

Ten After Ten: Session 29 --- He suffered Under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was Buried

574 From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, certain Pharisees and partisans of Herod together with priests and scribes agreed together to destroy him. Because of certain of his acts—expelling demons, forgiving sins, healing on the sabbath day, his novel interpretation of the precepts of the Law regarding purity, and his familiarity with tax collectors and public sinners—some ill-intentioned persons suspected Jesus of demonic possession. He is accused of blasphemy and false prophecy, religious crimes which the Law punished with death by stoning.

575 To be sure, Christ's relations with the Pharisees were not exclusively polemical. Some Pharisees warned him of the danger he was courting; Jesus praises some of them, like the scribe of Mark 12:34, and dines several times at their homes. Jesus endorses some of the teachings imparted by this religious elite of God's people: the resurrection of the dead, certain forms of piety (almsgiving, fasting, and prayer), the custom of addressing God as Father, and the centrality of the commandment to love God and neighbor.

576 In the eyes of many in Israel, Jesus seems to be acting against essential institutions of the Chosen People: 1. submission to the whole of the Law in its written commandments and, for the Pharisees, in the interpretation of oral tradition; 2. the centrality of the Temple at Jerusalem as the holy place where God's presence dwells in a special way; 3. faith in the one God whose glory no man can share.

577 At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus issued a solemn warning in which he presented God's law, given on Sinai during the first covenant, in light of the grace of the New Covenant: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

579 This principle of integral observance of the Law not only in letter but in spirit was dear to the Pharisees. By giving Israel this principle they had led many Jews of Jesus' time to an extreme religious zeal. This zeal, were it not to lapse into "hypocritical" casuistry, could only prepare the People for the unprecedented intervention of God through the perfect fulfillment of the Law by the only Righteous One in place of all sinners.

580 The perfect fulfillment of the Law could be the work of none but the divine legislator, born subject to the Law in the person of the Son... Jesus fulfills the Law to the point of taking upon himself "the curse of the Law" incurred by those who do not "abide by the things written in the book of the Law," for his death took place to redeem them "from the transgressions under the first covenant."

581 The Jewish people and their spiritual leaders viewed Jesus as a rabbi. He often argued within the framework of rabbinical interpretation of the Law. Yet Jesus could not help but offend the teachers of the Law, for he was not content to propose his interpretation alongside theirs but taught the people "as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

582 In presenting with divine authority the definitive interpretation of the Law, Jesus found himself confronted by certain teachers of the Law who did not accept his interpretation of the Law, guaranteed though it was by the divine signs that accompanied it.

583 Like the prophets before him Jesus expressed the deepest respect for the Temple in Jerusalem... His public ministry itself was patterned by his pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the great Jewish feasts.

584 Jesus went up to the Temple as the privileged place of encounter with God. For him, the Temple was the dwelling of his Father, a house of prayer, and he was angered that its outer court had become a place of commerce....After his Resurrection his apostles retained their reverence for the Temple.

585 On the threshold of his Passion Jesus announced the coming destruction of this splendid building, of which there would not remain “one stone upon another.”...this prophecy would be distorted in its telling by false witnesses during his interrogation at the high priest’s house and would be thrown back at him as an insult when he was nailed to the cross.

586 He even identified himself with the Temple by presenting himself as God’s definitive dwelling–place among men. Therefore his being put to bodily death presaged the destruction of the Temple, which would manifest the dawning of a new age in the history of salvation.

587 If the Law and the Jerusalem Temple could be occasions of opposition to Jesus by Israel’s religious authorities, his role in the redemption of sins, the divine work par excellence, was the true stumbling–block for them.

588 Jesus scandalized the Pharisees by eating with tax collectors and sinners as familiarly as with themselves...He went further by proclaiming before the Pharisees that, since sin is universal, those who pretend not to need salvation are blind to themselves.

589 Jesus gave scandal above all when he identified his merciful conduct toward sinners with God’s own attitude toward them. He went so far as to hint that by sharing the table of sinners he was admitting them to the messianic banquet. But it was most especially by forgiving sins that Jesus placed the religious authorities of Israel on the horns of a dilemma. Were they not entitled to demand in consternation, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” By forgiving sins Jesus either is blaspheming as a man who made himself God’s equal or is speaking the truth, and his person really does make present and reveal God’s name.

590 Only the divine identity of Jesus’ person can justify so absolute a claim as “He who is not with me is against me”; and his saying that there was in him “something greater than Jonah,... greater than Solomon,” something “greater than the Temple”; his reminder that David had called the Messiah his Lord, and his affirmations, “Before Abraham was, I AM”; and even “I and the Father are one.”

591 Jesus asked the religious authorities of Jerusalem to believe in him because of the Father’s works which he accomplished. But such an act of faith must go through a mysterious death to self, for a new “birth from above” under the influence of divine grace. Such a demand for conversion in the face of so surprising a fulfillment of the promises allows one to understand the Sanhedrin’s tragic misunderstanding of Jesus: they judged that he deserved the death sentence as a blasphemer. The members of the Sanhedrin were thus acting at the same time out of “ignorance” and the “hardness” of their “unbelief.”