

Jesus and the Religious Leaders
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 13, 2022-AM Service
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Mark 14:53-65

As you know, we will spend Lent in the gospel of Mark. We are following Jesus as he gets closer to the cross and we are watching to see how Jesus interacts with various groups of people—different human institutions. Groups and institutions like spiritual leaders, the family, the governmental authorities. We are watching Jesus to learn something about how we might interact with these institutions, and what it means to follow Jesus.

Today's institution is the institution of religious leaders. So people like me, and Bob, and all the other church leaders who speak for the Jesus out there. Our passage is part of Jesus' trial, the part where he is brought before the religious leaders. Specifically, he is brought before the Sanhedrin. In Jesus' day, the Sanhedrin was like the supreme court of Judaism. It was led by the High Priest and it was made up of 71 religious leaders—teachers of the law, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests—they were all part of this body. In our passage they are gathered for a special session. There is one item on their agenda. There is only one case on the docket. The case of Jesus. Here's what happens.

In the gospels, there is no group of people who fails Jesus more completely than people like me. From the beginning of Mark's gospel to its end, Jesus has a terrible relationship with the religious leaders. It starts in chapter 2 already. Chapter 2 of Mark's gospel consists of four encounters with the church leaders, and in every one of them it is negative. The negative encounters continue throughout the gospel. I counted at least 18 separate incidents in Mark. The church leaders try to trap Jesus with trick questions. Jesus tells pointed parables like the parable of the tenants that ticks them off. By the time we get to our passage, Mark has already told us three times that the religious leaders are plotting to kill Jesus. The conflict is so bad that the religious leaders are looking at each other and saying, "This Jesus is no good. He has to go!" Now they've finally got him where they want him—on trial. It's not a fair trial. Verse 55— "The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death." The verdict is decided; they just need to manufacture some evidence.

Mark shows us a terrible irony. Here are these men charged with the Spiritual leadership of Israel. These guys are supposed to be the experts on God. If anyone in Israel should know who God is, if anyone in Israel should know God's character, if anyone in Israel should recognize the living God, it should be these guys, and they miss it!

It's tempting for someone like me to see their failure and think, 'these men must have been different than me, they must be lazy and corrupt!' But I know that's probably not true. I'm sure they were all considered devoted men. I'm sure they worked hard. They got up every morning and did their devotions. They studied the scriptures every day. They tithed. They faithfully attended worship. They are on committees and boards for the work of the temple and synagogues. They stay up late preparing sermons and talks. Every moment of every day of their life was taken up with God stuff. *And yet now that God is standing in front of them in the person of Jesus, they want to kill him!* When God stands in front of them in the person of Jesus, they condemn him to death, and as if that weren't enough, they blindfold him and slap him around. There is no institution that fails Jesus more completely than the institution of religious leaders. There is no group of people who fails Jesus more completely than people like me.

What's going on? How do we look at this failure? Some people would say, 'that's the institutional church for you!' This is just another example of how organized religion is the enemy of real spirituality. Everyone loves to hate organized religion and the institutional church these days. But even though the religious leaders fail Jesus completely in the gospels, I don't think the message here is that organized religion is bad. In the Bible, it's pretty clear that God wants leadership and organization. In the Old Testament law, God appoints priests and Levites, God establishes an organized rhythm of feasts and observances, and the priests and the religious leaders are meant to oversee these festivals and sacrifices. In the Old Testament, God creates an institutional church with leaders. It's the same in the New Testament. The structure changes. The sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost alters the way that the church leadership works, but there are still people designated as leaders. In Acts, the apostles in Jerusalem clearly had some kind of authority. In Acts 15, at the first synod, James has authority. In Acts 6, the church appoints deacons. In Timothy, Paul talks about the proper characteristics of elders. Read the New Testament and you see an institutional church with leaders. So the institution is not the problem here.

What then is the problem? I went back through the gospel of Mark this week and I looked at all the conflict points between the Pharisees and Jesus. And if you look at those points, a kind of pattern emerges. *What really gets the religious leaders upset is when Jesus' words or actions threatens their popularity with the people.* Just a few examples. Chapter 2 is the first time you see open conflict between Jesus and the leaders and the conflict starts right when Jesus starts to draw crowds. The first open conflict between Jesus and the leaders is at the healing of the paralytic. Remember the crowd was so big that the paralyzed man's friends had to cut a hole in the roof and let him down in front of Jesus? Crowds had started to come to Jesus and they were saying things like, "What is this? A new teaching and with authority! He's not like our other leaders!" Again in chapter 3, it's when huge crowds are following Jesus that the leaders accuse him of being possessed by a demon. His popularity is a threat to them. And then when you look at the three times in Mark where the leaders openly plot to kill Jesus, in all three cases they are doing it in a way that won't disrupt the crowd. They want to have the crowd's approval. The reason for the leaders hatred of Jesus has something to do with the relationship between leaders and crowds.

When you are a leader in a church you get lots of attention. You get to stand up and speak to people and they listen to what you say. When you are in meetings, you sit in the middle of the table and your words have weight. When you gather in the narthex after church, people want to talk with you, to tell you a story, to get your opinion, to get your advice. And with all that attention comes power and affirmation and that's like a drug. It makes you feel like you're smarter than you really are. It's easy for leaders to get addicted to that feeling. I know from talking to retired ministers, that sometimes they struggle when they retire and all of a sudden when they walk into the narthex after a church service, there's no line of people who want to talk to them.

If anything, the temptation of leaders to get obsessed with crowds is worse than it was in Jesus' time. We live in the age of the celebrity pastor. We live in the age of 'how many Instagram followers do you have? How many twitter followers? How many YouTube subscribers?' For years now ministry has been obsessed with crowds and numbers. Social media has only made it worse.

It causes problems. I listened to the podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* this winter. Maybe some of you did too. It's terrific. It's the story of the rise and fall of Mark Driscoll, the

leader of Mars Hill church in Seattle Washington. I can't go into the whole story, it's enormously complicated. But Driscoll started out doing some really good things, but at some point he seems to fall in love with the attention. The power of his charisma and this ability to draw a crowd becomes the way he measured his Spiritual authority. At one point some people who are starting to get worried about his lack of accountability come to him and suggest that he should make himself accountable to some other megachurch pastors. He refuses. "How can I listen to them. Their church is smaller than mine." When other pastors on his staff would resign because they were sick of his management style, they would make them sign non-disclosure agreements that prohibited them from planting a church within a hundred miles of Seattle, lest they take away some of the members. He was in love with the attention and the power. Brings to mind what Jesus said. "*Watch out for those teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues.*" I don't think he wore flowing robes. He was more of a jeans and leather jacket preacher. But the animating spirit is the same.

Jesus' shows us a different path. Jesus has a different way of measuring things, a different way of leading. Jesus does something remarkable in our passage, something that I'm embarrassed to say that I noticed for the first time this week. Maybe you know that in the gospel of Mark, Jesus is constantly downplaying his identity. He actively suppresses the fact that he is the Messiah. He tries to keep his power quiet. He doesn't want people to know who he is. He heals people and tells them, 'don't tell anyone about what I did.' In chapter 1, a demon says, "I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God!" He tells the demon to shush. In chapter 8, when Peter finally says to Jesus 'You are the Messiah,' Jesus tells him not to tell anyone. Bible scholars call this 'the messianic secret.' His whole ministry long, Jesus refuses to admit he's the Messiah, his whole ministry long Jesus hides his true identity. Until our passage!

The trial is not going well for the prosecution. The witnesses don't agree with one another. You need at least two agreeing witnesses to get a conviction, but none of the witnesses seem to agree. The Sanhedrin is in danger of losing the case. So the High Priest throws a Hail Mary. He simply asks Jesus, "Are you the Messiah?" After hiding this truth for so long Jesus says, 'Yes.' He doesn't just give a simple yes he adds to it a claim to be the Son of God. He hands the prosecutors their victory.

Of all the times he chose to reveal his identity, *this* is the time he chooses? If he'd told the crowds after one of his miracles that he was the Messiah, the whole city would have followed him. If he'd announced that he was the Messiah after feeding the 5000, he would have had an army at his side. After the triumphal entry, if he had gotten off his donkey and said, "Hey Jerusalem! I am the Messiah!" The city would have lost its mind. He would have had the biggest megachurch in the empire. Instead he chooses to reveal himself at a moment where it will get him killed. Jesus, why did you do that!?

He does it because when we are looking for his glory, he wants us to look in the right place. He tells the world who he is at the moment of his sacrifice, and the moment of his humiliation, at the moment of his abandonment and betrayal, because the glory that Jesus wants you to see is not the glory of the big miracles and the big crowds, it's not the glory of the performance and the inspiring sermon, it's the glory of the cross. It's the glory of a love that will go down into the depths of human sin and sadness to take away the sin of the world. The glory of a love that is willing to be slapped and spit on so that we can be rescued, so that sinners can be forgiven and the dead can be raised to life.

This is a glory that doesn't need crowds. Crowds are great, but his leadership doesn't depend on them. His glory lives in a room at Lemmen Holton, where a husband holds his wife's hand and reads her favorite scripture passage as she gets her infusion. This is a glory that makes itself known at 3 in the morning when the exhausted parent strokes the head of their anxious child and prays with her because she just can't sleep. This is a glory that lives in the line at the funeral home when a friend embraces his grieving buddy and says, "I don't know what to say but we are praying for you and we love you."

It's a different kind of glory that leads to a different kind of leadership. By choosing to tell everyone that he is the Messiah at this moment, Jesus suggests a different way of measuring leadership. A different way of measuring ministry success. When we measure ministry effectiveness, we tend to look at the size of the church, the health of the budget, the number of YouTube subscribers. We don't generally pay attention to number of hospital visits, number of bedside prayers, number of hours spent walking with people through pain. By revealing himself here, Jesus is pushing us towards these sacrificial metrics. Or maybe he's not pushing us to metrics at all, maybe he's just pushing us to acts of loving sacrifice in his name.

What then shall we say? Watching my fellow religious leaders fail so completely in this story leads me to say at least this much. We religious leaders will fail you. Despite our best intentions, sometimes because our intentions aren't the best, we will fail you. We will disappoint you. We will get defensive. You'll be in the hospital and we won't show up. We will lose our temper. We will forget your name and your need. We will say things that cause hurt instead of help. We will be hypocrites. Please don't let our failures cause you to take your eyes off Jesus. Don't let our failures obscure his faithfulness. Your hope is not in us, or those 71 Sanhedrin members, or in that celebrity preacher. Your hope is in that man getting blindfolded and slapped and spit on. Your hope is in Jesus Christ your Lord.

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