

Social Contract
[John 18:33-37](#)
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Every government has a specific relationship with their people—it's called a social contract, the promises we all make to one another so that society can work. Here in Canada, in our social contract the people all agree to obey the law and pay our taxes and participate in democratic elections, and in turn our government promises to supply us with roads and transportation and electricity, clean drinking water, safe schools and communities to live and work in, hospitals when you're sick, parks and libraries for entertainment, all the comforts and necessities of modern life. And that all sounds good, but things don't always work out the way you expect. Sometimes the roads have potholes, the tap water has this funny taste, you've got to wait two years for knee surgery and the park is full of goose poop and rabid raccoons, and you start to wonder if anyone is going to do anything about all this trouble, if the social contract still works. And that's during the good times—when the real trouble comes, storms and floods, pandemics and earthquakes, suddenly all those services and structures that we all rely on and expect will always be there, they're not so secure—supply lines break down, infrastructure is overwhelmed, hospitals and parks and libraries all get boarded up while everyone stocks up on toilet paper and canned beans and waits for things to go back to normal. We

expect our world to keep running smoothly, no matter how crazy things get, and when things go wrong, we want to know why, and who's to blame.

Of course, if you were living in the Roman Empire two thousand years ago, you'd be living under a very different kind of social contract. If you were a peasant in first-century Palestine, you didn't have rights. You didn't have power. At any moment, a Roman soldier could decide to beat you up, just for fun, and you couldn't do much about it. Even for the upper class of society, for people fortunate enough to be born as Roman citizens or wealthy enough to buy that status, even then you had to obey and worship the emperor, and while you could appeal to the emperor if you didn't like how your local government was running things, there was no guarantee the emperor would take your side unless you were a personal friend or a major campaign contributor. For the vast majority of people, you spent your entire life just trying to go unnoticed by the government, by the Roman authorities and their cronies and enforcers, because they could only make your life worse.

And so when Pontius Pilate, governor of the Roman province of Judea, one of the top hundred or so most powerful people in the most powerful empire in the world at the time, when Pontius Pilate came into work at the palace in Jerusalem every morning, he was used to being treated with respect, also known as fear and groveling. A Roman Governor had the power to destroy you and everyone you had ever known and loved—he could send in the troops to wipe out your entire village without a second thought. In fact,

Pilate had a reputation for doing exactly that—Luke 13 tells how Pilate once ambushed a bunch of Galilean pilgrims on the way to the temple to offer sacrifices and slaughtered them all. So Pilate is used to being the most powerful man in the room, everywhere he goes. Everyone he meets is under his control—he can take away everything, or give them everything, and they have nothing to give him in return. That’s how the social contract works here—Pilate is in charge, so you give him obedience and loyalty and submission, and in return, maybe he’ll spare your life, if he feels like it. And that’s probably what he was expecting when he went to meet the latest prisoner on trial for his life—this poor peasant would weep and cry, “Oh please sir, I have a family, boo hoo hoo,” and Pilate will toy with him a little before sending him to the cross like all the rest.

But that’s not what happens. The man who’s standing in the dock when Pilate arrives doesn’t act like any prisoner Pilate has ever met. He doesn’t grovel. He doesn’t beg. He doesn’t act like Pilate has any power over him at all. Instead, he meets each of Pilate’s questions with a calm answer or a question of his own—he debates him, pushes back at Pilate’s interrogation as if Pilate is the one on trial, he turns the social contract that Pilate is expecting upside down. Clearly he understands how it’s supposed to work—he says “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to protect me”—because in this world, that’s what followers do for their leaders, that’s how it’s supposed to work. But it doesn’t work with Jesus. Jesus doesn’t act like a prisoner, he acts like a King, he acts as if he’s

got the power, as if he's got something that Pilate needs instead of the other way around.

But that doesn't make any sense to Pilate—what could this grubby little man who's about to die possibly have that Pilate would want? And Jesus tells him—I came into this world to bring you the truth. And anyone who listens to my voice, will belong to the truth, will receive the truth. Jesus is a King, but not one like Pilate, or the emperor, or any other King or leader or government that human beings have ever created. He doesn't rule through force or terror, he doesn't demand submission and obedience, Jesus just brings truth, he reveals the world for what it truly is, and all you need to do to receive that truth is just listen, just hear what Jesus has to say and let that truth become part of your life, part of who you are. Jesus is King, not a king with a social contract where you play your part and he'll play his, you pay your taxes and follow the rules and you'll get a reward in the end. Jesus is a King who brings the truth to all who have ears to hear, who brings his light and shines it everywhere there is darkness, who shares his love everywhere there is pain, who floods this universe with life that overwhelms and conquers death. Jesus is a kind of King that Pilate has never seen before, that Pilate just can't understand, because there's no social contract, no bargaining, no quid pro quo. Jesus' followers don't have to do anything to receive the gifts that their King has for them. They just have to receive, to listen to his voice and let the truth of Jesus Christ set them free.

And if that was hard for Pilate to understand, well, it's still pretty hard for us to understand too. We've built a world filled with all sorts of contracts and agreements, where no one does anything without getting something for it, where we tell ourselves that there is no free lunch, no one coming to help us out of our problems without wanting something in return. And all too often we turn our faith into just another social contract, just another series of obligations that we need to carry out to earn the perks that come with obedience and service. We need to follow these rules, read this book, come to this building so many times a month, put enough money in the plate and pay just enough attention to the sermon that we're not noticeably sleeping, and if we do all that for the rest of our lives we'll get a shiny ticket to heaven and a feeling of self-righteous superiority while we're down here.

Sometimes we act like God is like Pilate, this uncaring bureaucrat in the sky who would just as soon smush us as bless us, so we grovel and plead for him to go easy and cut us a break, "Oh please sir, I have a family, boo hoo hoo."

But that's just not true. God is nothing like Pilate. The King we follow is nothing like the kings and rulers of this earth, the leaders who use their power to control and exploit and destroy. The King we serve is a King who serves, who comes to us to bring us truth, bring us light and life and love, to show us who we are and who we were always meant to be, and give us everything we need to live that way, lives of freedom and truth. When we follow Jesus, there is no contract to sign, no hoops to jump through, no bureaucrats to appease, no small print to decipher. We just receive, receive

the truth of who we are, receive the grace to become more than what we were, receive the love that means we will never be alone. That's the king we follow. That's the family we're part of. And yes, each and every day as God's people, we try our best to grow a little more like Jesus, to say no to everything that leads us further away from him and say yes to everything that moves us closer to his love and truth, but we don't do that to earn our way into heaven. We follow because we've heard the truth, and now that we know the voice of Jesus Christ, we want to hear it more, to know more about Jesus, even as we are fully known by him.

Today, may we grow closer and closer to Jesus Christ, our Saviour and King, so that the world will know the truth, and the truth will set us free. In the name of Jesus Christ! Amen!