at the hands of sinners fulfilled prophecies that He Himself had made (Luke 9:22, 44; 18:32). It also fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies about Messiah as the suffering servant. Jesus is that spotless Lamb of God, the only sacrifice for our sins. As Isaiah 53:6 puts it, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." Yet He did no violence nor was there any deceit in His mouth (Isa. 53:9).

B. Jesus laid aside His rights in obedience to God.

Jesus had the right to speak the word and all of the Jewish leaders would have fallen dead on the spot. When Pilate told Jesus that he had authority to release Him or crucify Him, Jesus told Pilate, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). If Jesus had selfishly clung to His rights, we would not be saved. His voluntary offering of Himself as the sacrifice for our sins should make us trust Him and turn from all our sins out of love for Him.

C. Jesus bore faithful witness by His words and by His silent dignity.

When Pilate asked Jesus if He was the King of the Jews, Jesus could not say no and be truthful. But He could not say an unqualified yes, because he was not a King in the way the Jews had accused Him to Pilate. So He replied, "You say that I am." Luke does not record the further exchange between Jesus and Pilate, but John records how Jesus bore witness of the truth, but Pilate responded, "What is truth?" (John 18:33-38). Jesus did not respond to Herod's questions because He knew that Herod was not open to repentance. The lesson is, when Jesus is silent towards you, you are in deep trouble! He will respond to every seeking heart, but the Lord scoffs at the scoffers.

### Conclusion

Today, whether you were ready or not, you have had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Perhaps, like Pilate, you didn't even plan on it. You just thought it would be nice to go to church. But Jesus stands before you and confronts you with your need to repent of your sins. It is not enough to pronounce Jesus "not guilty" and get on with your life, as Pilate wanted to do. You must come to grips with who He is, the way, the truth, and the life, the only way to heaven (John 14:6). As the risen Lord, exalted to the right hand of the power of God (22:69), He also is the coming King who will judge all who reject Him. You can't dodge Him!

What is your verdict on Jesus? Guilty? You're seriously wrong! Not guilty? You're right, but that's not enough. "I trust You as my Savior. I turn from all my sin. I follow You as my Lord." That is the only correct verdict on Jesus Christ.

### Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: Intellectual problems with the Bible are a smokescreen to dodge the need for repentance. How should this affect our witness to scoffers?
2. How can a people-pleaser learn to become a God-pleaser?
3. What are some common ways we are tempted to compromise our integrity and deny Christ? How can we avoid them?
4. All sound theology should lead to repentance and growth in holiness. What are the implications of this? Are some theological issues not worth discussing?

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