

## **It Is Better That One Man Die for the People**

John 11:45-53

Our sermon series this Lenten Season: Ironies of the Passion.

So what is irony? A simple way of putting it is that irony usually signals a difference between the appearance of things and reality, or a difference between a commonly expected result and the actual result. In ironic situations, actions often have an effect exactly opposite from what is expected or intended. For example, it would be ironic if an electrician's house burned down because of faulty wiring. Ironic statements often convey a meaning exactly opposite from their literal meaning. For example, during the Vietnam War, an army press officer reportedly said, "We had to destroy the village to save it."

Do you think he was trying to contradict himself? More likely, in the heat of questioning, he failed to see the irony of his statement. This year during Lent, we're talking about irony—about situations that are different from what you would expect. Today/tonight, I want to focus on unintentional irony. Sometimes we do and say things that are ironic without even realizing it. Today/tonight we have just such a situation before us. Caiaphas, the high priest, makes one of the clearest statements of gospel teaching you'll ever find—and he never even realized it. His words are tonight's irony of the passion:

*It is better that one man die for the people.*

I. This shows the guilt of God's enemies.

Caiaphas made this statement several weeks before Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem. Ordinarily during Lent we focus on events that took place during the week before Jesus died. But this incident lays the foundation for so much that was going to happen that it's worth our attention today/tonight. Because the death of Christ was more than just a tragedy. Its significance goes far beyond the all-too-common realities of injustice and human cruelty. The unbelieving Caiaphas helps us to see that the death of this one man was an important part of God's plan for our salvation. But Caiaphas thought he was making a very different point. *It is better that one man die for the people.* This shows the guilt of Jesus' enemies.

The inspired writer John tells us that many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary & Martha in Bethany believed in Jesus because they saw what he did. He had just raised Lazarus from the dead. (John 11:1-44). It must have been an unbelievably awe-inspiring event. Jesus went to the grave of his dear friend and told the bystanders to remove the stone that covered the tomb. Then Jesus gave the command, "Lazarus, come out!" A man who had been dead for four days walked out of the tomb—alive. Many people saw that Jesus indeed had power over death itself and that he had the power to free them from death, and so they believed in him. There's no irony in that.

Yet John writes, *“Some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.”* (John 11:46). You’d think that they would’ve been so astonished seeing a dead man now alive that they would praise and glorify Jesus. But all they could do was tattle. Then the Pharisees called an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The council was divided between Pharisees and Sadducees, and they usually disagreed about everything. But now they spoke with one voice:

*“‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.’”*

(John 11:47-48).

Jesus’ enemies recognized that he was doing miracles. They didn’t deny that Lazarus had been dead and now he was alive. They understood that Jesus had raised him for the purpose of creating and strengthening faith. What was their response? “Everybody’s going to believe in him!” They were terrified that Jesus was going to convert the whole nation of Israel to his gospel! They thought that would be a tragedy. It would bring about the end of their religious system and of Israel’s unique place in history. They couldn’t imagine that their country would continue in those circumstances.

But more than that, they feared for themselves. From the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, these religious leaders had understood that Jesus was a threat to their authority. They claimed the sole right and authority to interpret the Scriptures. But Jesus was constantly telling them they were wrong, that their hearts were hard, that their religion of work righteousness was false. If they were to lose their hold on the people, the Romans would have no need for them and would get rid of them.

However, the High Priest Caiaphas had a solution to their problem. He said,

*“You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”*

That statement ended the discussion. From that time forward, they plotted to take Jesus’ life. It was the only solution that made sense to them. Of course, it wasn’t the only solution that made sense. The world is full of people who disagree with us, and many of them have much more influence on public opinion and even morals than we do. But we don’t plot to kill them. If Jesus really were a false teacher, these men could have simply entrusted themselves to God and opposed his false teaching with the truth. But these teachers of Israel felt they had to kill him.

Why did they reach that conclusion? It wasn’t politics. It was hatred. In the next chapter of John’s gospel, we learn they even plotted to kill Lazarus. That’s how much they hated Jesus and his message. Where did that hatred come from? Unbelief. The Bible tells us that the sinful mind is God’s enemy—and all unbelievers have sinful minds. Jesus himself

tells us that the world will hate us because it hated him. This is simply the most concrete example of that truth. So in the face of Jesus' greatest miracle, his enemies determined to kill him.

That's pretty ironic. But it may not seem like it has a great deal to do with us. After all, we don't hate Jesus. We believe the Son of God became True Man to take our sins away. That's why we're here today/tonight. For all that, I thank God. But, to be painfully honest with you, each of us has the seed of unbelief in our hearts. Each of us has the potential pride of the Pharisees inside us, just waiting for an opportunity to spring up and crowd God out of our hearts and our lives. Even though we are churchgoing people, we aren't immune to pride. The Pharisees were the churchgoing people of their day. They studied their Bibles regularly. They even taught in the synagogues.

However, behind the appearance of faith lay hearts that were dead and cold. What killed those hearts? Sinful human pride. Pride kills faith. Faith says, "I need God to do everything for me." Pride says, "I can do it all myself." If we constantly tell ourselves how good we are, how dedicated we are, how lucky our church is to have us, we're on the road to Pharisaical pride. If pride ever takes control of your heart, hatred of the gospel could ultimately take control too, although it will probably hide itself behind the image of concern for our church, our traditions, or our children.

We all are guilty of pride! If you have flesh and blood, then you are guilty of pride, because pride lives in the heart of every sinner. Does it make you upset and a little angry to be accused of pride? That's the sinful nature resenting the accusation of sinful pride. That sinful pride should carry us all down to hell. But pride is not the point John was making. Rather, the pride of these men became the means to an end—they all agreed, Jesus had to die in Jerusalem. But that's why Jesus came. God had determined to take the hate and unbelief of these men and turn it into a gospel blessing, a blessing for all people. Because Jesus let these men kill him, our sin is paid for—even the seeds of pride that lurk in our hearts—and we are forgiven. Because the Holy Spirit comes to us every time we hear that gospel message, God can wage war against the seed of pride in our hearts, day by day.

II. This shows the love of God.

The High Priest Caiaphas became a proclaimer of that very gospel message even though all he intended to communicate was hatred and self-serving practicality. Caiaphas was not in control that day. God was. God really made this statement to us:

*It is better that one man die for the people.*

This shows the love of God.

John says, "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation." Fifteen hundred years earlier, God told Moses to make his brother Aaron the first high priest. As High Priest, Aaron was given the duty of

interceding for the people before God and speaking God's Word to God's people. By Jesus' day, this duty had become a hollow set of empty, meaningless rituals. God always intended his Old Testament priests to speak for him to his people. Just as he had done when the high priests were faithful, God made this high priest speak for him one last time. Caiaphas was unaware of what the Holy Spirit was doing. Caiaphas was preaching a sermon that told why Jesus had to die. It was better in God's sight that one man die so that all the people would not perish.

That sinful pride in our hearts is a universal human condition. All sinners have it. It condemns all of us to die and go to hell. But God did not want that to happen. So he sent his Son to die and pay for our pride. Jesus came as the true High Priest that Israel was waiting for and offered the only blood that could ever pay for our sins, the only blood that could ever turn God's anger away from us, the only blood that could ever make us friends with God again—his own blood, the blood of the True God and True Man, Jesus. Jesus' blood—the blood of God—is worth more than the whole universe. So it paid for so much more than just the nation of Israel, as John continues,

*“ . . . and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”*

God always planned to save us Gentiles. Caiaphas prophesied that Jesus would die for the whole Christian church, indeed, for every man, woman, and child who would ever live.

The Bible tells us that sin is serious and God is serious about sin. Sin IS serious. Do your sins ever bother you? If they do, in Jesus, you can find peace. On Jesus, God placed all the punishment that should have come to us. He replaced it with the eternal life Jesus won. In and through Jesus' blood, God declared us—strangers and Gentiles—to be his true people. Through faith in Christ, we, who are scattered thousands of miles and 20 centuries from Jerusalem and Caiaphas, are now bought-and-paid-for children of God. All that is ours because one man died for the people. God loved his Son above all of us, but he willingly sacrificed him to bring us to heaven. All those who believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord will live forever.

As far as we know, Caiaphas never understood what he said that day, and never became a believer in Jesus. If that is so, when he died, he went to hell in one last, sad bit of irony. But God has revealed to us the truth Caiaphas spoke. That truth means that through faith in Jesus we have eternal life. The greatest irony of the passion is God's unending, undeniable love. He declared that love even through the mouth of an unbeliever. Amen.