

Stuck in Neutral

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John 18:33-38

Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God

***“Power leads
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corrupts
absolutely.”***

- Lord Acton

Lord Acton, a British historian from the early 20th century, said, “Power leads to corruption; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Consider the downfall of New York Governor Eliot Spitzer. He was a rising star in the American political scene. In 2006, his supporters gave him the largest margin of victory ever enjoyed by a New York gubernatorial candidate. In 2002, Time Magazine named him “Crusader of the Year.” Spitzer had ambitions to be President. The story of Eliot Spitzer’s downfall is almost Shakespearean in its tragedy. I shudder to think of its deleterious effect upon his teenage daughters.

For a former State Attorney General to spend upwards of \$80,000 on an international prostitution and money-laundering ring boggles the mind. Hiring a prostitute is not only against the law, but transporting her across state lines constitutes a federal crime. Spitzer’s name used to be associated with prostitution during his get-tough reign as New York’s Attorney General. Such hypocrisy is not lost on the American public.

Two of the so-called seven deadly sins are on display for the American public this week: lust and pride. The ancient church is right, my friends. These sins are deadly, after all.

First, there is this matter of lust. Everybody is asking, what was Spitzer thinking? Since when do hormones have brains? Another great leader with enormous appetites bites the dust! All this pandering after sex in our culture is killing us softly! We are reaching a point of diminishing return within our sex-saturated culture.

Then there is this matter of pride. Hubris almost always leads to the downfall of heroes in ancient Greek mythology. It was an act of monarchial arrogance for the governor to think he could know a prostitute in the Biblical sense of the word, with so little regard for its consequences. Pride often does that to people. We become a law unto ourselves. We answer to a different set of rules. The writer of Proverbs says it well: “Pride goes before the fall.”

This whole sordid affair is a curious backdrop to Holy Week. It dramatizes the danger of absolute power. Pilate is all about political power. Jesus lays aside worldly power. Last Sunday, we talked about Jesus laying down his life for people.

We have been focusing this Lent on living as God’s kingdom people. Kingdom people don’t grab for power. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Power is on the minds of Jesus’ followers when he rides into Jerusalem on that eventful Palm Sunday

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morning. Jesus is arrested a short while later. We pick up the action in John 18:28. An angry mob leads a shackled Jesus to Pilate’s doorstep. Notice how scrupulous they are about observing laws of ritual purity while they scheme to put an innocent man to death.

The irony is unmistakable. The crowd is in something of a hurry. They want to dispense with the legal formalities of a trial as quickly as possible to execute Jesus by sunset. That way, it won’t interfere with the sacred festival of Passover. More irony!

Pilate asks them, in verse 29, to state their charge. His question catches them off guard. They had just spent the better part of the night trying to trump up charges against Jesus without success. They had expected Pilate to rubber stamp their indictment and quickly authorize Jesus’ execution.

They answer, in effect, trust us, “If this man were not a criminal, do you think we’d be here bothering you” (18:30).

Pilate tries to sidestep the issue: “You take him. Judge him by your law.” The crowd is not so easily duped. “We’re not allowed to kill anyone.” This doesn’t stop them later from taking the law into their own hands when they stone Stephen to death (Acts 7). But they know they can’t get away with an execution at the Feast of Passover, when the Roman soldiers are on high alert and watching them like hawks.

Pilate ushers Jesus into his palace and asks him point blank, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

(v33). Pilate has little interest in becoming embroiled in a religious squabble. He wants only to know whether Jesus has political ambitions.

Jesus asks whether Pilate’s question results from honest inquiry or is he simply parroting the sentiments of his accusers. Pilate reacts indignantly, “I am not a Jew, am I?” (v35). Pilate’s rhetorical question qualifies as the sentiments of an exasperated man who thinks of himself as in charge but now senses the ground shifting under his feet. Who’s on trial now?

Pilate shifts the focus in verse 35. What have you done to make these people so angry? Jesus answers in verse 36, “My kingdom is not from this world.” Jesus’ kingdom doesn’t have a human origin. If his kingdom had origins in this world, Jesus would have commanded an army of followers to fight for him. That’s why Jesus ordered Peter at his arrest to put away his sword (18:11).

Jesus is not implying his kingdom has nothing to do with this world. Jesus’ kingdom is not from this world, but it’s for this world. That’s why Jesus enters this world in the first place. Jesus doesn’t merely save us from this world. He saves us for this world.

“So, are you a king or not?” Pilate asks (18:37).

“You tell me. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37).

Pilate’s answer, “What is truth?” may be sarcastic. It is most certainly ironic. Pilate asks about the

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nature of truth before the very one who is truth (14:6). But what does Pilate care about truth? The only thing he cares about is power.

Pilate reappears before the crowd, hoping he can persuade them to accept a compromise. First, he offers them a choice between prisoners: Jesus and Barabbas (18:39-40). When this fails, he has Jesus mocked and scourged, thinking this will appease them (19:1-5). Then he tries to pawn Jesus' execution off on the religious authorities (19:6-7).

None of it works. Pilate and Jesus are alone again. "Where are you from?" Pilate asks (19:9). His mood is desperate. Jesus gives him the silent treatment.

"Don't you know I have the power to pardon you and the power to—crucify you?" (19:10). Power, you say! Jesus: "You have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."

Pilate is now between a rock and a hard place. If he releases Jesus, the crowd will spread the rumor he's no friend of Caesar, which would put the kibosh on any promotion in the Roman government. But if Pilate complies with their desires, he knows that he is condemning an innocent man to death.

Notice how many times in this story Pilate shuttles back and forth between Jesus and the crowd. In verse 29, he went out. In verse 33, he went in. In verse 38, he went out. In chapter 19, verse 4, he went out again. In verse 9, he went in. In verse 13, he went out. Pilate is one

desperate man and the crowd plays him like a fiddle.

In the end, Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified (19:16). As much as Pilate attempts to wash his hands of the matter (Matthew 27:24), Jesus' blood is still on his hands.

Pilate tries desperately to remain neutral. He's looking for a way out that will make it unnecessary for him to decide for or against Jesus. But Pilate cannot straddle the fence. He cannot play both ends against the middle. He can't have it both ways.

Neutrality is desirable in some settings. We want our judges, umpires and referees to be impartial. Sometimes, in counseling, we seek input from a neutral party. But neutrality with regard to Jesus Christ is undesirable. Pilate's life is a warning to those who perpetually put off making a decision for Christ. Some people want it both ways. They want to straddle the fence.

My car comes equipped with four forward gears and one reverse gear. My car idles in first gear at a dead stop. As I accelerate, the ratio between power and speed changes, so my car's transmission automatically shifts into second, third and fourth gears. In fourth gear, my car achieves peak efficiency in speed and power. If you have technical questions, you can contact my mechanical brother in Ohio for assistance in these matters.

Between forward and reverse gears on my gearshift is the letter "N," which stands for Neutral. Neutral isn't really a gear. In fact, when a car is in neutral, the engine is disengaged from the wheels.

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Neutral serves us well when we start our cars, idle in traffic or need to be towed. But we can't go anywhere in neutral. We must shift into gear.

Some of us are stuck in neutral. We're not going anywhere. Some of us need to put faith into gear. Faith is not trying harder. Faith trusts God. Faith surrenders to God.

Some of us need to put faith into gear. It is time, my friends, to really trust God. Today is the day to receive God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Some of us are stuck in first or second gear. We are moving about in low gear. Have you ever manually shifted your car into first gear and left it there? The needle of the tachometer on your dashboard measuring rpms will let you know that you need to shift gears. If you leave your car in first gear on the open highway, you will spin your wheels and put strain on the engine.

Some of us need to shift gears. We've been chugging along in low gear. We're just spinning our wheels. It's time to take faith to the next level and shift into high gear.