

The Sham Trial (26:57-68)

Good morning everyone! It's great to see all of you. I realized this week that it's been a little while since I've been up here to teach, so I figured I'd reintroduce myself and catch you guys up on life these days. If I haven't had the chance to meet you, my name is Eric and I'm one of the pastors here. It's been 3 months since I've had a chance to walk through God's word with all of you. And in terms of where we are in life right now, 3 months feels simultaneously like no time at all and also an eternity. We have a 9 month old now, his name is Jude, which means we've transitioned from a baby who sits there looking cute and playing with whatever we put in front of him to a baby who is fully mobile and crawls with alarming speed to grab any cord he can find or try to eat anything on the floor we happened to miss with the vacuum. Which you come to realize is a lot more than you think. He's really good at finding it all.

It's both chaotic and wonderful. Our dog is also now having to come to terms with the fact that her days of lounging in one spot are over since Jude loves playing with her tail. She's been great about it, she's very gentle and she loves being around him, but we all have significantly less "sit around" time in our lives. But we're having a great time. I don't have a great catchy intro story with insightful parallels to the passage today, so please accept these pictures of my baby and my dog.

If you're just now joining us, or you're here for the first time in a while, we are approaching the end of the book of Matthew. And today, we are hopping back into the middle of a pretty high-octane evening. Last week we talked about how Jesus was arrested by an armed mob in the night, Peter attacked one of them and cut their ear off, then all of Jesus' disciples scattered and ran. That's where our story picks up, so let's get into it starting in verse 57:

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.*

So this crowd who arrested Jesus takes him to the house of the man named Caiaphas. We were first introduced to Caiaphas a few weeks ago at the beginning of chapter 26 when the chief priests were at his house trying to come up with a plan to arrest and kill Jesus. *That* plan is what's in motion now. So Jesus is arrested and brought to the house of Caiaphas where *another* crowd is waiting for him. This is a *planned* get together, not a chance meeting. We'll get into that more in a little bit.

We also see Peter who ran away with the other disciples in the garden, but he “followed him at a distance.” Peter doesn’t get mentioned again in our passage for today, but he follows to see what is going to happen to Jesus. He is hanging back so he doesn’t look to be associated with Jesus. In fact, he’s so confident he won’t be associated with Jesus that he “sat down with the guards.” That’s an interesting way of conducting oneself for someone who literally *just* said to Jesus, “even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” But I digress.

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.*

We need a bit of historical context here for this to make sense. The Sanhedrin was essentially the ancient Jewish court system. It was made up of local political and religious authorities. As with most legal bodies and proceedings, they had specific rules for how they were supposed to operate. And the reason we need some historical context is because everything we’ve read up until this point shows us that actually this is a glaring violation of *multiple* rules in the system in place at the time. Pretty much *nothing* about this trial happens the way trials were supposed to happen.

First and most obvious, the Sanhedrin was *only* supposed to meet during the day. But we just read how Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane at night where he told Peter in verse 34, **“this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.”** Peter hasn’t disowned Jesus three times yet and the rooster hasn’t crowed. We actually will get to that exact situation next week. But the point is, this trial is *not* happening in the timeframe it was allowed to happen, it’s most likely the very early hours just after midnight, or what normal people call “night.”

Second, the Sanhedrin was only supposed to meet in very specific locations, none of which include the high priest’s house. Think about how you would feel if you rolled up to someone’s house thinking you were going to hang out, and as soon as you walked in, he said, “hey man, I actually asked a judge and a few of the people who hate you most in the world because I’m actually going to try you for murder real quick.” Not really how that’s supposed to work. Third, Sanhedrin trials were not supposed to reach a conviction on the same day that the trial began, which we will see in just a bit is exactly what happens. Fourth, since a conviction wasn’t supposed to happen on the same day, the trials were not supposed to be on the day before a festival or the Sabbath, which we find out in the next chapter is *exactly* when this is. This is the day before the Sabbath. Lastly, these trials were supposed to *begin* with the accused giving a case for defense, but right

out the gate, we see things kick off here with multiple people coming forward and testifying *against* Jesus.

And if all that isn't enough to highlight the fact that this trial is a big sham, we just read that they were "looking for *false evidence* against Jesus **so that they could put him to death.**" In case it's not clear to anyone here, if a court is specifically looking for "false evidence" that supports the conviction they've already decided on, that's not a fair trial. I think it can hardly even be called a trial at all. Functionally, this is like an arraignment and also a verdict all rolled into one package, which is not a thing.

So they have false witnesses come forward to try to justify their actions, but what's hilarious to me is that despite their best efforts of rigging this trial, they're still failing to do it. They couldn't even get the people they lined up to lie and give false evidence to do it well enough to convict Jesus. When the people you hire to rig a trial can't even rig the trial, you're in a pretty rough spot. But they plow on with determination in their sham trial.

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.'"

There's no telling how many false witnesses they've gone through at this point who have been offering up lies and false testimonies about Jesus, but we *finally* see something the chief priests feel like they can work with. And this is an interesting turn because of what they say. If you're not super familiar with the different gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, there's an interaction in the book of John where Jesus comes into the temple and essentially "Hulks out" on the people there. He's flipping tables, he's cracking a homemade whip around, he's driving people out of the temple for defiling what he calls "my Father's house." And this is the interaction we see between Jesus and the Jewish people in the temple after that in [John 2](#):

"18 The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

Now, we know Jesus was referring to *himself* in this interaction. He was alluding to the fact that they would have him killed, but that he would come back to life after three days. But the two witnesses in Jesus' trial in Matthew put a bit of a twist on Jesus' words. It could be that the witnesses misremembered what Jesus said. Maybe they *misunderstood* what Jesus said. Maybe they twisted Jesus' words intentionally to make him sound threatening or to fit their own needs. We don't know exactly why they say what they say the way they say it, but I do find it incredibly interesting that the only "false

evidence” they were able to hit Jesus with was a misrepresentation of something he actually *did* say. But after they claim Jesus said he was going to destroy the temple, the chief priests turn to questioning Jesus:

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 Messiah, the Son of God.”*

So now the high priest asks Jesus to respond to what was just said about him, and he doesn't say a word. *Then*, the high priest turns around and asks Jesus another question that is *entirely unrelated* to anything else that has been talked about up until this point. This question has absolutely nothing to do with what the witnesses just said, and it is also the most direct question about Jesus' identity we have seen. He outright asks Jesus, “are you the Messiah? Are you the Son of God?” And Jesus doesn't dodge the question. Look at how he responds:

64 *“You have said so,”* [that's the kind of response you use when someone says something you agree with but you just didn't feel like saying it yourself. For example, someone says “I'm so annoying.” To which *you* say, “I mean, *you* said it, not me.” Jesus is confirming that he is the Messiah, just in a somewhat indirect way. He's saying “everything happening right now sure would seem to indicate that I am.”] *Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*

Not only does Jesus *not* deny that he is the Messiah and that he *is* the Son of God, he goes a step further and says, “from now on, you're going to see me sitting at the right hand of God.” Basically he's saying, “I don't need to confirm who I am, because soon enough *God* will confirm it.” This is the boldest and most direct claim Jesus has made about his identity, and it is the only thing he says in this entire trial. The only words Jesus speaks in this whole ordeal is to confirm his identity, and ultimately to seal his fate. Look at their response in the last part of our passage:

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.*

After all that has happened, we finally see an official charge made against Jesus. They accuse him of blasphemy. Which would have been an entirely legitimate charge against

anyone who claimed to be the Son of God, except for the Son of God himself. So they land on a conviction, and to add extra insult, they keep going further:

67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him 68 and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

So there's our passage for today. Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin, or the local court, he is put on trial, and he is convicted. But this *whole* trial is a mockery. They don't follow procedure, they've already decided on a sentence they want, and they're trying to find a means to get there, and the only people able to testify were "many false witnesses."

What I think is so important for us to see is not *only* the unjust actions of the chief priests and the people involved in this trial, but specifically their *posture* in everything that's happening. We really need to pay attention to the things going on under the surface. **In this passage, we see a group of people who have already made up their minds about who Jesus is. They've already made up their minds on what to do with him and what to do with the things he's said about their lives. They've already decided to reject Jesus, and now they're just looking for reasons to justify their decision.**

Now, at first glance, that seems like a pretty outlandish way to operate, don't you think? That's a pretty warped and messed up way to approach someone. But as irrational as that posture seems, it is how the chief priests approach Jesus. And as much as it pains me to acknowledge it, I don't think we need to look very hard to find this exact same posture in many of us today. In fact, I think we're actually pretty inundated with this posture, which is part of what makes it so dangerous. I want to spend the rest of our time today trying to show you what I mean and doing my best to help all of us identify this posture in ourselves and point us all back to the hope found in Jesus.

I meet people in the church all the time who are very aware of what the Bible teaches about sex being a beautiful thing created for the context of marriage, but they really don't care too much for what it has to say. They've actually already decided they think it's too restrictive, so they reject what Scripture teaches about it and decide to sleep with their boyfriend or girlfriend. And then they go on to try to find reasons to justify that decision. "Well the Bible is really only concerned with *adultery* or *promiscuity* and sleeping with *lots* of people, but we're fully committed to each other. We're basically married in God's eyes. Surely God would be fine with *that*."

Some of us look at what Jesus and the biblical authors teach about money and generosity and the dangers of greed and materialism, but living sacrificially doesn't seem all that appealing sometimes. We don't want to part with our comfort and our resources,

so we hold back. We don't care too much for what the Bible has to say about it, so we justify rejecting it. "Jesus was obviously talking to people who had a *lot* of money, and I really don't feel like I have a lot. He was talking to *them*, not me. There's tons of resources available that didn't exist in Jesus' time for people in need today, so giving directly to people with less than me isn't what Jesus means contextually. There's so many caveats that Jesus didn't lay out. I need to hit my investment goals or saving goals first, then I can look for ways to be generous." We find all sorts of reasons to reject Jesus' teachings on money.

And there's so many other ways this posture of rejecting Jesus and creating our own justifications comes up. "I know Scripture talks about how to be a parent and raise children, but this Instagram or TikTok account feels more accessible and more in line with how I think, so that's where I'll be taking my advice. It may not be biblical, but it's doable." "I know Jesus talks about humility and being servant-hearted and all that, but I'm *super* gifted, and I really think people are lucky to have me in their lives. Obviously he was talking about other people needing to be humble. It's not *pride* if I'm right." "I know Jesus says we should work towards reconciliation, but that person *really* hurt me. They were mean, they were petty, they think too highly of themselves, they haven't apologized to me, so it's not a *grudge* since I'm totally justified in thinking they're the worst." "I know the Bible says not to be in a romantic relationship with someone who isn't a Christian, but the pool of people just feels so small at church. This person is *really* cute, and they're nice, and they're not a *bad* person. They treat me really well, and they might come around our church or come around to the idea of God eventually." All of these are just different ways this posture can show itself. We've decided to reject Jesus or reject biblical instruction because we don't particularly like what he has to say. Then we retroactively fill in reasons and justifications for why we really *have* to reject it.

We do this all the time. And we don't only do this in response to Jesus' instructions. We also have this same posture towards Jesus as a response to things that happen in the world around us that we don't like. We know what the Bible teaches about the widespread effects of living in a world rocked by sin, but we still choose to blame God for things we don't like. Or at the very least we demand that he explain himself. C.S. Lewis articulated this incredibly well in an essay he wrote called *God in the Dock*. For context, "the dock" is a courtroom phrase that is essentially the same as "the stand." It's the place where the person being questioned sits. But Lewis put it this way:

"The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he

is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God in the dock."

Those are strong words, but also painfully relatable. Essentially, C.S. Lewis is saying "modern" people don't see God as an all-knowing, almighty creator king, but more as a spiteful, petty figure who is responsible for all the messed up things in our world, and who had better have a pretty convincing explanation as to why he put all this bad stuff in *my* world. We see it as not only our *right* to put God to the question, but maybe even our *responsibility* to demand answers from him.

But honestly, sometimes we don't even make it as far as questioning God. We often only make it as far as rejecting what the Bible says about his nature and who he is. We just decide our assumptions about him *must* be true, and we justify our rejection by pointing to the broken world around us. A world created *good* but then wrecked by sin, but we don't tend to reference that part in our rejection.

I could go on for a while with examples of this playing out, but the point I'm trying to make is that this posture of rejecting God then fabricating whatever justification we can come up with is far more prevalent than we would like to admit. So instead of trying to give an exhaustive list of ways this could work itself out, I think it's actually more helpful to try to give you some tools to identify this posture in general. I think these questions can be really helpful to ask yourself or ask people close to you *about* yourself to help identify this posture more readily. Admittedly, all of these questions have a lot of similarities and overlap because they're all meant to be different angles of approaching the question, "where do I have the same posture as the chief priests?"

Are you quicker to debate than repent? Do you listen to sermons or people talk about God thinking about how to argue or refute? Or are you thinking about how you might need to change things about your own heart? That's essentially *all* of Jesus' interactions with the chief priests in Scripture. Do you automatically assume your mindset is correct and anything that challenges you should be fought or debated? Or do you quickly listen to correction and guidance? Are you quicker to debate than repent?

Are you quicker to question Scripture or question yourself? Do you read things in the Bible through a constant lens of scrutiny, thinking through all the ways it might be outdated or irrelevant? Or do you approach Scripture looking for ways your life might not be aligned with what it teaches and looking for things in yourself where it could apply? Do you approach the Bible with your own worldview held tightly and insist that in order to change anything, you'll *really* need to be convinced? Or do you approach it with an open hand and open heart?

Are you more inclined to discuss issues or discuss your heart? Do you approach Jesus and the Bible purely as an intellectually interesting exercise, as if it's simply an intriguing topic to discuss and ponder? Or do you approach Jesus with a desire for heart change and life transformation?

Instead of being quick to look for ways for us to become more like Jesus, we find ourselves with a posture similar to the chief priests in our passage where we effectively put Jesus on trial in our own lives. And here's what I think is the great irony in all of this: the vast majority of the time when we do this, it's in an attempt to continue living in disobedience. We're hostile towards Jesus and we reject Jesus and we effectively put Jesus on trial to stay hidden in the dark with our sin, when it was Jesus' trial in the first place that led to us being set *free* from our sin.

It's as if we will do anything possible to run from and hide from the one thing that will actually help. Anyone in the room who has spent any time around really young children knows this exact behavior. Parents in the room, what do babies do when they're *overwhelmingly* tired? They peacefully fall straight asleep. Nope. That would be the perfect solution to their problem, but that's the opposite of what they do. They fight it, they scream, they cry, they do *everything* other than sleeping. Then when they become toddlers, we really see this posture come out with all the justifications they try to give. No one has ever cared more about adequate hydration than a toddler at bedtime. "I need water. I need a snack. I'm too cold, I'm too hot. It's too dark, it's too bright." They're so *tired*, but they'll do everything they can think of other than go to sleep, which is the one thing that will *actually* help.

I want us to look at what John has to say about this tendency in all of us in his gospel account. I think most people who have spent any time at all around church know **John 3:16**. Here's how John sums up what we've been talking about just a few verses later:

"19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed."

Jesus has given all of us, the chief priests included, a way out of the darkness in which we live. But the chief priests, and many of us, choose to attack Jesus to stay in our darkness and avoid being exposed. One of the biggest lies the enemy wants you to believe is that living in the darkness and living in your sin is safer and easier than letting the light in.

Jesus is the only person to ever live who doesn't deserve a single accusation, yet he willingly takes on *all of it* to bring light to the darkness and to pay the price for the sin that we were once enslaved to. The light that Jesus brings is the only place where *true* freedom is found.

Let's pray.