

Part 82: Close Encounters With Truth

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There's a famous scene in the 1992 movie, "A Few Good Men," where Jack Nicholson's character is on the stand in court facing a line of questioning from Tom Cruises character. At one point Cruise questions Nicholson saying in a heated moment, "I want the truth," to which Nicholson famously responds, "You can't handle the truth!"

Our study through the book of Luke this morning includes Jesus standing trial against his own prosecutors and the sentiment is the same. Jesus makes it clear that those who question him cannot handle the truth—but he makes this point clear not in a rage induced rant, but in his silent submission and poised affirmations of the truth.

Jesus is accused of being three things today (the Christ, the Son of God, and the King of the Jews) and he affirms all of those realities. But ironically Jesus will go to the cross not because the crowds think these claims are true, but because they think these claims are false.

This is important for us this morning because we too have the problem of staring the truth of Jesus in the eye, and responding the right way—putting Jesus on the cross—but for the wrong reasons. You see from a human perspective Jesus was going to be put on the cross because of who he falsely claimed to be, but from a true and divine perspective Jesus was going to the cross precisely because he was those things—and that is the scandal of the cross. If we want to respond to truth rightly, we must wrestle honestly with the claims of Christ.

Our big idea this morning is this, **Jesus was everything he claimed to be, believe it.** We will unpack this challenge of seeing this good news in such a dark text in three ways. First, we will look at the **Three Names and Claims of Jesus**, then we will see **Three Responses to Jesus' Claims**, and lastly we will see **Two Reconciliations**.

Our passage last week focused on Peter's trial outside the High Priest's house, but now the camera lens focuses to Jesus' experience inside the house. Luke tells us in **verses 63-65** that Jesus was mistreated throughout the night, beaten and mocked by the temple guards.

This blasphemous display of violence was on account of the due process of the day. In order for the Jews to kill Jesus, Rome had to sign off on it, which meant Jesus had to first be tried by the Jewish court—the Sanhedrin—but the law prohibited the court from convening at night.

So throughout the night, Jesus was beaten, until the first light allowed Jesus' official trials to take place. These temple officials and priests will act as the prosecutors throughout all of these, first before the Sanhedrin, second before Pilate, and lastly before King Herod.

Their case hinges on who Jesus claims to be, these claims are of central importance to our first point this morning: **Three Names and Claims of Jesus**.

If you have your Bible's open you'll see that Jesus is accused of being "the Christ" in vs. 67, the "Son of God" in vs. 70, and in 23:3 "the King of the Jews." In the end, it is our view of Jesus, not our view of ourselves which is most significant in our own understanding of the gospel.

Who do you think Jesus claimed to be? And what do you think that means for yourself? One musician wrote a song describing the modern tendency to re-write Jesus' message summarizing it as this: "He said we're star stuff, and baby, we are enough, and the Kingdom of Heaven is within, and the capital U universe is here to guide us toward our own inner light...Well...ok. But just saying that sort of things never got anyone crucified."

In other words if all Jesus claimed to do was ignite your inner heart fire to make you the best you, then why in the world was he crucified. That kind of messaging offends no one. Contrary to some modern theologies or spiritual talkers you might hear today, Jesus was not benign. Gracious, yes. Kind, yes. But non-offensive, no.

That's because the claims of Jesus leave little room for anyone but Jesus to be the center not only of your life, but of the whole world. That's the profound weight of all these names Jesus stands trial for. The names Jesus' uses here are not just names, they are claims.

When I tell my kids, "I am your father," when I'm asking them to do something, I'm not just identifying myself to them as if I was a stranger. Instead I'm making a claim that because of who I am, you are beholden to an appropriate response to it.

It is the arrogant assumption of these claims that lead the crowds to want to kill Jesus. So what are these claims?

Consider his claim to be "**The Christ**" in verse 67.

The "Christ" was the Greek word for the Hebrew title of "messiah" or "anointed." It was often used of anyone one who was of specific purpose to the Lord. But in the Old Testament also anticipated that there would be "THE messiah," who would be the man that God would choose to restore Israel—that is the Davidic messiah, the anointed one of the Lord (Psalm 2).

If Jesus was the Christ, then he is claiming not just to be another prophet, but THE prophet, THE anointed one who the whole of the Jewish nation should look to for hope.

These priests assume that when the stakes are raised, Jesus would want to distance himself from such a claim—but the opposite is true. He doubles down on it saying **Luke 22:67-69**, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

Jesus' answer is significant for two reasons. First, he points out how he has already openly answered these questions and they have been consistently unwilling to accept his answers. But second, he ties his identity as the messiah, who was assumed to merely be the chief human, to the Son of Man—a role the Jews understood as a divine position.

To be the Son of Man was to be the **Son of God** and that's clearly what the officials assumed in verse 70. **Luke 22:70-71**, "'Are you the Son of God then?' And he said to them, 'You say that I am.'" What seems

like a dodgy answer to us was understood to be a straightforward affirmation of that claim, for the council replied, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his lips."

Perhaps you've heard some modern scholar claim that Jesus never claimed to be God. But here, the chief priests respond with such clear rage because Jesus was claiming to be just that. To be the Son of God was to be God.

But lastly, Pilate inquires on a seemingly less spiritual claim, but one of deeply practical significance: **Luke 23:2**, "Are you the *King of the Jews*," to which Jesus answers with a similar affirmation, "You have said so." Pilate was less concerned about what Jesus claimed to be in the spiritual world, but who he claimed to be in the real world, the political world.

That is to say in summary, if Jesus is the Christ he is to be followed, if he is the Son of God he is to be worshipped, and if he is the King he is to be obeyed in visible, practical, tangible ways. It's been said that to confess the name, "Jesus Christ," is to confess the claim, "Jesus is the Christ."

When you pray, sing, or confess these names are you aware of the implications of it? This is no passive profession. It means that as the Christ he has atoned for our sins and called us into his mission for the world. It means that as the Son of God he is the object of our worship and our sole hope. It means that as the King, we are to submit the whole of our lives to him in ways that are not hidden or discrete even in this worldly kingdom. [talk about at lunch]

The claims of Jesus, the claims of the gospel, are a zero sum game. We either believe it, follow him, worship him, and obey his rule even in our sinful world. Or we reject it. There's not another option. C.S. Lewis famously said that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or he's Lord.

More fitting for our passage today one theologian says: "**With regard to Jesus there are only two possible modes of behavior: either to believe that in him God encounters us or to nail him to the cross as a blasphemer. There is no third way.**"

It's black and white. But in our own darkness we, like Lloyd Gross, hear that and say in our hearts, "So you're saying there's a chance." We might invent our own way, and that's not new, but it's fool hearted.

We see similar attempts to compromise in this passage and this is our second point: **Three Responses to Jesus' Claims.**

Everyone encountered not only Jesus, but true claims about Jesus, and yet everyone responded poorly. Let's take a look at each of these hearts.

First, let's focus on the Jews, and their *Intellectual Arrogance*.

The scribes and priests knew the Old Testament, they studied it, memorized it, and taught it. They knew what it meant for Jesus to claim to be the Christ, the Son of Man, the Son of God and the King of Israel.

But what is the problem? They didn't want to believe it. In John 5, Jesus says to the Jews, "You say you want to hear the Father's word, but you don't want to hear him because you won't believe his son whom he sent." He goes on to say **John 5:39**, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me."

You see there's a difference between wanting to know what Jesus says, and wanting to believe what Jesus says. Both carry the responsibility of reason and intellect, but one adds to it the humility of faith.

The whole history of the church has been that of "faith seeking understanding." We want to study, to interpret, to synthesize, so that we might apply our faith accurately. But let us be careful that faith seeking understanding doesn't turn into understanding as faith. If we only believe what we understand, then we establish ourselves at the center of our life.

It's common in churches like ours to be eager to read old dead authors and study theology. But if we are studying the God of the Bible then knowledge about him means nothing if we are unwilling to obey him. When there's tension, we submit to him, we don't submit him to ourselves. That's what these men did, and it's what we often do in our own lives as well. God didn't match up to what they wanted him to look like, and instead of humbling themselves, they lorded their own desires over the clear teaching of God.

And what happens when you give up God as the center of truth? We quickly give up all truth. These men who were so concerned with truth claims yet they willingly present lies to Pilate. Jesus just told the Jews to file their taxes with TurboTax, and here they say to Pilate, **Luke 23:2**, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar."

They wanted Jesus dead so bad in the name of truth, that they give false truths to Pilate knowing he would only care about the political aspects of Jesus' claims.

And here we see how Pilate's response of ***Apathetic Observation***.

Luke summarizes Pilate's examination but shows how quickly he came to his conclusion, **Luke 23:3-7**, "Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' And he answered him, 'You have said so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no guilt in this man.' But they were urgent, saying, 'He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee, even to this place.' When Pilate heard this, he asked whether this man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at the time."

A bit of cultural background here, Pilate did not normally live in Jerusalem. Archeologists have found a house with his inscription in the seaside town of Caesarea. But because of the nature of the Passover, and the history of Jewish revolts, Pilate had to leave his stunning beachside manor and come into the sweaty crowded stink pot of the Passover Feast to make sure they Jews didn't do something dumb.

So Pilate, hears that Jesus might in fact be trying to do something dumb. It's accused that he's leading an insurrection, stirring up people, and withholding taxes. So he asks Jesus if he's King of the Jews, to which Jesus gives the same affirmation he gave to the priests. And Pilate looks at Jesus, bloodied, silent, and bound. He looks for Jesus' followers, scattered and unable to be found and he comes to the same conclusion you might: "some king."

How easy is it for us as well to hear of the claims of the gospel, but then to look at our world, to look at the church, and to look at our own lives and say, "This doesn't seem to be that great." Remember the issue of Jesus' claim to be king was a claim that would have implied an immediate and tangible experience in the world. He looked at what he saw and said, "This is not it. This doesn't look like a real kingdom."

How easy for us in practice, or for those we are sharing the gospel with, to look at the hope of the gospel and say, "I don't think so. It doesn't look real." To die is gain? Nope. To be humbled is to be made great. I don't think so. To surrender my free time, my finances and my sex life to a King I can't see for a Kingdom that doesn't seem real...no thank you.

It's not that we hate it, it's just that it seems unimportant and impractical. So like Pilate, we try to pass off our responsibility to make a decision to someone else. As soon as Pilate realizes it's a religious and regional issue, he tries to pawn off Jesus on Herod who was also in town for the Passover.

As we saw last week, half-heartedness often betrays hard heartedness, and even though Pilate thought he found a way to avoid making a decision, the crowd would force his hand. There are not agnostics in the end.

But having sent Jesus to Herod we see the final response: ***Dangerous Curiosity***. Whereas Pilate couldn't care less about Jesus, Herod was actually interested. **Luke 23:9-11**, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate."

Herod was excited to see Jesus. He was a religious voyeur. He was quite interested in the miracles of Jesus and was hoping that he would get to see one of those great parlor tricks in person. He was very glad to have him, and you could imagine to tone of his initial questioning was optimistic that Jesus would do as Herod said—pull a rabbit out of a hat, and everyone would go their merry way. But Jesus was not interested in being his entertainment.

I'm not sure how many of you were taught to oddly dark song growing up, "I'm bringing home a baby bumble bee, won't my mommy be so proud of me." But at some point we say, "Ouch, he stung me," and the song ends going, "I'm squishing up my baby bumble bee."

Herod's pride was pricked, his authority was challenged, and curiosity got ugly. Like a spurned lover, or a petulant child, when he didn't get what he wanted, he had no use and the true reality of his heart was on display.

I hope that there are people here today who are curious about Jesus. I'm eager to share God's word with you regarding him. But at some point you will get serious about what you are now curious. There's no third way.

If Jesus is someone who you're hoping will treat you like a king and obey your every wish and command, then you will at some point respond seriously to him. You will either submit your foolish heart to him in repentance, or like Herod you will treat him with contempt, mock him, and send him away as if you are the judge over him.

Herod feels really big about himself when he sends Jesus away dressed like a jester king. We don't hear much more about Herod in the book of Luke, but Luke picks up the narrative in the book of Acts. In chapter 12, Herod puts on his own robes and gives a lofty speech to his people who respond to him shouting, "This is the voice of a god, and not of a man!" But Luke records this next: **Acts 12:23-24**,

"Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. But the word of God increased and multiplied."

Some of you in here today are very glad to be here but for the wrong reasons. What you need is not entertainment, community or a sign, what you need is a savior who will atone for your sins. Give glory to God, not to your own gratification.

Notice how these three trials conclude: **Luke 23:12**, "And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other."

Isn't this an interesting inclusion by Luke? Here we have a riotous mob, making false allegations about crimes, chanting for the murder of the Son of God and Luke gets warm and fuzzy at the end. Here is our last point, **Two Reconciliations**.

The cross always brings unity. But notice how careful we who stand in proximity to the cross must be careful of what that unity is. These men all encountered the truth claims of God, but through the eyes of men—and it led them to turn back to the world with greater fellowship.

Pilate and Herod were not friends, Pilate had murderously killed many Jews—but here they are united in their view of Jesus. Made friends by the blood of the cross. But this gets us nowhere. The world will love to take those who think they have responded to the cross, and welcome you back into faithful fellowship.

But with friends like these, who needs enemies? We don't need to be reconciled to the world, we need to be reconciled, we need to be made friends with God. The problem is, that we put God on the cross.

Like the soldiers we mock Jesus, asking him to prophecy not realizing that our mistreatment is fulfilling prophecy. Our sin demands Jesus to die. When Jesus said that he would sit in power at the right hand of God he's telling us that one day our roles are switched. He will cross examine us. None of us are under Pilate's jurisdiction, or Herod's authority, but all of us are under God's jurisdiction and brothers and sisters we have not made friends there.

Consider what sinful people did to Jesus here before he even got to the cross, and notice how Luke went out of his way to not just speak of the action but of the object. They didn't just mock. They mocked him. They didn't just beat, they beat him. They blindfolded him. They blasphemed him. They accused him. They treated him with contempt, they mocked him, they arrayed him in humiliating attire, and in a few hours they would crucify him.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn who witnessed the atrocious capacity of humanity in the USSR once said, **"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either--but right every human heart--and through all human hearts."**

We don't need any help being reconciled with each other, we need help being reconciled to the Jesus we have mistreated in our own unbelief and in our own hearts.

John Calvin makes this glorious turn when he says it this way, **"According to the flesh, it was disgraceful that the Son of God should be seized, bound and made a prisoner; but when we reflect that by his chains we are loosed from the tyranny of the devil, and from the condemnation in which we were**

involved before god, not only is the stumbling-block...removed out of the way, but in place of it there comes an admiration of the boundless grace of God."

Jesus was not killed because he claimed to be God. He was killed because he was God. And we must see that. **Isaiah 53:7** speaks of Jesus saying this, ""He was oppressed, and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb lead to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

You see because Jesus was the Christ, because he was the Son of God, because he was the one true King he chose not to open his mouth in his defense but instead to open his blood on the cross in our defense.

He came so that we would see who he claimed to be, and not send him to the cross because he's wrong, but because he's right. We need him to die for our sins so that we might have fellowship with God—that we might be friends with our savior king forever.