

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew
SERMON: **The Abuse of Religious Power Vs. Servant Leadership**
SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:47-68
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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The capacity for evil on the part of deeply religious people is absolutely stunning.

Fifteen years ago this week an American immigrant to Israel opened fire on a group of Palestinians at prayer in a mosque in the town of Hebron, murdering 29 of them and wounding about 125. It was done by a Jew in the name of religion.

A month later hundreds of Bosnian Muslims were slaughtered by Serb Christians. It was done by Christians in the name of religion.

In 2001 the World Trade Center was destroyed and more than 3000 Americans lost their lives. It was done by Muslims in the name of religion.

Just a few months ago thousands of militants torched dozens of Christian churches in Orissa, India, crying, "Kill Christians and destroy their institutions." It was done by Hindus in the name of religion.

For decades in Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics killed each other—men, women, and children indiscriminately—all in the name of religion.

We sometimes have the impression that people who commit such atrocities are just a tiny lunatic fringe, but the fact is that all but one of the violent actions I have just described—all but the massacre in Hebron—were instigated and incited by professional clergymen of mainstream religions and approved by a huge majority of their constituents.

In our own country we have seen religious abuse nearly as devastating as these examples in its results, though it differs in that people have voluntarily put themselves under the sway of religious fanatics. I'm thinking of the cases of Jim Jones, David Koresh, and the Mormon polygamist sect in Texas. But whether one is talking about terrorism or brainwashing, all of this goes a long way to prove Pascal's adage to the effect that "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." C. S. Lewis added, "Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst." Now I'm not so sure. When one looks at Stalin, Hitler, Kim Jong Il and other evil leaders who were not religious at all, it is obvious that religious people have no corner on the market, but certainly there is no doubt that religious leaders can be terribly evil.

But there is still another kind of religious abuse that we tend to tolerate, yet it's no less heinous in God's eyes. It occurs among Catholics, mainstream Protestants, fundamentalists, and even some evangelicals. Often people don't recognize it as abuse because it is so much more subtle than shooting into a crowd of worshipers or flying an airplane into a building or encouraging mass suicide. This kind of spiritual abuse happens when a leader uses his spiritual authority to coerce, control or exploit his followers.

A number of books have been published by Christian authors in recent years on this kind of religious abuse. One of the best of these is entitled *Churches that Abuse* by Ronald M. Enroth. He comments perceptively,

Unlike physical abuse that often results in bruised bodies, spiritual abuse leaves scars on the psyche and soul. It is inflicted by persons who are accorded respect and honor in our society by virtue of their role as religious leaders and models of spiritual authority. They base that authority on the Bible, the Word of God, and see themselves as shepherds with a sacred trust. But when they violate that trust, when they abuse their authority, and when they misuse ecclesiastical power to control and manipulate the flock, the results can be catastrophic.^{i ii}

I believe the single most effective antidote to this kind of religious abuse is the development of servant leadership on the part of pastors, elders, youth workers, teachers, mentors, employers, and parents. We can learn servant leadership in two ways—from positive examples and from negative examples. We all know positive examples of servant leaders from our own life experiences, and in addition there are many Bible passages, particularly in the Pastoral Epistles, which urge Christian leaders to be servants—passages like 2 Tim. 2:24, where Paul says to Pastor Timothy, “The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct.” Or 1 Peter 5:2-3 challenges elders to . . .

“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The other way to learn servant leadership is to study its opposite, examining the negative examples of those who regularly violate its principles. And, believe me, there are plenty of negative examples in Scripture, particularly in the conflict between Jesus and the spiritual leaders of Israel as recorded throughout the Gospels. One writer has said,

Jesus was so focused on the problem of spiritual abuse that it . . . was the only cultural problem that he repeatedly exposed and opposed. This is amazing when we recall that his culture was plagued by a host of serious social ills. Jesus took no public stand against slavery, racism, class warfare, state-sponsored terrorism, military occupation, corruption in government, abortion, infanticide, homosexuality, or the exploitation of women and children.^{iv}

This is not to say that Christ's teachings are not fundamentally opposed to all of these evils, but the one He nailed constantly was the abuse of spiritual power.

I was thinking the other day how interesting it is that Jesus said to His disciples about the spiritual leaders of Israel, “Be careful. Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6, 11). He didn't warn against the yeast of the tax collectors or the prostitutes—the “lowlives” of His day. Probably the destructiveness of their lifestyles was so obvious that few were attracted to become like them. But abusive religious leaders are especially dangerous precisely because their respectable positions and authority can be used to coerce, control or exploit followers.

This morning, as we continue our journey through Passion Week, we are going to examine the worst case ever of spiritual abuse—two powerful religious leaders who played a key role in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Let's begin by setting the stage. Jesus and His disciples are in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He is praying; they are sleeping. Suddenly, the peace and quiet of that sacred place is shattered as Judas appears with Jesus' enemies and Jesus is arrested. We pick up the story in Matthew 26:57-68:

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

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.

Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.' "

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.

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "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."

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

"He is worthy of death," they answered.

Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

Jesus was subjected to two trials (if it's even appropriate to call these kangaroo courts "trials")—one is a religious trial before the Jews and the other a political trial before the Romans, each consisting of several phases. This morning we will consider only the religious trial, but in a few weeks we will examine the political trial before Pontius Pilate.

I want to share the story from the vantage point of what it teaches us about abusive versus servant leadership.

Servant leadership is not inherited. (John 18:12-14)

Of the two key figures in the religious trial of Jesus—Annas and Caiaphas—only Caiaphas is mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. However, Annas is just as important, so I want us to go to John 18 to fill in the rest of the story. John tells us that when the Jewish officials arrested Jesus, "They bound him and brought him *first* to Annas, who was the *father-in-law* of Caiaphas, the high priest that year." Annas became High Priest in Israel in AD 6, when Jesus was just a small boy. Nine years later the Roman governor deposed him for unknown failings, but he succeeded in getting his son-in-law, Caiaphas, appointed high priest in his place. Thus he was able to remain the patriarch of the high priestly family and the real power behind the throne.

The family of Annas was immensely rich, and the principal way they made their money was by requiring pilgrims to purchase the animals required for sacrifice in the temple from them—at prices ten to twenty times market value. The whole business was sheer exploitation, but it enabled Annas to

amass a large fortune.

This helps us understand why Annas arranged that Jesus be brought first to him, even though his son-in-law Caiaphas actually held the office of High Priest. Jesus, of course, had attacked Annas' vested interest when He had cleared the Temple of the moneychangers and merchandisers less than a week earlier. That action had hit Annas where it hurt—in his pocketbook—and he was going to exact revenge!

History makes it clear that the only way Caiaphas ever got to be High Priest was that he married into the right family. It was a case of sheer nepotism, for he obviously had none of the spiritual qualifications for the job. He was the highest bidder and the one most willing to toe the line with the Roman governor. He became the arch-collaborator, the one who bought comfort, prestige, and power by paying off and cooperating with the Romans.

But to God human ancestry means nothing. It has often been said that “God has only children, no grandchildren.” Everyone who comes to God must come on his own, exercising personal faith. The same is true when it comes to leadership among God’s people. It is a beautiful thing when children learn from godly parents and follow in the footsteps of faith which their parents walked before them, but no child should ever inherit a position of leadership in God's church on the basis of bloodline. Nevertheless, it happens a lot.

I might go further and suggest that servant leadership cannot be determined by prestigious degrees either. There are churches that will not call a pastor unless he has an earned doctorate, and if it comes from Yale or Princeton, all the better. A doctorate may be a sign of many things, but it is not a sign of spiritual leadership. The gifts of the Spirit, personal maturity, and a godly track record are worth far more than ancestry or prestige or degrees or anything else the world can offer.

Servant leadership does not sacrifice people on the altar of power. (John 18:14)

In John 18:14 we read this parenthetical thought: “Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people.” We need to back up to John 11 to find the first-hand account of what this is referring to. The setting is immediately after Lazarus is raised from the dead. I'll read beginning in John 11:45-50:

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary (the sister of Lazarus), and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous 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 place and our nation."

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "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."

Caiaphas, facing the prospect that Jesus' rising popularity might make the Romans nervous and cause them to crack down, suggests they sacrifice Jesus so that the nation might survive. The fact that Jesus

was innocent of any capital crime (or any crime at all) was irrelevant to Caiaphas. If the nation could be saved (more importantly, Caiaphas' power and wealth) one peasant preacher's life is a small price to pay.

But Caiaphas said more than he realized. John 11:51-52 goes on,

Caiaphas did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one."

When Caiaphas suggested that one man should die for the people, he had nothing but murder in mind, but God used him to unwittingly deliver a prophecy about Jesus' vicarious atonement.

Caiaphas' plan failed politically, for the crucifixion of Jesus did not preserve the nation. Just 35 years later the Romans came and wiped Jerusalem off the map. But it succeeded spiritually, because when Jesus died on the cross He took the place of the nation. In fact He took the place of all sinners everywhere so that no one has to die spiritually. Jesus became our substitute, paying the wages of sin with His own death. That doesn't mean, of course, that everyone is forgiven, for God requires that we turn to Him in repentance and faith to experience that forgiveness in our own lives.

Now the fact that God prophesied our salvation through Caiaphas' words in no way exonerates Caiaphas. He still must be judged on the fact that his own position, power and prosperity were more important to him than a person's life. In fact, he was willing to sacrifice a completely innocent individual on the altar of power.

While it's not often today that a Christian leader resorts to murder to achieve his ends, it is not uncommon for Christian leaders to sacrifice people in other ways on the altar of power. Sometimes people are silenced when they disagree with leadership. Sometimes they are publicly humiliated for not measuring up to the leader's expectations. Sometimes the normal decision-making process is circumvented in order to achieve the leaders' goals. Sometimes programs become more important than people. In Christian homes sometimes relationships are sacrificed so the breadwinner can climb the ladder of success.

Friends, God calls us to be person-centered in the church and in the home. All the success in the world an organization might achieve is not worth the sacrifice of people. We should never write individuals off by arguing that the common good demands it. Oh, there are times when people write themselves off through anger and bitterness, or overt sin take themselves out, but every opportunity for redemption should be offered.

Servant leadership does not allow the end to justify the means. (Matthew 26:59-63)

When I was just a teenager I heard a powerful sermon I will never forget. The title of it was, "It Is Never Right to Do Wrong to Do Right." I don't even remember the preacher but I remember the point, which was that even if your goal is good, that does not justify wrong means to achieve it. Now I'm skeptical that Annas and Caiaphas had any godly goals at all, but I am absolutely certain they used ungodly means to achieve their goals. There were so many things about the religious trial of Jesus that

were downright illegal.

It was illegal, for example, for the Sanhedrin to try a defendant at night. It was illegal, of course, to convict someone without evidence, and Matthew 26:60 tells us “they did not find any.” It was illegal to allow false witness, but Caiaphas actually sought out false witnesses. It was illegal to force a defendant to testify against himself, which Caiaphas tries to do in verse 63. Scholars have enumerated more than twenty procedural laws that were violated by the religious leaders in this trial.

Caiaphas knows all this, of course, but it doesn't matter to him because for him truth and justice are completely expendable in the pursuit of his goal of preserving the nation and the high priesthood, from which his own power and wealth come. The perpetuation of the institution has become the end, and any means to that end is deemed legitimate.

Are there ways in which leaders today allow the end to justify the means? Should Christians not ask questions when a spokesman for the Bush Administration defends the policy of torturing and abusing prisoners by claiming that torture has produced actionable intelligence and kept us all safer? Should we not also be concerned when a spokesman for the Obama Administration defends the policy of funding and encouraging abortion by claiming that higher abortion rates have reduced crime and kept us all safer?

But it's one thing to see such expediency from political leaders; it's even more troubling when we find it in our religious leaders. I can't help but think of Ted Haggard, who blitzed the news media a couple of weeks ago, ignoring all the pain he was causing his former congregation in the interest of promoting the new film on his life, which will bring him a substantial amount of money. I'm sure he justifies it in his own mind by thinking that he is coming clean, but frankly, fallen leaders need to do their repentance in private before they do it in public.

Servant leadership does not sacrifice truth on the altar of tradition. (Matthew 26:60-63)

One of the revealing facts about Annas and Caiaphas is that they are both Sadducees. The Sadducees constituted one of the two principal religious parties among the Jews, the other being the Pharisees. Sadducees would correspond very roughly to Reformed Jews today, whereas the Pharisees would be Orthodox Jews as we know them. As the liberal wing of Judaism, the Sadducees denied a number of biblical truths, including divine providence, the existence of angels or spirits, the hope of a personal Messiah, and the resurrection of the body. But they loved their traditions, which they viewed as binding all Jews together culturally, no matter what they believed individually.

No tradition was more important to them than that represented by the Temple and all its religious affairs in Jerusalem. Isn't it interesting, then, that two of their false witnesses use Jesus' words against Him in regard to the Temple? In verse 61 two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” Yes, Jesus said those words, but He clearly did not mean what they intimated. Early in Jesus' ministry when He cleansed the temple the first time, His enemies demanded a miraculous sign to prove His authority to do this. Jesus then answered, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19) You may recall that they responded in astonishment: “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise

it in three days?" (John 2:20). Of course the temple He spoke of was His body which would be raised three days after the crucifixion.

But Caiaphas doesn't care what Jesus meant; He just cares that he has something to use against Jesus. He is willing to sacrifice truth on the altar of tradition. Do we see this happening today in the church? The Catholic Church has a tradition of celibacy of the priesthood. There are no biblical grounds for this tradition; in fact, quite the opposite—even the man they identify as the first pope was clearly married—I'm talking about Peter. But tradition is viewed as more important than truth.

We evangelicals can also get so attached to a style of worship or a philosophy of ministry or a kind of church government that we are sometimes willing to preserve it at all costs, even twisting Scripture in the process. Several years ago we did a worship survey in our church in St. Louis. In answer to the question, "What could our church do to make your worship experience more meaningful?" one person wrote, and I quote, "Whenever people raise their hands in worship, either call on them or cut off one finger each time." In fairness the person added in parenthesis, "Just kidding, maybe!" I'm glad he or she was kidding, but what this answer reveals, if I may be so bold as to guess, is that this person had a traditional way of worshiping that was very important to him—so important that he was willing to ignore the many passages of Scripture that not only speak of believers raising their hands but even command them to do so.

Now I am certainly not trying to equate the person who turned in that survey to Caiaphas. But the root problem is the same—a willingness to sacrifice truth on the altar of tradition.

Servant leadership does not use intimidation to enforce its influence. (Matthew 26:67-68)

I return once more to John 18 and to the first phase of Jesus' religious trial in the palace of Annas. John 18:19-24:

Meanwhile, the high priest (This is referring to Annas, who is still referred to as the High Priest, in much the same way that we still refer to Bill Clinton or George Bush as President Clinton or President Bush) questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

"I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said."

When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded.

"If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" Then Annas sent him, still bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

This is the point at which Matthew 26:57 picks up the story. Jesus is taken from Annas' palace to Caiaphas', where the same behavior continues, as they spit in His face and strike Him with their fists. Others slap Him. They use intimidation to try to get what they cannot achieve through rational argument, false witnesses, or trumped-up evidence.

In addition Caiaphas uses another kind of intimidation which might be called emotional manipulation.

Imagine a chief justice in a trial behaving as he does in verse 65: “Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” Of course, he receives the answer he is looking for—“He is worthy of death.”

It's a curious thing how often insecure church leaders resort to intimidation tactics of one sort or another to enforce their influence. Physical beatings are rare in churches, but emotional and psychological abuse are not so uncommon. Pastors and other spiritual leaders often use guilt to motivate people. Vague appeals to “lay it all on the altar” can play on people's emotions and cause them to feel intimidated. Sometimes spiritual leaders exercise control over people's private lives. Another intimidation tactic is an autocratic leadership style that communicates “my way or the highway.”

In contrast, servant leaders encourage discussion, give people every opportunity to express their reservations, and air all viewpoints before asking for a vote. Personally I believe every controversial issue in a church business meeting should be voted on by secret ballot so people never feel intimidated when they disagree with leadership. What is there to lose? If leaders don't have the hearts of their people with them, winning a vote isn't going to solve anything.

Conclusion: Servant leadership was totally absent from the character of Annas and Caiaphas; but ironically it was totally resident in their prisoner. We have seen many times in Matthew how Jesus served others rather than Himself, how He knelt down and washed His disciples' feet, how He reached out to the poor and the downtrodden instead of hobnobbing with the rich and powerful. This was absolutely revolutionary—the leader serving His followers! No other religious or political figure in history had ever done that, at least not to the extent that Jesus did it.

And now we see Him walking steadfastly to the Cross to demonstrate the ultimate in servanthood. Just a week before He was crucified Jesus called together His disciples and said,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

Friend, Jesus gave His life as a ransom for you. You were born into slavery—slavery to sin, and there is no freedom apart from the ransom Jesus paid. Won't you turn to Him in faith today?

i. Ronald M. Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, 29.

ii. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences*, 13. Ken Blue cautions that spiritual abuse must be defined carefully.

If everything church leaders do wrong is called spiritual abuse, the issue is trivialized. I want to discourage the superficial labeling of too many leaders as spiritual abusers. Let's deal responsibly with the real problem and not turn our concern with spiritual abuse into the Salem witch hunt of our time.

iii. These passages do not imply, as Dr. Paul Cedar, former President of the EFCA writes in his excellent book, *Strength in Servant Leadership* . . .

“that the effective leader should be too timid to be seen or heard. . . . He or she must be visible, shoulder responsibility, and speak out with vigor and conviction. It is a matter of motives: the Christian leader's passion is to lead people to follow Christ, not himself.”

iv. Blue, 18.