

Midweek Lent 4
Hands of Hypocrisy (Caiaphas)
Sermon Text: Mark 14:55-65

Every good story needs a bad guy, and in the inspired true story that is the passion of Jesus, there are plenty of villains to choose from. We immediately think of Judas, the disciple of Jesus who was willing to betray his Lord for a few pieces of silver. We remember Peter, the proud disciple of Jesus who repeatedly denied that he even knew Jesus. We picture the Roman governor Pontius Pilate seated on the Stone Pavement, knowingly sentencing an innocent man to die.

There is no question that these men did some very bad things, but were they themselves entirely bad? When Jesus was arrested, Judas was seized with remorse and refused to keep the blood money he had been bribed with. After the rooster crowed in the darkness, Peter realized his sin and sobbed uncontrollably. And Pilate at least tried, didn't he? He did what he could to spare Jesus' life until the Jewish leaders backed him into a corner.

I am not trying to minimize what these men did. Their actions had serious consequences. But the Bible doesn't describe them as evil incarnate either. Yes, they sinned. Yes, they succumbed to Satan's temptations, but in all three cases we see the evidence of an inner struggle.

Unlike Caiaphas. When Caiaphas puts on the black hat, it is a perfect fit. Read everything written about Caiaphas in the gospels and you will find no redeeming qualities. He is cold, calculating, and completely ruthless. He will not let anyone or anything stand in his way, not even the Son of God. Which is interesting because, as the man who held the highest spiritual office in Israel, Caiaphas was supposed to represent God.

There is a word for pretending to be something you are not. There is a word that describes the false assumption of an appearance of virtue. There is one word that comes to mind when we think of Caiaphas: hypocrite. Today we will examine the hypocrisy of Caiaphas. Not so that we can shake our heads at him. Not so that we can congratulate ourselves for not being like him. Taking a closer look at this account will also force us to take a closer look at ourselves, to examine our own hearts, to see if we are also guilty of having . . .

Hands of Hypocrisy

Mark provides us with detailed information about the interaction between Jesus and Caiaphas, even though he never mentions the high priest by name. Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin in the middle of the night, which was not only highly unusual, it was illegal. The intended goal of this gathering was not to get to the truth. It was to manufacture evidence, any kind of evidence—even false evidence—that would lead to a quick conviction.

There was a problem though. The Sanhedrin couldn't come up with any dirt on Jesus because Jesus was clean. Perfect, actually. And how do you pin a capital crime on someone who has never done anything wrong? By trying to use his own words against him. Some stood up and testified that they heard Jesus make the claim, **"I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands"** (v. 58). Jesus did say something like that at the beginning of his ministry (Jn 2:19), but he was talking about his body, not the actual temple. It didn't matter though. The false witnesses weren't telling the truth, so Jesus couldn't set the record straight.

And in the middle of this mess, presiding over this mockery of justice was Caiaphas. Was he more upset with Jesus or with his peers for botching this golden opportunity to get rid of Jesus? I wouldn't be surprised if the high priest was thinking to himself, "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," when he stood up and addressed Jesus directly, **"Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"** (v. 60).

Jesus gave no answer, so the interrogation continued. Except with his next question, Caiaphas raised the stakes. He put Jesus under oath (Mt 26:63) and demanded, **"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"** (v. 61). It was a simple yes or no question but also devilishly clever. Saying nothing would be a tacit denial. Saying no would be an actual denial, but answering in the affirmative would be a game changer, because it would give Caiaphas the evidence he needed.

Jesus understood the question and all of its implications. Jesus could anticipate what would happen to him if he gave an honest answer, and yet he declared, **"I am. . . . And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven"** (v. 62). Now was not the time for silence. It was time to testify to the truth. It was time to suffer at the hands of these hateful men. It was time to carry to completion God's plan of salvation.

Caiaphas must have been ecstatic when Jesus uttered those words, but he didn't show it. Instead, this morally bankrupt man made a huge display of moral outrage when he grabbed his collar with his hands and tore his clothes and asked the Sanhedrin, **"Why do we need any more witnesses? . . . You have heard the blasphemy"** (v. 63,64). Blasphemy. Claiming to be the Messiah, the Son of God. That was what (supposedly) shocked Caiaphas so much that he ripped his robes. That was the charge that was going to stick. That was all the Sanhedrin needed to be rid of Jesus once and for all.

And then, for just a moment, the hypocrites took off their masks. The men who made up the Sanhedrin, usually so sanctimonious, almost always practiced and polished, turned into an out-of-control mob. **"They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, 'Prophecy!'"** (vv. 64,65).

Spitting in the face of another human being. Attacking a man who couldn't defend himself, whose blindfold kept him from seeing where the next blow was coming from. The

images are disturbing, so disturbing that I don't want to picture them. But I do want to know why. Why were they so filled with rage? Why did they want Jesus dead? Why was Caiaphas willing to sell his soul to achieve this goal?

It was partly political. You have probably heard something like this in a Lenten sermon before: The Jewish leaders were afraid that the masses would forsake them to follow Jesus, and they would lose their authority and any semblance of autonomy. There is some truth to that. There is even a conversation of the Sanhedrin recorded in John chapter 11 where Caiaphas concludes that Jesus must die so that the nation might live.

But there was another reason Caiaphas hated Jesus. There was another reason Caiaphas would stop at nothing to destroy Jesus, and his primary motivation wasn't political. It was spiritual. The high priest represented a way of life, a time-honored religious system in which God rewarded people for being good. Some people, especially the religious leaders, were convinced that they were doing enough good to get into heaven on their own.

And then Jesus turned their comfortable world upside down. Instead of patting them on the back, he called them to repent. He called them whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers, children of the devil. He called them out for their hypocrisy, not to embarrass them, but because he cared about them, because he wanted them to see the error of their ways, because he wanted them to see that he was the only way to heaven. Even when Jesus made his confession before Caiaphas, when Jesus prophesied that the high priest would see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, when their roles would be reversed and the judge would be judged, with those words of warning Jesus was calling Caiaphas to repent.

By rejecting that invitation, Caiaphas demonstrates for us the inherent danger of hypocrisy. The hypocrite cares only about what can be seen on the surface. The hypocrite wants to project a shiny image on the outside to keep other people from seeing what's on the inside. The hypocrite wants to believe that he doesn't need to repent of his sins because he has no sin.

But God's Word wants us to believe something different. God wants you and me to ponder the personal implications of this spiritual truth: **"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"** (1 Jn 1:8). So are you vulnerable to self-deception? Are you guilty of hypocrisy? Have you ever thought to yourself, "I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not as bad as . . ."? Have you ever been critical of another Christian for committing a sin you struggle with yourself?

You have probably heard the criticism that the church is full of hypocrites, but have you ever considered that perhaps the best way to respond to that charge is by saying, "You're right"? We work so hard to project a positive image. We want other people to see us a certain way, but there are certain sins we want no one to see. And even if we are able to hide from view some of our deepest and darkest secrets, we can't keep anything from God.

Every person, every Christian, is guilty of hypocrisy. So what separates us from Caiaphas? What—or who—prevents us from going down the same path as Caiaphas? Jesus! Jesus calls us to repent, not to embarrass us, but because he loves us. Jesus calls us to stop pretending that we have no sin, to remove the mask and look to him to remove the guilt of our sin. When we come clean and confess, he is faithful and just and will forgive us and purify us from all unrighteousness. And since Jesus makes us righteous, holy, and blameless in the eyes of God, how we look in the eyes of other people ceases to be so important. In fact, the hope we have in Jesus makes it totally irrelevant.

A hypocritical high priest may have presided over that sham of a trial, but our Great High Priest was always in control. Jesus knew that he would be mistreated. He had predicted it. Jesus could see that the questions Caiaphas asked were an obvious attempt to trap him, but he still answered them—because he wasn't concerned about saving his life. He was on a rescue mission to save souls from eternal death. And so he spoke the truth. Jesus testified to the truth—because he is the Truth—and the Truth sets us free. Amen.