What is truth

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[0:00] Because in many ways this question of Pilate is a very modern question indeed. First of all then, let's look at what Pilate thinks about this question, and how this very question that he asks, and the way in which he asks it, decrays his whole attitude to the subject.

We may first of all note that when we are reading here of Pilate, we are talking about a real historical person. We sometimes forget that the people that are mentioned in the pages of the Bible had a real life and existence that affected events outside the things that are recorded in Scripture. Pilate, we know, was the Roman governor. As such, of course, he had come from a different country where he had lived most of his life already.
He had been brought up in a particular way. He had read a particular book. No doubt all very different from the background of somebody, say, like John, who's writing this Gospel.
But Pilate is mentioned by several of the historians of that time, and none of them really mentioned him in a very flattering way.
[1:29] He's mentioned by the Roman historian Tacitus, and he's mentioned by two Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus. And on top of that, we have an inscription that's been discovered by Israeli archaeologists in Caesarea, which mentions his name alongside of the emperor of that time, that is, Tiberius.

Now, all of this I mention because it reminds us that here we're dealing with a real flesh-and-blood person who was, of course, affected by the thinking of his time and, in turn, affected the history of his time by the things that he did and said.
Some of these writers were very uncomplimentary to Pilate. They talked about his harshness in his feelings. They talked about the fact that he would accept bribes.
They talked about his disregard for justice and his spitefulness, particularly to the Jewish people. Now, these things were said by Philo, who was a Jew, so making due allowance for perhaps some exaggeration about Pilate, we can still see that, really, he was not a very attractive type of person. Nonetheless, the Bible portrays him very fairly. Here, we have no reference to any kind of perhaps harshness or spitefulness on his part, although we can beteck something of a long-running battle between himself and the Jewish leaders in the conversations that take place.
[3:09] I want to look today not so much at what these outside writers have said about Pilate, which may be exaggerated, but to look at what we learn here from what the Bible, God's Word says about him and about his attitude.

First of all, and most importantly, his view of truth. This question he asked, this very famous question, and Pilate is remembered for several famous questions or statements.
He's remembered for the question, what will I do with Jesus who has called Christ? He's remembered for the statement that we read in this passage as well, Behold the man.
But he's remembered perhaps especially for this perhaps most important question, what is truth? It is such an important one and such an attractive one, but yet what vitiates it right away is that Pilate didn't actually mean it very seriously here.
Because we read that he asked Jesus, what is truth? But then with this he went out again to the Jews. In other words, this wasn't his question seeking an answer from Jesus, but it was really a kind of rhetorical question.
[4:36] It was a parting shot as he went out the door. Jesus had been speaking of truth, and Pilate says, what is truth? As he walked out, expecting that there could be no answer to that question.

And that really betrays Pilate's whole attitude to truth. The whole question of whether there can be truth, or whether there is such a thing as the truth.

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And in showing this attitude, Pilate chose himself to be in fact a very modern person indeed. As many people today hold the same kind of view of truth.
In other words, Pilate was sceptical with regard to truth. He was, we might even say, cynical. He didn't really believe that there was such a thing as truth at all.
Perhaps there are two shades of attitude here that we should distinguish. First of all, it's possible that Pilate was really taking up that position and saying there is no such thing as the truth.
[5:42] There is no such thing as one philosophy, or one religion, or any such thing that is the truth. He's speaking here as a man of the world, a much-traveled man who's been right throughout the Roman Empire.

He's seen it all. He's seen all these different kinds of religions, different kinds of philosophies. He's seen it all. And he says, what is truth? Everybody has their own idea of the truth.
There are all these different views. How can there be one thing that is called truth, or the truth? But perhaps there is another shade of meaning here as well that we would do well to distinguish.
And that is that perhaps Pilate might very well, like others, acknowledge that there may be such a thing as the truth.
But how can we know it? How can we know it? Perhaps again here, drawing on all his experience, all his travelling throughout the Roman Empire, all his dealing with different kinds of people here and there, he had come to the conclusion, yes, all these people claim to have the truth, these philosophers or these people who worship different gods.
[7:01] Yet, they can't all be true. And who's to know what is the truth? And whichever one of these shades of meaning we put into this question of Pilate, he does indeed show himself to be a very up-to-date person indeed.

Many people today holding very similar views to what Pilate and many other Romans of this period held with regard to truth. Many of the Romans at this time had abandoned any real, genuine belief in their ancient gods or their ancient worship.
And they were very cynical and sceptical with regard to a great deal of what was taught by philosophers and by moralists of the day in which they lived. They just simply lived for Rome itself. They lived for the political entity of Rome and its power and its influence throughout the world. This question of Pilate's and the way in which he asks it has a very modern ring about it indeed.
Many people today would, along with Pilate perhaps, say that there is no such thing as absolute truth. And that is a view that has gained so much influence in our society today that we might say it's almost come to be accepted.
[8:29] That there are so many different people claiming to have the right way or the truth, so many different religions, so many different philosophers. Well, there cannot be something that is really the truth that encompasses everything.

Rather, they believe that, well, people may have a little bit of the truth. Truth is relative. I may have a little bit of the truth, and what I have may not really be completely true.
And somebody else, they may have a little bit of the truth, and it may not be completely true either. Perhaps some people hope in some such way to get nearer to the truth by investigating all these different things.
But in the end, so many people coming to the conclusion, well, there just seems to be contradictions. And they come round to this other point of view that says, well, if there is such a thing as the truth, how can we know it?
How can a man ever come to know what is the real way in life? How can we ever come to know what really makes sense of life? Of life and of death?
[9:36] And all the complexities of living in this modern world in which we live. The greatest question of truth of all is the question of the existence of God, whether he exists or not.

And because people have come to the conclusion that they can't really know about truth, can't really know about whether there is such a thing as truth, many people have come to the conclusion that we cannot know whether such a person as God really exists.
And because of that, there is a great deal of skepticism also about what are called moral absolutes. That is, whether some things are definitely completely right and others definitely and completely wrong.
And so this whole process has filtered right throughout our society, right throughout the whole of the Western world, so that there is a great deal of unsureness, uncertainty, about what truth is, or if

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indeed there is such a thing, or if we can know it.
Well then, that shows us that this question of Pilate and his attitude portrayed in that question is a very relevant thing for us today. But then we must look secondly at Pilate's character.
[11:13] Because, you see, his character really is bound up with his attitude to truth. The kind of attitude he held with regard to this question affected the kind of person that he was.

Now that is extremely important. It is extremely important for us to grasp that today especially. Because, there seems to be the feeling abroad as well that it doesn't really matter after all what you think about these intellectual, or these religious, or these philosophical questions.
It doesn't really matter. In the end, it matters after all what kind of person you are. But, the Bible reminds us as a man thinks, so is he.
The kind of outlook of life that we have, the kind of philosophy we have, whatever name we use for it, however we think about life, that is the kind of person we are becoming.
And when a whole society thinks in a particular way, or the majority of people think in a particular way, that is the direction in which that society is moving. Make no mistake of it.
[12:35] And Pilate, at least in this, was being consistent. The kind of view he held, the cynical, sceptical view with regard to truth, bore a logical outcome in the kind of character he was.

We see Pilate's character shown, especially in his treatment of Jesus here. Pilate was the Roman governor, therefore he was the supreme judge, he was the supreme law officer in the country at that time.
And so, for any crime that demanded the death penalty, the Jews had to come to him so that he could pronounce sentence if in fact the person was found guilty.
Now, in the whole of Pilate's dealings with Jesus here, we see that he is completely arbitrary in his application of the law.
In other words, he saw quite clearly that Jesus was innocent. He said several times, I find no fault in this man.
[13:49] I find no basis of a charge against him. In other words, he was saying, there is no case to answer against this prisoner. He's innocent. He said it several times.

We have it here in verse 38. Immediately after he went out, after that parting shot to Jesus, what is the truth? He goes out to the Jews and he says, I find no basis for a charge against him.
And he repeats that many times. Yet, he crucified him. he gave the permission, he gave the order, no one else in the whole land could give that order.
Only Pilate. And he gave that order. Why did he do so if he believed that Jesus was innocent? Well, the answer comes back firmly to what his view of truth was.
If his view of truth was that truth is truth, that there is something that is true and the opposite is a lie, if his view of truth had been there is such a thing as absolute truth, then, of course, he would have said this man is innocent and he is not going to be punished.
[15:08] He is innocent and he doesn't deserve death. But because of his faulty view of truth, the whole question of Jesus' innocence or his guilt was really of no great importance to him.

It only became slightly more important when he began to discover that Jesus was a very unusual person. And it seems here Pilate is fascinated by Jesus and the kind of things he was saying.
And Pilate, maybe bad though he was in his dealings at many times, he didn't really want to do Jesus any harm. He seemed that he was quite interested in this person.
He was fascinated by him. And certainly when he heard something about him being a son of God, there was a kind of superstitious fear stirred up within him.
But yet, in spite of all these things, he still crucified him. And we discover that the reason why he crucified him is given quite clearly here in the passage.
[16:21] So in verse 12 of chapter 19 we read, From then on Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, if you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar.

Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar. And immediately Pilate hears this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the stone pavement.
In other words, what really brought Pilate to do what he knew to be wrong, was when they mentioned about Caesar finding out about this whole case if Pilate let Jesus off.
Now there's a whole background to this which is interesting, although it's not exactly essential to understand what's going on here, but it's interesting that the historians tell us that indeed Pilate had been hauled over the coals at least three times before by the emperor.

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And the emperor Tiberius at this stage of his life was really very cantankerous and unpredictable and Pilate didn't want to get on the wrong side of Tiberius again.
[17:38] He had got into trouble already for bringing the Roman standards into the temple and thus offending the Jews and nearly causing a terrible bloodshed.

Then he caused trouble again by using temple money to build an aqueduct into the city. Again he got into trouble for slaughtering Samaritans who had been assembling to worship on their Mount Gerestim.
And in each case Tiberius wisely rebuked Pilate and tried to see to it that he didn't stir up that kind of trouble.
So if something else happened that would be a black mark against him, that could possibly have meant the end of his political career. And indeed the whole situation in Rome at this time was very unpredictable because there was an assistant of Tiberius the emperor, a very evil man who had been exercising tremendous power.
But Tiberius was getting more and more suspicious of him and eventually he found him out. So that is the whole background against which Pilate is operating here. And suddenly it all comes home to him that what is to be decided here really is not a question of justice at all, but it's a question of his own life.
[18:57] It's a personal question concerning himself and his own position. And he decides it therefore not in accordance with the truth as to whether Jesus is guilty or innocent, but in accordance with his own personal preference.

in other words, what I said at the beginning, he exercises his power as the law officer in an arbitrary fashion, not according to the absolutes of truth and of justice, but according to the dictates of his own personal position.
Now that, I suggested, was the logical outcome of his view of truth. If he viewed truth as absolute and unchanging, something that could be known and something that could be put into practice in one's life, he would certainly have not as easily fallen into this departure from justice as he did.
At least he would have been totally inconsistent to his view. But, because he held that there really was no such thing as truth anyway, well, it wasn't such a great thing, it wasn't such a great deal for him, or he tried to convince himself of that anyway, that he would be unjust in this particular case.
In other words, when it all came down to it, with all these conflicts, on the one hand, the obvious innocence of Jesus, and that he was such an interesting person even to Pilate, and on the other hand, the pressure coming from the Jews and Caesar, when all these conflicts were weighed up in the balance, in the end, did it really matter if he was guilty or innocent anyway, because what does truth matter?
[20:54] And that is really how Pilate was so easily able to decide in the way in which he did. Now, that is the logical outcome of the particular view of truth that he held, and that will continue to be the logical outcome of that view of truth in our modern society today.

And more and more we begin to see it. The more we have left off a belief in absolute truth, in a God who is in control of all things and who has given us his law that is unchanging, the more we depart from that, the more it becomes just a case of, well, what society thinks is right at a particular time, or what I feel to be right in my own experience.
And it becomes even in the administration of law, or in the formation of law, just a question of what is expedient in a society at a particular time.
But so we have changes in the laws being brought about in the last twenty years that are clearly departing from what God's word says concerning homosexuality, concerning divorce, concerning abortion.
And that is the way in which our society is moving. The more we have a disregard for truth being absolute and unchanging, the more we move in that direction of an arbitrary application of law.
[22:31] and then the question remains as to who is going to administer that kind of law in the future. Because if the foundations of a society are taken away, things are open to change.

A democracy may not always remain a democracy. It may not always be a parliament that is telling us what to do. In other words, the whole way is open for a complete, totalitarian dictating of what the arbitrary law is going to be.
Just as we had in the time of the Roman Empire. If we're going back to their way of thinking, we will come back eventually to their way of politics, their way of law as well.

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So then, that's something of Pilate, his view of truth, and his character. that in the end, truth doesn't matter. But of course, we know even in a down-to-earth common sense kind of way, that truth does matter.
Not only did it matter here, he had to decide one way or the other against Jesus or for Jesus, but it matters in very ordinary, everyday ways that may in fact become matters of life or death.
[23:55] take for example, there's something wrong with your car, the brakes aren't working properly, you take it to a garage, get them repaired. When you go to collect it, you ask the man, now, is it safe?

Have you done the job? He says, yes. You get into the car, drive down a hill, you put on the brakes, nothing happens. You're smashed.
Of course, it matters whether the man has a high regard for truth or not. And that's fundamental to any kind of civilized society.
We take it for granted that there is such a thing as truth at that kind of level. But the greatest question of truth of all that overguards everything else is the great question of the existence of God. Does God exist or not? Because if he does not, as Dostoevsky said, if there is no God, then everything is permitted.
[24:58] And that is the situation we're coming to in our modern world today. If there is no God, everything is permitted. Everything, anything, may be permitted.

Because who ultimately is to say that it is absolutely and finally wrong and that people will ultimately finally, whether in this life or in the next, be brought to account for it if there is no God.
So then that's why this question is so vital. And I want to look with you briefly now at what is shown here by Jesus as a completely different attitude to the whole question of truth.
What is his view of truth? Well, we may say first of all quite simply that his view of truth was indeed a very unique one. His belief was that he is the truth.
He said in John chapter 14 verse 6, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. He says there, I am the truth.
[26:10] Now that statement is so staggering if we really had open minds as we were thinking about it. We know it as perhaps a familiar text or passage of scripture.

But if we just thought about it, a man saying, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to God the Father but by me. I am the truth. I am the truth.
In other words, he didn't need to make a whole series of statements concerning what the truth is. He said, I am the truth. And here in talking to Pilate he says, you are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. He is the king of truth.
Truth is intimately bound up with who he is. And that is, first and foremost, because he is God. Time and time again, throughout the gospels, we have clear references to this.
[27:15] He says to the Jewish people at one point, before Abraham was, I am. Taking on his lips the very name, the hallowed name for God, I am.

Before Abraham was, before there ever was a Jewish nation at all, Christ said, I am. I have been eternally existing forever. I am.
God. And time and time again, he goes on to say similar kinds of things. He says, I and the Father are one. He goes on to say things like, to know me is to know the Father.
To see me is to see the Father. All these things, Jesus says quite clearly indicating that he is saying he is the final and complete truth because he is God himself.
He is the eternal son of God. In other words, he takes as the fundamental basis for truth, the fact that God exists.
[28:19] He himself is God. And that is the fundamental fact. That is the fundamental truth. That God exists. And because God exists, then there is the great distinction between truth and falsehood.

God exists, and the opposite of that is that God wouldn't exist, but in fact God does exist. That is the final positive truth that God exists.
And then truth is defined by what he is, the kind of person he is. Truth is defined by his character, by his laws.
And there we have the ultimate basis of truth. In other words, when Jesus shows here in this passage and another is that he is the truth, he is the king of truth, he is talking about the absolute

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truth.
There is no other God, he is the truth. And whatever opposes him is the lie. He talks about the devil being the father of lies.
[29:27] And that is he is totally opposed and against what Christ says and what he stands for. But then Jesus claims to be the truth in a secondary sense from that as well.

And that is that he is the revelation of God. In other words, he tells and he shows the truth about God. In this passage again in verse 37 here, in fact, for this reason I was born and for this reason I came into the world to testify to the truth.
He came into the world to speak as a witness to the truth, to tell people the truth, to tell people about God, to tell people that there is an absolute law of God, that we are all responsible to God and that ultimately he will account us answerable to him for what we have done in this life.
He is the revelation of God and that means that we can indeed know the truth. This question that we began with, how can we know?
How can we know what is right and what is wrong? How can we know if there is just the conflicting ideas of different groups or different individuals? How can we know? We can know because God has not been silent.
[30:50] God, this God, the absolute eternal God has revealed himself and revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ at a particular time in history through the words that he spoke and the words that led up to his coming in scripture and the words that followed it in scripture.

All of it revealing God. We can know because God has revealed himself. That's why we can know. That's how we can know the truth. That's why the Christian says, I'm not skeptical with regard to the truth.
I know that there is such a thing as the truth. The truth is the Lord Jesus Christ and all that he says. That is the truth and that's how we can know it because it has happened and it has happened in the history of this world.
But he is also the truth he would indicate by his being the true way of salvation. He's the true hope for this world. In that very famous verse, John 14 verse 6, he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life.
No man comes to the Father but by me. In other words, he says, this whole question of truth is not just an academic thing, it's not just an interesting thing to think about for a few minutes on a Sunday or any other time.
[32:10] This question of truth is vital for your destiny. It is vital for your salvation. It is vital for where you're going to spend eternity.

because he says, there is only one way, there is only one truth, there is only one way to the Father, and he says, I am that way, and he says, everyone must come by that way.
In other words, his word is very exclusive. He's saying there are not many different ideas about the truth, some perhaps slightly more true than others but all got a little bit of the truth.
He says, I am the truth, and there is only one way. Now that kind of word again is something that cuts right across the world in which we live today, because as we mentioned already, there's this idea, well, maybe everybody, every viewer has got a little bit of the truth, but no, Jesus says, I am the truth.
No one can get to the Father, no one can get to heaven, no one can have eternal life, except by me. So, if we need to know the truth so desperately, if we need to know it so desperately, we need to come through the Lord Jesus Christ.
[33:31] We need to know it desperately because we need to have true life, and we need to have eternal life. Therefore, we need to come through Jesus, and through believing in him.

He said, that if we listen to his teaching, if we believe it, he said, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. The truth will make you free.
He came to speak the truth, to show the truth, and he came to exhibit the truth in every way. And when we accept what he has said and what he has done as the truth, and as the only way to God, then we are free, he says.
We are set free from the sins that would bind us and restrict us and drag us down to death and to separation from God. He sets us free. Those who know the truth will be free.
And so then, finally, we just look at wealth. What did that mean in Christ's experience? What kind of character was he? We looked at Pilate, what his view of truth was, and what kind of character he

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was.
[34:44] The logical outcome of his view of truth, and in fairness, we must look at Jesus and his logical outcome. What kind of character was he? Well, of course, we hardly need to answer that question.

It doesn't matter who people are today. It doesn't matter whether they're Christians or not Christians, whether they belong to other religions, Hindus, Muslims. No one will speak a bad word about Jesus Christ.
Yes, people may unthinkingly use his name in vain, but you ask people, what kind of person do you think Jesus was? What was he like?
Everyone will have some kind of good word to say about him. That is because the testimony of history is still being born. Not only did people, even his enemies, have to say good things about him in the day in which he lived, but right throughout the centuries since, people have had to say good about Jesus because of what he has continued to do in the world right up to this present time.
If we read his words, if we read his teaching, if we read what he did, we say, he was the best man who ever lived. Now many people who wouldn't call themselves Christians, who wouldn't believe a lot of what's in the Bible, they may come up with that very same sort of statement.
[36:08] He was the best man who ever lived. We see it even in the time in which he lived. Not only did his friends say things like he committed no sin and no guile was found on his lips.

Not only did they say in him there is no sin, but even people who weren't his friends at all, who had no axe to grind, would say things to show that in fact he was unique and he was very different. Think of Pilate himself. He said, I can't find any fault in this man. There's no basis for a charge against him. He has done no wrong. Think of Herod. He could find no fault in him either when he was sent to him, even although Jesus wouldn't even speak to him.
What about Judas, the person who betrayed him? When finally, in his despair, he threw down the 30 pieces of silver in the temple, he said, I have betrayed the innocent blood.
even after all that he had done, he had to say Jesus was innocent. What about the thief on the cross who said, this man has done nothing wrong.
[37:18] We are being punished justly, but this man has done nothing wrong. Then what about the centurion who said, surely this was a righteous man. all of these people are only saying in their own time, in their meeting with Jesus, they're only saying what millions of people have said ever since.

This man is innocent. This man is perfect. This man is the best man who's ever lived. Now that is the outcome of this particular view of truth, because he lived that view of truth to the utmost.
He was governed and directed by that view of truth, that God exists, and that he was in perfect harmony with God as the eternal son of God. And his desire for us is that we also would be in perfect harmony with God, that we would know that truth, and that we would be free, and therefore that we would come to be like him.
What a contrast between the life of Pilate and the life of the Lord Jesus. At that time the appearance of history was so different, wasn't it? Pilate was a governor sitting in judgment over Jesus.
Pilate was a great Roman governor. Pilate was a very famous man in his own time. Jesus, completely unknown, but yet history has totally reversed it.
[38:39] Who remembers Pilate now, apart from the fact that he was the man who commanded the crucifixion of Jesus? But we remember the Lord Jesus, and we remember him today because of the kind of person he is, because of his great words that are living and real today, that you too today can know, you can know this truth that will make you free.

You need to accept his view of truth, his view of himself, his view of what he came to do, and his view of what you must do. You must believe in him, accept him as Savior and his Lord.
Let us pray. Amen.

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