TO TESTIFY TO THE TRUTH

John 18:28-19:16

Key verse: 18:37 “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Last week we studied Jesus’ trial before the Jewish leaders. Jesus was sinless, but he was tried like a criminal, not because of his sin but because of our sins. He was tried in our place so that we may be freed from all condemnations which result in death. Through Jesus’ sacrificial and substitutional sufferings, the wrath of God on our sins is appeased, and we have peace with God. (Ro 5:1) Therefore, Jesus is worthy to be praised, and he deserves our eternal appreciation.

In today’s passage Jesus was tried before Pilate, the Roman governor. People say that it was an interview rather than a trial because Jesus taught him the truth in their conversation. This is Jesus’ longest conversation in the New Testament, longer than his dialogue with the Samaritan woman. Let’s study how Jesus was tried and what he taught Pilate, and how we can appreciate the meaning of Jesus’ sufferings and death.

First, the hypocritical Jewish leaders. In the previous chapter we classified three types of people: Judas-like people, Peter-like people, and Jesus-like people. Today we classify again three different kinds of people: hypocritical people like the Jewish leaders, compromising people like Pilate, and truthful people like Jesus. Why were the Jewish leaders hypocritical? Look at verse 28. “***Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover.***” In the previous night Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, gathered at the court of Caiaphas, in order to condemn Jesus. They summoned many accusers who testified against Jesus, but no one gave any evidence for their accusation. They didn’t find any basis to charge a death sentence against Jesus. In Matthew’s gospel they accused Jesus with blasphemy because Jesus was called the Son of God. According to Moses’ law blasphemy received a capital punishment. But the Jewish leaders were afraid of the people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. It was also illegal for them to give a death sentence at night. So they waited until the next day. Early the next morning they brought Jesus to Pilate for death sentence, but they didn’t enter the Pilate’s house. They thought that they might be unclean if they entered a gentile’s house. They did not want to lose a chance to celebrate the Passover. According to Moses’ law those who defile themselves by uncleanness must wait for 7 days until they are ceremonially clean.

Pilate was aware of the Jewish leader’s evil conspiracy and wrong accusation. So he asked them, “***What charges are you bringing against this man***?” (29) The Jewish leaders said, “***If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you***.” (30) They charged Jesus as a criminal even before he was tried before Pilate. Pilate did not want to get involved in the Jewish religious conflict. So he said, “***Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law*** (31).” Pilate thought that he was smart enough to avoid their trap. But they objected Pilate, saying, “***But we have no right to execute anyone***.” At that time the Jews were overseen by the Roman Empire, and only the governor had the authority to execute death sentence.

The Jews were religious leaders, such as the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. They thought that they were righteous before God. They accused Jesus because they thought that Jesus had violated Moses’ law by claiming that he is the Son of God. But they themselves violated Moses’ law by accusing an innocent man and killing him. They did not keep their own law in order to remove their political opponent who kept the law of God, which is love. Outwardly they claimed to follow God’s law, but inwardly they followed the law of Satan, which is murder. This coming Wednesday we will have the Bible Symposium at SLU with Michael’s message about the meaning and importance of worship at church. One of the reasons why students stop coming to church is hypocrisy of the believers in their church. Of course, it’s likely their justification is not the whole reason for their apostasy. Still, we have to consider their opinions. They were disappointed and even hurt by church people who were hypocritical. Who are hypocrites? According to Jesus they are those who do not do as they teach. The word ‘hypocrisy’ means ‘act in play.’ People pretend to be holy before the eyes of others, but they do many detestable things behind them in secret. They like to teach others, but they don’t teach themselves. Jesus warned the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in Matthew 23:3. “*So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach*.” If we hate brothers and sisters after we teach God’s forgiveness, we are hypocrites. How can we talk about God’s love when our hearts are filled with hatred and anger? If we don’t pray after we teach others to live by faith, we are hypocrites. How can we encourage others to live by faith if we ourselves don’t trust in God? If we don’t preach the word after we are called as a Bible teacher and missionary, we are hypocrites. How can we ask others to preach the word if we don’t go out? The Jewish leaders didn’t practice God’s law, which is love, by accusing Jesus as a criminal. They violated Moses’ law by accusing the innocent man for death by the hand of the gentiles. Let’s us repent of our hypocrisy and be honest before God. Let us live a life worthy of God’s grace. Amen!

Second, compromising Pilate. Look at verse 33. “***Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?***” Pilate asked Jesus about this because the charge against him was “the king of the Jews.” The Jewish leaders knew that blasphemy could not bring a death sentence under the Roman law. So they charged Jesus with treason against the Roman Empire. Those who opposed the Roman Emperor or any decision under the Roman law were charged with treason. So Pilate asked Jesus if he were the king of the Jews. After Jesus asked Pilate if it was his own idea or another’s report, he said to him in verse 36. “Jesus said, “***My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.***” Jesus didn’t answer with yes or no. He didn’t deny that he is the King of the Jews. In fact, he is the King of the Jews, which means the Promised Messiah. At that time the Jews believed that the Messiah would come as a king, the descendant of King David. Jesus is the Messiah and the King of the Jews.

What Jesus meant by “the king of the Jews” is that he is the spiritual king for God’s kingdom, not a political king like King Herod in Judea. Jesus’ kingship was not confined as a local king, but as the King of kings and Lord of lords. His kingdom is not limited to this earth, but in heaven over the whole universe. So Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world and his kingdom is from another place. Look at verse 37. “***You are a king then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me***.” Jesus talked about the purpose of his birth and destiny. He came to testify to the truth. Pilate retorted, “***What is truth***?” Pilate’s question was not easy to answer, but his attitude for knowing the truth was not sincere. Jesus said, “*Everyone on the side of truth listens to me*.” Pilate did not stand on the side of truth, but on the side of the liars. He wanted to defend himself by releasing Jesus. According to the Jewish custom, at the time of Passover the Roman governor released a prisoner to appease the Jews. He wanted to release Jesus according to this custom. But the crowd demanded Barabbas instead of Jesus. Barabbas was an insurrectionist who fought against the Roman government. To the eyes of Pilate Barabbas was a dangerous terrorist who should be locked up in prison and Jesus was a leader of vociferous religious sect. Jesus was also proved to be innocent. Pilate should have chosen Jesus rather than Barabbas, but he took Jesus and sent him to his soldiers.

In chapter 19 Pilate attempted to release Jesus one more time. He put the crown of thorns on Jesus’ head and a purple robe on him as the symbol of his kingship and brought him before the crowd. He again claimed Jesus’ innocence and demanded the Jews’ rightful decision. Still, the crowd shouted against Jesus and demanded for his crucifixion. After another personal interview with Jesus, Pilate tried to set him free. He knew that there was no basis for any charge of capital punishment. If he listened to Jesus’ words and stood on the side of truth, Pilate could have released Jesus despite the crowd’s demand. Pilate was the final decision maker for execution. He had exercised his authority according to the Roman law as the governor. He should have stood on the side of truth to the end, but he did not. The Jewish leaders knew the blind spot of politicians. They knew that they could not persuade Pilate with the claim of the multitude. They deceived their conscience and threatened Pilate saying, “***If you let his man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar***.” (13) Pilate replied, “***Shall I crucify your king***?” But the chief priest answered, “***We have no king but Caesar***.” (15) At that time the Jews hated Caesar. They would not accept Caesar as their king because they believed that the God of Israel is the only true king for them. So they protested against the Roman Emperor. But now in order to accuse Jesus, they sealed their conscience and lied that they served Caesar as their king. They also threatened Pilate that he would not be a friend of Caesar if he released Jesus.

Pilate was afraid of being treated as a traitor of Caesar. He was fearful for losing his position as governor. He also did not want a riot or any commotion among the Jews because of Jesus. So, finally, he handed Jesus over to his soldiers to be crucified. We wonder why Pilate had to be blamed and be responsible for Jesus’ death because he had tried to release Jesus several times. According to Matthew’s gospel he even washed his hands so that he would not be held accountable for the death of an innocent man. Still, he was accountable for the death of Jesus because he did not listen to the words of Jesus. Jesus told him, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (18:37) But Pilate listened to the voice of the liars. He compromised with the liars for the sake of his job and his security. Even though he knew that Jesus was innocent, he sent him to death. He neglected his task as a governor. He practiced injustice to save his own skin. He was an irresponsible man who compromised. As a result, he was known as the man who crucified Jesus on the cross from generation to generation. His name is mentioned in the Apostle’s Creed. Later it is reported that he was deposed from his position and then committed suicide with the sense of guilt.

Those who do not listen to truth will end their life like Pilate. As people of God each and every day our faith is challenged to be proven genuine. Our faith is tested to see whether we stand on the side of truth or on the side of the world. When we do something for God, we are often disturbed and distracted by something we do not expect. Satan always distracts us so we do not focus on God, but on something or someone else. So, in the Screwtape Letters, the demon Screwtape advises his nephew to distract his Christian patient as much as possible so that he may be far from the truth. Satan’ purpose is to lead us to compromise. Satan tempted even Jesus in the desert to compromise. He tempted Jesus to use his power to turn stones into bread. He tempted Jesus not to take up the cross, but to worship him for the kingdom of this world. (Mt 4:1-11, Lk 4:1-11) Adam listened to the voice of Satan and failed in temptation. But Jesus listened to the voice of God and defeated Satan’s temptation. Jesus did not compromise, but completed his task by standing on the side of truth.

People in this world think that compromising people are smart people. Some Christians prefer worshiping God in front of a TV, not in church. I strongly encourage them to come to our Bible Symposium and listen to Michael’s message about why we have to worship God on Sunday at church, not in front of the screen. Our young adults wait eagerly to become 21 years old, thinking that they can now drink alcohol freely. I am sorry to say that Ephesians 5:18 says, “*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.*” I mean that we must listen to God’s word, not to the voice of the liars.

Third, truthful Jesus When people saw Jesus being tried before the Jewish leaders and being handed over to Pilate, they thought that Jesus failed as the Messiah. How could the Messiah become helpless before his enemies like that? They thought that the innocent Jesus became a victim of the wicked religious leaders and timid Pilate. But the author John didn’t see this like them. He saw all this, Jesus’ trial before Pilate, as the fulfillment of God’s prophecy about how Jesus should die. The prophet Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah should be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, not be stoned to death. (Is 53:5) As Jesus predicted in John’s gospel, the Son of Man must be lifted up like Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness (Jn 3:14) Here being lifted up indicates Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus also foretold about his death by the hand of the gentiles. *“… the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life.*” (Mt 20:18,19, Mk 10:33,34, Lk 18:31-33) John saw Jesus’ trial to fulfill the prophecy of God about crucifixion. Look at verse 32. “***This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die***.”

Jesus knew that the Jews brought him to Pilate to kill him under the Roman law. Jesus also knew that Pilate was a fearful and compromising politician. If he said that he was not a political king who would oppose Caesar, he would have been released right away. But Jesus stood on the side of truth. As he said, he came to testify to the truth. He came to fulfill God’s will for world salvation. What is truth? This is a question not only for Pilate, but also for us. Jesus himself is the truth. Jesus said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (Jn 14:6) Jesus came to testify that God’s promise is true and that he came to verify God’s faithfulness. There is nothing true but the promise of God. All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the promise of God lasts forever (Is 40:7,8, 1 Pe 1:24,25). Amen. Jesus came to testify that God’s promise is true. God is love and his love endures forever. Amen

Standing on the side of truth is costly. We may lose our friend because of our faith. We may be mistreated unfairly by ungodly people. We may be ridiculed and mocked by this world. But we must stand on the side of truth to the end as Jesus did. Final victory is ours. Jesus said to Christians in Revelations 2:10, “*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.*” Jesus stood on the side of truth to the point of death. He did not save himself in order to save us. He endured the cross for the sake of our eternal and complete salvation. He bore all our pain and sufferings in order to give us peace with God which comes from the forgiveness of sin. By his wounds we are healed.

We are saved to testify to the truth. The word ‘testify’ and ‘witness’ is “*martyreo*” in Greek, which implies martyrdom. I often pray to God that I may stand on the side of truth to the end, even at gun point. Our permanent dwelling place is not in America, but in the kingdom of heaven. Our ultimate goal and purpose in life is to glorify God’s name. May God help us not to be like the hypocritical Jews or compromising Pilate, but like truthful Jesus! Help us to endure the cross and to testify to the truth until Jesus comes again! Amen.