

## **“From Bad to Worse”**

**John 18: 12-27**

Preached by First Baptist Church

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This morning our attention is drawn to the events that occurred immediately after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sometime after Jesus arrived there with his disciples to pray, a detachment of soldiers and religious authorities showed up at the entrance to the garden. When Jesus saw Judas with them, he knew why they had come.

You recall Judas abruptly left the Passover Meal in the Upper Room to rendezvous with the scribes and Pharisees and to accept their bribe for telling them where Jesus would be later that night. These particular religious leaders were upset with Jesus because of what he had been saying about them, especially that week when so many people were in Jerusalem to observe Passover.

Repeatedly, Jesus criticized them for their insincerity, hypocrisy and self-indulgence. He exposed their addiction to power, prestige, attention, money and control. He accused them of taking advantage of defenseless widows and catering to the rich and powerful.

By Thursday evening, the religious authorities were ready to act. Jesus had to be silenced, and the only way to do this was to have him arrested and crucified. They bribed Judas with thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus, and he did. While most of the Passover pilgrims slept, Jesus was arrested in a serene and secluded garden.

Immediately, Jesus was bound, taken to the Temple and presented to Annas ben Seth. Only in John's gospel are we told this, but it is significant.

Annas had been the High Priest from 6-15 AD. Several of his sons, four or maybe five, succeeded him in that position and at the time Jesus was arrested, Annas' son-in-law, Caiaphas, was the reigning High Priest.

Annas was a notorious character and the power behind the throne. No decisions were made without his knowledge and approval.

This meant Annas and his family were in charge of the people who presided over the Temple activities each day. In particular, they oversaw the work of the moneychangers and those who inspected and sold animals for sacrifices.

It appears Annas used these workers to fleece the people and line his own pockets. Let me explain how.

Everyone who came to the Temple to worship and pray had to pay Temple taxes, but those taxes could only be paid with kosher coins that had no image of a Roman emperor or deity. This meant everyone had to exchange their Roman coins for acceptable ones, and Annas' family was charging exorbitant prices to exchange those coins.

In addition, each family had to offer an animal sacrifice as an act of worship while in the Temple, and many brought animals from home. Inspectors examined the animals they brought and most of the time found them to be blemished, requiring the purchase of approved animals from the Temple authorities. Once again, the price of these animals was outlandish, yet the people had no choice but to purchase them.

You can see how Annas and his family accumulated so much wealth and power. Thousands of transactions occurred every year, resulting in huge profits for Annas and his clan. You also understand why they would not tolerate any public criticism of what they were doing.

Do you recall what Jesus did earlier in the week when he entered the Temple and went to the area where money was being exchanged and animals were being sold? He overturned the tables covered with coins, released the "unblemished" animals held for sacrifices and ran the people in charge of these unscrupulous practices out of the Temple.

He did not stop there, though. He boldly condemned the leaders of the Temple for exploiting the people who had come to worship God, accusing them of turning this house of prayer into a den of thieves.

I think you understand now why Jesus was taken to Annas before going to see Caiaphas. Annas had been waiting all week to get his hands on Jesus and enact revenge upon this whistleblower.

As soon as Jesus arrived Annas began interrogating him. This, by the way, was strictly forbidden by law for two reasons.

Trials could not occur at night while people were asleep and unaware of what was happening. Secondly, witnesses had to come forward explaining what they had seen the accused person do wrong before any questions could be asked of the one on trial.

Annas ignored protocol and began questioning Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus, knowing his rights, promptly told Annas to ask the people who heard him teach. Jesus reminded Annas he had been in the Temple since Sunday speaking openly to all who would listen. There would be no shortage of witnesses who would come to testify on his behalf if they were asked.

As soon as Jesus said this, he was struck by a nearby soldier who scolded him for lecturing Annas and speaking disrespectfully to him. ““If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why do you hit me?” (John 18:23)

Once again, Jesus took advantage of an opportunity to expose Annas’ hypocrisy and insincerity. Even under duress, Jesus spoke truth to power in the pursuit of justice.

When Annas finished questioning and insulting Jesus, he sent him to Caiaphas, his son-in-law and the current High Priest. Caiaphas assembled the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, and they continued to interrogate and abuse Jesus. Eventually, they found him guilty of blasphemy and treason, a charge they would use to demand that Pilate have Jesus crucified.

Woven throughout this story in John’s gospel is the account of Peter’s three denials. Peter, the leader of the disciples, quietly followed the soldiers who arrested Jesus and was standing with others in the courtyard of the High Priest as Jesus was being questioned.

On three occasions, people approached Peter and asked him if he was one of Jesus' disciples. Each time Peter emphatically denied he was a disciple, going so far as to say he did not even know the man who was being interrogated by the High Priest and the Sanhedrin.

And then the cock crowed, reminding Peter of what Jesus said just hours before at the conclusion of the Passover meal.

"This very night, you will all fall away on account of me for it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.' But, after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.

Peter replied, 'Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.'

'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'this very night before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.'

Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same thing." (Matthew 26:31-35)

I can only imagine how badly Peter felt after breaking the promise he had made to Jesus that same evening. I am not sure this amount of guilt and shame can even be measured or verbalized.

This is one of the most dramatic stories in scripture. Few passages put a mirror before us as this one does.

What lessons can we take from Jesus' encounter with the Temple authorities and the behavior of his own disciples, all of whom claimed to be religious people? I pondered this for some time last week and want to share some for you to consider.

**Be on guard against selfishness, greed, jealousy, hatred and the lust for power.** They will bring the worst out in you and lead you down a treacherous path.

This was true for Annas, Caiaphas and several of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Their unbridled ambitions, insatiable desire to maintain their lavish lifestyles and obsession with wealth caused them to distort the purpose of religion, misrepresent the nature of God,

break the law, exploit the poor, deceive the people who needed them to be trustworthy, torture the innocent and kill anyone who got in their way and threatened to expose them.

This was unacceptable to God, which made it unacceptable to Jesus. This was why Jesus ran the moneychangers out of the Temple soon after arriving in Jerusalem and spent the remainder of his time during Passover criticizing the leaders for making life harder for those who were struggling to survive instead of helping them rise above their dire circumstances.

Jesus laid the blame for many of the world's problems at their feet. He held them accountable for their abuse of power and called on them to confess their hypocrisy and repent. He implored them to discern what was important to God and to build God's kingdom on earth not theirs.

I wonder what Jesus would say to you and me if he walked among us for a few days. What character flaws would he see in us? What would he call upon us to confess and change?

These are the questions I believe we need to be asking during this season of reflection and renewal. Too much is at stake for us to let this opportunity pass.

Selfishness, greed, jealousy, hatred and the lust for control always lead to bad decisions that undermine all our relationships. Eventually, they cost us everything of value, including our family, job, friendships, health and pride.

Don't let this happen to you. Choose love over hate, kindness over cruelty, compassion over coldness, truth over deception, integrity over expediency, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting, discipline over irresponsibility, maturity over carelessness and sacrifice over self-indulgence.

Your family, friends, classmates, co-workers and neighbors will be glad if you do. I am confident you will be happy about these changes, too.

I see another lesson in our text, especially as I examine Peter's behavior that night. **Think twice before making bold claims or big promises because every promise made among the security of friends will be tested in a hostile environment.**

There are no exceptions, and often that test will come sooner than you realize and from unsuspecting sources. Ask Peter, who was completely unnerved and caught off guard not by Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate or an angry mob, but by an obscure servant girl who asked him a simple question.

Look carefully at the short and long term consequences of every commitment you are weighing. Count the cost. Clarify the expectations. Discover what will be required of you. Seek the advice and counsel of wise friends. Listen carefully to those who have concerns or see danger on the other side of the decision you are pondering.

Instead of bragging about his level of loyalty that night when Jesus warned him of what he saw coming, what if Peter had paused and asked some pertinent questions? Would it have made a difference in the way Peter responded later to the questions he faced around that charcoal fire?

What if Peter had asked, "Lord, tell me why you believe all of us will abandon you before this night is over? What do you know that we don't? What do you see we are overlooking? How can we avoid letting you down and making the biggest mistake of our lives?"

At the very least, I have to believe Peter would have been better prepared to handle this challenge than he was.

What about you? What questions do you need to be asking someone you trust?

I wonder what others see that you are ignoring or may be unable to see from your vantage point. A mature and responsible person will find out and avoid a multitude of heartaches.

This story doesn't flatter Peter at all, does it? It exposes one of his worst decisions and lowest moments.

Maybe this is why it was woven throughout the initial events that occurred after Jesus was arrested. It was included so we would see ourselves through Peter's disgusting and disappointing behavior.

All of us have made decisions we wish we could recall. We have experienced the level of shame, guilt, humiliation and remorse Peter felt that night around that fire. We have cried until there were no more tears to shed.

What have you learned from those experiences? Do you think twice now before making bold claims or big promises? Are you a better listener? Do you seek the advice of others and yearn to know what they see that you don't?

Do you pray more than you used to about decisions? Do you look to Jesus for wisdom, guidance, direction and courage?

On a steep mountainside the snow was coming down in sheets and the wind was howling. A wise Alpine guide grabbed a climber and said, "On your knees! On your knees! It is not safe here except on your knees!"

I know many places where this is true. You may be climbing one now.