

## 5.7.23 Sermon

# Power | John 19:1-16a

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

power, pilate, crowd, jesus, god, jewish leaders, people, jewish, rome, roman, authority, community, gatekeepers, lucia, pilot, crucify, life, represents, caesar, spiritual leaders

### SPEAKERS

**Matt Kistler**

Good morning! It's good to be here again. Today, we are looking at John chapter 19. You know, we've gone a long way through John, and there are only a few more chapters. One thing I noticed as I was getting ready was how John spent so much time on this part of Jesus's story. We had 11 chapters talking about basically the first three years of his ministry. From chapter 12 through now, we've had about one week. Chapter 13 through now, it's been about 20 hours. It seems like six months that we've been preaching on these 20 hours.

But I think that points to something that John is trying to say: this scene in Christ's life is something he really wants us to understand. So today, that's what we want to do. We want to hear what John is saying and see what God is speaking to us today. We're going to start at verse one and go through verse 16. I have my clicker here, but it doesn't do any good if the slides aren't up. There we go.

"Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged." It jumps right into it here. "The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and they slapped him in the face. Once more, Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I

find no basis for a charge against him.' When Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man.'"

"As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify! Crucify!' Pilate answered, 'You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.' The Jewish leaders insisted, 'We have a law, and according to that law, he must die because he claimed to be the Son of God.' When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. 'Where do you come from?' he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. 'Do you refuse to speak to me?' Pilate said. 'Don't you realize I have the power to free you or to crucify you?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'" Therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin. 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 king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the stone pavement, which in the Aramaic is good, Botha was the day of preparation of the Passover. It was about noon.

"Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally, Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.

There's a lot there. And for people familiar with the church and with this story, you've probably heard it framed in a lot of different ways. A lot of different characters you could focus on: you could look at Jesus, you could look at Pilate, the leaders, the crowd, and even the soldiers. But what stands out to me in this passage is a different character. It's only named in verses 10 or 11. But its backdrop is there throughout that character is power.

Power. There is a lot of power dynamics going on here. So, what do we mean by power? What does this word mean? I can't read that; I did not go to seminary. But I can tell you what Sophia would say. Because I'm sure she would have this

word there: it is "exousia." It's a very interesting word. It means a power of choice, being able to do what you want, having authority. Sometimes it's translated as authority, having the right or privilege to command others. And this word is very common in the New Testament and throughout the Bible; it's used over 100 times. I feel like John is trying to say something about power in this passage. So that's what I want to kind of dig at, a different lens to look at the story we might be familiar with.

And I want to point at this reality that we experience: sometimes power is beyond individuals and takes on a life of its own. And I think this is an idea that is important for us because, as a society, we're having a conversation about so many issues. And we're bumping into this idea, but it's kind of behind the scenes. We don't have to name it; we don't know how to handle this idea that there are things bigger than what we see. This power influences the world around us, and it drives people to do things they otherwise wouldn't do. And when we face these powers, I want us to think about what we can learn from Jesus's example confronting powers here to help us respond to the powers we face in our lives.

So, we'll start with a little character study. First, we have Pilate, who represents the power of Roman authority. We have the Jewish leaders, who represent the power of local Jewish spiritual and cultural authority. We have the crowd representing the voice of the everyday person. And we have Jesus, who represents and embodies the very power of the living God.

Now, one thing that I found interesting, as I was thinking about this, was that each of these powers has a source. Power comes from somewhere. So, let's unpack that a little bit.

So, Pilate, if you had walked into the room and didn't really know anybody, you could probably assume Pilate had the power. Right? He was the governor, he represented the hegemonic authority in this situation, you know, he was representing an empire that was in control. The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, held power because they were the spiritual and cultural guides for the local Jewish population. They derived their power from the respect and authority given to them by the people they led.

The crowd, while seemingly powerless, actually held a unique power – the power of collective voice. When the people come together and raise their voices, they can influence decisions and sway those in positions of authority. In this case, the crowd was using its power to influence Pilate's decision.

Lastly, we have Jesus, who represented and embodied the very power of the living God. His power came from a divine source, transcending the earthly powers and authorities of the time. His power was not based on military might or political influence, but on the spiritual connection he had with God.

That was in Chapter 18, where they were kind of groveling a little bit. From the outside, we would just think whatever Pilate wants to do, he can do. Wikipedia says, you know, I mean, it's a source. I didn't use Chat GPT for this, so I'm trying to stay on AI for my sermons.

As Roman governor, Pilate would be the head of the judicial system and have power there. He had the power to inflict capital punishment, was responsible for collecting tributes and taxes, and got power when he could take people's money. He also had the power for dispersing funds, including the minting of coins. He could make money. But the power that he had, came from his association with Rome. The power wasn't the power of Pilate, but the power of Rome, who designated Pilate as the representative. It wasn't his power; it was Rome's. But who is Rome? Right. Where did that power come from?

You can see that the Pharisees grasped this idea in verse 12. If you let this man go, you're not a friend of Caesar. What an interesting statement. That one gets me every time. They're saying, "If you don't have the power to make this choice, Rome has the power, and Rome wants Jesus dead." Pilate, the governor, is being told he has no power to do what he wants. He has no authority. Interesting.

Now, what about the Sanhedrin? The chief priests? What power do they have? Well, if we back up a little bit, it seems like if there was ever a bounded set community for a century, Israel might fit that box, right? They had norms that were policed by religious leaders, and following those leaders and those norms

either put you in, giving you full access to the community, connection to God, or out, which essentially meant your personhood was erased within the community.

The religious leaders were the deciders. They were the gatekeepers; they could choose who was in and who was out, based on how they interpreted the law. Now they may have claimed that their power was coming from God. But in the end, the deciders only have power when people listen to them. Have you ever met a bully who had a little posse that would follow them around? Why do they do that? Because without the posse, there is no power; without the pressure of many people, it's just a looming obnoxious voice that others will eventually shun and isolate.

So, the power of the gatekeepers is their ability to influence the opinions and the actions of the crowd. If they say you aren't clean, if you're a leper, it only means something if the community cares. If the community embraces the leper and continues on its way, the gatekeeper loses their authority.

And so then, you have Jesus. Jesus threatened everything about that scenario. He spoke with power, with authority, with influence. His actions were filled with this influence. Think about it, when he calmed the winds and the waves, he wasn't looking for anyone else's help.

He wasn't looking for the support or the moral encouragement of a crowd. He just did it. He had authority over sickness. He said, "Be well," and they were well; authority over demons that others couldn't cast out, "be gone," and they were gone. He had authority over death, "come out," and they came out. He didn't need anybody to exert the power of God.

And so, when you contrast that to the spiritual leaders, and if you're watching the scenario and you're looking, you say these people here are telling me I have to do this, this person has power. He is eroding the power base of those spiritual leaders; he is coming directly against them, which is why they're just butting heads over and over again. He's taking their power, not by trying to manipulate the crowd, but just living out the power within himself. So, Jesus had to die.

And then you have the crowd. And this is one of the really interesting things. I was just thinking about today as we were singing together, there is something about joining together with others. One voice can sing a song, but a crowd moves us. There is a power there. And in the same way, the crowd of Jewish people standing in the courtyard there or wherever they were.

That crowd individually probably had almost no power. These were people whose lives were essentially predetermined for them in every way, right, where you live, what you do, who you marry, your socio-economic status. You were put into a mold and just kind of went through life, and they feel that. But when you're part of a crowd, you could submit your voice and become something powerful. To the extent where the Romans and the Jewish leaders, they're afraid; they need that power.

Ultimately, it's the crowd deciding what's going on. It's fascinating. And so, this crowd can be manipulated by others; it can be used. People recognize that there is a real power here. And so, those desiring power fight to grab this latent power of the crowd. And so, given that, I want to retell this passage with a lens of power, and this is just the Matt Kistler power translation. You know, I offer this with grace and hope you receive it with the same.

From verse one, the Roman power wants to exert influence and remind the crowd that it, and not the Jewish power, is in charge. So, Jesus is whipped. More than that, the Roman soldiers make Jesus into an effigy of a king. Compared to the power of Rome, a Jewish king is nothing. They degrade and they mock Jewish power. They say if you are Jewish, the height of your power is less than a mockery to our soldiers. Roman power presents this mockery to Jewish power, to the Jewish leaders, rubbing in their faces their powerlessness.

But the Jewish power isn't aligned with the power embodied by Jesus. They see that power as a threat. So, they ignore the mockery and reassert their own power in front of the crowd. We are the gatekeepers, and this man has broken the rules; he must be removed from the community. They remind the crowd that Jewish power still controls community life. Roman power reconsiders, then goes back, reconvenes, and tries to negotiate with God's power.

I can help you overcome this Jewish power if you follow me. God's power ignores this offer and reveals that there are bigger plans at hand than Roman versus Jewish power. The very redemptive plan of God is in process and is facing off with the structural sin that has plagued the world since the beginning of mankind. Roman power doesn't get it; what power could be greater than Rome?

But Jewish power realizes their advantage and binds Roman power to its core value. There can be only one Caesar; the puppet of Roman power may want to make an alliance with God, but Rome will not allow it. In one last attempt to harness the power of the crowd, Rome presents God's power, asking the crowd to decide whether they side with Jewish power or God's power.

But it is too late, and the crowd would rather spite Rome than turn on their leaders. And the Jewish leaders, in a final stroke, offer their homage to Rome while simultaneously thumbing their nose at Rome's representative. There's a lot going on there. So, what, right? So, what I believe, wow, that is even smaller, I try. So, we embrace learning and discovery. I will do better next time.

Okay, so if we center our lives on God, I believe we will interact with power. We are putting ourselves on a road to come against powers in this world. What might that look like? We might be confronted by angry church power, who feels threatened by the way we pursue Jesus. I've experienced that. We might be confronted by angry social movements who want full allegiance to their agenda, when we may only be comfortable with a small part of what they are arguing for. We might be threatened by companies or corporations who benefit from damaging our community and view their profit more highly than our well-being. We might be ignored by the schools our children attend because what's good for our children doesn't align with the power structures of education.

No matter what aspect of life we want to see made better, no matter what area we seek, your kingdom come over schools, businesses, housing prices, equity inclusion, the justice system, the prison system, the immigration system, even family dynamics, we need to address the powers which perpetuate and energize brokenness as much as we need to address the individual people who are in

authority today. It's not just about naming and shaming an individual who holds a position today; we need to get to the root of the power behind them.

And I think that John 19 gives us a good example of how we can use, wield, and confront power when we look at Jesus. So first, we can notice that Jesus is Jesus; His power is intrinsic, it's from God, and he doesn't need to seek after the power of the crowd. Second, he's not distracted by the temptation of power. When it's offered to him, he sees a bigger role in mission for his life and work. I'm just blown away by Jesus here and how he handles power.

My friend, Kevin, and I were taking a walk together. He reminded me that Jesus was just hours away, one long evening removed from asking God to take this cup from him. Jesus was looking for a way to avoid this suffering. Just hours ago, he probably hadn't slept since then. And yet here is a crowd, which he could surely sway with his words and power. Here is a Roman official, offering him freedom.

And yet, he refuses. In many ways, I see this as a parallel to the temptations of Jesus. He's being offered all the power in the world, if only he performed a sign, took the deal, or denied God. And yet, he stands silent and secure in the source of his power. In this way, I believe we have an example when we are confronting power. We need to remember we will be tempted to turn away from our center, our purpose, for the sake of more power.

We will have opportunities to be popular, to win over the crowd, to draw their anger, their fear, and their presence into our agenda. We will often be called to shun that power and walk a different path, fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, which provides for us to persevere. And I believe that as a center set community, Cornerstone is preparing itself for this reality, while also putting ourselves with a bull's eye on our back to the prevailing powers of the world.

We are training ourselves by weekly sitting together and working out what it means to think differently. In community, we are resting in the ambiguity of what it means to neither align with one camp or another, theologically. That's our blessing and our challenge: to resist the desire to just fall into the mold the world and its power wants to put us into – that liberal church, those watered-down Christians, that conservative church, that anti-Bible Church, that hateful church,

those charismatic Christians, those cultural revisionists, whatever label people might want to put on our community.

We have a path before us which will take us through the gamut of power conflicts. But we must stand, not with the intention of getting rich, of getting known, or of getting big, but with the intention of remaining faithful to God, who daily invites us to be. With this as our center, as our North Star, we can follow Christ's example of fearless freedom in pursuing the work set before us, and we can have hope.

Hope that Christ has disarmed the powers, as Colossians 2 says, when he was nailed to the cross and rose again from the grave. He disarmed the powers facing us; he made a spectacle of them. And in Revelations, we see a world made new, where the powers are brought back into alignment. There will be power in this world, but it will worship our God. That is the hope that we have, that we have the tools we need to resolutely stand, to follow Christ even when the powers of the world stare us down.

And I pray that as a people, as a community, we, like Christ, will know the source of our power. Amen.