

Learning from the Characters

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[0 : 00] Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that your word is living, active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

And you have made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. Please enable me to speak your word faithfully today and please cause it to do amongst us what you have promised it will.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen. Please sit down. Now friends, last week we had a great time together just simply reading scripture with a few comments interspersed.

And I know that a number of you found it quite helpful because you said so to me yourself. Others of you I know found it a bit overwhelming, especially because of the brutality of what happened. This week we're going to do something slightly different.

That is, I'm going to assume that you now know the story and we're going to take some sample passages that speak about them. I would encourage you perhaps to follow in the outline because you'll see exactly what I'm doing.

[1 : 05] We're going to see if we can work out what motivated three or four groups of people in what they did and how they acted. Now I do need to point out that sometimes in the story we're not actually told why certain characters or groups of characters acted the way that they did.

At other times we're going to have to make a calculated guess. So having said that, let's get underway. And first I want to have a look at a group of people that are called the Jews. I need to explain who they are first.

First, I think in the passage they refer to certain officials amongst the chief priests and the Pharisees. You can see that in chapter 19 verse 3 for example. Second, I'm going to use the term to refer to the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

And third, I'm going to use the term to cover a broad range of people that the text simply calls the Jews, which seems to refer to Jewish leaders who actively oppose Jesus.

We think that's what it means. Let's have a look at some key incidents that happen among them. Have a look at chapter 18 verse 2. It tells us that the Jews came with Judas and Roman soldiers in order to arrest Jesus.

[2 : 18] John 11 has given us a bit of information as to why they are doing this. You see, in John 11 48, we're told that they began to plan to put Jesus to death because they saw the risk that everyone would believe in him.

They were also worried that as a result, the Romans would come and destroy the temple and the nation. So they have sided, the Jews have sided with their enemies, the Romans, in order to protect the people and their nation.

Now let's go back to chapter 18 and have a look. Chapter 18 verse 19. We know the Jews are worried about this growing number of disciples. We know that they're worried about the destabilizing impact this might have on relationships with the Romans.

We know that these men are genuinely concerned for the spiritual health of the people and they thought Jesus was a false teacher. But why, let me ask, are they questioning Jesus in secret?

Why have they arrested him in secret? And why are there no witnesses as is required by Jewish law? Now look at verse 22. The official, a Jewish official, orders Jesus struck in the face.

[3 : 32] This verse even tells us why. Supposedly it's because Jesus did not show proper respect for the high priest. But the response of Jesus questions whether that is actually true. After all, Jesus spoke a patently obvious truth.

The point is that the high priest is missing his position of power. He's threatened by the truth Jesus speaks. And then, therefore, he physically abuses Jesus. John 18.28, the Jews take Jesus to Roman authorities.

It's clear that they are going to use the Romans to do their dirty work for them. Then we're told that the Jews don't enter Pilate's headquarters. We're even told why.

They will not enter Pilate's headquarters because they want to avoid ceremonial uncleanness so that they can celebrate the Passover. However, there's some, when you think about it, some degree of hypocrisy here, isn't there?

You see, after all, the narrative has made clear that it's obviously okay to organize a man's murder, a man's crucifixion, and his curse by God.

[4 : 39] However, just don't get ceremonially unclean when you do it. Such hypocrisy is often the mark of religious people. And Jesus has highlighted that again and again in his ministry.

But let's move on to John 18.29-32. The Jews get Pilate to take on the case. Supposedly, they do this because they have no right to execute.

But friends, this rings a little bit hollow. After all, we know from later on in the New Testament, from the book of Acts, that this doesn't stop the Jews executing Stephen. So the real reason appears to be religious cleanliness.

Now look at chapter 18, verses 38 to 40. Pilate notes that the case against Jesus lacks substance. He gives them an opportunity to back out.

But the Jews say, no, no, give us Barabbas, a known criminal, to be released instead of Jesus. You see, it's clear, isn't it, that they are threatened by Jesus. It's also clear they're determined to have him killed at any cost.

[5 : 42] But let's move to John 19.6-7. The Jews state the charge against Jesus. They have a law, they say. And that law condemns a man, Jesus to death, because he claims to be the Son of God.

The political charge used to bring Jesus before Pilate is now squashed. Therefore, they try a religious charge. But they are exposed.

After all, they've already broken the very same law that they appeal to. They have acted in secret. They have not brought the required number of witnesses. In John 19, verse 12, Pilate attempts to just extricate himself out of all of this.

But the Jews will have nothing of it. They therefore bring Caesar himself into the debate. And they're clearly manipulating Pilate. You see, reason has failed. Due process has failed.

Law has failed. Therefore, they just try full-blown manipulation. And given Pilate's previous history with Caesar, they are very likely to succeed. A final reference, 19.31.

[6 : 47] Jesus has now been crucified. And the Jews asked Pilate to break his legs. Why? Well, so that there may be no bodies on the cross on the Sabbath. The point is really poignant, isn't it?

You see, the Sabbath was the day that God rested from his creation. It's a holy day. But Jews don't want it profaned by dead bodies testifying to their work.

Let me summarise what we found out about the Jews. The Jews here are religious people. They are among the most scrupulously religious people on earth, in fact. Pharisees were the most respected, God-fearing, Bible-believing Jews in Israel.

But this passage shows what they were underneath. They are self-interested. They are self-serving. They're manipulative. They're easy with religious law and traditions when it suits them.

They're hypocritical. They're brutal. And this is the nature often of human beings, isn't it? Human beings are sinful. Even the most religious humans can be sinful. But let's move on to Peter.

[7 : 51] Now, we all know Peter, don't we? And many of us love him. He's one of the earliest disciples of Jesus. He's one of the big three, if you like. He's impetuous. He's extravagant. A man with deep and spontaneous love for Jesus.

But let's have a look at his part in this story. Let's see what he did. See if we can work out why. In chapter 18, verses 10 to 11. He's in the garden where Jesus is arrested.

And he sees what is going on. And so he grabs a sword to cut off the ear of one of the arresting party. We're not told why he does it. Perhaps it was fear.

Perhaps it was a desire to protect Jesus. But the next incident involves Peter in verses 15 to 18. And he follows Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest.

And there he's questioned by various people. And he denies even knowing Jesus. Now, here's a picture of a conflicted man. He wants to be near Jesus.

[8 : 50] But he's scared of the consequences. Third incident, verses 25 to 27. Peter denies again any association with Jesus.

Again, his conflicted desires are apparent. He wants to be near Jesus. He wants to love Jesus. But he can't. His own being gets in the way. So let's put all of this together.

We all like Peter, as I said. He's a genuine person. He's genuinely searching for God. He genuinely wants to know God. He honestly wants to love Jesus and God.

But he can't stand the heat. And he can't come up with the goods. And he can't because deep underneath it, he's in many ways no different from the Jews. He's a man for himself.

He fears for himself. He's self-interested. And self-interested people want their friends dying on their behalf. But at the same time, they lie about knowing them.

[9 : 49] Self-interested people cop out. And that's the nature of human beings, isn't it? Even the most genuine human beings. Even those who honestly want to love and serve God.

Underneath it all, there are none who wholeheartedly seek God. As the psalmist puts it. All are tainted by their humanity. All are sinful. But let's turn to Pilate. History tells us that Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea.

He was appointed to that post by the Emperor Tiberius in AD 26. And he held that post for 11 years, till AD 37. History tells us that he was a morally weak and vacillating man.

And when Jews resisted his rule, he was savage in their treatment of them. You can see an example in Luke 13, verse 1. He was therefore loathed by the Jews. Let's turn to his place in this story.

Let's see what he did. See if we can find out why he did it. Our first passage, chapter 18, 33 to 39. You see, what Pilate does here is he questions Jesus about his kingship.

[10 : 54] We're not explicitly told why. But it does appear as though the reason is to ascertain whether Jesus is a political threat or not. You see, Pilate is the Roman representative.

It's his duty to maintain order and stop any threats to Roman rule. And these verses tell us the conclusion of his examination. In verse 38, he concludes that Jesus is no threat to Roman rule.

In verse 39, Pilate then offers to release Jesus. And his reasoning is clear. He sees that Jesus is innocent of any threat to Roman rule. He's not guilty of sedition.

But in 19.1, Pilate has Jesus flogged. Then he allows or perhaps condones the mocking of Jesus. And why not? He's got the raw power to do so.

He can. But I wonder what he's really doing. You see, in my own mind, I wonder if he does it to save Jesus from a worse punishment. He knows the Jews. He knows they have it in for him.

[11 : 53] I wonder if a softer flogging and mocking of Jesus accomplishes a number of things for him. It makes Jesus an example. And perhaps he thinks that will and hopes that will satisfy the Jews.

At the same time, he puts the Jews in their place by mocking the king of the Jews. The king of those people who have brought him. It is not only a mocking of Jesus, but it's also a mocking of the Jews themselves.

And whether that's the case or not, it's clear that Jesus has become just a mere pawn in a game. What happens here is not justice. It is all about appearances, alliances, friendships, vested interests.

And then in John 19, 4 to 6, Pilate attempts to release Jesus. His reasons are clear. There's no case against him. In 1908, he becomes afraid.

In 1910, that fear causes him to threaten Jesus with the use of power. Pilate is confronted, you see, with something he cannot understand. He's a man of power and he becomes a bully by wielding that power.

[13 : 00] In verse 12, he seeks to release Jesus again. It's clear that he knows that Jesus is innocent of both charges of sedition and of blasphemy. But as we're seeing, he's manipulated by the Jews in the second half of verse 12.

And in verse 13 to 15, he brings Jesus to the judgment seat. And he sentences him on grounds that he knew he was innocent of, of sedition.

A charge he'd already declared him innocent of. You see, his reasons are clear. He fears the Jews and what they can do in terms of his boss, Caesar. In other words, he fears an earthly king, Caesar, more than he fears a heavenly king, God.

And finally, in verse 19, Pilate arranges for a notice to be placed on the cross. Carried before Jesus. We're not told why he did this, but we cannot escape the conclusion that there is an element of having a go at the Jews.

There is a man carrying a sign, a man that the Jews hate, that says, King of you Jews, effectively. And again, Jesus is little more than a pawn in this game between those in power.

[14 : 18] Let's see if we can summarize what we've found about this. First, it's clear Pilate is far from being a religious man. Now, he's a politician, a bureaucrat, a military man. But he does have a sense of justice, doesn't he?

He doesn't want an innocent man to suffer unnecessarily, and he tries to stop it. However, his benevolence and sense of justice will stretch only so far. He will be benevolent, just only so long as he's not hurt or damaged in any way himself in the process.

You see, Pilate may be a little less blatant than the Jews. But friends, perhaps he's more honest. He's a flawed human being. He's self-interested, self-serving, hypocritical, brutal.

And he has his own interests in mind. And he doesn't mind using other humans to accomplish his goals. He doesn't mind playing with other humans in order to satisfy his own whims and meet his own needs.

So let's summarize what we've discovered about these three people or groups of people. What do we see in the story? As we just read the details. What do we see in the lives of the characters?

[15 : 25] Well, we see lies, manipulation, religion, law, pride, envy. All of these and more are used by these human beings. And all are used in the service of self-interest.

They pay second fiddle to the truth. Friends, all of these characters and their actions demonstrate an incredibly important and great truth. Humans are into self-interest.

They are incorrigibly self-centered and self-serving. And oh yes, they occasionally do have a desire to be benevolent. They're occasionally good.

They're occasionally altruistic. But even when they are, they're unable to bring such things to fruition and unable to consistently go without pursuing self-interest. Please understand what I'm saying.

See, I don't want us to just point the self-righteous finger at these people. Because we know the truth. They, the Jews, Peter, Pilate, they're us.

[16 : 26] And we are them. And we desperately are in need of help. Before we wrap up this examination, however, we've got one more person to look at, haven't we?

Let's look at Jesus. First, who is he? And the text of the Bible tells us he was a man who was approximately 30 years old. He lived at Nazareth. He was a preacher of great ability.

He had gathered a crowd of disciples around him. And that following posed a threat to the religious authorities of his day. Let's, however, have a look at what he does in this narrative. And let's ask ourselves why he did it.

Now, we don't have time to look at all the references. But I've selected just a few. Chapter 18, verse 4. Jesus goes out to meet the soldiers.

He confronts them. And he refuses to resist, arrest. Verse 3 in the preceding narrative indicates that he knew why all of this was happening. And its necessity.

[17 : 23] And didn't shirk from it. In verse 8. He requests the release of his disciples. It's clear. He's motivated by care for those over whom God has placed him.

19 to 22. He appeals to his public teaching. He notes that what he has done has been done in public view. It is not a secret like the actions of the Jews.

It is clear that Jesus seeks honesty and truth no matter what it costs. In verse 23. He again appeals to truth as his defense. Verses 36 to 38.

In verse 36. He notices that he and his disciples are not resisting. And he explains why. His kingdom, he says, is not of this world. And he doesn't use the weapons of this world that are wielded so aggressively by others.

Now, his kingdom is from another place. And he uses weapons of another place. In verse 37. He refuses to deny the truth. After all, you see his truth incarnate.

[18 : 28] It's a wonderful line, isn't it? Here is Pilate looking into the face of Jesus. And he says, what is truth? As he stares it in the face. Or him in the face.

In 1925 to 27. We see Jesus dying. And in his dying moments. Did you notice what he does? He takes care of his bereaved mother.

And his disciple. His love for them is clearly his motivation. Friends, what we've seen in these few glimpses is what we've seen throughout the gospel.

Jesus that we meet here is clearly a human being constantly divided by the divine will. Constantly guided by interests not his own. He's constantly loving his father.

And he constantly loves the people of God. And you can search and search and search. And you can examine the life of Jesus from beginning to end.

[19 : 26] But he is a man who is different from the others we glimpse in the narrative. There is no hint of self-interest. No manipulation. No envy.

No taking up weapons to accomplish his goals. No fraud. No lies. This man is not an overly religious man concerned with religious scruples and religious self-interest.

He's not a politician concerned with his own hide. He's not a good man like Peter unable to carry out his deepest desires. So who is this man? Well, chapter 1 of John holds the key.

For in chapter 1 we're given his identity. He is a human being who is also God. And that raises a question, doesn't it? If this man is God, then why?

I mean, why put up with fickle friends? Why die at the hands of religious frauds? Why suffer the ignominy that he suffers at the hand of a petty tyrant?

[20 : 27] Why die the most ignoble, shameful, cruel death at the hands of human beings, your creation? And this passage comes to our age, you see.

For our text shows us humans meeting God. And when God comes among human beings, he speaks truth, he speaks right, he does right. And human beings cannot handle right.

And so they squash him, persecute him, punish him. And do you know what human beings deserve for doing this to God? They deserve the anger and punishment of God.

But God, friends, is not a human like us. And he doesn't blindly retaliate. He seeks love in the face of rejection. And so this man who is God dies in the place of humans.

And he dies at their hands for their failure. The God of all the earth places himself in the hands of his creation. And he allows them to brutally murder him.

[21 : 33] And he becomes a human and dies in the place of humans in order to forgive humans. He does this at the will of his father. Please understand what is being said. This passion narrative is an incredible piece of work.

It is a great document. You see, at one level, it simply tells the story of the death of Jesus. But can you see what it's doing at another level? At another level, this narrative is exposing the people in the story and opening their hearts to us.

And doing so, it indicates why the death of Jesus was necessary. And it also illustrates why the death of Jesus works. So, I wonder if I might close by getting us to put ourselves under the spotlight just for a moment.

You see, there's a great temptation for us, isn't there? And that temptation is to see the world as the Jews saw it, as a religious world. Or as Pilate saw it, as a political world.

In other words, there's a temptation for us to view the world as a self-contained world. A world where God is either absent or removed. Where life's about survival and our interests and about looking after me and about where life is with me at the centre.

[22 : 50] And we see this everywhere in our society, don't we? We see it in our workplaces. We see it in Christian ministry. We see it in our families. We see it in our relationships.

And we can get sucked in by it, can't we? Or we can hear it and read it in this text. We can see human nature and understand its futility and its sinfulness.

And then we can see Jesus. And we can take on board what he communicates in his words and his actions. That is, we can take on board the reality of life is that life is lived before God.

And having understood that, we can go on and live life this way. Now friends, on Good Friday we're going to examine the death of Jesus in a little more detail.

And then we're going to see how the disciples grapple with it. And what it does to them on Easter Sunday. So be here for those two days. Bring your friends and family. These are exciting chapters.

[23 : 52] But they touch at the core of faith. Of Christian faith. And at the core of Christian discipleship. Which is what I've tried to show you today. But as we go this morning, I wonder if I can give you a closing sort of encouragement, exhortation.

As to how you might respond to what we've learnt today. I want to urge you to put aside being like the Jews. Or Pilate. Or even Peter.

And I want to urge you to be like the Lord Jesus. To live as his redeemed people. Having the interests of others as your central concern.

And with that in mind, I want to leave you with Ephesians 5 verses 1 to 2. And you might like to write these words down on. I carry around some business cards if I want to remember things. Write them down on the back of a business card.

Ephesians 5, 1 to 2. And memorise them during this week. Cut out a piece of cardboard if you don't have a business card. And memorise these two verses. They're not long. And work on living them this week.

[24 : 57] The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5, 1 to 2. Let me read it to you again.

It's wonderful, isn't it? Follow God's example. As dearly loved children. And walk in the way of love.

Just as Christ loved us. And gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering. And a sacrifice to God. So let me pray.

Father God. Please help us to follow your example. Help us to be dearly loved children. And to walk in the way of love that we have seen.

Portrayed before us. In the gospel these last couple of weeks. To love just as Christ loved us. And gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering.

[26 : 15] And sacrifice to you. Please help us in this we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.