

## Written Copy: Matthew 26:61-66 “Return from False Witness”

Midweek Lenten Service #3

Wednesday, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

### Text: Matthew 26:61-66

<sup>61</sup> and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" <sup>62</sup> And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" <sup>63</sup> But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." <sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, "**You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.**" <sup>65</sup> Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. <sup>66</sup> What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."

### The text's intent

This text shows Jesus' hearing before the religious leaders as Christ still in control of all things, and yet submitting as Isaiah 53:7 prophesies of Him as sheep going to slaughter but not opening His mouth. They struggle to find testimony to convict because Jesus is truly innocent. The 2 collaborating witnesses present a misquoting and misunderstanding of Jesus' words in the temple about destroying it and rebuilding it, which equates in Roman opinion as insurrection and worthy of death. Caiaphas by putting Jesus under solemn oath gets the confession that will satisfy a death sentence according to Jewish Law by agreeing with Caiaphas that He is the Christ, the Son of God. And to further seal His fate He adds that the testimony of Scripture regarding one who sits at the right hand of the throne of God is prophesying about Him. He also by saying they will see Him as the one coming on the clouds of heaven identifies Himself as the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel who is presented before the LORD God and given reign and rule over all for eternity, which makes Him equal to God. This is blasphemy and makes Him worthy of death. As the Old Testament calls for the Council takes part in His punishment. But they must send Him to Pilate to get the death penalty.

### Focus Statement:

Jesus allowed Himself to be wrongfully accused and even furthered His condemnation because the aim of Caiaphas and the Council was the Father's will. **2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

Jesus willingly took on the responsibility and punishment for our sins so that by faith in Him we receive His perfect standing before the Father and are acquitted of all we have done.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

The religious leaders are guilty of the very sin they charge Jesus with, testifying and judging Him guilty over the truth of who He really is, and in that sense blaspheming against God in human form. We are guilty of false witness and a rush to judgment when we engage in gossip and fail to live up to the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment by not showing love for God through not defending our neighbor's reputation.

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

Don't be quick to accuse our fellow man without proof. Avoid harmful gossip. Realize that when we are accused by the world wrongly we rest in the knowledge that comes from repentant faith that our Lord knows the truth and His death and resurrection declares us to be innocent, even when our past actions show otherwise.

### Subject Sentence: Repent of false witness because Christ took your sin

## **Introduction: Falsely Accused**

Our focus tonight is focused on the **8<sup>th</sup> Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.** Now, in what setting do we most often think of this commandment coming into play? One is in a court of law, you put your hand on the Bible and swear “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God.” Most of you probably have not been called to give that oath or to be a witness against someone in court, so maybe you feel you can relax during this sermon. But breaking this commandment also includes lying to one another. And God looks upon those little white lies the same as He does as if you lied in court. Now, perhaps you are squirming a little bit. But we must go further and look at Luther’s explanation of this commandment. ***“What does this mean? Answer: We should so fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, our hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”*** This includes the slandering and hurting of another’s reputation that is also called gossip. Are you squirming yet? You should be. Gossip is a sin that the body of Christ often overlooks as sinful but one we engage in regularly. Our world today loves to accuse people without sufficient evidence of wrongdoing because they look guilty, and summarily cancel them simply because they don’t subscribe to the Court of Public Opinion.

An example of this would be found in the story of Richard Jewell Does that name ring a bell? Perhaps it does, and you associate him as the one judged guilty in the court of public opinion for planting and detonating a pipe bomb that killed one person and injured 111 others during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. Richard Jewell was a security guard who was identified shortly after this incident as a person of interest by the FBI. This was because he fit the profile of a terrorist, being somewhat of a loner, and a failed law enforcement officer, who maybe had the desire to show himself to be a hero. This scenario was picked up by the media and they ran with it, influencing the court of public opinion. Despite his claims of innocence, the public began to question how it was he knew where the bomb was placed, and how he was able to clear the area 13 minutes before it exploded. The answer it came up with was that he knew where it was because he planted it there. He did all this so he could be the hero.

But this was only the first of four other bombings that happened in 1996-1997. And the responsible party turned out not to be Richard Jewell, but Eric Rudolph who was eventually captured and confessed responsible for all four And what about Richard Jewell, who the court of public opinion had declared guilty? In truth he really was a hero who noticed a suspicious backpack, notified authorities, and helped clear the area of spectators so that further lives were not lost. But even after Rudolph’s confession many in the public still associated Richard Jewell as the responsible party. In 2019 a biographical movie directed by Clint Eastwood helped to recover Richard Jewell’s reputation. But he didn’t personally benefit from it because he died long before in 2007 with the stained reputation still surrounding him in the court of public opinion. Unfounded rumors and gossip ruined a hero’s life.

## Jesus Before Caiaphas and Jewish Council

We see the damage that false witness and accusation can do in our Gospel Lesson today. False witnesses condemned Jesus Christ to death on the cross. But was this intentional lying such as knowingly telling falsehoods in a court of law? Or was it more along the lines of what happened to Richard Jewell, and what we engage in when we spread gossip?

Our Gospel Lesson begins with Jesus being forcibly seized in the Garden of Gethsemane by a large crowd of Roman Soldiers, Temple Guard, and other assorted people led by Judas. They eventually march Him to the house of high priest Caiaphas where the Jewish Ruling Council is gathered. These are men who are allowed some judicial and well as religious authority over the Jews. The job they've been tasked with is to investigate if Jesus has committed any crimes against Rome and against the Jewish faith that would make Him worthy of death. Many of these Council Members see Jesus as dangerous because He operates under His own authority in matters regarding the Temple and the selling of animals and the changing of money, in regard to the authority of His teaching, and His accusations against them that they are not in right standing with God. He has gone so far as to accuse the Pharisees that they need to repent of sin, when they know they follow all God's laws zealously. Many see Him as dangerous, but perhaps not worthy of death. But Caiaphas has already made up his mind about Jesus: **John 11:47-50** <sup>47</sup> **So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup> Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.** Caiaphas sees this as the chance to make this come true.

But is this trial a kangaroo court, fixed beforehand so that no one really is interested in witnesses? If it was then the witnesses would already be lined up and coached so that they are in agreement. But that's not what Matthew tells us happens. **Matthew 26: 59-60a** <sup>59</sup> **Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, <sup>60a</sup> but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.** Many came forward, but their testimony was not accepted. Why? **Mark 14:56** **For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.** In the Jewish court of law, to convict someone of a crime guilty of death there had to be two to three witnesses in agreement on what happened, but Caiaphas couldn't find any initially that agreed.

Now you might think that if they were just looking for false witnesses, in other words those willing to lie about Jesus. If that was the case, they should've been able easily find two witnesses they could bribe to lie. But Matthew and Mark call them "false witnesses", but remember they are writing from the perspective of Jesus Resurrection, which proved Caiaphas to be wrong and Jesus to be innocent. So, any testimony that witnessed to Jesus being anything other than the Savior would be untrue, or false witness to them. Caiaphas had a hard time finding two agreeing witnesses because these witnesses thought they were telling the truth about Jesus. But this truth was actually gossip, what they had heard from the court of public opinion, from the Pharisees and Sadducees and the chief priests. But the hearsay and gossip they had heard couldn't be collaborated because it wasn't true.

Hours went by until **Matthew 26: 60b-61** <sup>60b</sup> **At last two came forward <sup>61</sup> and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'"**

Now these witnesses probably really believed Jesus said what they testified to. You might remember the actual quote from last Sunday's Gospel Lesson **John 2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."** Here Jesus is not saying He would destroy the temple, but in answer to their wanting a sign from Him, He challenges them with what He knows will happen three Passovers later, what is actually in the process right now. They heard Him as referencing the Temple in Jerusalem, but He was speaking of His body which, as God in human form, is the true temple of God on earth. Perhaps Jesus claiming He would destroy it is what they heard. Perhaps they'd been influenced by the court of public opinion that this is what He meant. Either way, with this testimony Caiaphas is halfway there. The Romans would certainly hear any testimony regarding someone planning to destroy the temple as a plan of insurrection and revolt, something that would earn for Jesus the death penalty.

But he still needs to convince the whole Jewish Council as well as all the faithful gathered in Jerusalem that according to Jewish law Jesus is worthy of the death penalty. And from what he's heard Jesus' claim about Himself, Caiaphas knows how to get Jesus to confess and seal His own fate. So, after some prodding concerning Jesus' unwillingness to answer these charges of temple destruction, or any of the other things the false witnesses had said, Caiaphas plays the trump card. **Matthew 26: 63b** <sup>63b</sup> **And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."** This amounts to Caiaphas saying "*Swear upon the LORD God's name, do you claim to be the Christ, the Messiah in the line of David, the one promised to save us? And do you claim to be more than that, the Son of God, one who is equal to God?*"

And to this Jesus will answer **Matthew 26:64 Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."** "You have said so." A popular response from Jesus that seems to mean "**You finally got it right. You've actually given a true confession.**" But Jesus doesn't stop there. He makes two claims from Old Testament prophecy that will send Caiaphas over the edge. The first is from **Psalm 110:1 The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."** The LORD God saying "Sit at my right hand, join my upon the throne ruling with me until your enemies have been dealt with. Jesus is making the claim that He is the prophetic fulfillment of this figure at the right hand of God. And in doing so He has made Himself equal to God. And if that's not enough, He gives another reference from **Daniel 7:13-14** <sup>13</sup> **"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.** Jesus is saying He is that Son of Man who comes before the Father on the clouds of heaven to be given a kingdom that encompasses the whole world in which all people will serve Him for eternity, even and especially Caiaphas and this Jewish Council. Here Jesus is definitely claiming equality with God in power and might.

**Matthew 26:65-68** <sup>65</sup> **Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. <sup>66</sup> What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." <sup>67</sup> Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, <sup>68</sup> saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"** They've got what they needed. Blasphemy: claiming to be equal to and to actually to be God Himself. That is guilty of the death penalty. And Caiaphas appears to have the whole Council on board as they pronounce the deserving sentence. And just as in our Old Testament Lesson, the whole assembly joins in with the beginning of punishment that will end in Jesus' death on the cross.

## **The Necessity of Jesus' Conviction by False Witness**

As you and I know Jesus was truly innocent of any charges of Blasphemy or insurrection. In giving His witness before Caiaphas He told the truth about who He really is. But the court of public opinion had already condemned Him to death, with more climbing on board after this hearing. Those who falsely charged Jesus of blasphemy were, in all actuality, guilty of this sin. They pointed at the Son of the Living God and testified that He was a liar, and a blasphemer. They charged the sin of blasphemy against God Himself. They spoke falsely and disparagingly about God in the flesh. And for that they deserved death, not just death in this world, but eternal death. So too we who have lied to others and gossiped about others deserve death. Just as we have at times joined with the court of public opinion and judged someone guilty without an investigation or trial. Just as we have allowed others to talk ill of someone we know and have kept silent instead of speaking up in their defense. You and I deserve death.

But that's exactly why Jesus didn't respond to those charges and refused to defend Himself. That's why He told the truth about who He really was, a truth that served to convict Him of death. He allowed Himself to be found guilty as Paul explains in **2 Corinthians 5:21** **For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** He took responsibility for all the times we've broken the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment. He took our guilt, our punishment, our sin upon Himself. He took it to the cross and died to remove from us from responsibility for it. He removed from you the sentence of eternal death. And instead in His resurrection showed you what awaits you through faith in Him, right standing with God now and eternal life to come.

How powerful is that gift of grace and forgiveness Christ gives to us from the cross in our Baptism? Look at the conversion experience of Paul from our Epistle Lesson. Like the Jewish ruling council Paul denied Jesus' claim to be the "The Christ, the Son of the Living God." He had branded Jesus and all who followed Him as dangerous heretics deserving of imprisonment and death. Yet Christ appears to Paul. And instead of giving him the eternal suffering his sins deserved, Jesus brings about repentance in Paul's heart and life. So that, instead confessing Jesus as the devil incarnate, Paul now will spend His entire life serving as Jesus' witness to the Gentiles.

## **Conclusion**

Grace was a powerful thing in Paul's life. It's a powerful thing in your life and mine. It is the reason we can look at our lives and confess the times we have lied to others, lied and gossiped about others, joined in with the court of public opinion and found someone else guilty without a trial, without hearing them out. It tells you that despite all you've done you are completely forgiven. In fact, it is out of love for you that the Spirit is pointing out these times in your life, moving you to confess them, moving you to repent of them, so that you might turn from the sins of gossip and falsehood and lead a different life. So that ***We should so fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, our hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.*** And when we fail, we look in faith to the cross and the empty tomb, and know by faith we have the same grace and forgiveness shown to Paul, the grace that moves us to live a new life of faithful obedience. The grace that allows us to **(Joel 2:13) Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.** Amen