



# Central Peninsula Church

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## Avoiding a Violated Conscience

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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Pressure from outside influences can affect our conscience and our choice to do the wrong thing or the right thing. Dale Rooks used external pressure to get people to do the right thing. Dale was a school crossing guard in Florida and he had tried everything to get cars to slow down through the school zone but nothing worked. At least nothing worked until he took an old hand hair dryer and wrapped it with electrical tape, making it look like a radar gun. Dale just pointed the thing at a car, and it's incredible how quickly a driver would hit the brakes. He says, "It was amazing how well it worked."

We've spent a couple of weeks looking at the events between Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. We've seen false witnesses, bogus charges, and the abuse of a legal system that the Romans had always taken pride in. Today we'll see the ultimate failure of that system...an innocent man, Jesus, will be sentenced to death. Don't get me wrong, neither Jesus nor His heavenly Father were beaten by a better lawyer.

Throughout all of these legal proceedings, Jesus patiently waits for Pilate to give the verdict He knows His Father has purposed from the beginning of time. We know Jesus had committed Himself to God's will because in Luke chapter 9 we read, "**As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.**" No, the events of this day were not out of God's control; in fact, they were very much in His control. This trial was a necessary part of God's plan to bring salvation and hope to the world.

But what we see then and even to this day is that God works His plan through people. In this passage, God works His plan through Pilate. But the process Pilate uses and the choices he makes are his. No one pressures him to do anything. Well, at least not God. Pilate makes his own choices and what he chooses to do in this passage is clearly a violation of his conscience.

God gives us our conscience to help us know right from wrong. It is given to us to help us know when we are acting contrary to what He desires. Ernest Hemingway may not have been a Christian but he understood why God gave us a conscience. He once said, "What is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after." That's well said and it's as simple as that. God works through our conscience to reveal when we have chosen to say or do something that will hurt us and that goes against His desire for our best!

Earlier I gave you an example of how pressure

from outside influences can cause us to do the right thing. But failing to respond to our conscience in the face of external pressure can be disastrous. Let me remind you of a story from recent headlines.

Pfc. Lynndie England was a central figure in the mistreatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. She and other soldiers were shown sexually humiliating Iraqi prisoners in photos taken in 2004. One photo showed her smiling and giving a thumbs-up next to a group of naked prisoners.

At her trial the judge asked her about the photo that depicted her smiling. England said when first asked by the other soldiers to pose for the pictures she said, "No, no way." "But they were very persistent," she told the judge, "bugging me and so I finally said, 'OK, whatever,'" When England entering her guilty plea on May 2, 2005, she said, "I had a choice, but I chose to do what my friends wanted me to do."

In this passage we'll see how pressure from people can cause us to violate our conscience and lead us to do the wrong thing. As we look at Jesus' second appearance before Pilate, we'll see what lead him to compromise his sense of right and wrong. Then we'll look at some safeguards we have to deal with external pressures without caving in to them. We'll see how we can strengthen our ability and resolve to do the right thing...to do what God desires.

In the verses before we hear Pilate's verdict, we see his conscience in conflict with the desires of the chief priests and Jewish leaders. This day was not progressing as he would have liked. Early in the morning, he was called to deal with a confusing and heated legal dispute between the chief priests and religious leaders and a man named Jesus. As we saw last week Pilate took advantage of Herod's presence in the city and was able to pass off this dilemma to him. He then looked forward to a peaceful day. After all, it was Passover. He anticipated that Herod would settle this religious dispute without any further bother to him.

But Pilate was wrong and the whole mess was back in his lap. It reminds me of a scene from the movie *The Incredibles*. In the beginning of the movie Mr. Incredible, a superhero dedicated to saving the world from evil, vents his frustration to a reporter: "No matter how many times you save the world, it always manages to get back in jeopardy again. Sometimes I just want it to...STAY SAVED! You know...for a little bit. I feel like

the maid: 'I just cleaned up this mess! Can we keep it clean for...10 minutes?'"

We all know that feeling. The Christian author Leigh Anderson expressed it this way, "Most things that discourage me are dwarfed by some new problem within seventy-two hours." Well, for Pilate, it took much less than seventy hours. Jesus was brought to him again and this time he'd have to deal with it. He starts off well but in all of our lives, what counts is not how well we start but how well we end.

Let's see how Jesus' third trial begins in vv. 13-16:

**"Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him.'"**

First, I'd like to point out that Pilate has called not only the chief priests and Jewish leaders to meet with him but also the "people." This is important but we'll see why a little later. What are most significant here are Pilate's words to the crowd. Could he have expressed the fact of Jesus' innocence in any more certain or concise terms?

Pilate's words fit with what we've learned about Luke's purpose in writing this gospel and his later letter, the book of Acts. They were written, as evidence to be presented in court, that Christianity, this new sect of Judaism, was not a threat to Rome's authority. From the mouth of a sitting Roman Governor comes the testimony that Jesus, the founder of the sect, never incited any rebellion against Rome. Pilate also says he sought a second legal opinion and Herod agreed with his findings through his lack of action against Jesus.

But in the very same statement Pilate expresses his intent to punish and release Jesus. The likely punishment intended was a severe beating that, although painful, was not intended to result in death. This kind of punishment was meant to warn the accused and to teach them a lesson. It was meant to persuade them to change their behavior.

But for what was he being punished? Pilate had just proclaimed His innocence. Roman law forbid the punishment of an innocent man. So, in stating his intentions to punish Jesus, Pilate violates the law and his conscience. Why did he say this? The answer is that he was more concerned with the desires of his hostile audience and the consequences of their displeasure than in doing what was right. Although he has given the order, we see him making a move

toward violating his conscience.

Next, in vv. 18 and 19, comes the reaction of the crowd and Pilate must have been amazed and frustrated at what he heard. **"With one voice they cried out, 'Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!' (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)"**

If it wasn't clear before, Pilate had to know now that this was not going to be a good day. In light of his proclamation of Jesus' innocence, he had made a more than generous offer to have Jesus punished. Let me explain something about the "people" - remember them? Pilate included them in the audience to try to balance out the unreasonable and extreme demands of the chief priests and religious rulers. But Pilate's attempt to stack the deck in favor of leniency backfired. The people who had hailed Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem just a few days before had now sided with the Jewish leaders in seeking Jesus' life.

By the way, some of you may have noticed that I omitted verse 17 when I read this passage. Anybody catch that? Verse 17 reads, **"Now he (that is Pilate) was obliged to release one man to them at the feast."** If you didn't notice it, don't worry. It reads so smoothly without verse 17 that it wasn't until the third time I read the passage that I noticed my translation went directly from verse 16 to verse 18.

The reason my and possibly your translation omits verse 17 is that it likely was not a part of Luke's original letter. The verse is not found in some of the earliest copies of Luke. A possible explanation is that a scribe may have added it from another gospel as a marginal note to help readers understand why the crowd would think they could request the release of a prisoner. At any rate, whether your translation does or doesn't have verse 17, it clearly is found elsewhere in the gospel record. With that explanation, let's move on.

Instead of recognizing and appreciating Pilate's compromise offer to their demands they become more insistent. Their cry of "Away with this man (Jesus)" is a demand that he be led away to His death. Instead of Jesus' release, they request the release of Barabbas.

Now Barabbas was not a harmless "misdemeanor" type criminal. His offenses were not mild but heinous. In fact, they are the very things Jesus was falsely accused of doing. Barabbas had been imprisoned for insurrection, open rebellion against the Roman government. He had fought to end its rule and taxation. In the insurrection he had also committed murder. Whether we are talking about Roman soldiers or Jewish civilians is unclear. To get the right picture, his crimes would be comparable with the violent attacks we've seen recently in Iraq and other parts of the world. The word "murder" implies it was a "slaughter." Unlike Jesus, his imprisonment and pending execution was completely justified.

Yet know this, even if Pilate was disappointed in the crowd's reaction, he does not put a stop to the proceedings. He has already affirmed Jesus' innocence and offered a compromise but with no effect on the crowd. Instead of pulling the plug, his concern to appease their desires compels him to continue. So he tries another approach in vv. 20 and 21: **"Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'"**

He makes an "appeal"...a plea for Jesus' release. Why? Because v. 20 says he "wanted to." He wanted to release Jesus because Pilate knew that their demand was wrong and he didn't want to have any part of it. It violated Roman law. It violated his conscience and so he takes another step towards violating his conscience for he is giving over control of his conscience to them. In essence he was saying, "Come on people...let me do the right thing here." He was asking them for permission to do the thing his conscience was telling him to do. He was abdicating his responsibility for his own decisions and actions.

By the way, it's interesting to notice the growing hostility of Jesus' accusers. When they meet with Jesus immediately after His arrest, their questions are asked in a matter of fact manner, with little emotion. In the first visit to Pilate, they made accusations and "insisted" that He should be dealt with. Before Herod, the high priest and the teachers of the law made "vehement" accusations. Now, before Pilate for a second time, they have "cried out," "shouted," and it's going to get worse.

We can see from their escalating hostility that accommodating or giving into the desires of others when it violates our conscience will never satisfy their demands. The lesson we need to learn is that when you give into or try to accommodate others by compromising your sense of right and wrong, it never works. They will always keep crying and shouting for more until they get everything they are demanding. Pilate is at his wits end. He's tried every way he knows to deal with their desire to punish Jesus and now he makes a final attempt to reason with the crowd in vv. 22-25.

**"For the third time he spoke to them: 'Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.' But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will."**

Pilate asks them to give him some reason, any reason to justify their demands. If they can't, he repeats his intention to have him beaten and then released. He's asking for some argument or some obscure legal loophole he can use to order Jesus' death. But it's too late. The crowd knows they have him where they want him. He's gone

too far in their direction to turn back and ignore their demands. At this point the shouts are loud and the demands are insistent. The external pressure on Pilate is overwhelming.

Verse 23 ends with the words, **"their shouts prevailed."** Their persistence has overpowered Pilate's conscience. Asking for a reason to grant their demands, they offer none. They don't need to...Pilate's will, decision, and behavior was in their control. His sense of right and wrong and his intention to give a just rather than an unjust verdict is not important anymore. All he wants to do is remove the unpleasant pressure he has experienced all day. Instead of asserting his conscience in the face of unconscionable demands, he turns his back on what he knows is the right thing to do and becomes a participant in the wrongful execution of the innocent man, Jesus.

Verses 24 and 25 give Pilate's final words on the matter. His final decision is to allow the Jews to inflict the unjust penalty of death. He has forsaken his conscience and grants the crowd its demands. Barabbas, the one worthy of death, is spared. Jesus' life is substituted for the one who truly deserves death.

Let's not miss the significance of this substitution. We are like Barabbas. A correct understanding of what the Bible says about sin makes each of us guilty and deserving of death. But as He did for Barabbas, Jesus dies in our place. He becomes our substitute.

Some of you hearing these words today have been resisting responding to God's call to enter into a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. Your conscience is telling you that it's the right thing to do but you haven't done it yet. If that's you, then all that's needed is to acknowledge and accept that Jesus substituted His life for yours when He died on the cross. Go in prayer to God today and tell Him you are guilty but you welcome the payment of His Son Jesus on your behalf. Today you can respond to your conscience and do the right thing. Your life will be changed forever. Life will be new and you'll learn to live without the weight and guilt that has kept you separated from Him.

After Pilate gives his ruling, the story in Luke shifts from him back to Jesus and His crucifixion. But do we know anything about the rest of Pilate's life? Well, it appears he did manage to maintain his political position, but only for a while. History tells us that shortly after Jesus' trial and crucifixion, Pilate was removed from office and banished to Gaul.

But after his banishment, history is unclear. There are at least two traditions concerning how Pilate lived out his remaining years. We don't know for sure which one is true. One tradition simply says that while in exile, he committed suicide. But the Coptic Church has another tradition. They teach that while in exile,

Pilate became a Christian under the influence of his wife and that he fellowshiped with other believers.

What do you think happened to Pilate? Well, I'm an optimist and what I appreciate about this second option is that it reinforces a correct perspective that the failures of our conscience are only in our past...they are not a predictors of our future. In the Coptic tradition, although Pilate had violated his conscience, by the end of his life we see he has learned from his failure and secured his future in Christ. It is possible and what God desires is that we take the instances we violate our conscience and use them to motivate us to grow and change.

So how can we avoid the mistakes that Pilate made...the ones that led him to violate his conscience? I want to offer you a few ideas and safeguards. Basically we need to develop habits that help us stay focused on God's desires instead of violating our sense of right and wrong by following the desires of crowd.

**In order to keep from violating your conscience, you must understand that your conscience becomes violated through a series of small steps rather than one giant leap.**

Remember what happened to Pilate? He started off on the right path but gradually, in small steps, he moved away from doing the right thing until ultimately, he acted in total opposition to what he knew was right. We need to watch for tiny cracks in our resolve to do what God desires. When you feel pressure coming from outside and you begin to act contrary to God's truth, you need to recognize that the violation of your conscience has begun.

It may be pressure to cheat on a test or cheat on your taxes. After all, everyone else does it. You may feel pressured to run up a debt because all your friends have better things than you. Whatever the pressure, when you see yourself choosing to follow the crowd's desires rather than God's, you need to take action. You need a reality check to identify what it is you are thinking and doing today that you never would have considered yesterday. Recognizing these subtle shifts reveals your need for a course correction. And here's how you begin that process.

**First, you must fortify your conscience through Scripture and prayer.**

God's Word tells us all we need to know to keep from violating our conscience. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, **"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."**. That about says it all. God's Word will teach us what we need to know to keep a clean conscience. And if we start to stray, God's Word is there to rebuke, correct, and train us, as needed. By constantly reading the Bible we are bombarded by

God's desires for us. And if we should get off track and start to shift from following God's desires, what then? That is where prayer comes to our aid. Instead of thinking God is angry with us, it is just the opposite. He understands our limitations. James 1:5 tells us that, **"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."** God doesn't look down on us because we need His help; He wants us to seek Him in our confusion and failure.

**Another safeguard is that you must refuse to turn over your conscience to the control of others.**

What was Pilate's mistake in v. 20? He "appealed" to them. He asked them to let him do the right thing. He put himself on the defensive. No...what we know from God's Word is the only truth there is. If someone objects to what our conscience tells us is right, we don't need to apologize or change our stand to fit in with the crowd's. Galatians 5:22 and 23 are powerful: **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."** Did you get that ending? When we live according to God's Word, no one can accuse us. Oh, they may do it anyway but I don't have to let it control me. It's always been my understanding that "someone's accusation is not my conviction." If that saying helps you stay focused and stand firm then steal it from me and use it for yourself.

**That leads us to the next safeguard; you must seek and listen to godly counsel.**

Pilate's wife counseled him to not violate his conscience in his decision about Jesus. Although Luke's gospel doesn't record the exchange we find it in Matthew 27:19: **"While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.'** Just think how things would have turned out better for Pilate if he had listened to his wife. Yeah, I know it hurts to admit guys but it's the truth. And married or not, we all know people we can go to or that God sends to us to give us wise and godly counsel. They may even be the answer to our prayer for wisdom. But do we listen? If not, it may be to our ruin.

**Finally, you must accept responsibility for your actions.**

If we won't admit to what we have done, we will never grow from it. Pilate thought he could take that route. Again it is in chapter 27 verse 24 of Matthew's gospel that we read: **"...he (that is Pilate) took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'"** Saying it doesn't make it true. Pilate had a part in it. He could have acted in accord with his conscience but he didn't.

When we, like Pilate, choose to deny our failures, we cannot learn from them. But when we confess them, like Pfc. England, we can experience God's forgiveness. We can experience the same freedom and excitement for our future as Paul did when he wrote Philippians 3:13 and 14, **"...But**

**one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”**

Using these safeguards we can triumph over the pressures of the crowd. We will be able to avoid violating our conscience. When we do fail, we will be able to turn to God for forgiveness and a new start.

