

Theme: "The People of the Passion" – Caiaphas

Sermon Texts

(John 11:47-50, 53) [After Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead] Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. ⁴⁸ "If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation." ⁴⁹ And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ "nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish"... ⁵³ Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.

(Matthew 26:3-5) [Tuesday evening of Holy Week, two days before the Passover] Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. ⁵ But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

(Matthew 26:57; 59-67) [Late Maundy Thursday Night] And those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled...⁵⁹ Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, ⁶⁰ but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward ⁶¹ and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.' " ⁶² And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" ⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! ⁶⁶ "What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death." ⁶⁷ Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, ⁶⁸ saying, "Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?"... (Matthew 27:1-2) When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. ² And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor.

As we read through the accounts from the Gospels of the events that lead up to Jesus' suffering and death, where do we see the hatred, jealousy, and passionate opposition against Jesus come from? Who was it that hatched the plot to put Jesus to death, even though He was innocent of any and all crimes? Shockingly, it came from the "church!" This dark and unthinkable evil plot came from the hearts of the *religious leaders* of the people! They were the ones who made sure this wicked plot was carried through. They were the ones leading the chants of the crowd, "**Crucify Him, crucify Him!**" and finally convincing the reluctant Roman governor Pilate to put Jesus to death, despite His innocence (**Luke 23:20-23**). The "ringleader" of these chief priests and Jewish religious leaders was the high priest himself, **Caiaphas**.

Caiaphas appears to have risen to this high position because he was the son-in-law of Annas, who was also called "**the high priest**" (**Acts 4:6**). Annas seemed to be what we would call the "president" of the Jewish high council, called the *Sanhedrin*. During Jesus' final week before His crucifixion (what we call "Holy Week"), Jesus was taken before both Annas and Caiaphas after His arrest, but the "official" trial of the Jewish high court was conducted by Caiaphas, the high priest that year (**John 11:49**).

Before we begin studying our texts for today, we need to be reminded of what it meant—or what God intended it to mean—to be “**high priest.**” The office of the high priest was first established by God Himself after He had freed the Children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. God appointed Aaron, Moses’ brother as the first high priest (**Exodus 28:1**). Not only was the office of the high priest established by God, but also the services they were called to perform, the sacrifices they were to offer, the feasts and festivals they were to conduct—even down to the last detail of their work, including the garments that the high priest should wear (**cf. Exodus 28**)—these were all divinely prescribed by God Himself.

The fundamental purposes and ideas behind all these prescriptions by God for the high priest, and in fact, all His priests, were the themes of *reconciliation* and *mediation*. The idea of *reconciliation*, or making peace between man and God, was shown in the many atoning sacrifices that the priests were called upon to perform for themselves and the people. The idea of *mediation*, or a “go-between” between man and God, was also shown in the atonement sacrifices the priests made for the people, as well as in the burning of incense and offering up prayers on behalf of the people, and when they would enter the presence of God in the Most Holy Place of His Tabernacle on behalf of the people and sprinkle blood for their sins. In other words, the whole Old Testament service of the high priest was to emphasize: 1) Man is a sinner, God is offended, therefore, man’s sins must be atoned (“paid”) for, and 2) someone must stand between God and man as a peacemaker. All these duties and sacrifices were intended to point the hearts and minds of the people constantly to the One who would come to be their true *Mediator* and make full *reconciliation* for their sins: God’s promised Savior, the Messiah [Hebrew: “*The Anointed One*”].

The coming Messiah was to be the main focus of the high priest and of his worship and service to Jehovah. After all, all those sacrifices, prayers, and services would have meant absolutely nothing apart from Christ. The sacrifices of animals on the altars took away no sins, gave no peace, and saved no souls if they didn’t point the hearts of the worshippers to the “greater sacrifice:” the promised “**Lamb of God**” who would come and sacrifice Himself to “**take away the sins of the world**” (**John 1:29**).

These priests, especially the high priest, were not just to be man’s representatives to God. They were also to be *God’s* representatives to *man*, in the sense that they were to be the highest examples and teachers of holiness of living and devotion to the true God, Jehovah. This was symbolized by the gold plate that the high priest was required to wear on his forehead. This gold plate that all the people could see very plainly on the forehead of the high priest had this inscription on it: “*Holiness to Jehovah.*”

That is the type of man God expected His high priest to be. That is the office that this man **Caiaphas** held in Jesus’ day. *He* was supposed to be Israel’s “Holy Man.” *He* was the one who was to be their spiritual leader. *He* was the one who was to represent God to the people. *He* was the one who was to lead the people in God’s ways; to lead the people back to God, and to get them prepared and always ready for God’s promised Savior, the Messiah.

Is that the type of man we find in **Caiaphas**, the high priest? No! Instead we find a cold, hard-hearted, selfish, hypocrite. **Caiaphas** and the religious leaders of the Jews were anything but expectant and receptive of the Messiah, and they certainly weren’t “holy.” We read that after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and had gained many believers because of it, **Caiaphas** and the rest of the Jewish leaders gathered to discuss what should be done. They asked, “**What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation**” (**John 11:47-48**). What were the Jewish religious leaders so concerned about? The spiritual needs of their people? Finding out for themselves whether Jesus really was the Messiah? No! They are worried about saving their own positions of authority, preserving their means of making a very comfortable living, and keeping their Roman rulers appeased so that their country could stay as it was!

What was it about Jesus that worried these men and made them hate Jesus so much? Again, shockingly, it was the Gospel, the “Good News,” He was preaching about Himself to the people. He preached free forgiveness and life and a direct relationship with God the Father through faith in Him (**John 14:6**). He taught that true “religion” was one that worshipped Jehovah “**in spirit and truth**” (**John 4:23-24**), that is with sincere, believing hearts and **spirits** that put their trust in the **truth** of God’s Word, not in the teachings of man.

These teachings of “Good News” were destroying everything that the Pharisees and religious leaders had been building on for hundreds of years. They had taught a religion of obedience to their hundreds of man-made ceremonial and religious laws; a religion that was based on what you could put in your *head*, not in your heart; a religion of learning, memorization, and intellectualism. It was a religion based on working your way to get closer to God. And that “way to God,” they taught was through *them*, the religious authorities. There was no free grace or forgiveness. If that were believed by the people, as Jesus was teaching, their whole existence would be shown to be a lie and would be ruined. These men were desperate and didn’t know what to do! Jesus has just given the greatest proof to all of Israel and the surrounding regions that He is the Son of God, the Messiah, by raising Lazarus, a man who had been dead for four days. The Jewish high council appeared to be on the verge of giving up in desperation (**John 11:47-48**).

One man, however, was so cold, so ruthless, selfish, and hard hearted that it was very clear to him what they should do. That man was their leader, their high priest, **Caiaphas**. John writes, **And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish"**(**John 11:49-50**). In other words, “Are you men stupid? If we are going to keep our jobs, our places of prominence, and keep our nation in tact the way it is there is only one thing we can do! We must kill Jesus!” Never mind that they couldn’t deny Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead; they even admitted that Jesus had done miracles: they admitted “**this Man works many signs**” (**John 11:47**). Never mind the fact that Jesus had proven by His words and actions that He truly was a “holy man,” and more than that; He was the very Son of God, the Messiah, as He claimed to be. What was their conclusion? “Let’s follow Jesus and believe in Him!” No! They followed their leader, **Caiaphas**, and we are told “**Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death**” (**John 11:53**). From the third reading of our sermon text we see that this is exactly what they did. After an absolute sham of a trial that was not only illegal according to their own laws, but was also full of lies and false witnesses they are the ones who deliver Jesus over to Pilate in the hope of having Him crucified (**Matthew 27:1-2**).

What is the lesson here in these accounts of **Caiaphas** and the rest of the religious leaders, some of the “*People of the Passion*” of Jesus Christ? Surely, we would never sink to such stone cold, selfish, hard-hearted depths, would we? Maybe not, but the lessons of **Caiaphas**, and the religious leaders of the church of Jesus’ day should cause every one of us to do some serious soul searching.

Hypocritical “formalism” is what **Caiaphas** was guilty of and it’s exactly what the Apostle Paul warns us all against when he wrote to the young pastor Timothy, “**For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money...unholy...headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!**” (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

This danger of “formalism,” having “**a form of godliness, but denying its power**” (2 Timothy 3:5), is a temptation for all Christians to fall into, including pastors, teachers, and church leaders. We are in danger of religious “formalism,” if we, like **Caiaphas**, and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day treat God’s Word like a “textbook:” something to be memorized and intellectualized; something to learn moral lessons from, instead of what it is really is meant to be, first and foremost: The life-giving Word which shows us our great, loving God and His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

If the “form” of our worship and our traditions begin to be more important to us than the “why” of our worship—what it’s actually about and the reason we are gathering for worship, namely to hear and learn from the life-giving Word of Christ and give our thanks and praise in return—then we are falling into the same spiritual trap that **Caiaphas** and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day fell into.

One of the blessings and lessons that I hope we’ve all gained from the pandemic over this past year is the fact that it has forced us all to answer the question, “If the usual place and method in which we normally worship isn’t available, will I still worship? Will I still find a way to hear and read and learn from God’s Word even if it isn’t available in the way we’ve always been used to?” I hope and pray that it has lead all of us to answer those questions with a resounding “Yes! I will still hear God’s Word and worship Him even if it isn’t on Sunday in my usual pew at church!” If we’d been “going through the motions” at times in our worship lives, I pray that this past year has led us to a deeper appreciation of the blessings we have had for our entire lives of gathering together for worship and fellowship (and move us to thankfulness now that our indoor worship services in Hayward have resumed this weekend. We pray that our services in Mountain View will be able to do the same very soon.). May the Lord lead us all to make use of and join in these blessings together going forward! May He move our hearts to be focused on the “why” of our faith and our worship. That is where its power lies!

The “why” of our faith and worship is Jesus Christ Himself. He is the “cure” for religious formalism, or just “going through the motions” in our worship and faith lives. He alone can raise our stone dead, selfish hearts to true life through faith in Him and His sacrifice. Think of how much we NEED to pray the words we are about to sing to the only One who can cleanse and change our hearts and attitudes each day:

***“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”***
(Psalm 51:10-12 ESV)

Caiaphas did not realize that those cold and terrible words he spoke in unbelief are actually the central message of our faith, **“it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish” (John 11:50)**. John goes on to explain, **“Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (John 11:51-52)**. Only Jesus and the power of His sacrifice for our sins can lead us to work, preach, teach, and live for Him, instead of what is **“expedient” (John 11:49)**, or best for our own selfish interests. Because of Him we can say with the Apostle Paul, **“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20)**. When Jesus comes again, may we, the people of His church be among the first to welcome Him gladly, that He may in turn welcome us to Him gladly! Amen.