

Justice on Trial 5-14-06

Matthew 26:57-68 (NIV)

57 Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. 58 But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. 59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" 62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. 66 What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. 67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him 68 and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

In our passage today, we have a picture of man putting Justice Himself on trial. It is a picture of stark contrasts in which we see the depravity of man and the majesty of Jesus, the Christ. It is a picture of the ancient battle of greed against justice, of sin against righteousness, and ultimately of man against God.

To get a more complete picture of what is going on, I need to share with you some of what the first century readers understood. Israel prided itself on its justice system. God gave them the most merciful and fair ways of determining justice in the world. In fact, the Western world today owes much of its judicial principles to ancient Jewish tradition.

Here is a brief summary of how the system worked. Any geographical area with 120 men or more could develop a council to administer justice. This group consisted of 23 men. They were chosen because of their maturity and wisdom. They were to be fair and impartial and could not accept bribes. (Deuteronomy 16:18-20) The prominent men of these councils were eligible to apprentice with the national council known as the Sanhedrin. That word is an Aramaic transliteration of the Greek *sunedrion*, meaning, "to sit together". The national Sanhedrin had 71 members, which included the High Priest.

The Sanhedrin had very detailed rules of procedure. It is fascinating to see how much of their system carried over to modern law. There was always to be the presumption of innocence. The Council could not bring charges. Charges had to be brought by individuals. A defendant could refrain from incriminating him or herself. A person's testimony about him or herself was not sufficient to convict them. At

Commented [notes1]: 18 Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly.
19 Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.
20 Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.
Deuteronomy 16:18-20 (NIV)

least two witnesses had to be firsthand witnesses of the criminal act. They had to give the day, time, and location of the crime. If someone perjured himself, they would receive the same sentence they were seeking for the defendant. (Deuteronomy 19:16-19) That would sure make you think twice before a false accusation!

Commented [notes2]: 16 If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, 17 the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. 18 The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, 19 then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. Deuteronomy 19:16-19 (NIV)

Trials had to be held in public during the day. The national Sanhedrin had to meet in the Temple. The defendant had a right to know what he was accused of and could bring witnesses and present evidence. In the case of capital punishment, the council had to fast a day between the sentence and the execution. After the fast, a member could change his vote from guilty to not guilty, but not the other way around. If any new evidence were brought forward any time before the execution, the council would have to reconvene and consider the new evidence. The accusers had to be the first to initiate the punishment. (Deuteronomy 17:7) The ruling motto of the Council in capital cases was, "To save life, not destroy it." And perhaps something that is a bit strange to us, if the Council voted unanimously to condemn, the defendant was released, because there was no mercy among the judges.

Commented [notes3]: 7 The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you. Deuteronomy 17:7 (NIV)

Long before Jesus' generation, the Sanhedrin had deteriorated into a political power-mongering position. Rome selected the High Priest because of the person's willingness to work with them. High Priest was to have a lifetime appointment, but Rome changed them quite frequently according to their needs.

John tells us that before the trial in our passage Jesus was taken to Annas. (John 18:12-13) Annas had been the High Priest many years earlier. He was succeeded by his five sons, one after the other. The current High Priest was his son-in-law. Annas established a very lucrative Temple business of coin exchange and sacrifice approval. Historical writings refer to what was going on in the Temple as the Bazaar of Annas. Jesus cleansing of the Temple was a big part of what this arrest was really about. Jesus interrupted Annas' moneymaking scheme. (Matthew 21:12-13) Annas asked about Jesus' disciples and teaching. I think he was trying to discover who was backing Jesus. (John 18:19) Annas' concern was maintaining power. Jesus reminded him of proper legal procedure by telling him to ask those who heard Him speak. For that, He was stuck by one of the guards. Jesus asked the guard to testify to the reason for striking Him. (John 18:22-23) What amazing presence of mind! What clarity! The Apostle Paul lost it under a similar circumstance. (Acts 23:3) We probably would have as well. Annas sent Him still bound to Caiaphas.

Commented [notes4]: 12 Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him 13 and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. John 18:12-13 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 12 Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 13 "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'" Matthew 21:12-13 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 19 Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. John 18:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 22 When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. 23 "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" John 18:22-23 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!" Acts 23:3 (NIV)

⁵⁷ Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. Contrary to their rules of procedure, they assembled privately during the night (12pm to 3am) in the home of Caiaphas. The Church of Peter of Gallicantu stands over Caiaphas' home today. You can visit the dungeons below his house where prisoners were chained for interrogation. Apparently he had many enemies that he illegally interrogated and held as prisoners in his home.

⁵⁸ But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. In this courtyard stands a bronze of Peter, a Roman soldier and a rooster on top of a column. It

stands there in that courtyard to remind us of how weak our human nature is and how easily we succumb to fear. Peter had dared to come as close as he could to see the outcome. It is about 40 feet from the courtyard to the interrogation area under Caiaphas' home.

That is closer than most of us will go. We often stand there emotionally as we watch this trial in our minds. It is a safe distance. I do not want to be satisfied with what is safe. I want to let go of my fears, walk right into the room of the trial, and stand beside my Savior. I want to feel the shackles, see the faces full of contempt, and have my ears take in the questions and the silence. I want to stand between Jesus and those who struck Him. Will you let go of your place of emotional safety and walk in beside Jesus as we go over the rest of the passage? I am not asking you to go there with me for the sake of emotion. I just do not want your sense of reserve to keep you from taking in what was happening.

⁵⁹ *The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.* They had already made up their minds. Much earlier Caiaphas had already determined to kill Jesus. (John 18:14) Jesus was keeping them from their lucrative manipulation of the Temple, just as He often keeps us from our own plans of self-gratification. Caiaphas turned the motto of the Sanhedrin on its head. He was out to destroy life, not save it! They ignored their precious law and their centuries of tradition. They did not want evidence; they wanted false evidence to justify their plan of murder.

Commented [notes9]: 14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.
John 18:14 (NIV)

Surely this animosity went beyond their greed to something more. Jesus' righteous life was exposing their hypocrisy, just as it exposes us. His words of life and holy example revealed their mockery of righteousness. The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness hated the light. (John 3:19)

Commented [notes10]: 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.
John 3:19 (NIV)

⁶⁰ *But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward⁶¹ and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"* Jesus has not been accused. The trial is held in secret of night. False witnesses are sought, and still they cannot convict him. The only grounds they could cling to were a twisting and distortion of what He said. Mark records that one of these false witnesses said, ⁵⁸ *"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'"* Mark 14:58 (NIV) Even the witnesses recorded in Matthew and Mark did not agree. Notice the one in Mark refers to a "man-made" temple. Neither gave the day, time, and location of this supposed blasphemy.

What Jesus really said is found in John 2:19. *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."* (NIV) He was referring to His body. He would keep that promise and give us all the ultimate sign of His authority, but the Sanhedrin was not looking for facts. Are you? Sometimes we pretend we want the truth, but when the truth reveals that we should lay down our life and follow Jesus, we refuse to receive it. (Matthew 10:38)

Commented [notes11]: 38 and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.
Matthew 10:38 (NIV)

I want you to visualize the High Priest. Judas did not show up. The false witnesses were having trouble agreeing. Finally he thought he at least had something, but Jesus was silent. Caiaphas was frustrated and his anger was growing. Red faced and wide-eyed he jumped to his feet and demanded that Jesus defend Himself. ⁶² *Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"* Jesus had a right to defend Himself, but there was no charge. Was there a charge in this distortion of what He had said about rebuilding the temple in three days?

^{63a} *But Jesus remained silent.* I would have said something like, "You guys are breaking every rule in the Book. You are twisting something I said, hoping I will incriminate myself, contrary to your own rules. You have already decided the verdict before we began. God is going to judge you!" But that is the difference between Jesus and me. He stood there in majestic silence. His deafening silence gave them all a chance to consider what they were doing. It gave them time to think of the witnesses not agreeing, to contemplate why they were doing this at night. It was a majestic silence that shouted His trust in His Father. It shouted greatness so loudly that it echoed throughout all creation. It made them all look as small and powerless as they truly were.

Caiaphas was almost hysterical. *The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."* This was the ultimate demand that a High Priest could make, the oath of testimony. It meant that standing before God you must declare the truth.

Jesus had already declared Himself the Messiah and the Son of God numerous times. They tried to stone Him one of those times. (John 5:18) He said, *"Before Abraham was, I am!"* (John 8:58) He told the Samaritan woman that He is the Messiah. Now He is telling the Jewish rulers. ⁶⁴ *"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.* Mark tells us that He answered, *"I am!"* So what was the crime? Since Caiaphas had already determined to kill Him, He needed a crime punishable by death. He wanted to charge Jesus with blasphemy. (Leviticus 24:16) Claiming to be God would fit the bill, that is, if that person were not God. The evidence that would need to have been sought would be verification that He was not God. They were not looking for evidence. They just wanted to hear Him say He was the Messiah, the Son of God. Never mind if it was or was not true.

Then Jesus quoted Scripture. *"But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."* He was quoting from Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13. He was declaring that though they were sitting in judgment on Him, the day would come when He would come to judge them, that He would rule over all and be worshipped by all. (Daniel 7:14) What a declaration from a bound man in front of Israel's Senate! He was crazy or He is God. They really did not care which. They just wanted Him out of the way. What a warning He gave them! How shortsighted to ignore it.

Now Caiaphas totally lost it. ⁶⁵ *Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have*

Commented [notes12]: 18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.
John 5:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"
John 8:58 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 16 anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death.
Leviticus 24:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 1 The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."
Psalms 110:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.
Daniel 7:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.
Daniel 7:14 (NIV)

heard the blasphemy. ^{66a} What do you think?" Wait a minute. Can't Jesus present the evidence that He is God? Can't He call witnesses? Aren't defendants testimony not to be used against them? Caiaphas thought he finally had Jesus. Caught up in Caiaphas' emotion and fearful for their positions, "He is worthy of death," they answered. A unanimous decision! Apparently Joseph of Arimathea had walked out in protest of the illegal trial. A unanimous decision meant that it was one without mercy and the defendant was to be freed, but now they are just blatantly ignoring the rules and doing whatever their evil hearts desired.

However, they are not satisfied with mere conviction. They could not wait to express their rage. ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Spitting in the face was and still is the most extreme insult in that part of the world. (Numbers 12:14) These are the acts of those who have been exposed as hypocrites but who have the upper hand. They could not restrain their animosity, so they let it boil over in violence. When they tired of insulting Jesus, they turned Him over to the Temple guards.

Others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?" They are mocking His claim to be the Messiah. Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would not judge with the eyes. (Isaiah 11:3) Mark tells us that they did this while blindfolding Him. They were saying, "If you are the Messiah, then without seeing, tell us who hit you." Jesus could have called their names, one by one, given their ancestry back to Adam. For that matter, He could call our names, for He was bearing our sins. But in humility and surrender He silently took it all upon Himself. He allowed His creatures to strike and mock their Creator. The world had never seen anything like it, though there is a similarity in the persecution of every saint who is rejected and suffers for doing God's will. (Acts 9:5)

What a mockery of justice! How did a nation that had some of the greatest laws and legal proceedings sink to such a low? How could they ignore all the prophecies He fulfilled? How could they doubt His words of wisdom? How could they reject His miracle working power? (John 10:38) They did not want to even consider the evidence He had every legal right to present.

Perhaps there are some of us who have decided that Jesus was a good man, an amazing prophet, but not our Creator. We really do not want to examine the evidence because we fear where it might take us, and we do not want to go there. Have you made up your mind without an honest look at the evidence? *In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.*"

Did you allow your heart to walk with Him through the trial? He was there for your sake. It was just the beginning of the suffering He would endure to satisfy the justice of God that should have fallen on you and me. Will you stand at a distance and fearfully deny you know Him, or will you call Him your loving Lord and Savior? If you will not stand with Him now, you will not stand with Him when He comes on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matthew 24:30) If you deny Him now, He will deny you then. (Matthew 10:32-33) The choice is yours to make.

Commented [notes18]: 14 The LORD replied to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back." Numbers 12:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; Isaiah 11:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. Acts 9:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 38 But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." John 10:38 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 30 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. Matthew 24:30 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: 32 "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. 33 But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. Matthew 10:32-33 (NIV)