



Series Theme: Lenten Journey – Following Jesus

Title: Misplaced Zeal

Date delivered: April 7, 2019

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Synopsis: Being faithful is righteous only if one is faithful to that which is good. All good things come from God; therefore, it is right to be faithful to God. When personal desires get in the way of godly faithfulness, things can, and almost always do, go wrong; Wrong for the person; wrong for the situation; wrong for serving God, even if the person thinks that what they are doing is what God is leading them to do. If personal interests are most important, if pride and gaining power and prestige are at the heart of decisions, they are almost certainly not from God.

THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: John 11:45-52; Matthew 26:14-16; 27:3-4 (NLT)

THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Matthew 26: 57-66 (NLT)

MEMORY VERSE: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings Me great joy.’” Matthew 3:17

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

This morning we are going to take a look at a man who was deeply involved in the happenings during Holy Week. His name is Caiaphas and he was the High Priest during the

time of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Today I would like to try to understand who he was and why he acted in the ways he did.

First, a little about those who served at the Temple in Jerusalem. There were priests who were chosen from towns and villages throughout Israel. They served for one week; this type of service is much like our military reserves today. They carried out the daily religious duties necessary at the Temple, like the clergy in our churches today.

A second category were the Levites who took care of the maintenance of the Temple, they manned the Temple gates, cleaned the Temple, slaughtered some of the sacrificial animals, and performed the music during Temple worship.

One of the priestly group was chosen as the High Priest. This was a truly significant religious position since he was the most important priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. He was the only one permitted to enter the Holy of Holies and that was allowed only once a year on the Day of Atonement when he offered the special sacrifice as well. He was also the President of the Sanhedrin.

Before the Roman occupation that began in earnest in the year 6 AD, all priests serving at the Temple were descended from either Aaron or Levi. And the High Priest held office for his lifetime, but when the Romans placed Roman governors in charge, all that changed. High Priests were appointed yearly by Roman governors, and there is little doubt that such appointments were given out to those who used bribery, intrigue, and corruption. So instead of being a religious appointment, it became a political plum. It went to the man who could claim the most allegiance to Rome – and the one who paid the biggest bribe.

This was important because the priests, and the High Priest most of all, controlled all things that went on at the Temple. By the time of Jesus the High Priest focused more on amassing a fortune rather than religious duties, loving money more than serving God.

The first High Priest appointed by the Roman governor was Annas in the year 6 AD. He remained High Priest until the year 15 when a different governor removed Annas and placed one of Annas' sons in the position of High Priest. He lasted only a year and then Caiaphas became High Priest and remained in that position for 18 years. Following Caiaphas as High Priest were four more of Annas' sons.

From this it can be assumed that Annas' family and Annas himself were both powerful and manipulative. They became one of the richest and most powerful families in Jerusalem.

Here is one way they made their money. We know that when people came to the Temple to offer sacrifices, those sacrifices had to be perfect, without blemish. Some brought sacrificial animals from home, but most bought them in the marketplace by the Temple. This sounds like it was a very helpful thing to do, but it really was a way to make money. If a person brought his own animal, it would be found to be imperfect and rejected. Then the person would have to buy their sacrifice from the Temple marketplace – at a highly inflated price, perhaps 10 or 20 times what it would normally cost.

It wasn't only animals that were found to be imperfect; there were the moneychangers as well. Pilgrims brought coins from their hometowns, most bearing the images of Roman emperors or Greek gods, and the Temple authorities considered them idolatrous. The High Priest ordered that only Tyrian shekels were acceptable for paying the annual Temple tax because they contained a higher percentage of silver, so the moneychangers exchanged unacceptable coins for these acceptable ones. Of course, they made a profit, sometimes much more than the law allowed, and some of that profit went to those in charge.

And the High Priest was the one who controlled this marketplace. Annas was so influential, so powerful, so controlling that this marketplace was known as the "Bazaar of Annas." It was exploitation pure and simple, and he and his family totally controlled all of the buying and selling that went on there, every day. The money poured in.

Once Annas was relieved of his duties as High Priest, he continued to be respected – but feared – by the citizens of Jerusalem. The reason for this or so the Roman historian Josephus tells us – he loved money; he hoarded money. He offered bribes, had servants who would stoop to all sorts of force or deception or threat to squeeze money out of others, especially the priests.

Many priests, especially the older ones depended on these tithes offered by pilgrims for their means of support, much like ministers today depend on parishioners for wages. But those who worked for the High Priest were ruthless, even to these religious men. For example, they would take tithes that belonged to the priests – taking them by force and if there was any resistance, they beat anyone who would not give these tithes to them.

Once this action had begun, other High Priests followed; no one was able to stop them. Some of the priests, those who were old and were being supported with those tithes, died for lack of food. Jewish history records that the High Priests of that time were despised by most of the people for their brutality and love of money.

The reason we have spent so much time describing Annas is that he was the king-maker of his day. He was High Priest prior to Caiaphas, but his five sons were also High Priests, one before Caiaphas and four after. Caiaphas was not the son of Annas – he was the son-in-law. I can imagine how hard it must have been for Caiaphas to measure up to his larger than life father-in-law. Annas was likely a generation older, more experienced, more powerful, well-connected. And Caiaphas was the in-law, younger, ambitious, eager to please, wanting to make a name for himself, wanting to impress his father-in-law.

He must have succeeded fairly well since he was appointed as High Priest, following the one-year appointment of one of Annas' sons and he held that title for 18 years. So he must have been good at satisfying his father-in-law as well as cooperating with the Romans. I don't know if this is the way it happened, but I'm going to connect some of the dots, the facts we know from scripture.

We know that Jesus was unhappy with all of the buying and selling – and profits – that the Temple marketplace produced. In fact, he went, at least once but it could have been twice, to rid the Temple and its environs of all such activity. This would have disrupted the business of the animal sellers and the money changers for sure. But someone else would have felt the negative effects of this act.

And that person was Annas. His money stream would have been interrupted. Commerce would take time to regain its former robust activity. And all the while this was happening, Annas would be losing money. It must have been hard to Annas to accept that such a man as Jesus, a man of low social standing, little prestige, and likely little money, could disrupt his ordered life. It must have made him very angry. It must have made him want Jesus to be disposed of.

Caiaphas could have seized upon this situation, determined to gain praise from his father-in-law. He, Caiaphas, would make this problem individual go away. He alone would solve the difficult situation that so plagued his father-in-law. The leading priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin looking for ways to silence Jesus. They wanted to do this because they thought that there was a real possibility that anyone and everyone who saw Jesus' miracles would believe he was the Messiah. This, they felt, would bring in the Roman army to put down a resulting upheaval, and in doing so, both the Temple and the nation of Israel would be destroyed.

This desire to get rid of Jesus must have been music to Caiaphas' ears. He had already devised a plan in his own mind – find Jesus, arrest him, have him put to death, and take

away the very leader of this potential riot. He felt this was the best way to preserve the Temple, the nation, and his own personal power and wealth.

It seems that the members of the Sanhedrin agreed to this plan because from that time on, the Jewish leaders began to plot Jesus' death. They just needed to find out where he was staying, identify him, have him arrested and brought to trial. Finding him was the first order of business and that proved to be no easy task since Jesus was not gathering large groups of people around him but instead he was moving about quietly during the day and finding rest at night in unknown locations. But then their dilemma was solved – in the person of Judas.

Judas came to some of the leading priests and asked what they would pay him to betray Jesus. One of Jesus' inner circle came to them! Asking if they might be interested in finding Jesus and identifying him! And for money – just a little bit of money to them. How perfect for them! We all know what happened next. After having eaten a meal together Jesus and his disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Judas led a group of soldiers and Jewish officers right up to Jesus and, because it was dark, Judas kissed Jesus so that there would be no question as to just who Jesus was. The ploy worked, Jesus was arrested and taken away.

Judas, however, felt guilt about what he had done. He tried to give back the money, filled with remorse he tried to confess his wrong-headedness, but the leading priests and elders were not interested. Judas cried out that he had betrayed an innocent man. And the reply of those priests and elders? “What do we care? That's your problem.”

Caiaphas, on the other hand, felt he had solved his father-in-law's problem. This man, Jesus, was going to die, his followers would likely fall away, and Rome would let them alone. He would gain prestige with his father-in-law and with all of the members of the Sanhedrin. He might be able to remain High Priest for many more years, raking in more and more money for himself and his family. In his mind – a sweet deal. He worked hard to make this happen, something he was totally committed to, and now he was going to reap the benefits.

But we know that his happiness was short lived. History tells us that Caiaphas died only a couple of years after Jesus was put to death – not a long time to enjoy the results of his choices. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, so even the death of Jesus did not keep the Roman legions away from destroying the Temple and the nation of Israel.

And the followers of Jesus, did not fall away; instead they believed in the resurrected Jesus and spread the Good News that Jesus preached, retold the stories that Jesus told, wrote down accounts of Jesus' ministry, and the number of believers increased tremendously. So Caiaphas, who had such high hopes for a pleasant future, did not get any of the things that he thought would come from his actions. He was wrong – his allegiance was to the wrong person and the wrong ends.

We make decisions every day – about what to support, how to spend our time and our money, who we should listen to, so many different things to choose. We as Christians are to carefully choose among the many different options. And once we make Christ-directed right decisions we are then able to enjoy the outcomes. We can enjoy the outcomes if we make the right choices. That is at the center of our lives, making right choices. Sometimes that means going against the crowd, not listening to the “everyone's doing it” excuse. Sometimes it means disappointing folks we care about; sometimes it means losing popularity, losing promotions, losing friendships, but we are able to do this because we have made the right decisions to follow God.

Making decisions that are following Jesus' teachings is putting the proper perspective on how we live – whether we are following the right path with zeal or whether we have been tempted to care more about ourselves and our personal comfort. Instead we are to think more of others. The choice is ours – placing our lives in God's hands. What a blessing for all of us. Let us pray.

Holy and loving God, we thank You that You give us guidance and direction, that we can live our lives abundantly in Your love and will. Thank You for Your loving patience and care. Amen.