

“I Have Said Nothing in Secret”

The Fifty-Sixth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 18:12-27; Isaiah 45:14-25

From the period of time Jesus spent in Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths (the previous Fall), until the night of his arrest on the eve of the Passover (in the Spring), the religious leaders of Israel have been plotting to kill him. One of Jesus' own disciples (Judas) had approached certain members of the Sanhedrin with an offer he knew they could not refuse. In exchange for thirty pieces of silver, Judas was willing to direct the Sanhedrin to the ideal place where they could arrest Jesus. Once the Sanhedrin accepted Judas' offer, he then led them (along with Roman soldiers and temple guards) to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Judas knew Jesus and his disciples would have gone after celebrating the Passover together. To everyone's amazement, Jesus voluntarily surrendered himself and was soon on his way to appearances before the high priest, and then before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Jesus had done nothing wrong, had broken no laws, and was perfectly obedient to the will of his Father. But his obedience will take Jesus before the magistrate and will end in a sentence of death.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we are currently working our way through the so-called “Passion” narrative of John (chapters 18-19). Jesus has left the upper room, where he celebrated his final Passover with the disciples. After praying for himself (John 17:1-5), for his disciples (vv. 6-19), and then for us (vv. 20-26), Jesus took his disciples across the Kidron Valley to a small walled-in garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives—a place known as Gethsemane. After Jesus and his disciples entered the garden, while Jesus was praying for strength for the horrific ordeal which lay ahead, his disciples fell asleep, leaving Jesus alone when he needed them most. Struggling with the awareness of the painful suffering he must endure the next day, Jesus petitioned his Father—“if it be your will, may this cup pass from me.” “If there be some other way. . .” There is no other way. Jesus prayed to his Father, “not my will, but thy will be done.” Jesus will suffer and die so that the guilt of our sins might be taken away.

About this time, Judas, who left the upper room early, went to inform the Sanhedrin that Jesus and his disciples were going to Gethsemane to pray, and that this would be the ideal spot where the Sanhedrin could find Jesus and arrest him. The garden was small, it was surrounded by a stone wall, and Jesus and his closest disciples would not be expecting to be arrested there, of all places. Following Judas' direction was an arrest mob, described by John as “*a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees . . . with lanterns and torches and weapons.*”

Fearing trouble—that Jesus would perform a miracle, or evade arrest (as he had done on several occasions earlier during the Feast of Booths), a detachment of Roman soldiers was present, as were the temple police (who worked closely with the chief priests). According to John (chapter 18:4-5), “*then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward [i.e., out of the walled garden] and said to them, ‘Whom do you seek?’ They answered him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am he.’*” The moment Jesus identified himself, simply answering “I am he,” John, who was an eyewitness to these events, tells us that the armed mob “*drew back and fell to the ground.*” All Jesus need to is but identify himself—*ego emi* “I am he,” and those arresting Jesus cower in fear—perhaps seeing his words as an assertion of his oneness with YHWH (who identifies himself as the “*I am*” throughout the Old Testament), which, as we saw last time, fulfills messianic prophecy. Fearing that Jesus might attempt to escape, the mob fell to the ground, likely because they were afraid that Jesus would unleash upon them

whatever power which lay behind his miracles. Jesus' reputation as a miracle-worker was now widely known (many of the people in Jerusalem knew about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead). The arrest mob exposes their private fear that Jesus might do something to harm them and free himself.

But Jesus does no such thing. Although he could summon twelve legions of angels for help, it is the Father's will (as foretold throughout the Old Testament) that Jesus must suffer and die, so as to save all those given him by the Father. Even as Jesus voluntarily surrenders, Peter, trying to prevent Jesus' arrest, rushes forward and whacks off the ear of one of the high-priest's servants (a man named Malchus). Jesus heals Malchus on the spot and tells Peter, "*put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*" Jesus must drink the entire cup of his Father's wrath and be willing to go all the way to the cross. But Jesus' arrest is the merely first step in the process which will see the sinless Son of God suffering and dying the next afternoon at the same time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered.

We pick up where we left off last time (v. 12, of chapter 18), when Jesus is actually arrested. "*So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.*" This would seem to indicate that it was the Romans who initially took charge of Jesus, something which may have resulted from Peter's ill-advised assault upon Malchus. Peter is not arrested, only because Jesus has healed Malchus, and the Romans want nothing more to do with a Jewish religious dispute. It is likely that the soldiers returned to their barracks in the Antonia Fortress to get whatever sleep they could before morning, when they would be needed for crowd control in Pilate's court.

Meanwhile Jesus was taken into custody and then bound (tied up) by the temple police, who proceed to take him before those Jewish officials who had been plotting Jesus' death since the Feast of Booths, and who, were now ready, willing, and able to bring their plot to its fruition. John is the only one of the gospel writers to mention Jesus' initial interrogation before Annas, who here is identified as the high priest. In verse 13, John tells us that "*first they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.*" It is easy to get confused by John's account about whether or not Annas or Caiaphas was actually high priest. And we need to take a moment to sort this out.

Annas, apparently, was high priest from AD 6-15, but was deposed by the Roman governor preceding Pilate—a remarkable thing, since Rome usually tried to stay out of Jewish religious and political disputes. Nevertheless, Annas was still widely respected by the Jews, who deeply resented his being deposed by Gentile occupiers. In fact, five of his sons, and even his son-in-law Caiaphas, served terms as high priest, Caiaphas until AD 36. Annas was a sort of patriarchal figure in Judaism, who was still called "high priest" (a "high priest" emeritus—much like American presidents, governors, and senators, retain their titles after they are out of office). Annas was certainly the driving influence behind the events about to transpire.¹ His reputation is such, that Jesus' first stop on the road to Pilate's palace is before Annas.

According to verse 14, "*it was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.*" Earlier, in John 11:49-52, Caiaphas voiced his opinion that it would be far better for the Sanhedrin to take the very unpopular action of putting Jesus to death, rather than allow Jesus to go on creating the kind of trouble which, Caiaphas feared, might lead to civil unrest. This, in turn, might provoke the Romans into wiping out the entire nation. Caiaphas saw this in stark terms—real politik. Better for Jesus to die, than for the Romans to put the Sanhedrin out of power. John's use of

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 580-581.

irony is again readily apparent, because Caiaphas' language is overtly sacrificial—Jesus must die for the people, so as to save the nation from Roman wrath. To put it in contemporary terms, Caiaphas was hoping to “let Jesus take the fall,” so that the Sanhedrin will remain in power. The irony is that Christians now speak of Jesus dying on behalf of his people to turn aside the wrath of the Father, just as Caiaphas spoke of Jesus dying to save the nation from the Romans.

Meanwhile, Peter had avoided arrest, and when Jesus was bound over to temple guards, Matthew reports (in Matthew 26:56) that “*then all the disciples left him and fled.*” According to John's account, however, after fleeing from arrest along with the others, Peter's guilt or curiosity got the better of him, and he probably circled around in the darkness and began following from a distance the temple guards who were taking Jesus to the high priest's home for trial. We read in verse 15, that “*Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple.*” Many think that this unidentified disciple is John (the author of this gospel) and this, in my opinion, may very well may be the case. We are told that “*since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest.*”

Critical scholars question how this unnamed “disciple” who was “*known to the high priest*” could be John, who was but a young fisherman from Galilee. Many speculate that this unnamed disciple was one of the “secret” followers of Jesus, like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. This may be, but why would one of them gain entrance for Peter? Furthermore, the entire account has the character of being written by an eyewitness. How John was known to the high priest is not revealed, but there might any number of ways through which John was recognized by Annas and granted entrance. There may have family connections between John's family and the high priest, the high priest may have witnessed John with Jesus on those occasions when Jesus entered Jerusalem. By whatever means the high priest knew John, this “other disciple” was able to gain entrance into the courtyard for Peter as recounted in verse 16. “*But Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in.*”

The courtyard of the high priest's home would have been a large enclosed space typical of wealthy Jewish families living in Jerusalem. The courtyard was probably a large atrium, and was used for official business (during the day) and for entertaining. Such a space was private and must be entered through a guarded gate. Because John was known by the high priest he was admitted into the proceedings (like a pretty girl gets admitted to a night club much easier than some poor geek and his friends do), and John is able to make sure that Peter was allowed in as well (just as the pretty girl secures entrance into the club for her less pretty friends). The traditional site of Caiaphas' home is not far from the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane (just under a mile's walk). Since well-known and established families lived near, or next door, to one another, the private courtyard was likely accessible to both Annas and Caiaphas. No doubt, members of the Sanhedrin were present, their plan to arrest and kill Jesus now coming to fruition.

Once Peter was allowed entrance into the private courtyard, he is immediately confronted—by a young servant girl (probably 10-12 years of age). John tells us, “*the servant girl at the door said to Peter, ‘You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’*” If the girl recognized (or knew) that the “other disciple” was one of Jesus' disciples too, she either knew (or surmised) that Peter must have been with Jesus as well. The question is accusatory—you are one of Jesus' disciples, *aren't you?* Peter, the same man who boldly swore earlier that evening that he would even be willing to die for Jesus, is now afraid to admit to a mere servant girl that he is a disciple of Jesus. Perhaps Peter is being careful so as not to be arrested—after all he had just cut off the ear of the high priest's servant (whom the servant girl certainly knew). But he's also lost his courage, and the chief apostle now feels compelled to lie to a little girl to protect himself from harm.

One of the reasons why the “other disciple” is likely John, the author of this gospel, is the eyewitness nature of this account. He tells us in verse 18 of something only an eyewitness would remember and find worth reporting years after the fact. “*Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself.*” The fact that it was a charcoal fire which was burning on a cold evening points in the direction that the occupants of the house (Caiaphas and/or Annas) must have been planning for a long evening, since there was no reason to build such a fire unless you were expecting company.

It is very likely that both Caiaphas and Annas had been directly involved in plotting Jesus’ arrest since the Feast Booths (months earlier). They had met with Judas earlier this very evening, and they were expecting Jesus to be brought to this location by the temple police upon his arrest. Peter, trying to lay low and avoid detection, warms himself near the fire. Only an eyewitness would remember this kind of detail and include it in this account written long after Peter’s death (in Rome in the mid 60’s) and some forty years after he had been present (John’s Gospel is written at some point after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70). The image of Peter denying that he knew Jesus to a little girl, and then snuck up and warmed himself near the fire is something John did not forget, even many years later.

The scene now shifts to Annas’ questioning of Jesus and Jesus’ terse response. In verse 19, John tells us that “*the high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.*” The Sanhedrin had been worried about Jesus’ influence on the people since the beginning of his public ministry when he seemed to take over from John the Baptist—another huge thorn in the establishment’s side. Since Jesus acquired a large number of followers in recent days, he might be able lead a revolt against either the Jewish religious leadership, or against Rome. Annas wanted to know of Jesus’ intentions.

After the scene on Palm Sunday (just days before) it had looked to the members of the Sanhedrin like “the whole world” was following Jesus (John 12:19). Messianic fervor was everywhere and Jesus looked very much like a Messiah. The Sanhedrin knew full well that many of their own people hated them, and they were deeply divided among themselves (between the two political/religious parties—the Sadducees and the Pharisees). And then there was the Roman puppet, Herod. The Sanhedrin had enough trouble preserving the status quo without upstarts like John the Baptist and Jesus causing great chaos.

No matter how much the high priest and his son-in-law hated Jesus’ teaching and popularity, Annas’ biggest fear was Roman military intervention into the affairs of Jewish politics. Annas had been deposed from office by the Romans once before in AD 15, and he knew full well that if unless something was done about Jesus *now*, Rome would intervene, and perhaps remove the Sanhedrin from power and prevent them from playing any further role in governing Israel. When Annas asks about Jesus’ disciples, it is fair to assume that Annas is primarily worried about the number of those following Jesus in outlying areas, their political intentions, and whether or not they intended to cause trouble with Rome. It is unlikely at this point, that Annas was worried about the twelve disciples closest to Jesus—since, after all John and Peter were admitted into the courtyard to watch as the proceedings began.

Annas also asked Jesus about his teaching. If the Jews were seeking a way to put Jesus to death, they had two possible options. One, they could turn Jesus over to the Romans on the ground that Jesus was attempting to lead an insurrection (a concern which surfaces when Jesus stands before Pilate). Two, the Sanhedrin could try Jesus in their own courts and then find him guilty of blasphemy or heresy, and then take matters into their own hands and stone Jesus under the terms of their own law—although, by this time in Israel’s history, capital punishment was rarely meted out, if ever. The Jews let the Romans do their dirty work for them. Rome’s crucifixion teams were legendary—one way Rome kept the peace.

We also know that the Sanhedrin was very concerned about Jesus' teaching from the time Jesus attended the Feast of Booths and embarrassed them repeatedly while debating over Old Testament prophecy. In John 7:12, it is clear that the people were themselves divided about who Jesus is, as well as whether his teaching was from God or Satan. *"There was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, 'He is a good man,' others said, 'No, he is leading the people astray.'"* As we saw throughout Jesus' public ministry, his words open up the ground (so to speak) under people's feet. You could not listen to Jesus and avoid deciding whether you were for him or against him. We are also told in John 7:32, that *"the Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him."* Jesus told them at the time that his hour was not yet, but that soon it will come, and then they will seek him but will not find him (John 7:36). Jesus was speaking of his death, resurrection, and ascension, but they thought he was speaking of escape from arrest.

According to verse 42 of John 7, during the Feast the Pharisees asked Jesus, *"have you also been deceived?"* His teaching was very troubling to them (if Jesus is not who he claimed to be, he was guilty of blasphemy), and as we have seen, his teaching implied that Jesus was one with YHWH and that he was Israel's long expected Messiah. This message was especially offensive to the Pharisees, who thought that the messianic age would only come when the nation of Israel completely submitted to the pharisaical interpretation of the Torah (law), and if the people of Israel demonstrated sufficient zeal for righteousness. Now that Jesus is bound and physically present before those same members of the Sanhedrin who have been seeking his death, they have many questions to put to Jesus as they seek to sort all of this out. Yet, none of this happens against Jesus' will. Jesus allows this sham trial to continue because he will obey his Father's will, and fulfill all righteousness. Jesus must drink every drop of the cup of wrath, and this is certainly part of the suffering he must endure for us and for our salvation.

In response to Annas' questions about his disciples and his teaching, we are told in verses 20-21 that *"Jesus answered him, 'I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.'"* There is a loud echo in Jesus' response from Isaiah 45:19 (from our Old Testament lesson) when YHWH declares that he speaks nothing in secret, but declares his word before all. Jesus has done the same. When responding to Annas, Jesus is not denying that he had private conversations with the disciples, but rather is affirming that his message is the same in public and in private.² Jesus is not hiding anything.

To understand Jesus' terse response, we need to know something about Jewish law. Since it was illegal under the Jewish legal system to question a defendant like this *before* the case against him was formally presented and then established by the testimony of at least two witnesses, Jesus reminds Annas that he (Jesus) has on many occasions, spoken publicly and openly in the synagogues and in the temple. Jesus has hidden nothing from his accusers. If ever someone's life was transparent, it is Jesus'. In his answer Jesus throws the entire matter right back in Anna's lap. *"Ask those who heard me preach."* *"What do they say about my teaching?"* Jesus is asking Annas, *"where are the required eyewitnesses?"*

A number of important things emerge from this brief exchange. In the light of Annas' questions to Jesus about Jesus' teaching, we must remember that Jesus has spoken only those words given him by the Father. Jesus has revealed all the Father's words given to him—even in the Parables which are a form of judgment upon those who refuse to believe that Jesus was sent by the Father as Israel's Messiah.

² Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 500.

Nothing secret. Nothing held back. Jesus' response to Annas also exposes the nature of this inquiry to be nothing but a sham—a kangaroo court (to use a contemporary expression). The inquiry takes place in the middle of the night, without the full Sanhedrin present, and without the prior testimony of the required eyewitnesses, who must testify first, and only then can questions be asked of the defendant. The wise jurist Annas ignores the well-established rules of legal procedure, likely because the outcome of Jesus' trial is already a foregone conclusion. Those most zealous for external righteousness, think nothing of breaking God's law whenever it suits their purpose—to demonstrate their own righteousness.

Jesus says nothing about his disciples, but he will not lose a single one of them—including Peter who is about to bring complete shame upon himself. But those present did not like Jesus exposing the high priest's failure to follow Jewish law. According to John, "*when [Jesus] had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?' Jesus answered him, 'if what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?'*" In response to being smacked in the face, Jesus once again challenges the court to give testimony as to whether or not Jesus has done something wrong. If Jesus is speaking the truth, then on what legal basis does Annas do nothing about Jesus being hit in the face simply for answering Annas' question. Annas says nothing, and (according to verse 24,), "*then sent [Jesus] bound to Caiaphas the high priest.* Jesus has taken another sip from the cup of wrath, but there is much yet to consume.

Meanwhile, Peter enters his own private hell. In verse 25, John tells us that "*Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, 'You also are not one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.'* One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, '*Did I not see you in the garden with him?'* Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed." Afraid to admit to a servant girl that he was a follower of Jesus, Peter quickly realizes that people inside the courtyard watching Annas interrogate Jesus might recognize him. Peter tries to blend in, nonchalantly warming himself by the fire, but is soon noticed by a group of onlookers, one of whom asks him in an accusatory manner whether or not he was one of Jesus' disciples. Peter emphatically denies it.

Another man—someone related to Malchus, and who may have actually witnessed Peter's attack upon his family member—asks Peter if he was with Jesus in Gethsemane. Once again, Peter emphatically denies it. Immediately a rooster crowed. Mark's gospel, which in many ways, centers around Peter's testimony, gives us more information. In Mark 14:71, we read that Peter "*began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak,'*" and that after the rooster crowed, Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him earlier that evening that he would deny Jesus three times before a rooster crows (the sign that morning was near). Mark tells us that Peter "*broke down and wept.*"

Although we might expect that this would be the end for Peter, who, after vowing to die for Jesus, just hours later denies three times that he knew Jesus—afraid to admit to a little girl that he is one of Jesus' disciples. Jesus is about to be crucified, and Peter has shamed himself by abandoning his Lord. No doubt, Peter has failed Jesus, and so ashamed of himself he weeps bitterly. Thankfully, Jesus did not fail Peter. Jesus will be obedient unto death, he will drink the cup of wrath down to the bitter dregs. Peter will be forgiven, and by Easter Sunday, Peter will arrive at Jesus' empty tomb to find Jesus raised from the dead, and then realize that his own sins were forgiven—including the sin of denying he knew Jesus.

It is here that we find our point of application. Jesus' obedience to the Father's will, his obedience to God's commandments, and his death for our sins, provides that forgiveness and perfect righteousness which alone can remove the guilt of all of our sins, and grant to us a perfect righteousness and obedience, which is

none other than that of Jesus himself. This is why it is so important that Jesus be betrayed by Judas, arrested by a mob, and then appear before a kangaroo court conducted by the high priest. This is why Jesus must endure being mocked and smacked around, and why he will allow such people to crucify him. Jesus must do all of this so that those of us who identify with the sin and shame of Peter, can know that all of our sins have been forgiven and that we are counted righteous.