

## The Lessons of Lent – Worthless Goals

Our goal during our midweek services this Lenten season has been to identify and take to heart the lessons from which our God would have us learn. But Lent is a season not only of lessons but of contradictions. It is a time when we slow down to move forward, when we seek to rid ourselves of something to gain something better, and when we are reminded that life comes through death.

One of the clearest contradictions appears in the trial of Jesus. Though the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent (Scripture repeatedly shows Pilate trying to release Jesus) yet in the end Pilate chooses something else. He chooses a worthless goal.

This is obviously yet another lesson for every child of God to learn. To identify and learn that lesson this evening we ask ourselves a simple but important question: *“What goals am I pursuing that are ultimately worthless?”*

We find our fifth lesson in the 19<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John’s Gospel:

***ESV(John 19:12) From then on Pilate sought to release him (Jesus), 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 is God’s Word. We ask God the Holy Spirit to open our minds to understand and our hearts to believe all that he here desires to teach us as we pray, ***“Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!”*** Amen.

The first worthless goal we identify in our text is the goal of “worldly ambition.” When the crowd yelled to Pilate, ***“If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend,”*** they were exerting more than just political pressure. Jesus’ enemies were astute enough to recognize Pilate’s weaknesses. They knew exactly which buttons to push. They recognized Pilate not only as a political animal but as an individual ruled by, even obsessed with, his own ambition. Pilate obviously feared losing favor with the emperor, but the deeper flaw was his blind ambition. The approval of Caesar was just a means to that end. He knew he had to remain on good terms with Caesar not because he cared for the man but because he knew that the Emperor held the key to all of his plans and aspirations.

Note well the obvious problem. Blinded as he was by earthly ambition, Pilate was willing to sacrifice pretty much everything else. The very first victim was his own honor.

We really don’t talk much about honor, except in the abstract, and even then mostly as a verb – as something one does to or for someone else: *“This evening we honor…”* Honor is almost universally accepted as a good thing, but we spend little time or effort identifying what honor really is and what it is supposed to look like. Most in our society get it all wrong, as when Hollywood *honors* their fellow narcissists for being especially good at make-believe. They are thereby, for the most part, honoring some of the most *dishonorable* individuals alive. The same is true for something as twisted as the *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*, which seeks to permanently enshrine some of the most dishonorable and immoral individuals on earth.

God’s Word, which says much about honor, speaks directly to this perversion, listing it as one of the many elements of shame that will one day be corrected: ***“The fool will no more be called noble, nor the scoundrel said to be honorable.”*** <sup>ESV</sup>(Isaiah 32:5)

Although it is mostly externalized today, honor is internal – *must be* internal. It is a character trait, not exclusive to Christians but certainly a character trait that every Christian should possess. It is the internal resolve that tells an individual to do the right thing. But because sinful human beings can't be trusted to always know the right thing, God gave us the divine directive of his Word to forever establish right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, honest and dishonest. Therefore man doesn't have to guess at what is honorable and what is dishonorable. God has already done that for us – imperfectly by the law written in our hearts and perfectly in his Word.

Scripture does use honor as a verb, but it also tells us exactly who to honor (father and mother, the elderly, those God has placed into positions of authority, those who teach us his Word, virtuous men and women, etc.) and why – because in honoring them we are honoring God himself.

Obviously honorable people at times do dishonorable things, just as dishonorable people can occasionally act honorably. So also we have no idea if Pilate was an honorable man who, in this case, acted dishonorably. But the lesson here is, again, to learn to recognize how dangerous it is to adopt worthless goals. Whether Pilate's ultimate goal was power, fame, wealth, earthly prestige or a combination of all four, it overrode everything else in Pilate's world – his honor, his justice, his integrity, his compassion – all were sacrificed to his worthless goal.

Worthless goals transform those who adopt them into blind, unreasoning beasts. Focused as they are on the distant horizon of their adopted goal, they ruthlessly trample everything else that stands in their way. Pilate simply wanted what he wanted, but just look at what he sacrificed in what turned out to be a vain attempt to get it.

The second worthless goal for which Pilate struggled was public approval. In Mark 15:15 we read, ***“So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.”***

Important fact to remember about following “the crowd” and seeking its favor: the crowd changes positions faster than a Washington politician. Had Pilate “followed the crowd” just five days earlier, he would have welcomed Jesus as a king on Palm Sunday.

In Proverbs 29:25 we are warned: ***“The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.”*** Jesus himself revealed the seriousness of adopting public approval as your goal in life by asking his enemies a question: ***“How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”***<sup>ESV</sup>(John 5:44) His message is that you can have the approval of the world or you can have eternal life through faith in Jesus. You cannot have both. Such is the terrible danger of adopting worthless goals.

The third worthless goal for which Pilate struggled was self-preservation. In Matthew 27:24 we read, ***So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.”*** Because virtually everyone but Jesus was terrified of the mob that could form in Jerusalem at the slightest provocation, Pilate also adopted the goal of self-preservation – not only his position and power but his very life.

That is, after all, the world's way: to protect your own life at all costs. Jesus taught a very different way, a paradox: *to find your life, you must lose it.* <sup>ESV</sup>***(Matthew 16:25-26) For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*** He then went on to summarize this whole question of worthless, earthly goals, and to put all into its

proper setting or context: ***“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”***

At this point we've gotten pretty much all we can get from Pontius Pilate. We've learned pretty much all we need to know about his worthless, misguided goals. What remains is not only the lessons God's children are supposed to learn from them but how to apply them to our own individual lives.

The first worthless goal we recognized in Pontius Pilate was worldly ambition. You too? Does that represent a real or at least potential problem for you? It's hard to imagine that any of you have grand political ambitions, or that you necessarily crave power or fame, so ask yourself different questions: *What sort of thoughts fill most of my day – earthly thoughts or heavenly thoughts? To what end or toward what goal are most of my actions directed – toward gaining earthly treasures or heavenly treasures? What is the basis or goal of those things in my life that give me the most pleasure or satisfaction, earthly gain or pleasing my Savior?*

You see the problem. The fact that we aren't interested in earthly power or fame doesn't justify every other worthless, worldly ambition. Attack the problem from another angle. Are there good, God-pleasing goals that are being pushed out of my life by worldly ambitions like the accumulation of wealth. Has, for example, making money and having nice things become more important than what God has labeled as most important? <sup>ESV</sup>**(Matthew 6:33) *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.***

The second worthless goal we recognized in Pontius Pilate was public approval. You too? Have you ever found occasions in your life when the acceptance and adoration of those around you was more important than the approval of your Savior? Like Peter, have you ever allowed the world to shame you into disowning or effectively denying Jesus by your words or actions?

The third worthless goal we recognized in Pontius Pilate was self-preservation – preservation not only of life itself but of reputation, public opinion, lifestyle, and status. Again, you too? Is your first thought always *“What will make me look better?”* or *“What will glorify my God and draw others to their Savior?”*

Don't be discouraged by your failures. Learn from them. The greatest lesson we can possibly learn from our own failures is to give ever greater glory to our Savior. He truly did suffer and die to rescue undeserving sinners. We really do have an amazing Savior. We have allowed worthless goals to direct our lives. Jesus, on the other hand, directed every single moment of his life on earth to the singular goal of paying the debt that our sins deserved and rescuing us from the punishment we deserved.

So then this evening we acknowledge the guilt of our own worthless goals. We acknowledge that we can do nothing at all to pay for those sins, but we trust that our Savior has paid also the terrible penalty for these sins. In thanksgiving we simply ask God the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts whatever changes are needed to align our lives to his will and to his glory. *“We are foolish children, dear Savior. Show us how to walk.”* Amen.