



Matthew 27:24

Maundy Thursday, April 17, '25
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."

Sounds of the Passion: The Splash of Water

Hearing a splash of water can carry wonderful, happy ideas. A splash of water could be from a toddler playing in the bath after being washed. A splash of water could be from small children throwing rocks into pond, trying to skip them across its surface. A splash of water could be the waves of the ocean lazily lapping up on the beach. A splash of water could be from a fish being reeled in on a line. A splash of water when connected with the Word of God could even be an infant child becoming a Child of God, sins being washed away and the gift of the Holy Spirit being given. Yes, a splash of water can carry wonderful, very happy ideas.

The splash of water that we hear this evening is decidedly *not* wonderful, and it carries none of that happiness. In fact, it's very sad. This splash of water came from a man trying assuage a guilty conscience. The man in question was Pontius Pilate, the fifth Governor over the Roman province of Judea, servant to Emperor Tiberius. He was an administrative official entrusted with maintaining the peace, overseeing judicial matters, and collecting taxes for Rome.

And on *this* particular day, the peace of Judea and its capital Jerusalem had threatened to spill over into anarchy. The religious leaders of Jerusalem, the whole host of priests and scribes, had brought a Man to Pilate, bound and beaten, to have Him put on trial. And they had a whole host of accusations against the Man, including that He forbade the people from paying taxes to Caesar. Pilate was unmoved by most of the accusations, but there was one that caught his ear—that was that *this* Man considered Himself a king, according to the elders.

That was the only thing Pilate was interested in—did Jesus consider Himself a king? Because if *that* were so, that would mean insurrection, a direct affront to the rule of Rome. And so, Pilate didn't beat around the bush; he asked Him directly, ***"Are you the King of the Jews?"*** (John 18:33) Jesus answered, ***"My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight so that I would not be handed over to the Jews. But now my kingdom is not from here."*** (John 18:36)

Just looking at Him, Pilate could tell that Jesus wasn't your typical insurrectionist; He wasn't intent on wearing a crown or ruling some earthly nation. But he had to keep the peace of Judea, so Pilate was stuck. That is, until he found out that Jesus was from Galilee, and that *wasn't* Pilate's jurisdiction! So, he sent Jesus to stand before Herod Antipas who *was* the ruler Galilee. Perhaps that way Pilate could be free from responsibility; *Herod* would have to deal with the Jewish authorities, not Pilate.

Well, a little while later, Jesus was brought back, looking a little worse for wear. The problem was back in Pilate's hands. He *had* to keep the peace of Judea, but, at the same time, he wasn't about to just capitulate to every envious whim of this Jewish rabble. So, he tried another tactic: ***"You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him***

back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him. I will therefore punish and release him." (Luke 23:14-16)

That punishment involved flogging Jesus with a leather whip embedded with bone fragments. And whereas Jewish law had a limit to the number of lashes that could be administered, the Romans had no such restraint. He had Jesus' flesh, back and likely front, opened up by the whip. Pilate then had his soldiers twist together a crown made of thorns and shoved it onto His head, and then, in mockery, a royal purple robe was placed over Jesus' shoulders.

And you might wonder why—after declaring Jesus to be innocent—why Pilate would put Jesus through such cruel treatment? Well, remember, he had to keep the peace of Judea. He couldn't just *release* Jesus without stirring up political unrest, so this was just another attempt to be free of this problem. He was going for the pity vote. The goal seems to have been that the crowd would see Jesus beaten to within an inch of His life, and their compassion would take over. Moved by the gruesome sight, they would be satisfied with the punishment and move on with their lives. That's what Pilate was hoping for anyway.

This new tactic didn't have its intended effect. The scourging of Jesus wasn't enough, the people thirsted for more blood. They wanted Him dead. But now a new issue arose. Not only did Pilate want to keep the peace of Judea, he also wanted to keep the peace of his own household! But now word had come to him from his wife: ***"Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream."*** (Matthew 27:19)

Pilate was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Seeing no other course of action than acquiescing to the crowd's demands, he relented and approved of crucifixion. But he wouldn't do so without a final word. He had a bowl of water brought to him and with a little splash of water, he declared ***"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."*** He washed his hands of the situation.

You know, it's interesting. If you pay attention, you'll find that many turns of phrase in the common vernacular find their origin in the Bible. Sometimes, people say, "The writing is on the wall." That comes directly the book of Daniel, where the Lord wrote on the wall of King Belshazzar's palace that his kingdom was coming to an end. (cf. Daniel 5:5-6) "Spare the rod, spoil the child,"—that's another common turn of phrase; that one comes from Solomon's Proverbs. (cf. Proverbs 13:24) Another common idiom that comes from Proverbs is, "Pride goes before a fall." (cf. Proverbs 16:18) And of course, another phrase of obvious origins is when people talk about "forbidden fruit." (Genesis 3)

Well, the idea of "washing your hands" of something comes *directly* from Pontius Pilate. It's what people say when they don't approve of a course of action, and they want to distance themselves from it. So, a person might wash their hands of a particular job or a project; a politician might wash their hands of certain legislation. And it might work for them, but it did not work for Pilate.

Pilate knew the right thing to do; he knew Jesus was innocent, and he wanted Him freed. But seeing no other course of action than the one he felt he was forced into, Pilate was overcome by a guilty conscience. And to assuage that guilty conscience, with a little splash of water Pilate "washed his hands" of the situation. If only removing sin's guilt was that simple.

Pilate may be the origin of the phrase to “wash your hands” of something, but he was *not* the first to try to distance himself from guilt. To find the origin of that practice, you must go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. There you’ll find a guilty man and a guilty woman, both implicated in tasting the “forbidden fruit,”—they try to distance themselves from guilt by playing the blame game. “It was the woman’s fault.” “It was the serpent’s fault.” “God, it was really your fault.” But guilt is not so easily bypassed. And after the verdict was reached, God drove the pair out of the garden and placed two angels with a flaming sword between them, guarding the way to the tree of life. (cf. Genesis 3:24) God did so in case Adam and Eve got it in their heads that avoiding the consequences of their sin would be so easy as just grabbing another piece of fruit and eating it. The only effect of *that* would have been living forever still stuck in the guilt of their sin.

And we’re just like our first parents, aren’t we? We’re just like Pilate. We *love* to try to find ways to distance ourselves from any guilt or any blame. We want to wash our hands of our own messes. We want someone else to pay for it. We try to pin the blame on someone else, “It’s the other person’s fault!” We find excuses for why we are the way that we are, why we did what we did. We paint our sinful actions in the best possible light. We bury the memory of our sins deep down with the hopes that no one will ever find out about it. We hide our nakedness behind fig leaves and hope that God won’t notice; we wash our hands of our sins and hope that a little splash of water will remove our guilt forever. If only the removal of sin’s guilt was *that* easy.

The truth is it did *not* work for Pilate. A splash of water could not excuse him from what he did. And there will come a day when the roles are reversed—rather than Jesus stooped low before Pilate’s judgment seat, Pilate will be bowed low before Jesus’ judgment throne. And if the only “get out of jail free card” that Pilate has is that he “washed his hands” of Jesus—that splash of water will condemn him to hell forever. And dear friends in Christ, if we try to avoid the guilt of our sin by hiding it or by blaming someone else or by excusing it—we *too* will perish.

The removal of sin’s guilt is not that easy. There is only one substance that can wash away the guilt of your sins, and Jesus provided it. Jesus’ blood has the unique ability to accomplish something that no human effort can possibly do: Jesus’ blood can remove sin’s guilt. No matter how many sins you’ve been guilty of, no matter what kind they are or how often you’ve committed them, the blood of Christ works to *completely* remove sin. That’s why John writes, ***“The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”*** (1 John 1:7)

And thanks be to Jesus that He provided it. He didn’t have to stand there in Pilate’s court and take the beatings and abuse—but He did. He didn’t have to endure the mockery and the screaming insults of the Jewish crowd—but He did. And He endured even more—He carried the cross on His bleeding back down the road of sorrows that day. The sinless Son of God allowed sinful men to pound nails through His hands and His feet. The all-powerful Creator allowed His own creatures to crucify Him and put Him to death—all the while, paying the price of our sins. Paying and paying and paying—until not a single sin was left to be paid for. And we cannot claim like Pilate did that we are ***“innocent of this man’s blood,”*** but thanks be to God, we can claim that we are innocent *by* this Man’s blood.

And this very same blood He gives to you this evening. Together with the bread and wine Jesus gives

you His very body and blood—body broken by Pilate’s brutality, blood shed on the cross of Calvary. And so, as you prepare to receive that body and blood, pay close attention to what Jesus says: ***“Take, eat; this is my body. . . Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*** (Matthew 26:26, 28)

This blood is the one substance that can remove sin’s guilt. So, if you are feeling guilty this evening, if you are burdened by sins that you have tried to bury, that you have tried to excuse, that you have tried to wash your hands of—choose a different tactic. Bring those sins to the Lord and receive forgiveness for them. A splash of water can’t do anything to remove your guilt, but the blood of Jesus has removed your guilt forever.

The effect of this is that when the day comes that Pilate bows before the Lord’s judgment throne and then you step up after him, you won’t have to try to excuse yourself before the Judge. By faith, our slate is clean, our guilt abolished, and we are innocent—sins removed completely by Jesus. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.