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Sermon Summary #46

Truth on Trial Mark 14:53-65

I'm incredibly grateful for our legal system here in America, but I don't entirely trust it. I thank God for the many honest, hard-working, law-abiding attorneys who are there to help us. But on occasion, even when they do their very best, circumstances beyond their control, or an honest mistake made by a prosecutor or defense attorney, as well as the unethical choices made by others, or perhaps the perjured testimony of a key witness undermines justice. Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful for the laws that exist to protect the innocent and to convict the guilty. But every once in a while, whether it's the acquittal of O. J. Simpson or of Casey Anthony, I wonder if justice is being served.

Well, regardless of what you think about Mr. Simpson or Ms. Anthony, today we are going to look at a **colossal miscarriage of justice**. As it turns out, the only person with any integrity who was involved with this trial was the accused, the man who was ultimately convicted, that being, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ.

I can remember reading about the trial of Socrates while I was at OU. In the year 400 b.c. he was brought up on two charges: (1) he was accused of not worshiping the gods which the State recognized and worshiped, and (2) he was accused of corrupting the youth in the city. The prosecutor in this case demanded the death penalty. There were some 500 people who sat on his jury, a majority of whom voted to convict.

Socrates was given the option of going into exile to avoid the death penalty, but he turned it down. He had plenty of opportunities to escape, but chose not to, insisting that such would be contrary to his ethical principles. He spent his final day on earth debating with friends about the immortality of the soul, after which he drank the poison Hemlock, and died.

Don't think that I'm comparing the trial and death of Socrates with that of Jesus! After all, Socrates was only a man on trial for his own sins and eventually died solely for himself. Jesus was not only a man but also God who was on trial for no sin of his own, and died, not for himself, but for others.

When the four gospels are combined and compared we discover that Jesus had **two trials**, one Jewish or religious, and one Roman or civil. The need for two trials is clear: the Sanhedrin wanted to dispose of Jesus, but blasphemy was insufficient grounds. Furthermore, they were not permitted to conduct executions. Thus they remanded Jesus to the custody of Pilate and portrayed him as a seditious and rebellious threat to the peace of the empire, hoping thereby that Jesus would be condemned to death.

These trials each had 3 stages or parts:

The Jewish trial consisted of (1) an informal examination before Annas (Jn. 18:12-23); (2) a hearing before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (which we are looking at today here in Mark 14:53-65); and (3) the formal trial and decision at dawn, at which time he was sent to Pilate (Mark 15:1).

The Roman trial consisted of (1) an initial examination before Pilate (Mark 15:2-5); (2) the interrogation by Herod (Lk. 23:6-12); and finally (3) the concluding appearance before Pilate (Mark 15:6-15).

Liberal critics who don't believe in the inspiration of Scripture try to tell us that the material we have here couldn't possibly be authentic because of the numerous illegalities that occurred. For example, they point out that according to Rabbinic law, in capital cases such as this, trials at night were forbidden. Furthermore, two days were required for such a trial, and only on the second day could a verdict of guilty be declared. Jewish law also provided for the private interrogation of witnesses and there was a prohibition of capital trials on feast days. Add to this the fact that the proceedings apparently took place in the home of Caiaphas and not in the temple precincts, as one would expect, the fact that Jesus was neither offered nor provided with a defense attorney, and the fact that he was charged with blasphemy without actually blaspheming in the legally defined

sense, which required that the name of God be pronounced, all add up to numerous irregularities that should lead us to conclude that Mark and the other gospel authors just made it all up.

But:

(1) Contrary to the opinion of some, Rabbinic law actually insists that the execution of a rebellious teacher take place on one of the three primary feast days to serve as a more visible example and deterrent to the people.

(2) The reason for his trial occurring at night is that criminals could not be executed on the Sabbath. If Jesus was arrested on Thursday night, things had to move swiftly if he was to be buried by dusk on Friday, just before the start of Sabbath.

(3) Furthermore, “an all-night session of the Jewish authorities was demanded by the fact that Roman officials like Pilate worked very early in the morning and then refused to take on new cases for the rest of the day. If Jesus could not be presented to Pilate early Friday morning, the case would drag on till after Sabbath – along with mounting risks of mob violence” (D. A. Carson, 550).

(4) Finally, the other irregularities are easily understandable once we remember two things: First, many of the legal procedures contained in Rabbinic law were purely *theoretical* and were rarely if ever put into practice. Second, these religious leaders were obviously motivated by *expediency*. Such flagrant breaches of judicial procedure were of little concern to them when the hour demanded they take rapid action. Simply put, when there is a will to quickly remove an undesirable enemy, a way will be found, the law notwithstanding!

Immediately following Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemane, he was taken to Annas. We read about this in John 18:12-13, 19-24 . . .

Although Mark doesn’t name the high priest, we know that this was Caiaphas who had succeeded his father-in-law, Annas, in 18 a.d. However, since Annas had been deposed by the secular authorities, he was still called high priest (inasmuch as tradition dictated that only death could remove one from office). This explains why in John 18 both are referred to as high priest. They were both hypocritical, cunning, and ruthless. Someone has said, "For the absolutely sinless One to be subjected to a trial conducted by sinful men was in itself a deep humiliation. To be tried by such men, under such circumstances made it infinitely worse. Greedy, serpent-like, vindictive Annas; rude, sly, hypocritical Caiaphas; crafty, superstitious, self-seeking Pilate; and immoral, ambitious, superficial Herod Antipas; *these* were his judges!"

Mark 14:54 was inserted to prepare us for vv. 66-72 (Peter's denials). Here he follows “at a distance,” as one commentator put it, "midway between courage . . . and cowardice" (Carson, 553).

The word “council” in v. 55 refers to the Sanhedrin which was composed of 3 groups: priests, teachers of the law, and elders. There were 70 members plus the high priest; 23 constituted a quorum.

At a typical trial the members of the Sanhedrin sat in a semi-circle on elevated seats so that they all could see each other. To their right and left stood two court clerks who recorded the minutes of the proceedings. A seat for the accused and for any witnesses was placed in the center.

In capital cases, condemnation required the unanimous evidence of at least two witnesses (cf. Dt. 17:6; 19:15; Num. 35:30). Any discrepancy between their respective depositions and the evidence was ruled inadmissible. That these witnesses were immediately available implies that they had been previously alerted that Jesus would be arrested. Yet they were unable to agree with each other until some came forward contending that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple. The incident to which they refer is recorded in John 2:19-22. The obviously misquote him and twist his words, for Jesus never said “I will destroy this temple.” He said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Of course, Jesus was referring to the temple of his own body, the only real place where people come to find and meet with God.

Why didn’t they call for testimony from the countless lepers he had cleansed or the demonized he had delivered or the paralytics he had healed or the prostitutes he had forgiven or the dead he had raised? I suggest that even had these appeared in court it would not have been enough to turn the hearts of the council. Such was the depth of their hatred of Jesus and their determination to be rid of him.

The accusation was serious, for in the ancient world the destruction or desecration of a sacred place was regarded as a capital offense (see Jer. 26:1-19). The mere threat of violence against the temple was regarded by the Sanhedrin as a crime meriting the death penalty.

Obviously irritated and frustrated by the failure to secure competent testimony against Jesus, Caiaphas takes matters into his own hands and directly interrogates him (Mark 14:60-61).

“I adjure you by the living God!” (Mt. 27:63).

The pathetic irony here is that men resort to the imposition of an oath in order to secure reinforcement and assurance that one is telling the truth. By demanding that Jesus swear by the living God, he implies that the word of the Son of God is not sufficient! Stunning! He puts the one who is himself “The Truth” under an oath to tell the truth!

Jesus' response (v. 62) consists of a combination of two OT texts that were unmistakably messianic: **Psalm 110:1** and **Daniel 7:13**. Herein Jesus declares without equivocation that he is indeed the Son of God, the Messiah, the One who is to be exalted to the place of supreme authority and majesty and who will execute judgment on just such as these who dare stand before him this day.

The law defining "blasphemy" was ambiguous, but at minimum was the idea of dishonoring God by diminishing his glory or by depriving him of rights to which he alone as God is entitled. What exactly did Jesus say that constituted blasphemy?

- (1) Some suggest it was his claim that *he* would be seated at God's right hand (Ps. 110:1), together with his claim to be the Danielic Son of Man (Dan. 7:13).
- (2) Since Judaism expected the Messiah to provide miraculous proof of his identity, the idea that one so helpless and hapless should claim to be the anointed one could only be blasphemous, for it made a mockery of God's promises to his people.
- (3) Finally, in Judaism it was believed that God alone had the right to announce and enthrone the Messiah. Anyone who claimed the office before God had crowned him as such would be regarded as having infringed upon the divine prerogative.

But what does Jesus mean in v. 62? What is he describing? This passage has been a problem for many to interpret, for in what sense can it be said that the high priest and those with him would “see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven”?

To answer this we first need to understand what the reference to the “clouds of heaven” means. The “clouds of heaven” was a phrase often used when referring to the appearance or intervention of Yahweh on behalf of his people or in judgment. For example,

- the ‘pillar of cloud’ in the wilderness wanderings (e.g. Exod. 13:21-22; 14:19-20,24; 33:9; Ps. 78:14; 99:7);
- the cloud in which Yahweh descended or hovered over the tabernacle (Exod. 34:5; 40:34-38; Num. 9:15-22; Deut. 31:15);
- the cloud associated with the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11; Ezek. 10:3);
- the cloud in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek. 1:4,28);
- the clouds associated with eschatological theophanies (Isa. 4:5; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:2; Nahum 1:3; Zeph. 1:15).

See also Isa. 19:1; 2 Sam. 22:12; Job 22:14; Ps. 68:34; 104:3; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Rev. 1:7. It’s important to remember that “coming with/on the clouds of heaven” was not an ancient form of space travel but a powerfully symbolic way of referring to divine intervention, judgment, or providential preservation of his people.

But what is meant by his “**coming**”? Is Jesus talking about his “coming” from heaven to earth at the end of history, what we know to be his Parousia or Second Coming? No.

Note: I've said repeatedly that Mark's gospel is concerned ultimately with answering one question: Who is Jesus? He's providing an answer once again here in this text.

Christians today are so conditioned to assume that the "coming" of the Son of Man "on the clouds of heaven" is his return at the close of history that it is hard to gain a hearing for any alternative position. But we must aim to read the text not in terms of our traditions or preferences but from the perspective of Jesus and in the light of the Old Testament Scriptures from which he draws his language.

Just as we saw in Mark 13, so too here in 14:62 the "coming" of the Son of Man is an allusion to **Daniel 7:13-14** which speaks *not of a "coming to earth" from heaven but of a "coming to God" in heaven to receive vindication and authority*. This "coming" refers to an event whereby the authority and dominion of Jesus are vindicated over the Jewish establishment which has rejected him.

"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. 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" (Daniel 7:13-14).

This is a vision not about a descent from heaven to earth; not about the second coming of the Son of Man at the close of history, but rather **a vision of the Son of Man in heaven coming to the Ancient of Days, God the Father, to receive his kingdom**. A new kingdom, a new and everlasting dominion is being established to replace the failed regimes of previous empires.

Again, Mark 14:62 is not about the Second Coming of Christ at the end of history but about his enthronement as King and Lord in the very middle of history. He is describing not a 21st century event but a 1st century event!

Standing in the presence of the high priest and members of the Sanhedrin, Jesus declares, "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." These to whom Jesus spoke are obviously not now alive. Jesus must be referring to an event in their first-century life spans. Jesus is saying that Caiaphas and others alive at that time will witness his vindication as the one True Prophet; they will see events that testify that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

"Jesus is using Daniel 7:13 as a prediction of that authority which he exercised when in AD 70 the Jewish nation and its leaders, who had condemned him, were overthrown, and Jesus was vindicated as the recipient of all power from the Ancient of Days. . . . Jesus, exalted after his death and resurrection to receive his everlasting dominion, will display it within the generation . . . by an act of judgment on the nation and capital of the authorities who presumed to judge him. Then they will see . . . for themselves that their time of power is finished, and it is to him that God has given all power in heaven and earth" (R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 236).

In other words, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and God's judgment on Israel in 70 a.d. is all about Jesus! It's about who he is, how he reigns as sovereign; it's about the truth of who he claimed to be and the extent and duration of his dominion over all creation.

In other words, Jesus was telling those present that they would witness the sign of Jesus' enthronement in heaven: namely, Jerusalem's destruction on earth. Thus ***the "sign" of the Son of Man being enthroned and vindicated in "heaven" is the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple on "earth"***.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, in the book of Revelation, and elsewhere Jesus is explicitly said to "descend from heaven" at the end of human history. But nothing in Mark 14:62 speaks of Jesus coming "down". It rather speaks of something that is happening in heaven, as the Son of God, the Son of Man, Jesus, comes "to" God the Father, not "down to" the earth.

They will "see" him in the sense that they will "understand", i.e., spiritually *perceive* that he is the vindicated and enthroned King. For "seeing" as a reference to "understanding", see John 12:40 (Isa. 6:10); Acts 26:18; cf.

1 Kings 8:29,52; 2 Kings 2:16; 6:20; 19:16; Isa. 35:5; 42:7,16; see also Luke 24:31; also note Mark 1:44; Luke 17:22; John 3:3,36; Rom. 15:21.

What that generation will “see” is the universal authority and dominion of King Jesus being vindicated and made known in the judgment of God on Israel. The covenant nation that rejected Jesus as King is now experiencing the consequences of his enthronement and vindication at the right hand of the Father.

The reaction of Caiaphas and the rest of the Sanhedrin is quite dramatic (vv. 63-64). The symbolic act of tearing one’s garments was an expression of either sadness or rage, either of sorrow or indignation. Here it is an act of remarkable **hypocrisy**! Caiaphas is putting on some kind of show! Acting as if he is overwhelmed with grief, he is secretly rejoicing that he now has the proof necessary to obtain a conviction.

Since the death penalty could only be applied by the imperial authority of Rome, this kangaroo court ends with the decision to hand Jesus over to Pilate to secure his conviction.

An Unspeakably Heinous Act

Mark 14:65 is difficult to read, and even more difficult to understand.

That Jesus was blindfolded, hit, and asked to identify his attacker was based on a Jewish test by which the Messiah was to be revealed (see Is. 11:2-4). Since it was believed that Messiah will use neither eyes nor ears, he must judge by the sense of smell. Thus this treatment of Jesus is but another taunt based on his claim to be the Messiah: "If you are truly who you claim to be, you should be able to identify your attacker without seeing him!"

Spitting on someone and the inflicting of blows were conventional gestures of rejection and humiliation (cf. Job 30:10; Num. 12:14; Dt. 25:9; Isa. 50:6). Throughout Jewish history, people would go to Absalom’s tomb in the Kedron valley outside Jerusalem and repeatedly spit on it as an expression of their disdain for Absalom’s treatment and betrayal of his father King David.

“Be astonished, O heavens, and be horribly afraid. His face is the light of the universe, his person is the glory of heaven, and they ‘began to spit on him!’ Alas, my God, that man should be so base!” (Charles Spurgeon, 3:253).

One almost hesitates to comment at all on such an inconceivable and despicable act as spitting in the face of the Son of Man. William Hendriksen explains:

"The face which these underlings -- with the wholehearted permission and co-operation of their utterly selfish, sadistic, and envious superiors -- now covered with their spittle was the one that had smiled upon large throngs of people whom he instructed to love even their enemies. It was the face which used to break into a smile at the approach of a child. It had been in the habit of beaming graciously upon publicans who became penitents. It could glow with righteous indignation when the Father's house was being desecrated, or when the widow's rights were violated, her needs ignored. In days gone by, it had become overspread with gladness when something good could be said about a friend. Above all, it was the face that mirrored the heart of the heavenly Father in all his holiness, displeasure with sin, and -- last but not least -- love and tenderness. It was into **this** face that these men were spitting! Surely, unless by the miracle of God's grace they should still repent, they would, on this day of the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy (26:64) of him who was now a prisoner, be saying to the mountains and to the rocks, "*Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb*" (Rev. 6:16).

Conclusion:

He who is the eternal and infinitely righteous Judge of all mankind is himself brought before the transient and corrupt judgment of men.

“And they all **condemned** him as deserving death” (v. 64).

He who is the very embodiment of Truth itself, the one by whom alone truth is known to be true, is here declared to be a liar.

“For many bore **false witness** against him” (v. 56).

He whose creative design was for men to use their God-given hands in the service of purity and love is now the object and target of their brutal fists and angry blows.

“And some began . . . to **strike** him. . . . And the guards received him with **blows**” (v. 65).

He who grants breath and speech to all men is now himself the focus of their slander and mockery.

“**Prophecy!**” (v. 65).

He who graciously gives saliva to our mouths must now experience the humiliation of having it spit back in his face in derision and shame.

“And some began to **spit** on him” (v. 65).

He whose knowledge and discernment are perfect and infinite is here taunted and challenged in a child’s game to identify his assailants.

“And some began . . . to **cover his face** . . . saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’” (v. 65).

Jesus once said, “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). We, then, should not expect any better treatment from the world than our Lord received.

You must make a choice. There is no third way. There is no other alternative. There is no middle ground. Either you believe him and trust him and embrace him as Lord and Savior, or you join with those who mistreat him and mock him, spit in his face, and eventually crucify him.

Finally, why would Jesus submit to this indignity? Why would he allow himself to be so horribly slandered and mistreated and mocked by hell-deserving sinners? The answer is simple: he was motivated by his love for the glory of his Father and by his love for you and me!