

People of God,

Have you ever discovered yourself to be working for the exact opposite cause of what you confess to be right? For example, you confess to be pro-life. You give money to the offerings for that cause. You have a membership. You pray for the protection of the unborn. But then you discover that the company you have stocks in also gives money to organizations like Planned Parenthood which is all about abortions. Or suppose you're a parent who works hard to protect your children. You feed them healthy food. You always take precautions to protect them from injury. Then one of them comes down with an illness and the cause is something you've been feeding your children. You thought you were doing the right thing, but it turns out that you were doing something that led to the opposite of what you were working for.

On a spiritual level, I think we have people and churches today that can fall into that trap of contradiction just as the religious leaders of Jesus' day did. The Sanhedrin is the ruler of the Jewish faith. And Caiaphas, the chief priest or high priest, is the president. Picture a Roman Catholic Pope surrounded by several cardinals, all dressed in their robes. Seated at the centre is Caiaphas. He's the one who makes the decisions that others will listen to and implement.

To this body of leaders, Jesus had been a pain in the religious neck. As we saw last week, they made arrangements with Judas to lead them to Jesus so that they can arrest and question him. They now have him in their court room. Jesus' teaching, as the Sanhedrin sees it, is disruptive to the unity of the Jewish faith. Jesus has introduced teaching that dishonours God. In fact, he has made claims about God that are considered blasphemous. Blasphemy is his crime.

The Crime

Caiaphas has it all planned. When Jesus is brought before the court, some false witnesses testify that Jesus has made threats to the temple, but those are not reason enough to condemn him. Jesus remains silent. So Caiaphas orders him to speak.

Mt 26:63 "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

Jesus remains silent for a time but when he is ordered to speak, he obeys even these authorities, though they have malicious motives.

Caiaphas believes he has the million-dollar question and Jesus has no lifelines left: *"Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."*

Mt 26:64 "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."

Mt 26:65 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."

Caiaphas is delighted with Jesus' answer. Caiaphas must speak of trying to protect the honour of God's name, but inwardly he is happy that Jesus has given him the nails and the hammer that will put him on the cross. In our day, we might say Jesus gave Caiaphas the gun and bullets to kill him. He has given the Sanhedrin all the ammunition they want to accuse, try, convict and crucify Jesus. If Jesus is trying to save his own life the way we might, he could have given a different answer. He could have been vague.

But, no, our Lord tells the Sanhedrin exactly what will fuel their hatred of him and drive them to put him to death. He knows he'll be betrayed and falsely accused and condemned. It's an ugly injustice and none of us would volunteer for the job.

Jesus is no stranger to the charge of blasphemy that Caiaphas raises. There is the time when four men bring their friend to Jesus and let him down through the roof. They want Jesus to heal their paralyzed friend. Luke tells us,

Lk 5:20 *When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."*

"Well, how can anyone forgive sins, but God?" say the Pharisees. Jesus, they conclude, is claiming to be God and therefore is blaspheming.

In fact, in John 10:30 Jesus claims that he and the Father are one. The reaction of the Jews is to pick up stones to throw at Jesus. And when he asks them why, they say,

Jn 10:33 *"We are not stoning you for any of these (healings), but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."*

Jesus claims to be one with God. He claims to have authority to forgive sins like God alone. Therefore, to the Jews it's crystal clear: Jesus is guilty of blasphemy.

But there is more. When Caiaphas asks Jesus, "Are you the Christ?" meaning the Messiah, Jesus says this:

Mt 26:64 *"Yes, it is as you say.... 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."*

In the Greek, Jesus' words "in the future" are at the end of the sentence and are sometimes translated as *hereafter*. So the Sanhedrin listens to his claims of being the Messiah but the hereafter or future talk doesn't fit. Jesus is saying that his suffering and death are the way that will lead to his glorification beyond the clouds. But the Jews picture the Messiah coming to them and being crowned king in their sight. The Jews expect a Messiah to come and conquer their earthly enemies and restore them to autonomy and even superiority in this world by the power of God.

What Jesus suggests is out of this world—literally. And to the Jews it is crazy to think that a Nazarene like Jesus could enter the glory of heaven and be seated at the right hand of God Almighty. Jesus, they argue, is blurring the lines of distinction between heaven and earth, between the profane and holy. Such arrogance, the Sanhedrin can argue, will bring down the wrath of God because it is blasphemy for a man to think he can enter the place of holy God.

You ever watch those nature documentaries where, say, a pride of lions surrounds a zebra and take it down as lions sink their teeth into it from all sides. Well, Jesus gives Caiaphas

the raw meat that will feed the beast of the Sanhedrin. And Caiaphas is the first one to sink in his teeth. Jesus says he is the Christ, the Messiah, and even the Son of God. That opens the door for Caiaphas to immediately charge Jesus with blasphemy. To the Sanhedrin, Jesus' statement blurs the distinction between God and man. He is sinning against God himself and robbing God of the honour only God can receive. That's blasphemy.

Dear friends, listen: In order for us to be saved, Jesus volunteers to go to the cross, throwing himself as meat to the prowling lions. See how he lays down his life for us! He is indeed putting the hammer and nails into the hands of those who want to kill him because that is necessary for him to attain salvation for us! Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin would argue that they are working to save their people but they are actually working against that same plan in the heart of God, accusing the Son of God of blasphemy.

The Sentence

The Sanhedrin argues that Jesus must be put to death for the sake of the people. If Jesus is permitted to live and the blasphemy to go unpunished, the anger of God will burn against the Jewish people. It would be one thing to have to deal with the wrath of Rome and Caesar when they heard about Jesus' claims of kingship. But to deal with the wrath of God is unbearable. Therefore, Jesus must die—for the sake of the people and the honour of God. The Sanhedrin has a perfect case.

Then to display the gravity of the sin of Jesus, Caiaphas tears his priestly robe. He rips it as a sign of sorrow for sins, sorrow for the fact that Jesus belongs to the Jewish people. How could it be that Israel gave birth to such a sinner as Jesus of Nazareth? Caiaphas rips his robe perhaps the way the king of Nineveh took off his royal robes and repented in sackcloth and ashes when Jonah pronounced that God would destroy his city in 40 days. Or think of Israel's king Hezekiah. He heard the report of Isaiah that the Assyrians would destroy Israel and we read,

1 Sa 37:1 When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD.

For the high priest to tear his robes is utterly serious. Caiaphas displays horror at Jesus' words.

Kind of ironic, though, isn't it? The man who believes he is doing the Jews a favour by trying to get rid of Jesus the blasphemer is in fact doing the world a big favour. After all, Jesus is God's Son who must die for the sins of those people. The man who condemns Jesus as a blasphemer and sees himself as the protector of God's name is the one who opposes the very same God who plans to bring salvation to the world through that Son accused of blasphemy. The man who condemns Jesus as a vile sinner needs to repent and recognize that he is a sinner who cannot be saved apart from believing in Jesus. Although Caiaphas says he wants to protect the honour of God's name by getting rid of Jesus, little does he realize that Jesus is the only one capable of restoring God's name and honour which has been lost to the sin of humanity.

Jesus, the One whom Caiaphas sentences to die for blasphemy, is so filled with a desire to honour the name of his Father. Jesus will go to the cross—lay down his life—to bring the

Father glory. Jesus is not being trapped by Caiaphas; he willingly lays down his life for the love of mankind and the glory of God. Jesus knows that God's name cannot be honoured without payment for sin being made in full. And no man on earth is able to do that, except the perfect Son of God.

The wrong-minded sentence of death from Caiaphas against Jesus is used by God to ensure that the sentence of God against the sins of the world is lifted by Jesus. All of us!

The True High Priest

So, congregation, Jesus proves himself to be a High Priest far greater than Caiaphas. Caiaphas tore his robe as a sign of grief at the words of Jesus. Meanwhile Jesus, the great High Priest of God, later has his garments taken off of him by gambling soldiers who have stripped and beaten him. But, now already, Jesus is filled with true sorrow because of the blindness and brutality of sinners who condemn him to death. He is filled with true love for God's people and the world. He has no self-serving agenda. His heart is set on truly honouring God by paying the debt of sin for us. His heart is set on saving lost sinners and restoring them to God.

Why? As Isaiah prophesied,
*Isa 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

When Jesus finally pays the price of our sin, God himself tears "the cloth" behind which he has been concealed in Israel. The curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom when Jesus' sacrifice for sin is completed on Good Friday. The pathway to God is opened for us. The true High Priest of God has restored us to a right relationship with God.

Caiaphas would have kept the world under bondage to the law and the ceremonies, but Jesus offers us grace to cover our sins, to reconcile us to God and to give us access to the Father. By the tearing of the curtain, God would remove the Sanhedrin and the human high priest like Caiaphas forever and installs in their place his Son to be our everlasting High Priest. Hallelujah! What a Saviour.

Now, who do you say is truly honouring God and who is dishonouring his name? The actions of Caiaphas are working against the very honour of God that he claims to defend. Jesus is the true High Priest of us all. But only by faith in him can you see this. Caiaphas and his Sanhedrin are blind to it. Only by believing in Jesus do you understand that while Caiaphas tears his robe, Jesus' heart breaks for us, his body is torn for us, his blood shed.

For Us

Do you know Jesus as that loving Saviour who willingly put the nails into Caiaphas' hands, as it were, nails that would hang him on the cross? Do you know and trust him as the

one of put the hammer into the hands of the Roman soldiers who would nail him to the cross? My friends, he did this to become our true High Priest. Yes, Jesus is the one who stands between God and humanity as a High Priest should and he alone reconciles us to God once and for all. He takes our sin, characterized by the blindness of unbelief that we see in the Sanhedrin, the stubbornness of self-preservation that we find in Caiaphas, and everything else that keeps us in denial of our true need of reconciliation with God because of our sin.

Sometimes we can be so blinded by our sin, right? It's hard to see ourselves for who we are when we are busy trying to justify ourselves. How many abusive men over the years have tried to keep women in bondage by claiming that man is the head of the home? It is a biblical truth but a sinful application that does not reflect the reality of Jesus' life and liberating message for all God's children. Jesus laid down his life for the church, his bride, and commanded husbands, as priest in their homes, to love their wives that way too.

The same could be said for fathers and mothers who abuse their children. It is all about control and self-preservation, whether it be preservation of personal power, preservation of a family lie or secret, or simply an unwillingness to seek help from Jesus for something like a bad temper. Jesus the High Priest brings freedom to the slave—both the abuser and the abused. He offers a life lived by grace and seasoned with grace to heal our deepest wounds as our great High Priest. He creates a home where parents do not exasperate their children and children honour their fathers and mothers as the Lord desires.

In the workplace too, the grace of Jesus our High Priest frees bosses from thinking that employees are the means to the end of making greater profit, which is another form of self-preservation. And employees don't always fight for more money and other means to self-preservation. When Christ is Lord of us then management and labour work together to serve as our Lord has served us. We strive to show the freedom we have in Christ by creating a work environment of grace, where cooperation and respect abound. We do it in the name of Jesus and look to him to deliver us from sinful attitudes toward each other and to provide us with all we need to be priests in this world.

Jesus our great High Priest opens our eyes and calls us to be priests in his name, minister of reconciliation in our world. Brothers and sisters in Christ, the more we are gripped by the reality of what Jesus has done to deliver us from the need to preserve ourselves and to fight for our own agenda, the sooner we become priest-like servants of others. Yes, Jesus has freed us to serve others as he has selflessly and willingly served us as our eternal High Priest. The robe of Caiaphas was torn for nothing. What we needed and have received is the temple curtain torn to completely open the way for us to receive the blessing of Jesus our perfect High Priest.