

Driven By What We Fear
John 19:12

We come to a turning point with the paragraph before us where the official pronouncement is handed down and then Jesus is going to be taken and crucified. And this paragraph deals with the ongoing dialogue between Pilate and the religious leaders about what to do with Jesus. And verse 12 really is the tension. You have two halves. One where Pilate wants to release Jesus, and the other where the Jews want Jesus put to death. And they want Pilate to carry out their evil and diabolical plan.

And in one sense, you really do not know who is more reprehensible. Is it Pilate who vacillates and cares more about the things of this world — position and power and being in the good books of the emperor, rather than to carry out justice, and remember what we are talking about is the death of an innocent man? Then there are the Jews. These are the children of Abraham. These are individuals who knew the Scriptures and promises of the Old Testament, and they had witnessed not only the teachings of Jesus but also the miracles of Jesus, and they did everything they could to subvert the truth and deny who he truly is. Both play their part, and both are wicked and carried by the lusts that are in their hearts.

And it is incredible to look at Pilate, because Pilate is presented, although powerful, as a weak man who is driven by various fears in this text. One is the origin and nature of Jesus who is accused of these crimes. He realizes, as we saw last time, that there is something so different about Jesus. No one ever appeared in his presence like Jesus. He is not sure if this one is truly of this world or maybe a messenger from above. And he is fearful of Jesus — fearful even as Jesus speaks that the authority Pilate now exercises has been granted to him from above. He is now thinking about eternity and about accountability. Pilate is no atheist. He is certainly not a God lover, but realizes something of the truth in Jesus' words. He is driven by the fear of this one that he had just beaten.

But he is also fearful of the Jews who are before him. If he wasn't then he would have banished them from his presence and released Jesus immediately. Three times he has announced the innocence of Jesus, but still has not released him. The Jews have brought serious charges up against Jesus. Charges that Pilate cannot ignore, but charges that can't be substantiated. Seeking to pervert the nation and causing an uproar, refusing to pay taxes, and claiming to be king of the Jews. Listen to Luke 23:2, **“And they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.’”** These were such fearful accusations that if Jews sent word back to Rome that he released such a man he could certainly lose his position, power and maybe even his life. He feared the damage and ruin these individuals could do to his life.

And then he feared Rome, or in particular, he feared Caesar. The ruler at this time was Tiberius Caesar who was known more for his cruelty and his irrational suspicions that almost everyone was unfaithful or disloyal, and therefore powerful individuals, rulers, generals were routinely put to death. It was great to be in the good graces of the leader because it meant affluence and power, but not to be in his good graces could mean the loss of everything. And so Pilate feared Rome and Caesar.

And it is incredible because whatever we fear really controls our lives. We give it such a place where it dictates the direction that we will go. It causes us to do things that we never thought we would do. And for Pilate it was the execution of Jesus Christ. And you can see that in our text. He no doubt is becoming weaker and weaker and succumbing to the demands and threats of the religious leaders. And we stand appalled at the injustice that is demanded and being done. But as we look at our lives, what do we fear? What or who is controlling our lives? Your fears will take you to places and cause you to do things you never thought you would do, say things you never thought you would say. And again, what are you fearing today? Because that is what is controlling your life. I want us to look at verse 12 and really see the interaction and the threat and then see how fear enters into all that is done.

1. We need to see the intentions. V.12a.

When we talk about intentions, we talk about what we want to do, or at least what we should do in any given situation. The problem is not that we do not know what the right thing to do, we often do, and as believers in Christ many times we do not do the right thing. We might be silent when we should speak. We might speak when we should be silent. Someone starts to gossip in front of us, and it would be embarrassing and risky if we stop it and say enough, so we start to engage in the gossip. We know we should be patient and kind but often we are loud and angry. Loud and angry people are usually the most fearful people. Instead of trusting God, they are fearful they are going to lose control so they lash out. The problem is not that many times we do not know the right thing to do, many times we are just so controlled by the fear of what might come in our lives if we do the right thing. What are you afraid of losing today? Where has fear clouded your judgment of what you should do?

Because as you look at Pilate, his intentions are clear what he wants to do. You can see that more than ever he wants to release Jesus, get him out of his sight and be done with the whole situation. He never could have imagined that morning as the Jews came to him that he would be in such a situation. No doubt, even as he started out he knew their intentions and even tried to frustrate the religious leaders, but now the tables have turned, and they seem more in control than him. But look and think about what this verse says, because his intentions seem so clear, **“From then on Pilate sought to release him.”** Notice the words “From then on.” This points back to the previous conversation Pilate had with Jesus. Pilate asks where are you from? And it is more than a question of geography, but the one who was before him might be divine. Jesus refuses to answer. He has already given an answer to Pilate earlier and Pilate didn’t listen but cut the conversation short. Pilate rebukes Jesus — don’t you know who I am? I am the very one who can release you. And then Jesus rebukes him that this power has been given not by Caesar or some other power but from God above.

And it is amazing how some statements of truth seem to startle various individuals. They seem to awaken to the fact that what we see is not all that there is. There is an eternity in front of them, and a God that we must all appear before to give an account of the things that we have done in this life. And individuals can be shaken at various times that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God. It may seem that people are big. It may seem that the religious leaders or even Caesar are big before the mind of Pilate, but is there anyone bigger than God?

And it is incredible how truth interacts with our hearts. We can come out to a service, hear the Scriptures preached, see something of the glory, holiness, and grace of God and be so resolved that things in our lives are going to be different. We realize certain directions and sins in our lives, and we go out and say things are going to be different. There is going to be a new direction and a new resolve to live for God and his glory. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been so challenged by God and his word, been shaken to core of your being by His glory that things are going to be different? But things never change.

What happens? Why do things not change, especially when we made such a resolution in our hearts before God that things were going to be different? It is actually right in our text. There are a couple things we need to see here. Look at the text again, **“From then on Pilate sought to release him.”** One thing we see that in order to release him, he has to go back out. And one of things we have to see is that our lives and the decisions we make are made in the presence of those who are opposed to the purposes of God, and those who many times can punish or hurt us through their words or actions. And that is where the fear of people and situations comes in. What people can do to me is greater than obedience and the glory of God. People become bigger than the God we claim to serve. And as you look at your life, as you look at your actions, we can always find reason why we do what we do. We can find reasons to placate our consciences, but we are driven by the fear of others rather than the fear of God more than we think. Pilate comes out. He comes out to the world that is opposed and hostile to him doing the right thing. Where in this fallen world as you come and live in it are you struggling with the bigness of others rather than the bigness of God?

The other thing is notice that he sought to release him. Here is the question to ask, if Pilate is the judge and it is his decision alone then why is he seeking to release him? There is no seeking necessary. He is the judge. It is in his power and right to hand down the verdict of not guilty. Jesus is innocent, and he could even bring up charges against the religious leaders. They are the real lawbreakers here and peace disturbers. So what is the problem? The problem is he sought to release him, because think of what he is doing. We are not told what he said to the religious leaders, but he is making some appeal to them. Think of it, he is trying to do two things. He is trying to placate the religious leaders so that he will have no problems with Rome and at the same time do what is right in God's sight. Remember, he has been challenged that the very authority he has — has been given by God. The problem is he is trying to live in two worlds. That is what fear does to you. It causes you to try to live in this present world where people can cause all sorts of problems and difficulties and hurts, and at the same time do what we know is right in the sight of the God of all glory.

Think of it because Pilate's has the right and power to release him. He should not have sought to release him but just released him. And it is easy to be hard on Pilate, but how often do we measure whether we should obey God or think about what others might do? And we might even think we do not have the ability or the power to obey. We certainly do not have the authority of Pilate. But let me say we actually have a greater power and ability to obey. We not only have the full revelation of his Word, but we have the constant presence of Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and greater is he that is in you than he who is in the world. And here is the thing, God wants us to go beyond our intentions, to actually trust and obey our big God. And again,

where are we called to truly make much of him, and follow him? We need to be more driven by the delightful and glorious fear of God rather than the fear of man.

2. We need to realize the fear of man will raise its head time and time again. V.12b.

Now think through this text, because we see that this verse is really all about Pilate, even though we see the religious leaders come up here. The leading thought is the first part — Pilate sought to release him. And then notice that word “but” right after, it is a contrast between what Pilate wanted to do and what Pilate actually did. And think of it, because we are probably driven more by the fear of others than we think. And if you don’t think you are let me just say one word — “evangelism.” We know it is God’s will in each of our lives to share the glorious news of Jesus Christ and him crucified. We even realize that someone shared that good news with us. But have you ever had the opportunity and second guessed yourself? Have you ever thought about how they might responded? Have you ever made the excuse that this is not the right time? And if the answer is yes, then we have a “but” in our lives. Our intention is to share Christ but then the fear of others and what they can do enters in. Do you see that? Do you see how that fear controls us more than God?

Because let’s gain something of an appreciation of what this opposition is, **“but the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.’”** This right here is the most powerful and damning accusation against Jesus thus far, and it is meant to instill fear in the heart of Pilate who is already vacillating. He is already being tempted to do what is wrong and unjust. Think of what they are saying — Jesus is a rival king to Caesar. Now Jesus has already refuted that accusation. His kingdom is not of this world, that is why his subjects are not fighting for him. Jesus is not in opposition to Caesar. And here is the thing — Pilate knows this. But mere the thought that this could come up before Caesar. If the Jews would send a letter or delegation before Caesar and accuse Pilate of doing nothing when this rival king tried to usurp authority, and they could say anything they want in that letter, making it as condemning as possible, you know there could be repercussions. Not only the loss of position but also the loss of life.

Now the key here in this accusation is that by this accusation it will be evident that **“you are not Caesar’s friend.”** That is the key. Because those who are Caesar’s friends have greater wealth, influence and power. And the great longing no doubt in Pilate’s heart, and you can see this in his struggle to do the right thing is to be Caesar’s friend. And the choice in his decision is to be either Caesar’s friend or God’s friend. That is the choice of who is more desired, and that choice will dictate what you fear losing most of all. To be God’s friend he is called to do what he knows is right and release this innocent man. To be Caesar’s friend and have his favour will mean to execute an innocent man in the most brutal way possible and that is crucifixion. And think of it, because whatever we desire or whoever we desire most in this life will control our hearts and control our fears. Think of a young teen girl with her boyfriend, she knows that sexual immorality is wrong. She knows that God forbids it. She intends to love him and desire to obey God. But she wants the acceptance and attention of her boyfriend even more, and she fears losing that. That fear grows. And she will do things she never thought she would do in fear that she might lose the attention of that very

boy. She is give up friendship with God for friendship of the boy through what she fears and desires the most.

So think of it, whatever we want most, will control our hearts. Imagine if we so loved God that the greatest fear in our lives was to disobey or somehow degrade his name? Think of it, if we truly realize that God had ordained all circumstances, and even if obeying him brought loss into our lives he is so worthy of worship. Imagine what our obedience would look like if we had that worship fear of him. Remember Daniel's three friends? All are gather before the idolatrous image of Nebuchadnezzar and at the sound of the trumpet they are to bow. And you can imagine at that sound a whole sea of people bow down, and that is so easy to observe there are three that remain. The sentence is death by being thrown into the fiery furnace. And we know the end of the story and the deliverance of them from the fiery furnace but they didn't. They didn't know God was going to deliver them. What made them stand and honour God rather than Nebuchadnezzar? The fear of God. God was so much greater and glorious, and even this life is so little compared to an eternity with him. They didn't count the temporary pleasures of this life as something to be gods in their lives.

Nebuchadnezzar says that he would give them another opportunity to bow down, but listen to their response, because again they didn't know what God was going to do. And it is one of the greatest statements of trust, reliance, and faith and fear in God that we have in all of the Old Testament, Daniel 3:16-18, **“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.’”** There is the fear of God. God is in ultimate control, Nebuchadnezzar — you are not. He is able to deliver us and in one way or another he will, but even if he doesn't we are not going to sin against our great and glorious God. We are going to follow the God of our salvation. They sought to be a friend of God. This is what is most precious to them.

Here is the incredible thing in our text, Pilate wanted to be the friend of Caesar. Oh the delights that would come his way if he was only closer to him. And the reality is that even with all the miscues and even the statements that Pilate made about the Roman Empire, Caesar probably knew very little or nothing of this man. He certainly didn't have a relationship with him, and really cared nothing for his welfare. He would never become close to him. And in the end, he would banish him to Gall, and that basically is the end of Pilate.

So let me end with a couple of things. One is that anything that we fear in this life, anything that we prize more than Christ will ultimately fail in the end. This life certainly is not eternal and even if we get the things we want in this life, none of us can hang onto them. Even the feeble rule of Pilate was fleeting. There is nothing that we can hang onto in this life. And in the end the joy in those things is so fleeting. It does not stay as a constant. It does not deliver on the joy and security an satisfaction that it promises. In the end all the things we prize about Christ will betray us because none of them can deliver what they promised and in the end we will have to give them up.

Now consider secondly the fear of God. Think about serving him. Yes, as we serve him, it could cause the loss of relationships or friends or status or popularity or acceptance or whatever. It could bring more trials and more grief. For some it even costs them their very lives. But in the end we realize even in the midst of loss God is working for our good. And in the end the things that matter most can never be taken from us. They may take the three lives of Daniel's friends but they cannot separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. How we overcome the fear of man is through a robust and growing fear and knowledge of my God. This is my God, how could I ever think of turning from him? Grow in seeing him, his sacrifice, what he went through for sinners like us, his sovereignty and his goodness and grace. The fear of God will grow and the fruit of that fear will be a life of worship and grace. The fear of our ever present and all good God will control our lives. Remember whatever you fear the most controls your life. There is no one more to be feared and delightfully feared than our Lord.