

Sermon Notes, March 12, 2017

The Passion of Jesus: Above All Earthly Powers, John 18:33-38; 19:8-11

We are looking at what the gospel writer John says about the last hours of Jesus' life. Here we're looking at the confrontation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. In this confrontation Pilate says to Jesus, "I have power to crucify you." And Jesus says, "The only power you have is given to you because it's part of a plan. Yes, I will be crucified. You think it's your idea, but actually, it's part of God's plan. He's the One who has given you the power to do it."

This conversation is so important. Jesus tells Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." This is a confrontation of Jesus Christ with political power. The Gospels want to teach us something about how Christianity relates to political power. We're going to learn here:

The limits when it comes to political power, the problem, and the transformation of power.

1. The limits of political power

When Jesus is asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate is not actually asking a theological question. He's really not interested on whether or not Jesus is the Messiah according to the Scriptures. What he's actually asking is, "Are you a political leader? Are you leading a political movement? Are you someone who's trying to undermine Roman power?" Political power is the power to make people do things. But look, Jesus says, "I am not a political leader. If I were, my servants would fight." When he says, "My servants would fight," he's not just talking about physical aggression. When Jesus says to Peter, "Put away your sword. Don't draw the sword in my name," you must keep in mind in the Bible the word *sword* is all about political power. Jesus is saying, "I don't want anyone drawing the sword in my name. My kingdom is not, and will not, be moved forward through political power or coercion."

Jesus is telling us in no uncertain terms that “I am here to change the way people actually live in the world. Christianity is not this otherworldly thing that is just good for your private life and it doesn’t affect the way people actually live in the world.”

N. T. Wright captures this perfectly. He writes,

We must say that the ‘kingdom’ of which Jesus was speaking was not *from* this world, but was emphatically *for* this world.

Jesus says, “I have come to bear witness to the truth.” That actually is what really does influence the way people live in the world. What Christianity brought was not simply a spiritual movement but a whole new culture, a counterculture, an alternate way of being a human society. Because Jesus bore witness to the truth, and the Christians bore witness to the truth. They changed people’s minds, and the Christian witness, by word and deed, changed people’s worldviews.

2. The problem of political power

Jesus says, “I came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” Pilate looks at him and just laughs and says, “What is truth?” Pilate saying, “Truth? What in the world does truth have to do with power? I don’t care about truth. All I care about is are you a threat to power?”

Václav Havel in 1991, gave an acceptance speech to an award he was getting, the “*Temptations of Political Power.*” He said that when you seek political office, you have two motives in the heart. He knows from experience. You both want power as a means to an end to serve others and the truth, but you also want power as an end in itself to fill that need you have to convince yourself you’re a significant person. He says virtually everybody, when they are seeking political office, only admit to themselves and other people they only have the first motive. They won’t admit they have the second motive. They don’t seem to know they have the second motive. He says if you get into political office and you have both those motives and you don’t know you have the second motive, the second motive will overcome the first.

You see, we were made to know the delight of the Father's love, and have our identity rooted in him. We're built to be his sons and his daughters. If we don't have it (and we don't have it) and you get near power, you're going to use power to fill it up, and it'll become a means to an end. Therefore, it will be abused. You will abuse it, and you won't even admit you're doing it. What will change that?

3. The transformation of power

At the end of the first interrogation, Jesus said, "The reason I've come into this world is to bear witness for the truth." Do you want to know the Father, the Lord, utterly delights in you? When you see Jesus Christ, not coming to take power and to take glory, but to empty himself of his glory and to empty himself of his power, die on the cross for you, there and only there will you actually have that absolute assurance of his delight in you.

When that gets into your heart and to the degree that it fills your heart, to that degree now it's safe for you to go into political office. Do you think Christianity is trying to say, "Oh, we don't want Christians to be in politics"? Of course, not. Every person, whether you're in political office or not, who has a heart filled with the knowledge of what Jesus Christ has done, you're going to be out there changing the world through your witness to the truth.