

# True Power and Authority

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[ 0 : 00 ] The openness of what Christianity is all about and what is at the very heart of Christianity.! The truth of God's justice and righteousness, the truth of God's grace toward us.

And this week, in these verses, there is a whole load of things going on. But right at the heart of them, really the focus here is going to give us clarity, I think, regarding the true nature of power and authority in our universe and in our world.

What do those things look like? Who is it that really holds the power? Where is it that we look for authority? Who do we give that authority to?

So much of our world is a struggle for power. And who it is that has that power, whose authority we submit to, how they use that power, that has a huge effect on our lives.

That's why, rightly so, when it comes to election times, people get very animated about it. You know, get out and vote. Because who has power really matters.

[ 1 : 38 ] And that can be formal, civil power. But even in our day-to-day lives, we have the choice. What kind of power will we pursue?

What kind of authority will we submit to? Who will we allow to shape our decisions? And how will we treat those that we have influence or authority over?

These verses this morning, I think, are going to give us a great insight into those questions. We're going to look through the three major characters in this passage, or groups of characters. And in them, we see, in each time, great pictures of where the power lies.

We see examples of where people are looking for power. And we see the various results of that. So let's begin first character in our verses with Pilate.

And Pilate is where we might well think, we might well assume that, well, this is the person who is in charge here. It's Pilate who has been in control up until this point.

[ 2 : 40 ] It's Pilate who we read, verse 1, has Jesus flogged, has him beaten? Despite even his own judgment that we see in verse 4, I find no guilt in him.

It seems Pilate then can really act however he chooses. That Pilate perhaps has this control over Jesus. And as well as that, we also see Pilate emphasizing his power and his authority over the Jewish leaders, and really the Jewish people and religion as a whole in this passage.

There's such a mockery, there's such venom in so much of what Pilate says here. Verse 5, behold the man, he says, said with complete irony.

Again, not just mocking Jesus after he has been beaten, after he is brought out on display, but also mocking the Jews who had brought him to trial.

Pilate is saying, is this really the guy that you're so worried about? Is this really the guy that you think is such a big deal? And then again in verse 7, he's there emphasizing the Jewish leaders' limitations, their subjugation under him.

[ 3 : 49 ] Pilate said to them, take him yourselves and crucify him, knowing full well that the Jewish leaders are not able to do that without his permission, that he holds all the cards, that he has the power.

And so from both the Bible verses like this that we're looking at this morning, and this is also found in other historical records of the time as well, but we are given this picture, a description of Pilate as a cruel, as an angry man.

I think we get a really clear picture here. This is a man who revels in the authority that he holds over others. This is a man who loves the position of power that he's been given, and who repeatedly underlines that power to all those who are under him.

And again, historically he was, for this reason, despised by the Jewish people, the violent protests against his heavy-handed authority.

So here is a man who looks like he holds the power, and yet actually what we start to see as we move through these verses is a shift to where ultimately Pilate is revealed as powerless.

[ 5 : 09 ] We're told in verse 8, as he hears the description of Jesus as the Son of God, he has some kind of response to that, most likely I think a superstitious response to that. It says, when Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid, and because of that he then wanted to release Jesus.

But here we see his joy at having authority over people is really turned on its head as he is vividly reminded that there are others with authority over him.

Verse 12 is really kind of the kicker here. It says, from then on, Pilate sought to release him, that is Jesus, Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, if you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend.

For Pilate to enjoy the power that he holds over others, this power from which he perhaps derives his worth, his value, his satisfaction, for that to happen, he has to fall in line with those who have power over him.

Pilate is not free. He can't risk offending those who are further up the food chain, or he will very quickly find that he is worth nothing. And so we see here a man essentially trapped, unable to do what he wants to do.

[ 6 : 29 ] Ironically, trapped by those under him, by the threat of what they will report to those over him. And so what we have here then in Pilate is this incredible picture of the nature of human power, its source, and yet also its limitations for so many people.

And as I say this, I'm talking about all of us. This is not for so many people out there. This is something that is a temptation for all of us, for so many people. The temptation is so strong to find our worth and our value by how far up the ladder we climb, by how many people are underneath us, do we have authority over.

You know, in some places this can be really obvious. You know, where do I rank in the workplace? What's my job title? Who reports to me? Well, that is where my value lies.

You know, I need to make sure that people, especially those under me, make sure they know where I fit in the pecking order. To be the person, in this case, who gets the promotion is to be the person who is superior, more significant than those who haven't.

In some cases, it's very black and white like that. In other areas, it's less explicit, but it's equally real, isn't it? Where do I fit in my friendship group at school? Where do I rank among my peers?

[ 7 : 53 ] Am I kind of a hanger-on, desperate to stick in with people, trying to kind of climb the ladder, trying to find people lower than me to bolster my status?

Or am I the ringleader? Am I the person that people look up to, the people who I have influence over and I kind of revel in that status? But then again, where does our friendship group fit in relation to other friendship groups, with other circles?

For so much of our lives, we are measuring ourselves against others and seeking power, seeking value, seeking respect in that way.

And yet, actually, I think we find, just like Pilate, that traps us, because there is always someone on a higher rung of the ladder. And that means that, just like Pilate, we're always captive to how other people might respond to our actions.

Our decisions then become defined by what other people might think, what other people might say, how other people might respond. Like Pilate, we become increasingly bitter, treating those under us maybe increasingly harshly to emphasize our position, our status, to make up for the fact that we're ultimately controlled by what other people think and what their opinion of us and our actions are.

[ 9 : 17 ] Just to give you an example of this from my life in the past, I remember one of my first jobs when I got one of my first promotions, and this was in no way a high-flying role by any stretch of the imagination.

But as soon as I got that, I found it incredibly difficult to accept good suggestions, good ideas from those who are technically kind of under me. I found I was desperate to find faults in people.

I was desperate to find reasons why their ideas wouldn't work. I was desperate to think of a better solution for myself. Why was that? Well, it was what we're talking about here in action.

I was finding my kind of identity in this new position over people. As a result, I was desperate to try and prove my superiority. I was desperate to impress those who are over me.

Again, it's a kind of a grim situation. It was not a good time to look back on. It's a kind of poor work and leadership skills. But that is the outworking when we think that power is worldly power.

[ 10 : 23 ] That is the kind of result we get when we find our worth in our rank relative to others. Who has to listen to me? That's the picture we see here in Pilot.

And yet again, we see that it's not real power. It's not something that brings real freedom. Because we are dependent, again, on the opinion of those over us. And as long as we have to define ourselves relative to others, we always will be stuck in that trap.

So that's Pilot. I suppose it's obvious, isn't it, if we know our Bibles, to see that Pilot is not a goodie. And yet it perhaps gets more challenging. I find it more challenging when we start to see actually elements of his attitude, his behavior, inside each one of us.

So that's the first character, Pilot. But second, let's move on to the Jewish leaders, our second group of characters who are such a key piece of this passage. As we've just been reading, it seems as though, doesn't it, they managed to get one over Pilot.

They are able to dictate the outcome. They get the result that they desire. Perhaps here, then, it is where power lies. These leaders were used to a position of power. They were literally the religious authorities.

[ 11 : 37 ] And throughout John's Gospel, there's been then this mounting tension, this opposition between them and Jesus. Here that is coming to its sharpest point.

And what is the reason for that conflict? Well, theologically, the reason is that the message of the Gospel, the message of Jesus, is a great leveler.

The message of Jesus is actually that all people need forgiveness. That all people need Jesus. That their religious uprightness didn't take away that need.

And therefore, it doesn't elevate them above others. Really, these Jewish leaders found their power, their authority in their own efforts.

And because of that, they felt they were able to look down on others who they saw as worse than themselves. And so really, in some ways, they're not that different from Pilot, are they?

[ 12 : 36 ] They desire the prestige that comes from being over others. Rather, they seek that through self-righteous religious means instead of political means.

But the end result that we see here is very much the same, that desire to elevate themselves. And as we've said, it looks like their authority wins out, doesn't it? They get what they desired.

Jesus, at the end of this passage, is delivered over to be crucified. The exact outcome of what they wanted. But the irony, really, of where this leads them, of the cost that they pay, is seen so clearly.

What are the final words of these religious leaders? The final words in these verses of those who considered themselves to be over God's people, who considered themselves to be the ones protecting true religion, who considered themselves to be kind of God's elite.

What did they end up saying? Well, do have a look down at the end of verse 15. It says there, The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar.

[ 13 : 44 ] We have no king but Caesar, they said. Who is supposed to be the king of God's people? Well, God is their king. The Old Testament that these Jewish leaders would have known abundantly, would have known so well, makes that abundantly clear.

And not only that, but the Jewish hope was found in the fact that God was going to send another king, an earthly king, a descendant of David, a son of God, a Messiah, to come and rescue them.

The Jewish people were supposed to be hoping for this king, waiting for this king. And yet these Jewish leaders, in seeking to protect their religious power and authority over others, here pledge their allegiance to Caesar, to Rome.

We have no king but Caesar. John is not accidental in how he records this and the shock it's supposed to give us. These Jewish authorities have sold out completely on God.

They've sold out completely, giving up their messianic hope of a king to come. They've turned their back on all of that and submitted themselves to worldly power because they are so viciously opposed to Jesus.

[ 14 : 58 ] Because they are so desperate to keep their power and their status and their authority. And so what then is the lesson for us as we look at these religious authorities?

Again, this is for any of us, whether you're a Christian or not here this morning. I really think the lesson is this, that if we seek power and authority through our own moral or religious efforts, if we think that will put us above others if we just do the right things, that that will demand respect or that will earn God's love, that if we have that approach that ultimately depends on us, then just like these religious leaders, we will be rejecting Jesus.

And here is the key thing, here is the most significant thing. If we reject Jesus, again, just like these religious leaders, we reject God himself. And that doesn't bring us freedom.

It submits us to the rule of Caesar. It submits us to the authorities of our age. The idea that we can sit in a church like this and look around and kind of rank ourselves.

I'm probably doing a bit better spiritually than that person, or I wouldn't do what that person is doing. I'm probably a little bit above them. The idea we could do that and then use that to give us a sense of superiority over other people is a complete anathema to the gospel.

[ 16 : 20 ] But all of us are here entirely because of God's grace to us in Christ. We're all needing to grow in that. And if we turn away from God's word and God's work, the pride in our own work, then ultimately we are not having God as king because we are not trusting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A real warning here of that danger of spiritual pride. And that is not just a theoretical danger. That is a seed that hides in all of us.

And so this really, again, is a warning, a passage for everyone. I do think it's worth addressing here as well the particular question of religious authority that is right before us here.

Because it's important here to remember as well that the priests, the priesthood was established by God, were given to the people as the religious teachers and leaders of his people.

And yet what we're seeing in these verses is just how wrong that went. And that was not because of God. That's not because his plans were wrong. But it is because of human sin misusing the authority God has given.

[ 17 : 29 ] And in our present day, still, we're only too aware of spiritual abuses of power. And that is a tragic thing. We want to be really clear on that.

It's a tragic thing that I could stand here and list names of people, including a great deal of high-profile people from all sorts of different Christian traditions and backgrounds who have had this role of leadership but who have fallen short of God's requirement for that role.

It is a terrible thing when people in places of religious authority abuse that authority, abuse that position for their own benefit.

Why does that happen? Why is that, unfortunately, an all-too-common story? Well, unfortunately, that happens when what we see here happens, that people love their power and authority more than they love Jesus.

And that is an incredible danger for anyone in Christian leadership, for the elders of this church and any church. Whenever we come across passages like this in Scripture, we need to be so aware of that danger because, again, that temptation lurks in all of us.

[ 18 : 48 ] And yet, as we think of that, it's vital to see the Bible's answer to that is not to do away with authority in the church but rather to make sure that it is an authority which is constantly looking back to Jesus, constantly recognizing its dependence on him, constantly remembering our need for grace and that our identity is found in that rather than any position or authority that God delegates to us.

It's only a church leadership who are constantly looking to Jesus who are, in turn, who are able to constantly point others to Jesus as well.

And so really, the takeaway here is for all of us to be aware that we don't reject Jesus and, in doing so, reject God himself. We must not depend on ourselves and our own righteousness.

We must not rank ourselves in that regard. We cannot have God on our own terms. We only have him through Jesus. But also, I think it is worth saying to specifically pray for the leadership of our church.

We really would ask you to do that for us and of other churches and Christian organizations that we would be people who remain fixed on Christ as the foundation of our lives, that we would never take that for granted, that we would never seek the gifts that he gives us or the positions he gives us over God and Christ himself.

[ 20 : 14 ] And by doing that, we would, unlike the Jewish leaders here, be able to serve his people well by constantly pointing to Jesus. And so that then leads us to the final focus of our time together.

As we do that just now, let's look at the person of Jesus as we think about the subject of power and authority and purpose. Now, I'm aware I probably haven't mastered the element of surprise here.

You probably weren't thinking that Pilate or the chief priests were going to be the biblical model of power and authority. This perhaps isn't a surprising place that we've landed. But having seen how everything we've looked at so far falls short, let's look at what it is that Jesus shows us about true power and what it truly means to submit to that.

And really, the key verse here, I think key verses here, verse 10 and 11, right at the heart of the passage. So Pilate said to him, You will not speak to me?

Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you? Jesus answered him, You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.

[ 21 : 31 ] Jesus is clear that the ultimate authority, the ultimate power is God alone. Jesus is clear that true authority comes from above, as he says, that everything that happens, including the cross and everything leading up to that point, that it all happens under God's sovereign control.

God holds the authority. And the only one person in this scene submitting to that authority, to true authority, is not Pilate or the priests as they try and grab power for themselves, as they squabble with one another.

It is Jesus Christ willingly submitting to that authority from above as he walks the path to the cross. And we might well say, while looking at this passage, well, how has that worked out for Jesus?

Not good, we might say. Jesus stands here, doesn't he? Battered and bruised and condemned to death. And if the Bible finished at this point, we would have to agree with that.

Stay clear of God's authority. It might take you to a terrible place like this. And yet actually, in the Gospels, in the Bible as a whole, the cross comes as a peace with the resurrection that follows.

[ 22 : 53 ] And so while we've seen in these verses the powerlessness of Pilate, while we've seen the compromise of the Jewish authorities, as we continue to work through the Bible, the end goal for Jesus is his glorious resurrection, as we'll see in the chapters to come in John.

And beyond that, the promise that through carrying out, through his carrying out of God's salvation plan, that all authority is then given to him from the Father.

And the rest of the New Testament tells us that Jesus now sits on his heavenly throne, ruling over all things. That as we saw last week, he is the true king. As we see in these pictures with him crowned and wearing a cape, and it looks like a mockery.

But actually, it is the reality. And he holds the authority. To submit to God's authority, which means to listen to Jesus' words, which means to accept Jesus as king, which means to depend upon his sacrifice, upon the cross in our place, to bring the forgiveness we all need.

And to submit to God's authority, that true authority, we see here in this passage, that is not a promise of a smooth ride. Nowhere is that seen more clearly than with Jesus going to the cross.

[ 24 : 13 ] And if we follow in his footsteps, we shouldn't be surprised by the suffering that comes from refusing to give ultimate allegiance to the world's authority and instead submitting to God's authority.

And yet we also see it leads us to the perfect and eternal glory that we are promised as we share with him, that truly putting ourselves under God's authority, submitting to his power and his word, is the very best thing we can do for all eternity.

And also that it makes all the difference in the present as well. Because as we look to Jesus, it means that rather than trying to find our place, rather than trying to demonstrate our power and our authority or worth by kind of lording our position over other people, just as Pilate did, and yet actually, which we've seen, ties us into this never-ending kind of food chain of who's above us and below us, constantly controlled by what people will think of us.

Instead, instead, as we submit to Jesus' authority, we follow the one who we can be confident in, certain of his opinion of us, certain of his love for us, the one that we don't have to kind of scurry around to try and impress in case they give a bad verdict on us, but the one who in his love has gone to the cross in our place, securing that perfect verdict and righteousness for us.

We don't need to be worried about our status before others because our status before God is guaranteed. That means whatever authority we might be given, whether formal in work or in church or relational or family, whatever influence we are given by God, we're able to use that in humility to serve, to try and lift others up rather than to try and drag them down.

[ 26 : 07 ] Again, because our identity is secure in our place in glory with Christ. Rather than being found horizontally in our place relative to others, it enables us to be gentle, kind people lifting others up.

It means as well, rather than trying to cast off any power, any authority over us, instead we come to see that the very best place we can be is under God's authority, an authority of ultimate power, but an authority demonstrated in perfect love and care.

We see true authority belongs to God. It is given to Christ. And the key to joy, to satisfaction in life is not to kind of scrabble after that power and try and take it for ourselves by whatever means possible, but it's to submit to Jesus, to follow him, to rejoice in his authority, and there find our identity, our freedom, and our joy.

Let's pray together. We read in Psalm 2 of the King whom God will send, blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you alone hold perfect power and authority. We thank you for Jesus Christ and his perfect submission to that authority and going to the cross according to the eternal plan and covenant of redemption made within the Trinity.

[ 27 : 41 ] We thank you that through his obedience, Christ has now been given authority over all things and rules at your right hand. We ask that we would, therefore, take refuge in him, that we would rejoice in his authority, and that we would enjoy the blessing that grants.

Lord, please forgive us for how often we try and manufacture power for ourselves, for when we try through various means to lift ourselves above others and find our status in that.

Lord, please forgive us for the times when we use the areas of authority or influence or relationships which you have given us to try and elevate ourselves rather than point to you.

And rather than to serve and lift others up. Lord, we pray again that you would help us this morning to keep on looking to Jesus, that we might be depending on his grace, that we might be finding ourselves in him, and through that, that we'd be able to live lives demonstrating our love to you and our love for those around us.

Lord, please give us great confidence that we go out into this week, into a world which is under your sovereign control. Lord, that does not mean everything will be easy. But Lord, we ask that we would through your Holy Spirit have the strength to live for you under the authority of Jesus as our King and for the glory of your name.

[ 29 : 06 ] And we pray all these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Thank you.