

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Mark 15:1-5; John 19:12 on March 22, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: People of the Passion

Today's Focus: The Thinker

“What's the Cost of 'Winning'?”

Anybody else here have a crazy week? I mean March Madness is here! But the first bit of surprising news I heard this week came on Monday morning after I dropped off my girls for school and I heard that former Wisconsin Badger, Chris Borland, had retired from the NFL at the ripe old age of 24...after playing just one NFL season. Now why was this surprising? I suppose because he had a fantastic rookie season at linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers and was set to become the full-time starting middle linebacker for that team for the next decade. Who wouldn't be excited about that!?

But in choosing to walk away from his NFL dream, he will likely have to return nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of his \$617,436 signing bonus and forfeit most of a four-year, nearly \$3 million contract. So what was he thinking? I mean with that signing bonus alone he could immediately build an incredible all-inclusive playground and probably do it without any red tape or controversy! What was he thinking?

Well he's retiring because of concerns about the long-term impact of football-related head trauma as a linebacker who smashes into people for a living. After suffering an apparent concussion during training camp last year, he embarked on a season-long education that included extensive reading and consultations with neuroscientists and former players. So after a lot of thinking, Borland has decided his brain is more important to him than his bank account. He's walking away from the \$, the fame, and the game he loves as a result.

Now, did he win or did he lose in making that decision? Is he overreacting or is he wise? Did he just overthink it? Of course lots of different people have lots of different opinions on the matter. And whose counts? Who defines "winning"? And what's the cost of "winning" anyway?

This brings us to the man we'll be talking about today as we continue this *People of the Passion* series. His name is Pontius Pilate. He was the man in charge, put there in the land of Palestine by Caesar. His job was to keep order, to keep the peace, to keep the Jewish people under control. So you can imagine what was it like when one of his servants had to wake him up at the crack of dawn one morning to say, "Sir, Mr. Pilate, sorry to get you out of bed, but Caiaphas and the entire Jewish Sanhedrin are here to see you and already a crowd of people is gathering outside...and of course I don't need to remind you that Jerusalem's full of all the religious pilgrims here for the festival." I

mean how would you feel if you're forced to get out of bed to go deal with some people who you know are out to cause you trouble at a time when you're already a little stressed out?

From the very beginning you can almost hear Pilate's brain going into overdrive. "I've got to get to the bottom of this. Hmm....let me think. How can I find a way to come out on top? What's it going to take to "win" in this situation?"

Well here's what happened as we take a look into one little window of this situation. Mark 15:1-5 records: *Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.*² *"Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "You have said so," Jesus replied.*³ *The chief priests accused him of many things.*⁴ *So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of."*⁵ *But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.*

And let me read to read one short verse from John's gospel that summarizes things (19:12):¹² *From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."*

Here we get a little glimpse of the interaction between Pontius Pilate and Jesus Christ. The one is a politician. The other is a prisoner. The one thinks he holds the power of life and death in his hands. The other knows he is the source of Life himself. The one wonders whether he's talking to someone who's delusional or criminal in claiming to be the king of the Jews. The other knows he deserves to be worshiped as the King of kings. The one starts asking questions. The other knows he is the Answer to every question. And so already after this first little conversation Pontius Pilate thinks to himself, "This man's done nothing wrong."

In fact if you read the whole story there are at least 3 times when Pontius Pilate concludes that Jesus is innocent and so he tries to actually set Jesus free. It's almost like each time after Pilate and Jesus interact you see the gears turning in Pilate's mind, "What if I try this? What if I say this? Come on Pilate, you're sharp. Figure it out. There's gotta be a way to set Jesus free and yet at the same time make the Jews happy."

But of course, there wasn't. Pilate wasn't bright enough to figure out a way at least. And he didn't have enough courage to do the right thing so instead he calculated in his mind a way by which it would still look like he won. But at what cost? It meant condemning an innocent man. It meant rationalizing that the ends justify the means. After having Jesus flogged, beaten, and mocked, Pontius Pilate made the maker of heaven and earth carry a cross to a hill called Calvary where he was crucified.

So who won? The Jewish leaders thought they did—they got rid of Jesus. Pilate thought he did—he made the Jews happy thus keeping his job. (Quick side note here. Guys, listen up. In this process Pilate perhaps made his boss happy, but didn't probably make his wife happy. She told him not to have anything to do with that innocent man Jesus (cf. Mt 27:19). I can't imagine this helped strengthen their marriage or made Pilate more beloved in his wife's eyes. Remember that guys!) So the Jews thought they won. Pilate thought he won. But can you win if in the end you condemn an innocent man? Can you win if in the end the cost of winning is that you kill the Son of God?

Friends, what's the cost of "winning"? Have you ever been faced with a decision and been forced to think about that? To evaluate, "Do I compromise my integrity for the opportunity to get what I want?" "Am I willing to use these people to get to the top?" "How could I manipulate this situation to my own maximum advantage?" I know you have, because in the process of making every decision in life, major and minor, the selfish desires of our sinful nature are often right there trying to motivate us, aren't they, even if sometimes they're camouflaged ?

Now let's talk about this a little bit. How did it happen that everyone thought they won—the Jews thought they won, Pilate thought he won—while it looked like Jesus lost? Well here's what jumps out to me as I thought about this topic all week of "The Thinker."

First of all, the Jewish leaders *vilified* Jesus when they brought him to Pontius Pilate. They told a villain story about Jesus. This is what happens you spin nasty little tales about decent, kind human beings. Then you impute to them a bad motive and tell everyone about the evils of the other person as if somehow you're doing the world a huge favor. When you tell a villain story about someone you automatically assume the worst possible motives while ignoring any possible good intentions. You ever do this about others? About your spouse? About your coworkers or your boss? About your coach? About your pastor? About your elected government leaders? It's what the Jews were doing with Jesus. They *vilified* him.

But then we've got Pontius Pilate. What did he do? He *magnified* the villain story of the Jews and allowed a few loud critics to have too powerful an influence over his thinking. He allowed a very vocal and critical minority of people among the Jewish leaders to compel him into compromising what he knew was the difference of right and wrong in order to make them happy. He *magnified* their criticisms and villain stories. You ever do that? I have. A number of years ago I actually spent time online researching other careers because of the harsh, unfair criticism of a very vocal but very small minority of people. It's amazing isn't it, sometimes, how a few loud and constant critics can influence our decisions? Pilate *magnified* the voices of these critical Jewish leaders.

And of course what was the result? They *crucified* Jesus. Vilified – Magnified – Crucified. The innocent Son of God who only spoke the truth, who only loved, who only helped, was condemned to the most

excruciating death imaginable as a common criminal. Now of course you or I have never made a decision that led to someone's crucifixion. But at the bottom of this—don't we start to find the answer to the question, "What's the cost of 'winning'?"

The Jews vilified Jesus. Pilate magnified their villain stories. And in crucifying him they all thought, "We're going to win!" "Whatever it takes to get this problem out of the way so that in the end I come out looking good. I'll pay whatever the cost."

And Pilate actually thought he could come out of this looking good. Do any of you remember how the story ends? Matthew 27:24 tells us: *When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"*

Can you believe it? Pilate who held the power of decision thought he could justify his decision of condemning an innocent man and come out looking innocent. It just goes to show you that sometimes what the world thinks in terms of "winning" and "success", is in reality just the opposite. In winning like Pilate, you can actually lose your soul.

So the Jewish leaders got what they wanted. Pilate got what he wanted. But Jesus...what did he get? He got beatings, mocking, a crown of thorns, nails, and the cross. Who won? Well that depends on the definition of winning, doesn't it? Because even though the Jewish leaders thought they won by getting rid of Jesus and even though Pilate thought he won by getting rid of a problem, they lost their integrity. Even worse they lost their souls. In the end they were the biggest losers.

But Jesus, who didn't respond to the unjust accusations in kind, who didn't try and manipulate the situation for his own advantage...it sure looked like he lost when he died. But in reality, what did he accomplish? Our forgiveness! His innocent, precious life in place of guilty sinners like us. What is the true cost of winning? We see it most clearly at the cross of Christ. Yet the proof that God has turned tables on what the world thinks about winning and losing happened three days later when he raised his Son Jesus from the dead. Jesus, the Lamb of God who was slain—now risen and gloried. The message that we now proclaim is about the victory that Jesus Christ has won who has taken away the sins of the world so that we who believe in him are free. We are free from the villain stories other people tell about us. We are free from the ways other people magnify our shortcomings. We are free to make God-pleasing decisions in all that we do motivated now not by fear or guilt but out love for our neighbors and friends.

Of course when this is your definition of winning, that isn't going to make life easy. In a way life becomes harder because now every decision is a choice. Will I bring glory to God or serve myself? Will I work for the greater good or will I just try and make myself look good? And as we navigate all

the decisions of life we won't always get it right. Yet despite our setbacks and failures God's faithfulness endures forever. Everything we now experience as dearly loved children of God, every high and every low, God uses to help us learn and sometimes re-learn that our true worth, our true identity is in Christ alone. And in Christ this promise is most certainly true: *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"* (Romans 8:37).

So then how do you make God pleasing decisions in life? Let me share these three questions I ask whenever facing a decision—recognizing that every decision is an opportunity to honor my Savior who loves me and gave himself up for me. **1) Is it *right*?** - What does God's Word say? **2) Is it *loving*?** - What's in my neighbor's best interests? **3) Is it *wise*?** - What do my godly friends and mentors advice when I seek their counsel? You can find these questions in your worship folder under the Next Steps section. Try them out the next time you're faced with the question, "What's the cost of winning?"

In case you're wondering these are the questions I went through this week as I faced some crucial conversations with my friends from Kayla's Krew and our city leaders on the common council. I'm completely at peace and I'm proud as your pastor for the way that all of you have handled this situation.

I'm going to close today with a message of encouragement that I was sent this week because it meant a lot to me and I think helps put this sermon into practice.

Just sending you a quick message to keep your head up with all of this. I know you guys put in a lot to try and get this done, and I completely agree with you that this is more of an opportunity to show Jesus' love even when things didn't go our way. The more I age, the more I realize that it's just as honorable to help someone climb their mountain as it is to be standing at the top with them once they get there.

My Next Steps

Question to Ponder: Pontius Pilate and Jesus Christ had two very different ways of doing things, yet they both stood together in the same room. What does this mean regarding the way to achieve success—from the world's perspective? From God's perspective?

Treasure to Share: *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"* (Romans 8:37).

Action to Take: Struggling how to think through making a godly decision? Try this decision making matrix: **1) Is it *right*?** - What does God's Word say? **2) Is it *loving*?** - What's in your neighbor's best interests? **3) Is it *wise*?** - What do your godly friends and mentors advice when you seek their counsel?