

# Law and Disorder

Mark 14:53-65

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In the criminal justice system the people are represented by two separate, but equally important groups: the police, who investigate crime; and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories.

You may be familiar with those lines as the opening lines of every episode of a TV show called Law and Order. Law and Order is one of the longest running and most popular shows on television. Each episode is split into two parts. The first part shows the police investigating a crime, and the second part shows the district attorneys prosecuting those accused of committing them. I suspect that part of what makes Law and Order such an engaging show to many people is the satisfaction that comes from watching justice be served. Both the police and the district attorneys are expected to operate with dignity and honor, even when the situation makes that difficult.

We like to see justice served and the justice system catch and punish the bad guys. Unfortunately, in our text today, the opposite happens. The bad guys are the people who are prosecuting (or more correctly, persecuting) the accused. This morning, we are going to look at the account of Jesus' trial before the Jewish religious leaders, and we will see that what happened was not even remotely just.

## Peter

Last week we saw Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane after being betrayed by Judas. Peter, in his haste, had attacked one of the guards, but Jesus stopped him. It seems that most of the disciples fled as Jesus was arrested, fearful that they might be next on the chopping block. Mark, however, tells us that Peter did not.

<sup>53</sup> They took Jesus to the high priest's home where the leading priests, the elders, and the teachers of religious law had gathered. <sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Peter followed him at a distance and went right into the high priest's courtyard. There he sat with the guards, warming himself by the fire. (Mark 14:53-54, NLT)

Jesus was taken to the home of the high priest, Caiaphas, where a large group of religious leaders had gathered. Mark tells us that rather than fleeing for his life, Peter sneaked up to the house and waited with the guards around a fire.

John's gospel says that another, unnamed person also accompanied Peter to the house. Many people think John's choice not to include a name means that it was John himself who had accompanied Peter to the courtyard.

Mark seems to be setting the stage for the passage we will look at next week, where Peter denies even knowing Jesus. We'll unpack that more next week, but for now, I want you to notice that Peter didn't run away like the other disciples. He followed behind Jesus and went to the courtyard. Despite Peter's failures, he was committed to Jesus.

## The Trial

While Peter was outside, there was a trial taking place inside. The religious leaders were gathered at the home of the current high priest, Caiaphas to hold the trial. The other gospels tell us that before going to Caiaphas, they took Jesus to the home of Annas, the previous high priest. According to Jewish law, a high priest was supposed to serve for life, but the Romans had begun to install and remove high priests as they saw fit. Annas had apparently angered the Romans and was removed from his position even though he was still living. It is likely that despite being deposed by Rome, Annas still held significant influence among the religious leaders (and as Caiaphas' father-in-law, may have still been pulling the strings), which is why they went to him first.

Caiaphas had been appointed in place of Annas and had served as high priest for quite some time. This would seem to indicate that Caiaphas was good at playing the political game, managing to serve as high priest while also keeping himself in the good graces of the Romans. Here, at Caiaphas' house, they held a trial for Jesus.

<sup>55</sup> Inside, the leading priests and the entire high council were trying to find evidence against Jesus, so they could put him to death. But they couldn't find any. <sup>56</sup> Many false witnesses spoke against him, but they contradicted each other. <sup>57</sup> Finally, some men stood up and gave this false testimony: <sup>58</sup> "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another, made without human hands.' " <sup>59</sup> But even then they didn't get their stories straight! (Mark 14:55-59, NLT)

Jewish law said a great deal about how trials were supposed to be carried out, as God was concerned with ensuring justice was served for all people. Almost everything about this trial violated the Jews' own laws about how such trials should be conducted. Ironically, as they hid behind the notion of ensuring justice, they were carrying out a tremendous injustice. The worst part is they knew exactly what they were doing! They weren't concerned about what was right, they were concerned about getting what they wanted. There were many issues with this so-called trial of Jesus.

The first issue with this trial was that they did not meet with the entire Sanhedrin, and instead stacked the deck with only those who agreed with them. Trials were supposed to be carried out before the entire Sanhedrin, which was a group of seventy-one priests, elders, and teachers of religious law. This would have included many prominent members of both the Pharisees and Sadducees. These would have been the most educated, most respected, and (theoretically) most devout members of the Jewish faith. These men would have devoted their lives to studying God's Word, so they would have known the rules about trials, and they were very familiar with the prophecies about the Messiah. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were probably not part of the group because we are told later that they did not approve of the actions of the Jewish leaders.

The second issue was the location of their meeting. The Sanhedrin was supposed to meet at a place called the Hall of Hewn Stone, which was within the temple complex. Meeting at the home of the high priest was not permitted.

The third issue was that they were meeting at night. The Jewish laws at this time were very clear that the Sanhedrin was not supposed to meet at night or during the great feasts (like Passover).

We know they convened again at dawn, and most likely saw this as a way of fulfilling the letter of the law while still being able to circumvent it. By meeting first thing in the morning, they could say they held their trial in accordance with the law, even though basically everything had been done in secrecy under cover of night.

The trials were supposed to work by calling witnesses who would give testimony about the alleged crime. Each witness would testify before the council by himself. A person could not be convicted unless there were two or three witnesses whose accounts agreed that showed the accused was guilty of the crime.

Apparently, these Jewish leaders had attempted to round up several witnesses who would testify that Jesus had committed a crime. Mark tells us these were false witnesses, possibly even hired by the leaders to convict Jesus. This plan backfired, however, as when the false witnesses were questioned separately, it was painfully obvious that their stories did not agree.

Finally, they found witnesses who claimed that Jesus had declared He would destroy the temple. Throughout the Roman world, destroying a temple was considered an act of insurrection and was punishable by death, so if they could convict Jesus of this, they would have what they needed. Jesus had indeed said something *similar* to what these false witnesses claimed. Jesus said that if they (not He) destroyed this temple (referring not to the building, but His body), then He would cause it to rise again three days later. These false witnesses misrepresented what He had said, and ironically contributed to Jesus fulfilling this exact prophecy!

As we see this, we are reminded that throughout these proceedings, God was in control. God did not cause these men to act deceitfully. He did not make them lie about Jesus or make them try to kill Him. Rather, God allowed these sinful men to act on their sinful desires. But God remained in control. We know this because all these actions fulfilled prophecies made about the Messiah hundreds of years earlier! These men were carrying out a tremendous injustice, while at the same time fulfilling God's plan! They imagined themselves as crusaders for justice and defenders of the faith. They imagined that they were the ones staying true to God's Word. All the while, they were violating God's laws at every turn and they missed the Messiah completely. And yet, God was using their sinful, evil actions to accomplish His good purposes. It's paradoxical and hurts our brains, but it is a reminder that no matter what happens, God remains in control. God is not surprised by the evil actions of evil men, and His plans are not thwarted by them either. We see this clearly in Jesus' trial, and it should remind us that He does the same in our lives as well.

## The Verdict

The religious leaders had to be getting frustrated by this point. Their goal had been to get rid of Jesus and now they finally had Him in custody. Despite all their tricks they had been unable to get witnesses who could convincingly demonstrate that Jesus deserved to die. They had been presented with a golden opportunity and could feel it slipping through their fingers. Time was running out and they were frustrated. So, Caiaphas took matters into his own hands.

<sup>60</sup> Then the high priest stood up before the others and asked Jesus, “Well, aren’t you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?”

<sup>61</sup> But Jesus was silent and made no reply. Then the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

<sup>62</sup> Jesus said, “I Am. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

<sup>63</sup> Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, “Why do we need other witnesses? <sup>64</sup> You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?” “Guilty!” they all cried. “He deserves to die!” <sup>65</sup> Then some of them began to spit at him, and they blindfolded him and beat him with their fists. “Prophecy to us,” they jeered. And the guards slapped him as they took him away. (Mark 14:60-65, NLT)

Caiaphas tried to trap Jesus by asking why He wasn’t going to respond to these charges. Jesus was no fool. He knew that none of the charges leveled against Him held any weight, because the witnesses kept contradicting one another. Caiaphas was on a fishing expedition and Jesus wasn’t taking the bait.

Then Caiaphas asked a direct question of Jesus: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” This question was illegal. Their law did not permit asking the accused a question that would force them to incriminate themselves. It was similar to the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment of our constitution. But Caiaphas was desperate, and the laws were not important if they stood in the way of convicting Jesus. So, he asked this question.

The question had two parts. First, he asked if Jesus was the Messiah. This was the deliverer that had been promised throughout the Old Testament. The religious leaders were convinced Jesus was not the Messiah, because they Jesus didn’t meet their expectations of who the Messiah would be. The second question was if Jesus was “The Son of the Blessed One”. The Jews did not say the name of God, because they deemed it holy. So they would use phrases like “the Blessed One” to refer to God in place of using His name. So Caiaphas was asking Jesus are you the Son of God?

Up until this point in His ministry, Jesus had not really identified himself as the Messiah specifically. At various times, however, He had identified himself as the Son of God. But now, Caiaphas asked a direct question and Jesus gave a direct answer. He began by saying, “I AM”, which was not merely an affirmation that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God, but was itself a claim of divinity, as I AM was the name by which God told

the Israelites to refer to Him. Jesus did not mince words in His response. He knew exactly what He was saying.

He continued by quoting a prophecy from Daniel 7 about the Son of Man being seated at the right hand of God. Jesus was claiming authority equal to God Himself! Those who say Jesus never claimed to be God have either never read or never understood this passage. Jesus was unequivocally making a claim that He was the One who had been promised from the beginning of time, and that He was in fact, God in the flesh!

Caiaphas was both relieved and incensed. He couldn't believe Jesus stepped right into his trap! Caiaphas tore his robes (which was a sign of grief and mourning) and cried out that they needed no other witnesses (which was a relief, since they had none) because Jesus had committed blasphemy! He had claimed to be God, which was a crime worthy of death. The problem, of course, is that claiming to be God is only blasphemy *if you aren't God!* If any of us were to make such a claim, it would be blasphemous. But Jesus was God, so it wasn't blasphemy at all—it was a statement of fact.

At this point Caiaphas asked what their verdict was, and they all shouted guilty. This too was a violation of their own laws. When the verdict was to be decided, each member of the Sanhedrin was to answer individually. This was not a courtroom; it was a lynch mob.

After this, things descended into bedlam. Jesus was seized and they began to spit at Him. They placed a blindfold on Him and began to hit Him, asking Him to prophesy who had hit Him. This was a slam against His claim to be the Messiah because they believed, based on a passage in Isaiah 11, that the Messiah would have supernatural knowledge. Jesus did have supernatural knowledge, but He refused to give in to their taunts. Though He could have stopped everything with a single word, He did not. He knew that this was all part of God's plan to save humanity. Jesus willingly endured all this shame and ridicule because He knew what it would accomplish.

## Conclusion

Nothing about what went on that night was either lawful or orderly. Nearly everything the religious leaders did demonstrated that they were the evil ones, not Jesus. And yet, Jesus allowed all of it to happen, because He knew what the greater outcome would be. As we look at this passage, we should draw some lessons from what we have seen.

**First, we can find justification for almost anything.** The religious leaders knew what God's law said, but they concluded that God's law stood in the way of getting "justice" or that disobeying God's law was necessary to protect God's people. We look at them in disgust and disbelief, wondering how anyone could possibly believe their actions were righteous. But don't we often do the same thing? Don't we convince ourselves that it's ok to lie or cheat to get what we believe is right? Don't we conclude that we can't obey God because in so doing we will miss out on the good things of life? Don't we believe that God's ultimate goal is for us to be happy, so anything that stands in the way of us feeling happy must be removed? Don't we look at the world around us and rationalize that if we don't use their tactics, we will be defeated? We must recognize our own

capacity to rationalize evil actions, because we're very good at it. The remedy to this is simple, but not easy. We must choose to take God at His Word, even when it conflicts with our desires or thoughts. We must trust that He knows what He is doing, and obey Him, even when it's hard or inconvenient.

**Second, many reject Jesus because He doesn't meet their expectations.** How often have you heard people say something like, I tried Christianity, but it didn't work. Or I couldn't possibly believe in a god who... The Jewish leaders refused to believe in Jesus because He didn't behave the way they thought He should. So they rejected Him and killed Him. My challenge to you and to those with whom you interact is to ask an important question: is Jesus real? Not, does Jesus meet my expectations? Not, do I like what He says? Is He real? If He is, then it doesn't really matter what you think about Him. If He is real, then it demands a response: submission to His authority. You can reject Him because you don't like Him, but if He is real, then there will be real consequences to your rejection. Make sure you're asking the right question.

**Third, God is in control.** God does not make us like robots who only act according to a program. He gives us freedom to make real choices that have real consequences. But God is also not limited by our choices. He is so powerful that He will ensure His purposes are fulfilled, even in the face of evil. God promises believers that He will work all things for good. That means He is working behind the scenes in *all* things. If you want evidence that God can bring good even out of unspeakable evil, look no further than the cross. God can bring good in your life as well—we just have to trust Him and one day we will see what He was doing all along.

**Fourth, if Jesus was slandered and attacked, His followers should expect the same treatment.** Jesus said this to His disciples. If they attacked Him, we should expect no different. Like Jesus, however, we should not resort to the world's tactics, and we should not despair. We should remain faithful, doing what we know is right, and trusting that God is in control *no matter what*. His purposes will prevail, so we don't need to wring our hands in fear.

**Finally, we see Christ's love for us.** Jesus had the ability to stop all this injustice with a word. He did not have to put up with the slander and attacks of these evil people, but He did, because He knew that in so doing, He could provide a way for you and me to be forgiven. If we understand this, then we also understand that His actions demand a response. We should embrace Him, trust Him, and follow Him—because we see His love for us.

This was the greatest miscarriage of justice of all time. Yet God used it to bring about the greatest good. This should drive us to a place of worship, a place of trust, and ultimately, a place of peace. It's found only in Jesus, so run to Him.

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