

**"We, the Jury, Find the Defendant, Jesus,  
Guilty of Our Crimes!"  
Sermon on Matthew 26:59-68  
Saint Mark's, Watertown  
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*He was pierced for our transgressions, Christ was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by Jesus' wounds we are healed. Amen.*

**Introduction: Today's Scripture Makes Us a Jury Over Jesus**

Dear fellow onlookers during Jesus' trials:

Have you ever served on jury duty? – I imagine some of you have; I suspect strongly that most of us have not.

Jury duty must be a heavy responsibility, eh? It requires you to listen carefully to every fact presented. Afterwards, you need to compare and evaluate all those facts. Then finally, you need to come to a conclusion of innocence or guilt. And the stakes are high! A person's life – really aspects of several persons' lives – hang in the balance.

Today's Word from God has the Holy Spirit inviting you to be, in effect, a part of a jury. Listen carefully to the facts of this case. Evaluate them. And render your verdict—innocent or guilty? Realize, too, that the stakes are really high. The life of many people – the lives of all people, really! – hang in the balance.

**Part One: Jesus' Trial Declares Him Innocent of Sin (for Us!)**

Like trials nowadays, trials in ancient times did not always move speedily. But this one did. The defendant had been nabbed less than a mile away – across the Kidron Valley, at the edge of the Mount of Olives – only hours earlier. They stashed him at the house of the High Priest Emeritus, Annas, for a preliminary interrogation and intimidation, as we heard last Wednesday. And they wouldn't be done with the defendant, even after this trial, because this was itself an illegal trial—not held in public, held secretly in the wee hours of the morning. They'd have to wait for the first rays of daylight for an official verdict, as we'll hear next Wednesday.

But for now, here we are. It's absolutely the middle of the night. All of Jerusalem is dark—maybe darker than it's ever been. All of Jerusalem is asleep—all of Jerusalem, that is, except the seventy or so men who served on the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Messengers had awakened them with the news, "We've got him – the big fish! – come quickly to the trial." And so, they gathered in a very sizeable room in the mansion of the High Priest, Caiaphas.

But the trial didn't start very well for them, certainly not at first. Listen to the beginning phase of this trial, and draw your own conclusions. Matthew chapter twenty-six, verses fifty-nine and sixty: *The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.... But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.* "Okay, what can we pin on this boy?" they were thinking. "At least some false teaching, at least some scandal, at least some harm he has done to others?" they asked. And so, they scrambled for evidence. But nothing resulted.

Don't you think that's remarkable? I mean: let's say that you are the criminal defendant in this case. How much would a jury of seventy have to scramble to find

evidence against you? Any falsehood in your past? Any scandal? Have you done any harm to others? Me, too! On all three accounts, we're guilty!

But with Jesus: nothing—nothing, at all! So, as a juror in the first phase of this case, what do you find? Jesus is innocent—entirely innocent of crime!

## **Part Two: Jesus' Trial Declares Him Guilty of Our Sin (for Us!)**

But the trial is not done yet. We enter into the second phase. Matthew chapter twenty-six, verses sixty through sixty-three: *Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"* It was the first point at which the testimony of two converged, and having two witnesses to a crime was a requirement for a guilty verdict among the Jews.

The testimony of these two men was accurate. Three years earlier, Jesus had cleared the temple, remember? And he had done it again only four days before this, his trial. The first time, the Jewish leaders asked Jesus, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to clear the temple?" And Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." Of course, the temple to which he had referred was his body. He promised to rise, three days after he died. And the Jewish leaders understood this well enough. That's why they ended up with a guard stationed near the tomb. It all means that this charge against Jesus was also unsustainable.

And so, probably in frustration, we read: *Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent.* He wasn't compelled to testify against himself. Even more tellingly, he was actually accepting guilt for what he did not do.

Now, isn't all of this remarkable, once again? At the heart of it, this charge against Jesus was that he was somehow speaking against the temple—that he was somehow threatening what God had set up. And of course, nothing could be farther from the truth! Jesus went to the temple. Jesus taught at the temple. When Jesus cleared the temple those two times, he was restoring it for his Heavenly Father's use. Even many of the Jewish people themselves must have applauded his action. Most directly to the point: you and I know that Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple; the way God had dwelled in the temple, God now dwelled fully in Jesus in bodily form, because Jesus is God!

In contrast, of course, it occurs to me that a charge like this could be sustained against you—and against me. Have we ever spoken against an institution that God set up? Obviously! Our government, which God set up, makes one misstep—and we're ready to overthrow it! Our church or church body, to which God has gathered us, makes any faulty decision—and we no longer support it! Our leaders at work or our leaders in our houses make a decision with which we disagree—and we cause them trouble the rest of their lives!

At any rate, as a juror in this second phase of this case, what is your verdict? Jesus is innocent—innocent once again!

## **Part Three: Jesus' Trial Declares Him Christ the Savior (for Us!)**

And so far, as much as the original jury wanted to declare Jesus guilty, they still couldn't do that—until: Matthew chapter twenty-six, verses sixty-three through sixty-six: *The high priest said to him – brilliantly – "I charge you under oath by the living God – so, no way could Jesus evade a responsibility to tell the truth here – Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!"* – a question they had never really directly put to Jesus before.

**"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.** And you could probably hear the gasps—and after that much audible agitation. And then, just to make things clear, and even more to warn them and to call them to repentance, Jesus adds: **"But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."** "I am God the Son," Jesus is saying. "I am the one through whom God the Father governs the entire universe. I will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead."

And that's what this jury needed! **Then the high priest tore his clothes** – the prescribed measure to indicate upset at something really outrageous – **and said, "He has spoken blasphemy!"** "Blasphemy" is anything to injure the reputation of God. He was accusing Jesus of blasphemy because Jesus – as far as the Jewish leaders were concerned: a mere man – this Jesus was claiming to be God! **"Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy."** "You, the jury of seventy—you are now also that many witnesses to the capital crime of blasphemy." **"What do you think?"** the high priest asked. **"He is worthy of death," they answered.**

So you see, Jesus was "guilty", wasn't he? He was "guilty" of telling the truth! He was "guilty" of being God the Son! He was "guilty" of being the promised Christ! He was "guilty" of being our Savior!

Jesus was utterly, entirely innocent of any crime. But he was guilty for us! I mean: if Jesus had been guilty of any crime, then when he died he died for his own sin. Since Jesus was not guilty of any crime, then when he died he died not for his own sin, but for somebody else's sin—for yours and mine! He was guilty for your crime and my crime—and he died for it! He was guilty for your rebellion against God's good institutions and my rebellion against God's good institutions—and he died for that! He was guilty for your blasphemy and for my blasphemy—and he died for that, too!

### **Conclusion: Today's Scripture Makes Jesus the Criminal Instead of Us**

Earlier on in the sermon, I asked you whether you had ever served on a jury. But there's probably a more appropriate question, given what we just read from God's Word. Have you ever been a criminal defendant? – Most of us probably, really have not; some of us, I suppose, have been criminal defendants.

Can you imagine how scary that must be?—even if you're innocent, especially if you are guilty! You're hoping against hope that the jury will declare you innocent. You're praying that the judge will be lenient. You can't sleep at night. You hardly dare to make eye contact during the day.

Then the news reaches your ears, the jury is coming back—and returning its verdict. And the foreman speaks, "Your honor, we, the jury, find the defendant not guilty, by reason of Jesus." Jesus takes our crimes to be his own. Jesus accepts the guilt. He receives the punishment. As we read: **Then they spit in his face** – how ugly! – **and struck him with their fists** – how painful! – **others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"** – how disrespectful! But you go free....

...Now, isn't that a Savior that you can defend to the very end? Amen.

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Jesus Christ the iniquity of us all. Amen.*