



NOLO CONTENDERE

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke 23:1–12

81st Message

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What do you do when you are criticized, judged, hated, or made the pawn in someone else's power game? What do you do when the world comes crashing down on you or sets itself against you? These words of Kipling often come to mind:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:¹

This virtue is what characterizes Jesus as he is headed to the cross and is reflected in my message title. The Latin phrase *nolo contendere* means "I do not wish to contend." In the world of lawyers and courts, this phrase refers to a plea of "no contest" as opposed to pleading guilty or not guilty. A plea of "no contest" has the same effect as a guilty plea and is often a part of a plea bargain. Most of us are familiar with a news report informing us that a certain defendant entered a plea of no contest.

In Luke's passion narrative, we continue to look at the trials and questioning of Jesus before various authorities—the high priest, the Jewish Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Herod. The basic position of Jesus is to plead *nolo contendere*. He does not wish to contend even though he is innocent. Technically this is a bit different than the idea in our modern courts but the point I want to make is that Jesus' responses are ambiguous and he does not defend himself against the accusations of the Jewish leadership. Mostly Jesus is silent, a point which Luke makes more clear than do the other three gospels.

Luke is very methodical and comprehensive in what he writes. This makes sense because Luke is a doctor. He is not as concerned with the physical torment of Jesus, but rather an accurate reporting of the events that lead up to the cross. And so in Luke's passion narrative we get an orderly account of Jesus before the authorities, including an appearance before Herod that none of the other gospel writers include, sandwiched between two separate appearances before Pilate.

Jesus Before Pilate

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. (Luke 23:1 ESV)

"The whole company" refers to the Jewish Sanhedrin and leadership—scribes, elders, and chief priests. After being arrested Jesus was questioned during the night by Caiaphas and Annas, mocked and beaten by the temple guards, and in the morning brought before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, since night trials had no legal status according to Jewish law.

As you might recall from last week Luke records two questions the Sanhedrin asked of Jesus: "Are you the Christ?" and "Are you the Son of God." Both questions dwelt with Jesus' identity and were intended to give the Jews a political reason for going to Pilate. Jesus did not deny his identity and even claimed to have the power of God to judge and rule. The council had what they needed to go to Pilate.

Pilate was the Roman governor or procurator stationed in Palestine. Technically he was a prefect, or military commander in charge of the Roman troops of occupation stationed at Caesarea on the coast. He had responsibility to keep law and order, collect taxes, and oversee the finances. He also controlled the Temple funds. Pilate had a good relationship with Caiaphas, having appointed him as high priest for ten years.

According to Philo, Pilate was rigid and harsh, often angry and spiteful, a weak man who feared any reports of unrest reaching the ears of Tiberius the emperor. Pilate's weak character and lack of conviction is what we see in the gospel accounts. During the festivals, Pilate would come to Jerusalem with his soldiers to keep a lid on any rebellious activity. Thus, conveniently for the Jews, Pilate was present because of Passover. The Sanhedrin brings Jesus before Pilate either at the Fortress of Antonio or the king's palace. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not record the fact that Jesus was bound.

The Accusations

And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." (Luke 23:2)

The Jewish leaders make three accusations of "this man," avoiding any mention of Jesus' name. Only Luke mentions the specific charges. The first charge is that Jesus is misleading the nation, meaning to pervert, make crooked, to depart from the standard. The Jews claim that Jesus is a religious agitator, seeking to change the accepted way of doing things. This is the most subjective and general of the three charges. In reality Jesus is trying to make straight the perverted paths of the Jews.

The second charge is forbidding the Jews to give taxes to Caesar. This charge is completely false for when Jesus had been asked about taxes, he had said to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. The Jews want to convince Pilate that Jesus is a financial risk to Rome and thus undermines Pilate's function as financial administrator.

The third accusation is the most important, that Jesus is claiming to be the Christ, a king. "King" describes what Christ or Anointed One would have meant to a Roman, a bit different than our understanding today. The Jews are trying to convince Pilate that Jesus is a revolutionary leader involved in treasonous activities

and is a threat to Rome. The Jews are using the idea of Messiah as a political tool to have Jesus killed. This is how Rome had dwelt with many other Messianic figures in the past and this is how the Jewish leaders wanted Rome to deal with Jesus.

The Questioning

And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” (Luke 23:3)

Upon hearing the last charge that the Jews bring, Pilate asks Jesus directly if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus replies, “You have said so.” The reply is not straightforward but would appear to be an affirmation. We see a similar reply to Pilate in Matthew and Mark:

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You have said so.” (Matt 27:11)

And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” (Mark 15:2)

Jesus also made the same reply to the Sanhedrin in the previous scene: So they all said, “Are you the Son of God, then?” And he said to them, “You say that I am.” (Luke 22:70)

Jesus is a king, but he is not out to overthrow Rome. Pilate will later put up a sign on the cross that reads “The King of the Jews.” Similar to Matthew and Mark, this is the only question from Pilate that Luke records and the only words Jesus speaks to either Pilate or Herod. John has a lengthier exchange between Jesus and Pilate.

The Verdict

Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” But they were urgent, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.” (Luke 23:4-5)

Pilate concludes that Jesus is innocent, a harmless enthusiast and no threat to Rome. The matter should have ended at this point, but as we see Pilate is a weak man.

At Pilate’s refusal to condemn Jesus the Jewish leadership presses the issue further. They are adamant, insistent, and persistent. The voices grow louder and stronger. They claim that Jesus is stirring up the people, causing agitation with his teaching and that his teaching is extensive, throughout all the land. They are like a dog that has gotten hold of a bone and will not let it go or like the home crowd booing the umpire after a questionable call.

We might ask here: why is the Jewish leadership so intent on getting rid of Jesus? Even though the Romans occupied Palestine, the Jewish leaders had authority over day-to-day affairs. The elders and scribes and chief priests controlled the temple and Jerusalem. Since they controlled religion, they controlled the people. They drew the circle and decided who was in and who was out. They liked the cozy arrangement they had with Rome.

And here comes Jesus. Jesus refuses to play their power game. He doesn’t play according to the rules. He teaches with authority, says he can forgive sins, eats with tax collectors and sinners, people outside the circle, and doesn’t condemn women caught in adultery. The scribes and elders cannot control Jesus. Jesus threatens to upset all the power structures and shake up the current system. What if Jesus is the Messiah? What if Jesus gains public approval? The control of the Jewish leaders is threatened. So what do you do

when someone threatens to upset the power of those in control? You have to get rid of them.

Passing the Buck

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. (Luke 23:6-7)

Upon hearing the mention of Galilee, Pilate suddenly has an exit strategy. He can pass the buck to Herod who is the Jewish ruler over Galilee and Perea, and also happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. Rather than being courteous Pilate is abdicating responsibility. As I said, Luke is the only gospel that mentions this encounter with Herod.

Herod is the son of Herod the Great who was called the King of the Jews and sought to kill Jesus when he was born. He was a brutal and paranoid man. When Herod died the kingdom was given to three of his sons: Herod Agrippa (this Herod), Herod Archelaus, and Herod Philip II. As you might recall Herod Agrippa divorced his wife and married Philip’s wife, Herodias. John was vocally opposed to this marriage and thus hated by Herodias who manipulated Herod to have John executed. Herod was unstable and capable of violence like his father. His son, Herod Agrippa I, follows in this family pattern.

Jesus Before Herod

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. (Luke 23:8)

Herod had wanted to see Jesus for quite some time. In chapter 9 we read that he was perplexed because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, some that Elijah had appeared, and others that the prophets of old had risen:

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him. (Luke 9:7-9)

In chapter 13 some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod was seeking to kill him. “At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you’” (Luke 13:31 ESV).

Upon seeing Jesus Herod does not want to kill him but rather he is “very glad,” which is really an understatement. Herod is exceedingly joyful. This is ironic because joy is a characteristic of Luke’s gospel. We find joy throughout the birth narrative, as a response to the miracles of Jesus, and the response of heaven when one sinner repents. Herod on the other hand is joyful because he hopes Jesus will perform a miracle. He wants to see firsthand a magic trick, to see Jesus pull a rabbit out of a hat. This is his sole interest in Jesus.

The Questioning

So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. (Luke 23:9-10)

Herod questions Jesus for quite some time, but he does all the talking. Jesus is silent. He feels no need to respond to Herod. “By remaining silent, he does not confirm the accusation. By not refuting it, he despises it. A special attribute of Christ is that among wicked judges he seemed to be unwilling rather than unable to defend himself” We are reminded of Isaiah 53:

**“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.” (Is 53:7)**

The chief priests and scribes are anything but silent. As they watch the proceedings they continue to get more and more worked up. They continue to accuse Jesus vigorously, with intense emotion. They will not be deterred from their purposes.

Despised and Mocked

And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:11)

Herod and his soldiers humiliate Jesus before sending him back to Pilate. The bright garment, which most likely was either white or regal purple, makes a joke out of Jesus being a king. But even though Herod treats Jesus with contempt, he sees no reason to kill him.

Pilate and Herod BFF’s

And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. (Luke 23:12)

Finally, we see that Herod and Pilate sign into Facebook and announce that they are BFF’s, best friends forever. Prior to this their relationship had been a bit frosty. The tension may have been caused by Pilate setting up Roman standards or shields with images of the emperor in the temple and in Herod’s palace. The Jews appealed to Tiberius who told Pilate to place the shields in a pagan temple in Caesarea. Or perhaps another source of tension is what we read in Luke 13 about some Galileans that were slain by Pilate and their blood mixed with their sacrifices. But now we see that common foes make strange bedfellows. They are like sports fans that bond over teams they do not like. Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish leaders are a three-ring circus.

Reflections

Let me offer two reflections this morning. The first has to do with power and control. Jesus shows exceptional control and self-restraint. Even though he is treated like a criminal he doesn’t act like one. Even though he suffers unjustly he does not hate, defend, accuse, or plead for his life. Even though he is an innocent victim of social and political forces he does not play the victim. Jesus has an inner authority that gives him the freedom to be silent and allows him even to be humiliated. He does not have to play the power game with the religious or political authorities. He does not contend. His silence is louder than words. Jesus is a revolutionary king but he doesn’t take up the sword. Rather he lays down his life.

How do we respond to criticism, judgment, hatred, or power and control games? Are we more like Jesus or the Jewish leaders? I think, if we are honest, when our categories, our system, our world

is threatened in any way we respond by playing the power game. We seek to dominate and control others to get what we want or to keep things the way we like them. We don’t want to yield ourselves to the control of others, we fight unfairness and injustice with the sword, and we want to get rid of people who don’t fit into our circle. We get agitated, stirred up, accusatory, and vigorously defend our position. This is how the world functions—government, business, and even families.

Where do you play the power game? What are the emotional triggers or the people that cause you to get agitated?

Jesus invites us into a different way of being in the face of harsh injustice, accusations, or suffering—a way of silence, calmness, and self-control. In Christ we do not have to respond in kind. We don’t have to win. We don’t have to contend with others. We do not have to fight to get our way because our way is to trust God for his care and provision. Instead of being agitated and fearful we can be more other-centered and can love even our enemies. We can get off the merry-go-round. Other people may not like it if we get off the merry-go-round. They really want us to play the game. But the way of the Lord is simply to lay down our lives. When we die to self we renounce all attempts to dominate others. This is true power and authority.

The other reflection revolves around Psalm 2. The early church saw in these verses a fulfillment of Psalm 2:

**“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed” (Ps 2:1–2)**

In Acts 4 Luke recounts the questioning of Peter and John by the same Jewish authorities. When they were released and tell the others what happened the people quoted Psalm 2 and then went on to say:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. (Acts 4:27–28)

Herod and Pilate represent the rulers of the world, the political and religious power. Jesus is the ruler of the kingdom of God. The Jewish leaders plot in vain and counsel against the Lord’s anointed. But the Lord “sits in heaven and laughs...saying, ‘as for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill’” (Ps 2:4, 6).

My title this morning has a double meaning. Jesus pleaded “no contest.” But when it comes to God vs. the rulers of the earth, it is “no contest.” God has set his King on Zion. God’s plans and purposes are not thwarted. He is always in control.

This is a very reassuring and comforting word for us today. The world is in turmoil and the nations rage. We are reminded daily of the conflicts in Syria and other places in the Middle East. Last week it was the Coptic Christians in Egypt who suffered and this week it is the Assyrian Christians in Syria. The conflict continues in the Ukraine and financial crisis looms. Greece’s financial woes might cause the withdrawal from the EU, creating instability in that part of the world. Now there are reports that young people

in the UK are joining ISIS. Bombings by terrorists are an almost daily occurrence.

All these events sadden us but they also cause us fear and anxiety, especially if you are getting onto a plane to travel outside of this country. Things can seem out of control. How do we respond when the Herods and Pilates seem to be causing chaos? We trust in the same truth that Jesus trusted in: that God is in control, working out his plans and purposes. The king is ruling from his heavenly throne. And even if we or others suffer, we “serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.” Jesus is the king and we “take refuge in Him” (Ps 2.11-12).

1. David Lule Jeffery, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2012), 270
2. Wikipedia contributors, “If—”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=If%E2%80%94&oldid=651172418> (accessed March 2015)

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