

Existential Questions

On Sunday we looked at the dramatic encounter between Jesus and Pontius Pilate at Jesus' trial.

1. Warm-up Question: Have you ever had to testify in a court of law? What happened? How did it feel?
2. Historians tell us that Pontius Pilate served as Rome's provincial governor in Judea for ten years starting in 26 AD. He commanded 3,000 Roman soldiers, collected taxes on behalf of Rome, and exercised judicial authority over civil and criminal cases. On the morning after Jesus' midnight arrest, he was delivered to Pilate by the Jewish authorities who accused him of claiming to be King of the Jews, a treasonous offense against Caesar. At the trial, as Pilate cross examined Jesus, he ended up asking several towering existential questions. Read selected verses from John 18 and 19, as printed on p. 3.
3. John 19:8 says, "When Pilate heard [that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God], he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, '**Where are you from?**'" This is the first great existential question.
 - a. The text tells us that Jesus refused to answer Pilate's question. Actually, throughout his trial, Jesus says very little, almost as if he's not putting up a defense. Why? What are the possible reasons why Jesus did not vigorously defend himself at trial?
 - b. Although Jesus did not answer Pilate's question about his origins, the Gospel of John does. John 1:1 describes Jesus this way: "In the beginning was the *Logos* [Greek for divine reason/wisdom], and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." Have you ever thought of Jesus as being the principal agent in creation of the cosmos and human life? How does this affect how you see Jesus?
 - c. John 1:10 says, "He [Jesus] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." Imagine what it was like for Jesus, the eternal timeless Son of God, to give up the divine prerogatives of being an heavenly being to come to earth as a mere human. Brainstorm together to come up with a list of powers and privileges Jesus had to give up to become human.
 - d. Jeff compared the transformation of Jesus into a human to what it would be like for us to transform into a cat. What are the powers and privileges you'd have to give up to become a cat? If the cats of the world really needed you to become one of them, would you make that sacrifice? How does this analogy affect how you think about Jesus' decision to become human?

4. In John 18:37, Jesus told Pilate, “For this reason 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.” Pilate replied, “**What is truth?**” This is Pilate’s second great existential question. Typically we assume the best way to answer the question “What is truth?” is by applying human reason and intellect to figure things out, as all the great philosopher’s attempt to do. But if you’ve ever read much philosophy, you quickly realize, as Socrates said, “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.”
 - a. What do you think Socrates meant? Do you think it’s possible for us humans to discern ultimate truth through reason and analysis?
 - b. Jesus took a very different approach. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” John 14:6. In other words, he believed the best way to communicate ultimate truth is not through esoteric philosophical teachings, but by being a living, breathing example of truth in action. Thus, for us as Christians, Jesus was truth embodied. In the example of his life, we see what is true and good and meaningful. We experience the same thing when we encounter a deeply spiritual person in our own time. Tell us about someone who has been “embodied truth” in your life. What did you learn from them?
 - c. Jeff said, “If you want to know what truth is, look to the example of Jesus.” Based on what you know about Jesus, what are some of the great truths you think we’re meant to learn from him?
5. In John 18:35, Pilate asked Jesus a third great question. Pilate said, “Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. **What have you done?**” In other words, Pilate was trying to figure out what Jesus had done to stir up such an intense backlash. Jeff said, “It turns out when heaven meets earth, sparks fly. When light meets darkness, when truth meets deception, sparks fly. Jesus came to stir things up.” He overturned the money changer tables in the temple, he hung out with “sinners,” he violated Sabbath rules to heal people, he included female disciples, he urged an end to discrimination against the Samaritans, etc., etc.
 - a. As followers of Jesus, our lives also ought to challenge the status quo in ways that help earth become more like heaven. We ought to be the kind of people who surprise others in a good way. What are some countercultural values that we ought to embrace as followers of Jesus?
 - b. Former congressman, civil rights advocate, and pastor John Lewis spoke of the importance of making “good trouble.” He believed that Jesus’ followers should still be pushing the envelope and challenging the world. In your own personal life, what’s something you’re doing to make “good trouble” in your family, among your friends, at work, or in society in general?

John 18:28 - 19:9, selected verses

28 Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. 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." ³⁸Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him." ⁷The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.