



SILENT TRUTH AND FALSE TESTIMONY

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Mark 14:53-72

42nd Message

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Last Wednesday, I officiated at the funeral of a woman who had spent the last year of her life paralyzed and confined to bed in a convalescent hospital. Hazel Worth had one of the sweetest spirits I have ever encountered. She gave glory to God every moment of her severe illness. Her funeral overflowed with the unanimous praise of those who knew her all her life. But the testimony that impressed me most was that of an unnamed girl who knew Hazel for a mere twenty minutes. This young woman's boyfriend was assigned to install a new phone by Hazel's bed. He was so impressed with Hazel's life that he took his girlfriend along to meet her while he worked. When the young woman spoke, tears filled her eyes. Her voice cracked, but she managed to say a few words. Even though she was a stranger, she said, there was a look in Hazel's eyes that drew her right into her heart and for the first time in her life she felt like a daughter. As Hazel lay paralyzed, she taught the young woman how to dance with her fingers. Those twenty minutes so drenched her in love she resolved to change how she lived.

When someone we know is near death, seconds become measured in years and moments become a lifetime so dense with emotion we can barely contain it. At these times lives take on their true color and everything that ever had meaning comes clearly into view. This is what happens to us when we examine Jesus' passion narrative. Time slows down and every detail is filled with a sea of emotion.

Our text from the gospel of Mark this morning covers the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Bracketing the trial are two vignettes from the story of Peter. In the opening scene, the apostle is following Jesus at a distance; now, in the closing scene, he denies Jesus three times. From Mark's viewpoint, the story reveals much more about this disciple (and us, by implication) than the Jewish religious leaders who condemned Jesus to death. This is how the text must be understood and applied or we will fall into the grievous error of church history, blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus. This error was, in part, responsible for the heinous crimes of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms in Russia, the expulsions in Spain, and the terrible Holocaust of our own times.

So we will observe the trial of Jesus through the eyes of Peter, the disciple who followed at a distance and became lost in denial. In this holy text we will learn of three things: First, our Lord as a faithful and true witness; second, the seriousness of our sin the cross which faces us with; and finally, God's amazing love in his confirming choice of us.

I. Peter Following from a Distance (14:53-54)

A. Jesus led to the Sanhedrin (14:53)

And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered

together. (Mark 14:53, NASB)

Following the betrayal by Judas, the arrest of Jesus came off as planned, without a hitch. There was very little resistance, only one brief display of violence which Jesus himself quelled. Under arrest now, he is led directly to a large room upstairs in the palace of Caiaphas, where the Sanhedrin will hold court. The Sanhedrin consisted of some seventy members. Mark's use of the term "all" suggests that at least a quorum of twenty-three were present to pass a ruling on the Jew from Galilee. Normally they would gather in the open-air of the marketplace to pass their rulings, but on this night they will meet in Caiaphas' home so as to ensure secrecy. Mark makes no mention of the initial hearing before Annas, who had been high priest until he was deposed by Pilate's predecessor, Valerius Gratus. Though currently deposed, this man still remained the most influential member of the Sanhedrin. As Bargil Pixner writes:

The house of Annas had succeeded in almost monopolizing the office of high priest for its own family. During the period of the Roman Procurators, this office was held with few exceptions by the family of Annas. In the very beginning, Annas himself had been high priest for nine years (6-15 A.D.). He was followed by his son Elazar (16-17 A.D.); then it was Annas' son-in-law, Joseph Caiaphas, who held the position for nineteen years (18-37 A.D.)...This family of high priests also formed a central council in the Sanhedrin. It seems that the most influential person of the Sanhedrin was Annas. As emeritus high priest, he was the gray eminence. Second to him were his son-in-law Caiaphas and his son, the former high priest Elazar. These three, together with their confidants, formed an inner circle of high priest and former high priests within the Sanhedrin.¹

This inner circle functioned as a powerful executive committee within the ruling body. In their hands now lies the fate of the Jew and their nation. It is ironic that, despite all their authority, Mark doesn't even dignify them by mentioning their names. Though they think they wield all the decision-making power in the kingdom, from the writer's point of view they are mere pawns in the drama. The only names we find in the text are Jesus and Peter. This is primarily their story.

B. Peter Following at a Distance (14:54)

And Peter had followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the officers, and warming himself at the fire (or "light"). (14:54)

Peter, now personally identified, is following Jesus "from a distance." Plummer writes: "When the first panic was over, Peter's affection re-asserted itself."² Apparently, after he fled the garden, Peter's love for Jesus took hold of

him and he could not bring himself to desert him completely. Driven by curiosity, he makes his way behind the arresting mob, under the cover of darkness, right up to the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace. John adds a personal note telling how Peter managed to get past the gate. Apparently there was another "unnamed" disciple, presumably John, already inside who knew the high priest. When Peter arrived at the gate, the other disciple spoke to the servant girl on duty and she let Peter into the inner courtyard, around which the palace was built. Peter entered through the archway and was drawn to the middle of the place, where a number of soldiers were keeping themselves warm around a charcoal fire. From this vantage point Peter had a clear view of Jesus. The symbol of the fire is double-edged. Peter longs for its warmth but not its light, for he wants to keep his identity secret. But Mark uses a subtle word play here, substituting the word "light" for "fire," suggesting that the light of the fire will indeed give Peter's testimony away and provide precious little warmth.

Next, Mark takes us into the council, where we hear the preliminary testimony against Jesus.

II. Inside the Court: Silent Truth vs. False Testimony (14:55-65)

A. False Testimony (14:55-59)

Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death; and they were not finding any. For many were giving false testimony against Him, and yet their testimony was not consistent. And some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying, "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.'" And not even in this respect was their testimony consistent. (14:55-59)

Here we get a sense of how securely this court was rigged. It was well into the early hours of morning, yet the court was able to find witnesses. Where did they find witnesses at that hour? They hired them, of course. The issue the Sanhedrin thought would bring condemnation from the court was Jesus' attack on the temple. Desecration of the Holy place was considered a capital offense. I imagine Caiaphas put forward Jesus' action of cleansing the temple without official sanction as a serious threat to the sanctity of the Holy place, not to mention his prophetic sermon announcing its complete destruction. Then Caiaphas called for eyewitnesses. They seized upon Jesus' statement, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19-21). John went on to say that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. But the witnesses interpreted what he said literally, and with evil intent attempt to portray Jesus as a violent insurrectionist who was planning a terrorist attack on the Temple.

The law demanded that in cases requiring the death penalty (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15) the prosecution had to present two witnesses with consistent statements. It was a good tactic, but the more these witnesses were questioned, the more inconsistent their testimony became. As they began to utter inconsistencies, Caiaphas started to feel uneasy. This approach was heading nowhere. So at this juncture, he cuts right to the heart of the matter, asking Jesus to take the stand.

B. Silent Truth

And the high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, "Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" But He kept silent, and made no answer. (14:60-61a)

Caiaphas rises out of his seat, steps into the midst of the assembly and asks Jesus to respond to the allegations. But Jesus is silent. The silence must have been deafening in that tension filled courtroom. "In majestic silence, Jesus refused to dignify the self-refuting testimony by any explanation of his own."³ Exasperated, the high priest has but one card left to play, and he plays it with all the authority of his office.

C. Testify Under Oath

Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" (14:61b-62)

Matthew adds that Caiaphas charged Jesus under oath by the living God to say if he was the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed ("*The Son of the Blessed*" was another term for Messiah). Backed into a corner, Jesus had no choice now but to testify. "If he refuses to answer, he breaks a legally imposed oath."⁴ If he answers as they think he will, he will be guilty of blasphemy and liable for the death penalty by his own admission. The historic moment has arrived. The answer all Israel has been waiting for will now be delivered from the very lips of Jesus. Who does he truly claim to be? What will he say under divine oath to this ruling body that has already determined his fate?

And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (14:62)

Jesus' answer is a powerful testimony about not only who he claimed to be, but what the future of the court would be. He begins with an unequivocal, "I am." This is a resonant echo of the divine name: "I am the Messiah." Now the truth is out. In the eyes of the court it is blasphemy. But Jesus doesn't end there. He hammers home the implications of his statement. In a daring move he exchanges roles, from accused to prosecuting attorney. He combines two texts from the Old Testament, Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1. Both speak of the enthronement of God's Messiah King and his receiving power, dominion and authority over all his enemies. This is a daring claim of the authority he will receive at his ascension when he indeed will fulfill what Daniel and David saw. And he tells them that they will see it in their lifetime. Soon they will be in his courtroom, and then their roles will be reversed. On that day he will not be present as an accused but as Judge and they will be the accused. In 70 A.D., that day came and the sentence was fully executed.

Jesus' claim resulted in quite a display of emotion in the courtroom.

D. The Accused Condemned (14:63-65)

And tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. And some began to spit at Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him with their fists, and to say to Him, "Proph-

esy!" And the officers received Him with slaps in the face. (14:63-65)

Forcing Jesus to testify has paid off. No longer was there a need for witnesses. The high priest had obtained first-hand testimony from the lips of Jesus that clearly substantiated the charge of blasphemy. In an emotional display, the high priest tears his clothing. His action signaled more than grief, for in the case of the high priest, it was "a formal judicial act minutely regulated by the Talmud" (Taylor). It revealed that his ears had just been desecrated by blasphemy and that the death penalty was in order. In rapid succession the other members of the court sound their approval. They vent years of pent-up anger, turning their refined speech into a trail of spit and their scribal fingers into clenched fists, striking Jesus repeatedly on the head. As he attempts to shield the blows, they mock him and demand he prophesy who had hit him "This was their way of trying to make a mockery of Jesus' messianic claims, because a rabbinical interpretation of Isaiah 11:2-4 stated that the Messiah could judge by smell and did not need sight."⁵

As Jesus receives the blows, we can hear the words of Isaiah:

***"I was not disobedient,
Nor did I turn back.
I gave My back to those who strike Me,
And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting."***

(Isa 50:5b,6)

While all this is going on in the upstairs room, Peter is watching from below. Adding to the horror of what is happening to Jesus will be the pain of what this disciple finds out about himself.

III. Peter's Denial in the Courtyard (14:66-72)

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him, and said, "You, too, were with Jesus the Nazarene." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch. And the maid saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" But again he was denying it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too." But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" And immediately a cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he broke down and wept.

While Jesus is being mocked, spit upon and beaten in the upper room, Peter is below, warming himself by the fire. But the servant girl who probably had allowed Peter to slip past the gate looks intently into his face by the light of the fire. Then it dawns on her: she had seen him with Jesus at the temple. Her contempt for Jesus spills out in her words, "you were with *that* Nazarene!" The stunned Peter is ill prepared to respond. He seizes upon his first impulse and denies any knowledge of Jesus. "Peter denied her charge by 'using the form common in rabbinical law for a formal, legal denial' (e.g. M. *Shebuoth* VIII. 3)."⁶ Fearful of being discovered, he retreats to the archway that led into

the street. But the servant girl perseveres and follows him, pointing him out to those "standing around," presumably those in the employ of the high priest. Her pointed accusation prompts a more firm denial from Peter. Then, when pressed to the wall by those "standing around" (who now take note of his Galilean accent), Peter goes over the edge. His only way out is to place himself under oath, and the moment he does that he commits blasphemy. No sooner have his words left his mouth than he hears a cock crowing a second time, and the words of Jesus come flooding back, "Before a cock crows twice, you will deny Me three times." Luke adds that at that very moment the Lord "turned and looked straight at Peter" (Luke 22:61). Peter could not hold his cover any longer: "He broke down and wept."

IV. Lessons from the Courtroom

Mark has crafted his story to show that in reality there were two legal proceedings taking place this night, one in the upper room, where Jesus is giving his testimony before the all-male Sanhedrin, the second below in the courtyard, where Peter is testifying before a female slave and unnamed bystanders. The Sanhedrin, the most influential body in Israel, had charged Jesus with crimes meriting the death penalty. The servants, the most inconsequential officials in the land, had no authority to impose any legal sanctions against Peter. Jesus is forced to testify under oath to the high priest; Peter testifies under a self-imposed oath. One oath provokes the simple truth, the other three forceful denials. Jesus is wrongfully accused of blasphemy for his attested relationship with God the Father, and thus condemned to death; Peter commits blasphemy, denying any association with the Son, and lives. One freely opens his face to censure, mocking, beating and spitting, the other covers his face in shame. The thread that connects the two trials as one is the penetrating cry of a cock crowing; an insignificant cock, whose piercing cry penetrates deeper into Peter's heart than any *shophar* in all Israel. Mark's clear intention is that the impact this had on Peter would continue on in the church. Peter broke down and wept. Bold, brazen Peter, now convulsed in sobs. This is the only time he is described as weeping in this gospel. Why does he weep? Why should we weep?

A. The Lord as a Faithful and True Witness

First, Peter weeps because of what he had just learned about Jesus. Though he was brave enough to follow only at a distance he did get a rare glimpse into the Lord's character at this hour. Backed into a corner with all the world forces ready to pounce, here was one who would not compromise the truth, bearing faithful testimony about himself though it would cost him his life. Push this one to the limit, spit on him, pluck out his beard, beat him, humiliate him, but he will never compromise who he is. He is Messiah king and the glorious Son of Man who will reign at the right hand of God forever and ever. We must never credit Jesus with anything less than that. You may say he was mistaken, but never say he regarded himself as merely a good teacher or the victim of circumstance. If you want to know who a man thinks he is, see what he says when the truth is about to cost him his life. Then you will learn what he believes in.

What was it that strengthened Jesus to remain faithful? It was his prayer in Gethsemane. That prayer gave him the

spiritual insight to see beyond the veil to the heavenly court. He knew that the Sanhedrin were in power only temporarily, and that they were but pawns in the kingdom of God. Behind them stood the heavenly court. Soon he would take his stand in that courtroom, not as an accused or as an attorney, but as Judge. On that day he would impose their sentence. This testimony has strengthened many martyrs in church history and at times has converted their captors. This is why Peter weeps.

B. Peter as a Faithless Witness

The second reason he weeps is because while he is seeing the Lord in all his glory, at the same time he is learning the naked truth about himself. When our lives are on the line, our greatest boasts prove faithless. We will try and dismember ourselves from the very one who gives us life at the hour when he needs us most. And our stage is so much smaller and the prosecuting panel far less intimidating than the Sanhedrin: the waitress at the counter, the civil servant who sells us stamps, a neighbor, even a relative. The human reaction to persecution is denial, and in the extreme it can lead to outright blasphemy. The implication is clear. When we come face to face with Jesus, the sin that is dealt with is spiritual pride. In our own strength we cannot follow Christ's example, even after we have made bold commitments. When you realize that, whenever your cock crows, you weep. In essence, this is sweetest sorrow you will ever know, because you are beginning to understand the pain you bring to him who died for you.

C. The Love of God Who Cannot Deny Himself

But there was a third reason Peter wept. He wept not only because of what he heard, but what he saw: the Lord looked at him. It was a look that knew everything about him and still loved him and wanted him for his own. Though we try and dismember ourselves, and may even commit blasphemy, Christ still chooses to love us and use us. It is this kind of sweet sorrow that keeps us from ever becoming Pharisees again. This is the kind of sorrow that seared itself so deeply into the heart of Peter that after Pentecost, he was able to bear the faithful and true witness before the same Sanhedrin without fear of death. And it was this kind of sorrow that gave him the wonderful demeanor of being poor in spirit until he died.

This is the kind of sorrow Zechariah predicted would overtake Israel some day:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born.”
(Zech 12:10)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if this kind of sorrow overtook His church today? May God grant that might see such a spirit of mourning in our lifetime. Amen.

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1. “The trial of Jesus took place in two stages, a religious trial followed by a civil one. Each had three episodes. The religious trial included (1) the preliminary hearing before Annas (reported only in John 18:12-14, 19-23); (2) the trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65); and (3) the trial before the same group just after day-break (Mark 15:1).” Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 767. I have greatly depended on Wessel's material for my text.

2. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus in Jerusalem, his first and last day in Judea* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1996) 109-110.

3. A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914) 335.

4. Hiebert, *Gospel of Mark*, 371, quoted by Wessel, 769.

5. D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 554.

6. Wessel, 770.