

"Many Bore False Witness"

We call it perjury. In our court system in America it is a criminal offense to make false statements under oath. For that matter, I don't know of a single court in all times and in all places where that is legal. Of course, that doesn't mean it never happens. If it never happened, there probably wouldn't need to be a law against it. No, the reality is that it does happen. Sometimes it's just an isolated incident. One person perjures and gets away with the lie. Sometimes it's more corrupt than that. Sometimes the attorneys and witnesses will be in collusion together to make a false claim. Even worse, is that sometimes the judges themselves can be involved in this injustice.

In our passage for today we have an ecclesiastical court gone bad. Here a court of the church, abuses its power. Of course this probably doesn't surprise most of us. It's common knowledge to know that the church has abused its power over the years. We know the church courts can be corrupt. Just think of things like the Spanish Inquisition, and we know that humans with too much power in the name of God can do some terrible things.

And yet what we have here is the worst of them all. Here we see a church court falsely condemn the Messiah to his death. The council referred to in verse 55 of this passage is the Sanhedrin. That's the actual word in Greek. That refers to the highest ruling body of the Jews. The Jewish Sanhedrin as testified to in extra-biblical sources was made up of the chief priests, scribes, and elders, and that's who we see present in verse 53. And so this was the highest court of the Jewish people, and because of their close relationship of the church and state, it was also essentially a court of the church.

And here this court of the church is supporting perjury. This was just as wrong then as it was today. More so even. Not only did the extra-biblical Jewish laws speak against false testimony, the Torah clearly spoke against it - the first five books of the Bible, which would have been their primary book of law. And not only that, but the sin of false testimony is of course one of the Ten Commandments. Engraved in stone. It's the ninth commandment. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." We often like to think about the ninth commandment as a command not to lie. Certainly that's included in the scope of this commandment. But most specifically, the ninth commandment is about legal testimony. It's an explicit violation of the ninth command to give false witness against your neighbor.

This ecclesiastical court was in contempt of its own most fundamental God-given laws. And yet this is a very fitting setting to find Jesus in, isn't it? Just before Jesus would go to the cross to bear the sins of man, here he has to patiently bear the sins of man in this courtroom. He silently witnessed all the false witness against him. He took it in, permitting himself this injustice against him, because he came to do away with injustice. This injustice would lead to the cross. On the cross, he'd die to atone for sins. He'd die to pay the penalty for all the injustices his chosen people have done against him. He die to make legal satisfaction - he'd satisfy the judgment that was due upon us, by paying for our sins in our place. That's love, isn't it?

And so let's look further at this ecclesiastical court gone bad. This court case had one injustice after another. Let's start with the judges. They were corrupt

from the start. Look at verse 55. They are described as seeking out testimony against Jesus. Here they have Jesus arrested, and they are looking to find the witnesses who can bring a specific verdict - death. You know, that's the wrong order isn't it for a judge? Usually you get certain accusations against someone. If they are serious enough and seem substantiated enough, then you arrest the person. Then you try them and as judges you carefully listen to all the facts first before making up your mind. Finally you give your verdict. It's this little something we call today as "innocent until proven guilty." The same was supposed to be the case for the Jewish leaders too. They were supposed to judge with wisdom the testimony that was brought to them.

But they do the exact opposite here. They seek out testimony in order to engineer a result - the death penalty. They want Jesus dead, and so they go looking for whatever testimony they can find. But what's the result? Verse 55. They found none. But it's actually worse than that. Verse 56 goes on to explain. It's not that they didn't find anyone willing to testify. It's that they brought in witnesses that falsely testified. The testimony didn't agree. The stories didn't match up. The evidence couldn't be accepted. But they were the ones who dug up these witnesses! They were bringing the false witnesses into the court, to try to engineer a result, instead of being unbiased judges and actually hearing the case. Remember the passage we read earlier in the service. Deuteronomy 19 said that this was the very job of the chief priests and judges. They were to protect against false testimony. They were to punish people who gave false testimony. But the picture in Mark 14 is that they were the ones engineering this false testimony.

And so this ecclesiastical court gone bad had corrupt judges. But it also had false witnesses, who gave false testimony. They too were liable before God for their actions. Verse 56 lists the false testimony in general. But then in verse 57 there is a specific charge raised up against him. This is a specific piece of false testimony that is given. Verse 58, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'" And yet in verse 59, it says that even then their testimony didn't agree. If you look at Matthew's account of this, you'll notice a similar but slightly different claim. It's probable that these two gospels each record one of the different testimonies. Essentially they're trying to charge him with a threat to destroy the temple. And yet interestingly, we know that Jesus said something similar to this according to John 2:19. But he said there, "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up." John tells us he was actually speaking about his body. He was spiritually referring to his body as the true temple, the true place where God dwelt on earth. That's the irony here. The false witnesses accuse Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple. Jesus was actually suggesting that they would destroy the temple, namely, himself. Ironically, their false testimony is trying to do just that, to destroy the temple. They would destroy the temple, not Jesus. But certainly Jesus would raise up the temple in three days. And so the witnesses also show how this is a court gone bad.

So there are corrupt judges and false witnesses in this court. But there is also a corrupt high priest to lead all these. The high priest was supposed to be the president or moderator of this body. And in verse 60 he takes the lead. After their first attempt to secure false witness doesn't work, he steps up to try to salvage the case. Remember, they are hoping to secure a clear case against him to give a guilty verdict deserving of death. And so after the false witness comes up short, he turns to interrogate Jesus himself. He turns to Jesus at first trying to get him to answer something to the false testimony, but Jesus is silent. But then he brings his central question. Maybe he thought this was his hidden ace. He asks in verse 61, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed"? Finally Jesus speaks and affirms that he is. Finally, some valid testimony. Finally, something

truthful has been said. And yet the high priest shows his corruption by how he responds.

Think about this, this is an amazing claim by Jesus. But does the high priest give it a valid hearing? When Paul was on trial by the Roman governor Felix, and Paul declared the coming judgment of Christ, it says that Felix became afraid and stopped the trial (Acts 24:25). Certainly such a bold pronouncement by Jesus here should have sparked a similar response by the high priest. Surely such a claim had to be considered. But that's not what the high priest did. He instantly assumed it was false. You might understand how that could be the case. Surely the claim by Jesus seemed outrageous. Surely the high priest thought it impossible. And yet the high priest was wrong. Jesus was the Christ, whether the high priest thought so or not. This should be a lesson to all the critics and unbelievers today, that just because something doesn't sound right to you at first glance, doesn't mean your assessment is right. The high priest's rash assessment was wrong. Many people's assessment of Jesus today can be just as rash and just as wrong.

The high priest instead makes quite a show. He tears his clothes before everyone and boldly declares that Jesus has committed blasphemy. He in turn puts the question to all the judges - "What do you think." The high priest basically is saying we don't need any witnesses, because everyone here is a witness to the blasphemy he just committed. Of course, it incorrectly assumes that Jesus' words were blasphemy. And I can't help but think that the high priest's showy response might have been to influence the other judges; to pressure them inappropriately into declaring a guilty verdict. The high priest seems to decide the case for them and then ask them to concur.

And that's of course what happens. This case gone bad not only has corrupt judges and false witnesses headed up by a corrupt high priest, but it results in a troubling verdict. Verse 64 is their verdict. Guilty as charged. Jesus is guilty of blasphemy and deserving death. Their wording appears to be the legalese of the day to describe a verdict against him.

Well besides this being an incorrect verdict, which it obviously was; Jesus wasn't committing blasphemy since he really was the Messiah, it's just plain troubling. Think about this. If they really felt convinced that Jesus was a blasphemer, how come they didn't act out the punishment? They said this deserved death. If true, then they were right. Under the Jewish law in the Torah, blasphemy was punishable by stoning the person to death. Leviticus 24:15 says, "Then you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. And whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name of the Lord, he shall be put to death.'" That was the punishment, but they didn't execute it. Instead we'll see that they'll send Jesus off to the Roman Prefect Pilate the next day. They'll have Pilate try him essentially under the political charge of treason - that he claimed to be King of the Jews, by virtue of the fact that he claimed to be the Messiah. They don't execute the God commanded sentence of stoning that the Jewish people were supposed to do in their nation. They instead sent him off to the Romans to hopefully have them crucify him for treason.

Well you might say, that they did this because they had to. The Jewish Sanhedrin didn't have the right to commit capital punishment, because the Romans took away that authority. Well that's true. But I'd submit to you that it's a curious conscience that's willing to say God demands that he's put to death, but then hand him over to the pagans with a different charge, to get them to kill him for a different reason than what God had supposedly commanded you to do. That sounds

more like politics than religion. When Peter and John are later brought before the Sanhedrin in the book of Acts, they were charged by the council to not teach in the name of Jesus. How did they respond? They said that they must obey God not man. Peter and John, and others, disobeyed man-made laws if they went against God's law. They stood up for what they believed. How come the Sanhedrin didn't do the same thing here? If they really felt God's Word demanded that Jesus be put to death by stoning, how come they didn't pick up the stones? Think I'm being too harsh? Well, the Roman law didn't stop the council later in Acts 7 from stoning Stephen to death for the same charge of blasphemy.

I think instead this just reveals the sinfulness of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. They had been jealous of Jesus from the start of his ministry. They had been looking to kill him since early on. Now that they had him in their grips they'd do anything to make that happen. But if their own envy and lust for power drove them to kill Jesus, they weren't going to kill Jesus in a way that could lose that power. It seems they were motivated all along to preserve their power, not really out of religious convictions. If they had been, you'd expect them be willing to stand up for their religious convictions, even if it meant they might lose their power. Even if they were persecuted by the Romans for their actions. But instead this who trial shows that their religious convictions were pretty loose. They were willing to break the Ten Commandments by bringing false witnesses. They were looking to find any way to condemn Jesus, even before hearing the trial. Then when they found supposed religious grounds for his death, they turn him over to the Romans with a claim at civil grounds for his death. None of this sounds like religious conviction. It sounds like political expediency at any cost. Even if it meant that this trial of Jesus would be a sham. Need further proof? Just look at the final actions in verse 65. Some of them start mocking and beating Jesus along with the officers. Spitting on someone was supposed to be a sign of their shame. But it's actually the people spitting on Jesus that should be ashamed. They had falsely condemned the Christ to death and now mocked him and beat him.

What do we do when the courts go awry? Maybe we protest. Maybe we riot. Maybe we write letters and stand up for justice. If it's a church court, nowadays we would just leave the church. But what did Jesus do?

Well, for the most part he was silent. But he did break his silence once in this passage. He gave the only valid testimony in this trial, and yet it was rejected. And he didn't just give his own words, he appealed to the Word of God, with his answer combining both Psalm 110 and Daniel 7. When asked if he was the Christ, Jesus said in verse 62, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." What's interesting is that these two passages quoted by Jesus, Psalm 110 and Daniel 7, both have the final judgment in view. Psalm 110 is God speaking to the Messiah to sit at his right hand until all his enemies are put under his feet. And Daniel 7 speaks about the Messiah coming back at the end of history to usher in the final judgment. So think about the significance of Jesus' words here. Here you have this sham of a trial going on. There is injustice and false testimony through this court case. And yet the only true testimony comes from Jesus where he not only acknowledges that he is the Messiah, but warns them of a real judgment that is coming. There will be a final judgment of mankind, where all men will have to give account. But as Daniel 7 goes on to say, "But the court will sit in judgment." There is coming a day of final judgment. Ultimately Jesus, the Messiah, will be the judge of that final court. The injustice of this tragedy of a trial will one day be replaced with the final judgment against the wicked when Christ returns in glory. On that great day of judgment, that court will not be full of contempt. God's righteous judgment will go forth.

And yet at this mockery of a trial, Jesus was silent. He broke his silence only for these few words of testimony. Otherwise he was quiet. Why? Well, the prophet Isaiah foretold this day. Isaiah 53:7 says speaking of Jesus, "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not His mouth.

You see, I think the silence is a mark of resolve. Of course, what answer could be given to false testimony? What defense could be made when the court was determined to find you guilty regardless? What could be said of your righteousness when the court obviously had little regard for God's law itself? But I think Jesus kept silent because this case represented what he came to do. He had come to atone for the sins of God's people. It was fitting that he would not go out swinging, but that he'd go out patiently bearing sinful man. Isn't that what he had just said in the Garden before he was arrested? Chapter 14, verse 41. He had said, "The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners." Jesus allowed himself to be delivered over to sinners. He was betrayed by a sinner. He was deserted by sinners. He was tried and convicted by sinners. And the sinners who did this showed that they were sinners all the way to the last moment. Jesus would not go out swinging. He'd go out patiently bearing with the sorts of people he had come to save. He'd go out in such a way that highlighted that man was sinful and needed a savior. He'd go out in such a way that leaves men without excuse, but needing a savior.

Jesus is that savior. And we are the sinners. Each of us. Each of us have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. But the good news is that we turn to Jesus in faith, then we have forgiveness and eternal life. He has taken on our sin. He has taken on our iniquity. If you have never come to him in faith and repentance, I urge you to do so today. Turn from the false testimony that the world has said about Jesus. And believe the testimony from Jesus himself and from the Holy Scriptures. Jesus is the Christ. Believe and be saved.

Brothers and sisters, back then people gave false witness against Jesus. Today, people continue to give false witness against Christ. But this passage for today does not only remind us of all the false witness against Jesus. It also calls us to give the right witness to Christ.

You see, don't miss little verse 54. There was someone else nearby who could have offered true witness to Jesus. Peter. Verse 54 tells us that Peter had followed behind at a distance. Evidently, after initially fleeing when Jesus was arrested, he had regained some courage and now followed behind. He had come right up to the courtyard of the high priest. And now what was he doing? He was warming himself by the fire sitting with the servants. That's nice Peter. Two important words to mention here. The word for "fire" here is actually the literal word for "light," which was one way you could refer to a fire. Peter was warming himself by the light, instead of standing beside the one true light who was being falsely accused. Second, the word for "servants" here is actually the exact same word translated as officers in verse 65. That's right. Peter is sitting here warming himself with the same people who will soon mock and beat Jesus.

Realize that verse 54 is a bit out of place. It should probably appear at the end of our passage, after verse 65. That's when the account of the trial ends and the account of Peter's denial begins. That's our passage for next week. We'll look at Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus in verses 66-72. But do you see why Mark puts verse 54 where he does? Do you see why Mark interrupts telling us about the trial to tell us that Peter was sitting here warming himself? It's to connect this

passage with the next. These are concurrent events. While Jesus is being put through this joke of a trial, Peter is not only warming himself, he is also denying Jesus. When Jesus could have used *someone* to give some truthful testimony about him, Peter is going around denying that he know him and sitting with the people who would shortly beat and mock him.

All the people who got up and gave false witness against Jesus. And Peter could have been a true witness. Peter had seen all the evidences that said that Jesus' claim was true. He was an eye witness to the miracles, and the exorcisms, and had all the parables explained to him. Peter had witnessed Jesus glorified at the transfiguration when he heard God speak from heaven. Peter denied Jesus three times, while he should have been witnessing of him to the court.

Jesus asked Peter back in chapter 8, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter knew the answer. Peter knew that Jesus was the Christ. That's essentially the same question the high priest asks Jesus. Are you the Christ? But they didn't believe Jesus' testimony. You see that *is* the question, isn't it? And we know the answer, don't we? The world may deny it. But will you? I'm not talking about here on Sundays. I'm talking about out there, when you are in the world? Will you confess that Jesus is the Christ to an unbelieving world? To a world that's already made up it mind to fill itself with supposedly learned people to tell them false testimony about Jesus?

This passage doesn't just tell us about false witnesses. It calls us to be witnesses for Christ. Not to be like Peter, standing by from a distance, with the very people who reject Christ, just trying to blend in. No, we must boldly stand up for Christ, even if it's to our harm. Even if it means we find ourselves in a court in legal trouble.

And may that encourage us. I already mentioned how later in Acts we'll see Peter and John tell the Sanhedrin off. They'll politely tell them, "No, I'm sorry, but we can't stop proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ." God has called us to stand up as witnesses to this truth, and we will do that no matter what any man tells us. If Jesus could transform Peter from this scared witness into a bold martyr of the faith, then he can do the same with us. Let us each pray for that boldness. That we'd tell the world that Jesus is the Christ. That he'd take away the fear of man and the temptation to fall behind in the shadows. And instead to lead the way in testifying to the world of the salvation that is in Jesus. Amen.

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