

“What Is Your Judgment?”

Matthew 26:57-68

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 26, 2014

For some reason people seem to be fascinated with trials. Especially high-profile trials. In 1995, the whole world, it seems, was glued to their televisions for 133 days watching the O.J. Simpson murder trial. I can remember seeing the O.J. trial on in restaurants and people everywhere were talking about it. In fact, when Boris Yeltsin came to meet with President Clinton, the first thing he said when he got off the plane was, “do you think O.J. did it?” And when the verdict was read on the morning of October 3, 91% of all people who were watching TV at that moment were watching the O.J. trial.

But it’s not just O.J. Whether it’s Martha Stewart, Timothy McVeigh, Michael Jackson, or Bill Clinton; Patty Hearst, Charles Manson, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, or the Scopes “Monkey” Trial, people are just drawn to court drama. People like Judge Wapner and Judge Judy have become successful with courtroom television shows about insignificant legal disputes. Until 2008 there was even a cable TV network called Court TV.

So what is it about trials that captures our attention the way they do? I think it’s the search for truth and justice. Each one of us has a sense of justice. We don’t always act like it but it’s there. You see this among children. They know when something’s not fair and they don’t mind telling you. That sense of justice is why Superman has been so popular over the years. As the radio program and then the television series announced, Superman was fighting “the never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way.”

Today we begin looking at the most high-profile trials in the history of the world, the trials of Jesus. Those trials – one before the Jewish leaders and one before the Roman leaders – were also the greatest injustices in the history of the world. This morning we are talking about the Jewish trial.

The purpose of a trial is to find the truth and to make sure justice is administered fairly. This highly illegal trial turns out to be far from seeking truth. After Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was taken to the palace of the high priest where the scribes and elders had gathered. We’re not told if they had gathered because they were expecting Judas to return with Jesus, but they might also have been there as part of the Passover celebrations. It seems likely that they were expecting Jesus because they had arranged for witnesses.

Verse 59 says, “Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.” They had already decided what the outcome would be and now simply needed to find the evidence to get the verdict they wanted. This turned out to be harder than they expected. We’re told that many false witnesses came forward but for some reason the lies weren’t good enough. The problem they faced is that they had no authority to execute Jesus. Jerusalem was under Roman control and the Roman government reserved the right to execute criminals. So the Jewish leaders had to find something against Jesus that they could take to the Roman governor.

Not only were they not interested in the truth, they disregarded most of the Jewish laws about trials. For example, it was illegal under Jewish law to hold a trial at night. It was also against Jewish law to render a verdict on the same day as the trial. They were required to wait 24 hours before issuing a verdict. Most seriously, the Ten Commandments prohibit false witness or false testimony. We don’t know what some of the false accusations were, but it doesn’t matter. All of the witnesses were false witnesses because none of them recognized Jesus for who he truly is.

Finally, however, two witnesses came forward with the same testimony. They said,

“This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’” That’s not exactly what Jesus said. In John chapter 2, where Jesus drives the vendors out of the Temple courts, the Jews come and ask what sign he will give them to show that he has the authority to do that. He says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John then tells us the response of those who heard him. “The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.” Jesus was telling them that the proof of his authority as God is the resurrection.

One of the most interesting parts of this whole scene is Jesus’ response. Caiaphas the High Priest is furious by this point because he has not been able to get what he wants, which is some accusation worthy of the death penalty. Jesus has not been very cooperative, either. Verse 63 says, “Jesus remained silent,” even when Caiaphas said, “Have you no answer to make?” Jesus knew that there was no point in arguing with them. The Jewish leaders had made up their mind already. Jesus also knew that he must suffer and die. More importantly, Isaiah had prophesied Jesus’ response hundreds of years before. Isaiah 53, verse 7: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”

As a last ditch effort, the High Priest put Jesus under an oath saying, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” In other words, he’s asking Jesus if he claims to be God. Jesus finally answers and says, “You have said so.” Then, just to make sure everyone understood what he was saying, Jesus refers to Daniel 7, which is about the Messiah. He says, “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.”

The High Priest has had enough and declares that Jesus has uttered blasphemy. He

has claimed the power and authority that is reserved for God himself. Caiaphas says to the Jewish leaders, “What is your judgment?” They respond that he deserves death.

On one hand, this really wasn’t a legitimate trial. They broke almost every rule concerning trials and they certainly weren’t interested in finding the truth. But on the other hand, this is but one of many trials. You could say that Jesus has been on trial since before he was born – from the moment the angel appeared to Mary. During his entire life and ministry, this peasant carpenter was in conflict with those in power.

The truth is that Jesus is still on trial today. Even in our modern culture almost everyone has heard of Jesus. You would be hard-pressed to find someone in America today that hasn’t at least heard of Jesus. Throughout history there have basically been three responses by people who come in contact with him. One response is to consider the claims of Jesus, to believe that he is the true God as he said, and to accept him as Lord and Savior. That’s the Christian faith. For some people it happens all at once and for others it takes a long time to come to that place of faith. I think God honors both and it takes an honest desire for the truth to believe it.

The second way people respond is by not responding. They refuse to consider who Jesus is. There’s a story in the Gospels about Jesus and his disciples crossing the lake to a region called the Decapolis. When they get there they are confronted by a demon-possessed man who lives among the tombs. Jesus heals the man, sending the demons into a herd of pigs who then jump off the cliff and drown. When the townspeople show up they are not interested in what happened to the demon-possessed man. They simply want Jesus to leave. Many people today hear bits and pieces about Jesus and simply pay no attention. They don’t bother to search for the truth. They merely go on “doing their own thing.” They may even be members of a church but they never get to know the real Jesus. You could say they get inoculated from the Gospel. They get enough religion to feel

better about themselves but not enough to know the life-changing savior of the world.

The third way people respond to Jesus is to reject him. They hear and understand Jesus' claim to be God and they reject it, like Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders. They say, "that's impossible." Some go so far as to seek false witnesses. You may be familiar with some of the people who are called the "new atheists." These would be Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and others like them. They are on a crusade against God. They claim that science and reason prove there's no God. The truth is the exact opposite and, like the Jewish leaders, they must ignore a whole lot of evidence in order to reach their verdict.

Finally, when Caiaphas asked, "What is your judgment?" the elders answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in his face and hit him. Some slapped his face and they ridiculed him. The new atheists do the same thing when they write books with titles like *The God Delusion* or *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

I think most of us get upset with the image of Jesus being insulted and abused, beaten and spit upon. Many of us are bothered by the insults of the new atheists. Some of us get concerned when the City of Houston sends subpoenas to area pastors demanding copies of their sermons, speeches, and emails. We are uncomfortable with a growing number of people who reject Jesus. But before we can point fingers at others we need to look at ourselves. Every time we sin we are basically doing the same thing. When I choose to sin it's the same as spitting in the face of God. Which is why I need a savior.

So what about you? Have you considered the claims of Jesus? Do you believe that he is who he claims to be? Do you trust him as your Lord and Savior? What is *your* judgment?

Amen.