

“A Kingdom Not of This World”

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New Testament Lesson: John 18:33-38

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 12:2-6

The sports writers at USA Today came up with a list of the 10 hardest things to do in sports – things like skiing a downhill race at 80 mph, bicycling the Tour de France, and running a marathon.¹

But the No. 1 most difficult thing to do in sports is hitting a major-league baseball thrown at 90-plus mph, though the Royals sure can make it look easy, didn't they! A fastball reaches home plate in about 0.4 seconds. In the blink of an eye, you have to swing the bat to exactly the right spot at exactly the right time.

According to retired Yale University physics professor Robert Adair, you have only about two-tenths of a second to process “the last information that does you any conceivable good whatsoever” – and then swing.² “After two-tenths of a second, they can turn out the lights in the stadium and it won't affect your hitting....”

Can you imagine being in the dark at such an important moment in your life – you've made your decision and have no control over the outcome. That's where Pontius Pilate found himself as he faced off against Jesus some 2,000 years ago. He was completely in the dark about who Jesus was, and all the facts in the world weren't going to help. In the end, Pilate had to rely on his gut instinct, what every fiber in his body pointed to as the right decision.

Would it be a swing-and-a-miss or a home run? Only time would tell. We too are faced with such split-second decisions – important, life-changing decisions every day. Even little decisions, say, in how to raise your children can last a lifetime. The hard choices of forgiveness, apologizing, and loving your enemies have huge affects your life, so much more than the other person's.

Quitting cigarettes, getting sober, or giving up some other addiction is the hardest thing in the world – it takes a series of moment-by-moment choices. Do what's right or give in to temptation.

What can we do to make the right decision? Look to Jesus. Jesus gives us the key to making the right choices in life. It all has to do with how you approach the plate, where you take your stand, and what you listen to deep down inside, in making those split-second decisions.

¹ March 3, 2003

² Speaking to USA Today (March 2, 2003).

Jesus, in coming up against Pilate, approaches the plate in a calm and honest manner. Unlike Pilate, he's not looking to rig the game.

Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you King of the Jews?" But he doesn't really want to know who Jesus is. He wants to trip Jesus up, to clinch an early victory.

We see this when Jesus answers him saying, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus is asking if Pilate really wants to know about who Jesus is, or is he just interested in playing power games.

Turns out it's politics as usual. "I am not a Jew, am I?" says Pilate. I am not in your camp. Jesus answers him, saying, "My Kingdom is not from this world." In other words, it's not about politics; it's not about trying to get over on one another. It's about seeing things in a new way, a more honest way.

We have that same choice when faced with life's biggest challenges and toughest struggles. Do we make it a power play and try to rig the system in our favor, or do we approach the situation honestly, open to a new way of seeing things, a new way of being.

Let's say you're struggling with family issues. Or maybe it's your friendships that could be deeper. You will always land on solid ground when you relate to people calmly and honestly, like Jesus related to Pilate. It's something all of us can do – look for opportunities in our relationships to be more open and honest, both with others and with ourselves.

Pilate was fooling himself trying to get one over on Jesus. If instead, Pilate had stopped to really listen to Jesus, he might have seen that he was being offered something extraordinary – a new and more powerful place to stand in relation to the world around him.

That's what Jesus offers us – a new place to stand in relation to the world around us. Jesus stands apart from the world. Don't get me wrong, Jesus was and is fully engaged in life on earth – he was truly in the world – but he was never of the world. Jesus kept himself firmly grounded in the Kingdom of God – that place of truth, and justice, and self-giving that the world just doesn't seem to understand. Jesus actually put his life at risk for the greater reality of God's Kingdom.

God's Kingdom is available to us now, here on earth, if you take your stand alongside Jesus, alongside divine truth. Like Jesus, we actually risk our very lives by taking a stand for truth. That's a conscious choice we have to be willing to make if we're going to live up to being a follower of Jesus --- take a stand for truth instead of victory.

Remember what Jesus said about Pilate's kingdom of political power verses God's Kingdom of divine truth: "If my kingdom were from this world," said Jesus, "my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over.... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. ... For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

What or who do you listen to deep down inside? Jesus speaks the truth into our hearts. If we stop to listen we know that. When we're about to tell a lie, cheat at school or in business, hurt a friend or family member, or attack an enemy, we know the truth of our actions – or lack thereof.

When something like this is about to happen in your life, listen. Listen for the truth, take a stand for the truth over any victory you may imagine.

A father woke up in the middle of the night and realized his teenage daughter's boyfriend was still downstairs in the living room with her. He called downstairs: "Do you realize it is 2 a.m.? Do you think you can stay here all night?" The boy thought for a moment and said, "Gee, I don't know; I'll have to call home to see." Now in truth, how do you think that situation played out for the boyfriend? Not so well, I'm sure.

Things will always go better when we listen for God to speak in a situation of uncertainty. It may mean embracing a new way of responding, and that's not easy. But I guarantee you that in the long run, things will always work out better for you and for the world. How do we know this?

We know this by looking at Jesus! Despite the struggles he faced, everything came out for the better. They could arrest him, belittle him, beat him, rob him, string him up, and kill him, but they could not kill the truth that was and is Jesus Christ.

The truth can not be killed. There will always be people who hear and know and follow the truth as given to us by God, as embodied for us by Jesus Christ, as spoken to us into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

I know it's tough when tragedy strikes – God knows it's tough – just as tough as having Jesus the Son stand before Pilate and all his earthly power. But Jesus does not let it get the best of him and neither should we. Jesus stayed calm and trusted in God and so should we.

I know it's tough when all the world is going one way and God is calling you in a different direction – God knows it's tough – just as tough as when Jesus took a stand for divine truth over and against worldly power. And God lifted Jesus up, showed the world where true power lies, and showed us that there are greater things to lose than life itself.

I know it's tough knowing who to listen to in life – God knows it's tough – just as tough as Jesus allowing the whole world to go off in its own direction, confident that there are still those who know and follow the truth.

Jesus puts it all on the line, everyday, and he's counting on you and me to listen to the God-given truth when we hear it, and to act on it. All of this seems real hard to do – being calm in the face of tragedy and struggles, turning away from the temptations of this world, and acting on the truth of Jesus Christ in every decision we make. It seems hard, and maybe it is.

Narrow is the gate, says Jesus. "I am the gate," he says. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Whatever it is you or I stand to lose in choosing Jesus over the ways of world, we actually gain so much more. It is Pilate who lost in facing off against Jesus. His final question to Jesus was, "What is truth?" Pilate never knew Jesus in his heart of hearts. That was the end for Pilate. But is it the chance for a new beginning for us.

How we answer that question – what is truth – in every moment of our lives, will determine who we follow and what we get out of life. What is truth? Jesus is truth. Follow Jesus and you can't go wrong. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord of us all, we come to you in gratitude for your love, which is always present to us. In the stillness of these moments, we remember with thanksgiving the times in our lives when your love has enabled us to rise to our better selves.

We thank you for the gift of your son, who came that we might know what perfect love looks like.

Keep us mindful that Christ is, indeed, king of our lives.

We remember with regret the times when we have acted in anger rather than in love; we recall with remorse when our patience has been less than perfect and our behavior has been childish.

Forgive us for the occasions when we have loved things and used people and when we have failed to make love a priority in our lives.

In these moments of quiet, help us to let go of the guilt that we carry because we have been less than loving.

Grant us the grace to give our guilt into the hands of our loving Lord.

And let us breathe in new life, replacing old burdens with a new enthusiasm to begin again.

Empowered by your love for us, O God, let us unite ourselves with all of life in the example of Jesus, the Lord of our lives.

Help us to be intentional in the way we interact with one another, that there can be no doubt as to the king we serve. In the certainty of your unending love for us, we pray the prayer of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.
Amen.**