

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor Emeritus  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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Mark 14:53-65; 15:1-15a “Guilty of Love in the First Degree”

Intro. This morning we move to the subject of the trial of Jesus. What do you think? Did Jesus receive a fair trial after He was arrested? Was Jesus guilty of the charges laid against Him? Or did they cause the crucifixion of an innocent man? We are going to seek answers from this text of Scripture this morning.

Last Sunday I shared that our Lord Jesus surrendered to the will of God in Gethsemane, and then went out to meet Judas His betrayer. He did not flee into the darkness, but allowed Himself to be arrested by those who plotted His death. In the meantime, the High Priest had issued a call for an unusual night meeting of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews. Once almost everyone had arrived at his residence, Jesus faced the first of two phases of His trial before the Council. Today, we will consider His trial before the religious leaders of Israel, and then we will take a look at the civil trial of Jesus before Pilate, the governor of Israel appointed by the Roman Emperor. We will also draw some lessons from Mark’s account of these trials.

First of all, we see here:

## I. THE TRIAL BEFORE THE HEBREWS

This trial was a most unusual trial, for notice with me:

A. The Character of this Trial – Mark does not waste any time characterizing this trial as unjust. He says in v.55, “Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony<sup>1</sup> against Jesus to put Him to death....” Here we see that instead of being impartial judges, they were seeking witnesses to lie if necessary to carry out their plot to put Jesus to death. They were using their judicial power to carry out the murder of Jesus!

Why did they want to kill Jesus? Well as 15:10 indicates, they were envious of Jesus. He was far more popular with the people, as the triumphant entry into Jerusalem just demonstrated. Furthermore, Jesus had denounced them, and exposed them publicly for their hypocrisy (Mt. 23), and so they were determined to kill him. As you can see, this trial was *not* an exercise of justice. There was no intention at all of giving Jesus a fair hearing in order that it might be discovered whether or not the charges against Him were just or unfounded. Hence, this was not a trial but a legal farce, a detestable plot. They devised it and they saw to it that it was carried out. And even when they nailed him to the cross, they followed Him there to mock Him (15:31).

The sin nature of man can corrupt the legal system. The June, 1990 *Readers Digest* contained an article about the corruption in a circuit court of Chicago, and how one district attorney helped to get almost 100 convictions against crooked judges, lawyers, and policemen. And the more our society turns from Christ, the worse it is going to get.

So we see the character of this trial. Now let’s see:

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<sup>1</sup> They had to seek testimony because they really hadn’t planned arresting Jesus & putting Him on trial until after Passover. So they had to seek testimony very quickly.

B. The Charges Presented – It is clear that they were just grasping for any charge against Him that might stick. Jewish law required that a charge had to be established at the mouth of at least two witnesses (Num. 35:30; Dt. 17:6; 19:15). So they brought in some men who were willing to fabricate lies and misquotations. Now let's look at the charges presented. First, Mark tells us about:

1. Various Unstated Charges - V.56 says, "For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree." How tragic that a group of religious leaders would encourage people to lie, especially during the holy season of Passover!

Then, some came up with another charge. They said:

2. That He Threatened to Destroy the Holy Temple – The Jews took great pride in the Temple and treated it as most holy. Any threat to the temple would inflame passion. So we read in vv.57-58, "Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, 'We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'" Their accusation alludes to the veiled saying of Jesus reported in John 2:19, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Now what did these false witnesses do? In addition to misinterpreting, they also misquote. Jesus did not say that He Himself would destroy the temple.<sup>2</sup> Besides, He was talking about the temple of His body, not the temple in Jerusalem (Jn. 2:21).

Let it never surprise true Christians if we are slandered and misrepresented in this world. We must not expect to fare better than our Lord (Matthew 5:11).

The High Priest was getting upset at the direction of the trial at this point. The witnesses could not get their stories straight. And so he decided to deal with what they viewed as the most serious charge:

3. That He Claimed to Be the Son of God - In v.61 the High Priest asked Jesus point blank, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" To avoid taking God's name in vain (Ex. 20:7), the Jews did not speak the name of God. That is why he said, "Son of the Blessed." Now if Jesus answered with a "Yes," they would charge Him with blasphemy, saying that He claimed to be God.

I find it interesting that they were careful not to break the commandment about taking God's name in vain at the same time they were in the process of committing judicial murder against Jesus! They were also encouraging the violation of another one of the 10 commandments, "You shall not bear false witness" (Ex. 20:16; 23:1).

This time, Jesus did not remain silent. He boldly answered in v.62, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand<sup>3</sup> of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." He first said, "I am," perhaps alluding to God, the Great, "I am" (Ex. 3:14; cf. Jn. 8:58). At the very least He clearly and bravely affirmed that He is the Messiah and Son of God, even though he knew that meant a death sentence. What a contrast to the denial of Peter!<sup>4</sup> He then alluded to the prophecy of Dan. 7:13. In doing so He affirms in another way that He is indeed the Messiah. After all, the title "Son of man" is messianic according to Daniel's prophecy, for v.14 of that prophecy states, "And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him...." That is clearly a reference to the Messiah, who is to rule the earth.

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<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they said that Jesus had contrasted "the temple made by (human) hands" with another "not made by (human) hands." These modifiers cannot be found in the language used by Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> "Sitting at the right hand" is not in Daniel's prophecy, so this biblical reference is also alluding to **Psalm 110:1**, "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"

<sup>4</sup> Jesus set the example for multitudes of persecuted believers in the centuries to come.

They were looking for a Messianic Deliverer, but because of their unbelief, Jesus warned that He would only take rule of the earth after an interval of some time. Jesus was also in essence warning that someday, He would be *their* judge, for the Messiah is both King and Judge.

Since Jesus is the Son of God, he possesses all power and authority (Mt. 28:18). He can answer your prayers and meet the needs of your life.

So they accused Him of threatening to destroy the temple and blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God. Those were the two main charges. Was He guilty? Next, we see:

C. The Condemnation Agreed Upon – In v.63 Caiaphas acts as if he has been stricken with grief<sup>5</sup> at the words of Jesus, when in fact inwardly he was filled with glee. Now he has the charge he has been looking for. In v.64 we see that the High Priest said, “You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?” Then Mark reports, “And they all<sup>6</sup> condemned Him to be deserving of death.” IF Jesus was indeed guilty of blasphemy, then He was to be put to death according to the Law of Moses (Lev. 24:16<sup>7</sup>).

However, was their verdict just? There were numerous problems with the trial of Jesus. In fact, it was downright illegal on several technical grounds. First, it was held at night. It was not held at the temple complex, but in the home of the High Priest. The judges were not impartial, but the judges also acted as prosecutors against Jesus. The witnesses did not even agree (v.56). Furthermore, no one was allowed to testify on behalf of Jesus. If there was no rush to judgment, the disciples could have brought in many witnesses for Jesus, to testify of the miracles He did. Many lepers could have come forward to testify of what Jesus had done for them. Many blind men could say, “I once was blind, but now I see.” A man known as Legion could have testified of how Jesus had set him free from the enslaving power of many demons. Lazarus and others could have testified that Jesus had even raised them from the dead! (Barclay, p.368) And many here today could stand and give testimony that Jesus is still alive, for He has changed *our* lives. This was a travesty of justice! There was and is abundant evidence that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and thus could *not* be guilty of blasphemy, or any other sin.

I want to tell you that Jesus was *only* guilty of one thing. He was guilty of love in the first degree. He loved you and me so much, He was willing to go through the shame and humiliation of this trial. He offered no resistance, and even affirmed the truth of His deity, though it meant a cross for Him the next day.

So the condemnation of the Council is followed by:

D. The Contempt of the Council – After they condemned Jesus to death, the members of the Sanhedrin showed their cruel, vengeful, and sadistic character. In v.65 we read, “Then some began to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, ‘Prophecy!’ And the officers struck Him with the palms of their hands.” It seems likely that some members of the Council began to walk up to Jesus to spit on Him in the face. Then, they mocked His prophetic ministry by blindfolding Him, and beating Him and saying, “Prophecy.” In other words, who hit you? Then the Jewish arresting officers joined in on the sport and began to strike Him with the

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<sup>5</sup> The High Priest violated Scripture when he tore his clothes! (Lev. 10:6; 21:10).

<sup>6</sup> Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea must not have been invited!

<sup>7</sup> That verse says, “Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death.” Jesus not only did not slander the name of God but did not even speak the name of God. As was common for Jews, He substituted “Power” for God's name in v.62. Yet the Jews evidently interpreted blasphemy more broadly (Mk. 2:7; 3:28).

palms of their hands. Such abuse took place even before He was formally convicted and sentenced the next morning.

Too many are still spitting upon Jesus today. Too many are still mocking Jesus today. We see Jesus insulted as one utterly contemptible. Why was this? It was so that we, vile as we are, might have glory, honor and eternal life through faith in Christ's atonement.

Then, in the last phase of the Jewish trial of Jesus, we see:

E. The Conclusion of the Trial - This unanimous verdict was not as yet a formal sentence. Declaring a person guilty and sentencing him are two different matters. In order to create at least a semblance of legality, a short period of time must elapse between these two actions. According to existing regulations, that interval should have been at least the next day.<sup>8</sup> But as the Council saw it, such a delay would have been too dangerous. It could have given the many friends and advocates of Jesus enough time to organize a revolt on His behalf. *Now* is the time to act. So early in the morning the Sanhedrin convened once more, probably after no more than a three-hour break.<sup>9</sup> V.1 says, "Immediately, in the morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council...."<sup>10</sup> The purpose of the "consultation" (*sumboulion*) was to formally sentence Jesus to death, which they did.

But it's not over yet. The Sanhedrin was well aware of the fact that they did not have the legal authority to carry out the death sentence. So they bound Jesus, led him away, and delivered him to Pilate, the Governor. That's because Rome reserved the right to carry out the death penalty. So we not only see from our text the trial before the Hebrews but also:

## II. THE TRIAL BEFORE THE HEATHEN

Once again, charges must be presented at a trial. So as the leaders of the Council stood before the Governor, consider with me:

A. The Charges Brought Against Jesus – Even though the Sanhedrin had accused Jesus of blasphemy, they did not immediately press this charge. They felt that a strictly religious charge would make little impression on a pagan. So according to Luke's account, they quickly advanced three *political* charges: Jesus perverts the nation; He forbids the payment of tribute to Caesar; and He claims that he himself is king (Luke 23:2). They were basically saying: "This man is a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, and a rival to Caesar." Mark's account focuses on the charge that Jesus claimed to be a king. The fact that Jesus affirmed that He is the Messiah (14:61-62), and therefore the King of the Jews, seemed to support their accusation.

Pilate could not afford to allow such an alleged claim to kingship to remain unexamined. He had no desire to do the Jews a favor, but he was a self-seeker, wishing to maintain a good standing with the emperor. So in v.2 Pilate asked, "Are You the King of the Jews?" The pronoun "You" is emphatic in Greek.<sup>11</sup> Standing before him meek, bruised and bloodied from the abuse, it is as if Pilate were saying, "Are *You* the king of the Jews? How incredible!"

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<sup>8</sup> Barclay says that the members of the Sanhedrin could change their vote during the interval in an act of mercy (p.368). Also, according to Jewish reckoning, the day began at sunset. The next morning was not a new day!

<sup>9</sup> The cock crowed around 3 AM and the sun rose probably around 6 AM.

<sup>10</sup> Mt. 27:1 says, "When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death." (ESV).

<sup>11</sup> It is not only spelled out as a separate pronoun, but it heads the question.

When someone presented a false charge, Christ remained silent. He thus fulfilled the prophecy of Isa. 53:7, “He opened not his mouth” (see also Ps. 38:13-14). But the few times the charge presented was true, Jesus would answer to affirm truth. So in the last of v.2 Jesus said, “It is as you say,” a less than direct affirmation (such as “I am”).<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, from other gospel accounts we know that Pilate initially declared that Jesus was not guilty of the charge of being a rival king to Caesar, largely because He sure didn’t seem to be. This is why we read in v.3 of the many other charges brought against Jesus. Then, in vv.4-5 we read, “Then Pilate asked Him again, saying, ‘Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You!’ But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled.”

Notice that “Pilate marveled.” He marveled because of the great contrast between Jesus and others. It is likely that no other accused man had been so silent before him. And what a contrast between the troublesome and aggressive person as Jesus had been pictured by His accusers, and the quiet, dignified, serene individual who was now standing before him.

Pilate had a dilemma on his hands. He knew that Jesus was not guilty, but it would be politically difficult for him to go against the leaders of the nation. So he came up with a plan. That leads to:

B. The Choice Presented to the Jews – The background is given in v.6, “Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested.” The idea of setting a prisoner free would seem to be most appropriate in connection with Passover, the commemoration of the deliverance of the Israelites from the house of bondage. V.8 says, “Then the multitude, crying aloud, began to ask him to do just as he had always done for them.” That’s why this particular crowd had gathered that morning. Pilate at this moment was most willing to release a prisoner; for, as he saw it, this was a way to get Jesus off his hands. So note:

1. The Presentation of the Choice – In vv.7-11 we see that Pilate decided to offer them Jesus or Barabbas.<sup>13</sup> Why Barabbas? V.7 says of Barabbas, “And there was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion.” He belonged to a group of men committed to do everything they could to resist Rome, even murder. Barabbas was considered a hero to many of the Jews, like Osama Bin Laden was considered a hero to many Muslims. Pilate was clever. I doubt if he normally would have offered to release a violent insurrectionist. Yet the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of being an insurrectionist, a political enemy of the Roman Empire. So Pilate offered them someone who clearly *was a violent* insurrectionist. Could they, in all good conscience, choose such a man in light of their accusations against Jesus? Surely they would be forced to choose Jesus.

As v.10 indicates, Pilate knew the real reason these leaders were requesting that Jesus be executed. They were envious of His popularity with the people, both due to His excellent teaching and amazing miracles He did. And since many hoped that Jesus would be their messianic king, he assumed that they would choose Jesus. So notice v.9, “Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” It is clear that his question is really a suggestion that the Jews should ask for the release of Jesus, for He is their King! Furthermore, there was absolutely not even a charge that Jesus was a murderer like Barabbas. Surely, the crowd will call for the release of Jesus and Pilate will have his way. Or will he? As Matt. 27:19 relates, there was a sudden interruption. A message

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Tim. 6:13, “I urge you in the sight of God ... [before] Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate.”

<sup>13</sup> Some manuscripts call him Jesus Barabbas (cf. Mt. 27:16-17). Jesus was a common name and Barabbas meant, “son of the father.”

arrives from the governor's wife. While Pilate was being kept busy with the message from his wife, the chief priests took full advantage of the situation. V.11 says they worked the crowd and intimidated any who were inclined to choose Jesus. Next we see:

2. The Pick of the People - The people reacted angrily to Pilate's assumption that they regarded Jesus as their king. They were there to secure the release of a man like Barabbas. So more shouted for the release of Barabbas than for the release of Jesus.

Then in v.12 Pilate asked, "What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" Most in the crowd cried out, "Crucify Him!" And by the end of v.14 the crowd has become a riotous mob, a screaming rabble. Notice that "they cried out all the more, 'Crucify Him!'" No emotionally-charged mob is prepared to use good judgment. All they can do is cry out, "Crucify him."

Pilate stresses and constantly reiterates in v.14 the truth that in Jesus there is no cause of indictment. No evil act could be identified. Nevertheless, in a few more moments this same Pilate is going to succumb to the persistent clamor of the crowd and sentence Jesus to die the accursed death of crucifixion. Pilate is a typical example of a cheap politician who is seeking to compromise and to please the most people. What turned the scales so that Pilate finally decided to yield to the mob's clamor was the frightening and diabolical outcry found in John's gospel, "If you release this man (Jesus), you are no friend of the emperor. Whoever makes himself king rebels against the emperor" (19:12). The people's angry statement implied, "We will lodge a complaint against you. We will tell the emperor that you condone high treason against the government. We will accuse you of 'softness toward rebels.'" The charge of being a rival king<sup>14</sup> was more serious than the charge of being a foot soldier in a revolution. So yielding to political pressure he ordered that Jesus be flogged<sup>15</sup> and crucified while Barabbas was set free.

Barabbas illustrates the truth of the substitutionary death of Jesus. Barabbas deserved to die. There was a cross waiting for *him*. But at the Passover, Jesus took his place as the Lamb of God! Jesus died on the cross made for Barabbas. And Barabbas went out a free man. The guilty is set free and the innocent is put to death. The great sinner is delivered, and the sinless one remains bound.

We are all by nature in the position of Barabbas. We are guilty of breaking God's holy law and worthy of condemnation, but "when we were without hope," Christ the innocent suffered and died for the ungodly. Our plea must always be, not that we deserve to be acquitted, but that Christ has died for us. And so all you have to do to be set free from the penalty of your sin is to believe in Jesus, but who died in your place.

So far we have seen the trial of Jesus before the Hebrews. Then we discussed the trial before the heathen. Now let's close by considering:

### III. THE TRIAL OF EACH PERSON

Jesus is no longer on trial. Though condemned to death as a common criminal, Romans 1:4 says that He was "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by

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<sup>14</sup> Yet Jesus denied that he was a rival to Caesar. In John 18:36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

<sup>15</sup> The gospel writers barely mention the account of the scourging of Jesus (v.15; Mt 27:26; Jn. 19:1), yet the whip with bits of bone and metal at the ends tore terribly the flesh of its victim, so much so that some went raving mad or even died during the ordeal. Prophecy predicted it (Ps. 129:3; Isa. 50:6; 53:5). Jesus predicted it (Mk. 10:34; Lk. 18:33). Peter later wrote in 1 Pet. 2:24, "...by whose stripes you were healed," quoting Isa. 53:5b.

the resurrection from the dead.” God reversed the sentence of death and declared His Son to be not guilty! Likewise, Acts 17:31 says that God “has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” So Jesus is your judge. The day is coming when *you* will be on trial before Him.<sup>16</sup> The most important question is, “What have you done with Jesus?” Have you rejected Him as the Council and the people did? Will you try to avoid making a decision, as Pilate did? Or will you trust in Him as Savior and Lord? Consider with me two main points:

A. It’s a Choice You Cannot Avoid - That reality is:

1. Illustrated in Pilate - Pilate had tried again and again to avoid making a decision about Jesus. He discovered that this was entirely impossible. First, he tried sending Jesus to Herod, the ruler of Galilee (Luke 23:6-12), but Herod only sent Jesus back after mocking Him. He tried to get the crowd to take Jesus off his hands. That plan failed also. They chose Barabbas. So Pilate was forced to take a stand, and he took the wrong stand even though he stated four times in the Gospels that he found no fault in Jesus. His problem was that he lacked the courage to stand for what he believed was right. Instead, he chose political expediency.

2. Expressed by Jesus - The impossibility of evading Jesus is expressed by Jesus in these words, “He who is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30). You can’t avoid Jesus. You either embrace Him by faith or you are against Him.

B. What Will Be Your Choice? - Don’t be like Pilate, this morning. Make the right choice. Believe in Jesus and confess that He is the Son of God and your Savior and Lord! The service of sin and the service of God are continually before us. We must choose between the friendship of the world and the friendship of Christ. Are we making the right choice?

Furthermore, Jesus is too important a person to ignore. He is a looming figure, both on the horizon of history and on the horizon of our future. Have you examined the claims of Jesus Christ? What is your verdict concerning Him? Do you believe that He is the Son of God, the Savior of the world? Or do you believe the claim of some that He was just a religious impostor? Make the right choice this morning! Make sure you have repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956); James A. Brooks, *New American Commentary: Mark* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2024; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Mark* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 6/3/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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<sup>16</sup> See Revelation 20:11-15 in reference to unbelievers.