

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

9/8/24

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Sermon Title: The Illusion of Control

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:57-68

Matt. 26:57 ¶ Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered.

Matt. 26:58 And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end.

Matt. 26:59 Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death,

Matt. 26:60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward

Matt. 26:61 and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'"

Matt. 26:62 And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?"

Matt. 26:63 But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

Matt. 26:64 Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Matt. 26:65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy.

Matt. 26:66 What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."

Matt. 26:67 Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him,

Matt. 26:68 saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”

Main Point: While human beings are determined to oppose the Lord, even their rebellion is planned and under the banner of God’s own sovereign determination.

Outline:

1. The Determination of Men
2. The Determination of Jesus
3. The Determination of God

Introduction

Today’s passage is filled with driven and determined individuals. Human determination is something Jesus runs up against here today; and determination can be so powerful. But we must never forget that as determined as people might be, they can never overrule or overpower God. This principle comes through today in this text.

Because here Jesus is, he’s been betrayed. His disciples have run. And now his sham trial has really begun. He seems as weakened as he’s ever been. Here he is before these highly motivated and highly determined individuals, who all seem to feel like they are in control. But even here, as we’ll see, their sense of control is fleeting, and is ultimately an illusion.

In this text we see here three incredible forces colliding together: On the one hand, you have the determination of men – men who will do anything to accomplish their purposes. Second, you also have the determination of Jesus, who has already resolved that he will go through with these things. Third, we have the determination of God, which of course overrules all of these events, even including the darkness of the coming cross. Let’s look at each of those today and how they collide together in this mock trial before Caiaphas the High Priest.

1. The Determination of Men

First today, our passage confronts us with the determination of man.

Jesus is in front of the most powerful group in Israel. Now, this group doesn't have the power to put Jesus to *death* – that only belongs to the Romans. But they have incredible power and moral influence over the people, and they exert an important pressure on Rome.

They know that they almost certainly hold Jesus' life in their hands. The biggest problem they face is pretty fundamental: they don't actually have the facts on their side. Because of this, their determination drives them to go to extremes to get what they want.

When human beings are set on having our way, we can see here the lengths that they will go to even if it isn't true.

And so they turn to dishonesty. Spin. They twist Jesus' words and try to make it seem as though he has called for the destruction of the temple.

I have not yet preached a sermon on the ninth commandment, which forbids us from giving false testimony. But let me say something about the 9th commandment: we vastly underestimate what a big deal it is to speak falsehoods. It's the currency of our day, so we have gotten used to it in some ways.

We are individually tempted to lie, of course. We individually know what we can manipulate others and situations to our benefit if we say things that are not true. This is evil, of course, and part of Satan's first move in the garden against mankind.

But think bigger. Think of the power our society exerts over us through lies. We live in a moment where society's collective decision to lie and bring others in on their lies exerts an incredible pressure on each of us. Either in the commercial sphere, in the entertainment sphere, or in the personal and even familial sphere of our lives: all of us feel the pressure of the ideas and beliefs of others that we know to be false. Sometimes we are asked to lie about ourselves. Sometimes we are asked to lie about others. And often those lies go to the very nature of reality itself.

This may be extremely obvious and base of me to bring up, but perhaps the most blatant example of this in our world at the moment is the lie that there really is no such thing as a man or a woman except for how a person feels about themselves. Christians face incredible pressure to join in with this example of collective groupthink. But we cannot go along with them because there truly is a givenness to reality that is imposed on us by God. Truth matters. Our bodies matter.

We can love people and treat them with gentleness and respect, and we must. But loving them will actually mean *not* joining in.

In fact, in our cultural moment, lying and forcing others to join our lie are believed to somehow lead to real freedom. Listen to what G.K. Chesterton says about this in his book *Orthodoxy*:

“If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck. If, in your bold creative way, you hold yourself free to draw a giraffe with a *short* neck, you will really find that you are not free to draw a giraffe. The moment you step into the world of facts, you step into a world of limits.... Do not go about as a demagogue, encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end....”

Notice how Chesterton is saying that twisting reality doesn't bring the freedom that we think. It separate us from freedom and reality. This kind of freedom never lives up to its press. Instead, this kind of freedom eats itself and creates new slaves. Peter, in his second epistles tells us that “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them” (2 Pet 2:19).

Margaret Sanger – the founder of planned parenthood, used the slogan “No Gods, No Masters” as the slogan of her newsletter. Yet even as she promoted such supposed freedom, untethered from any bondage, she also advocated for eugenics, sterilization, and the murder of those children from groups she deemed “undesirable” – especially along racial lines. Her idea of “freedom” was really freedom for her and for those in a position to take life, but at the expense of death for the undesirables and the powerless. In Sanger's escape from Gods and masters, she became both.

We are always a slave of someone. Even Margaret Sanger was a slave to someone. Either we are a slave of a good master (God), or we are a slave of a cruel master (Pharaoh, or the eugenicists, or the crowd, or the online mob – whomever we are living for and seeking to please. Whoever they are, we serve them and they are our masters).

Many of the same people who were excited for the supposed freedom that would come in the French Revolution, for example, were eventually executed by the same crowds they had previously riled up. Some college professors have lately found themselves denounced and shouted down by the very students they helped to teach. You see, we are never really free if we serve a cruel master. Our world is obsessed with freedom. But we will always have someone or something as a master, and we are only truly free when we serve a good master who protects us, loves us, and has our best at heart.

Sanger and her followers believed that the ends justified the means. I think it's worth mentioning that for these men in our passage today, the ends *very much* justify the means. Once they decide that Jesus must be killed, and that his death would be a greater good, they are willing to do anything to reach that destination: even take innocent life.

We must always be cautious about those times when we are tempted to use the world's means to accomplish God's purposes.

We see the world taking up false weapons (dishonesty and spin, for example); *initially* we think it would be ironic or even hilarious if we did it – a way to really “own” the other side and “Give them a taste of their own medicine!”

But we are Christians; we're not like the world. We must resist using the world's weapons and harming our own souls or soiling our testimony by living and arguing and winning like they do, and fighting as they do. Paul says we don't do these things like the world, because our wrestling isn't really against flesh and blood.

Maybe we need to have a real moment where we really challenge ourselves as Christians and face hard truths: If we think like the world, argue like the

world, live like the world, talk like the world, relate to others like the world, live on social media like the world, and do everything just like the world around us, we may have to just admit, there isn't much that makes us Christians anymore beyond showing up here perhaps once each week.

If we do these things, then we should admit that the world is our master and our lord. The admiration of society has become our God. The groupthink of the world around us dictates our heart and mind instead of the word of God.

If that's us, there's nothing to do except repent and return to our first love – Jesus Christ.

The new masters always believe they are powerful. And as Jesus stands here, these men are deceived into believing that they are powerful. Look at the mockery here: “Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, ‘Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?’” (26:68). Let me state the obvious: you only do this to someone that you think is never going to be able to do anything about it, ever. They are so deceived into thinking they have power.

When we see what happens to Jesus here, yes, we should be angry. But even more, we should be resolved that we'll be willing to face the same mob, too. The same powerful people who stood against Jesus will one day stand against us. We're not exempt.

J.C. Ryle: “Let us draw from the passage one practical conclusion. Let it never surprise us if we have to endure mockery, and ridicule, and false reports because we belong to Christ. The disciple is not greater than his Master, nor the servant than his Lord. If lies and insults were heaped upon our Savior, we need not wonder if the same weapons are constantly used against His people.”

As we can see, the determination of men is incredibly powerful. And yet it still has limits.

2. The Determination of Jesus

Because second, we see the determination of Jesus.

I wanted to mention this second because looking at the Jewish leadership we see an incredible determination. But here's the interesting thing: in comparison to Jesus, their determination is nothing.

Part of the expression of Jesus' determination is found in what he is willing to tell them about himself. Look closely in verse 63:

“And the high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

Let's slow down a moment and look at this accusation: that Jesus claims to be the Messiah. And remember what this means: to be the Messiah is to be the anointed one, the Savior, the long promised one who would save Israel. And for Caiaphas, it would be enough for him to claim to be the Messiah. If he could catch him in this, nothing else needs to be proved.

Jesus does respond, and he knows that whatever he says, it will be spun against him. And so he speaks very clearly of himself here.

“From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Here's what's happening: He repeats his claims from earlier not only to be the Son of Man from Daniel 7, but he also claims that he will come in judgment against the very ones judging him. He will judge his very judges.

Jesus tells the truth when it would be difficult to tell the truth. You may have had such moments, where you were called upon to tell the truth, and you knew people would hate your answer. It takes great determination to go ahead and say it.

Think of the resolution; the determination of the Savior here. Hebrews 12:2 commands us to look to “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the same, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Why do we look to him? Because we're going to have to endure hardship. Because he did it first.

It is good for us to be strengthened and fortified by looking at Jesus' own determination. We see the determination of Jesus in other places. For example, twice, Luke's Gospel says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51 and 53).

We must be resolved that because a disciple is not greater than his master that there may come a day when we are called upon to summon our determination and be faithful when it is unpopular. What might that look like?

It might look like paying the ultimate price. It might look like a radical personal sacrifice. But I think that will be the exception for most Christians.

I may be naïve, but I actually do not anticipate most of us ever being in a position of official state persecution. Instead, we will be tempted to fold under far LESS pressure than that. Whether or not state sanctioned persecution ever happens in our lifetime, all of us will have a moment where there is social pressure, pressure from those we thought were our friends, our co-workers, our family... to bend and give up the truths of Christ which are so precious.

Neil Postman once pointed out that most Americans imagine that the world will become 1984 with an all-powerful Big Brother surveilling and tormenting its citizens. But Postman's argument is that it's far more likely that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* will become the world we live in. Instead of being persecuted or hunted by an all powerful state, Huxley imagined that we would be drugged and entertained into lethargy and indifference. I agree with Postman: there's no need to persecute an indifferent, drugged-up, sleepy, pleasure-obsessed people. And we do live in a heavily medicated daydream nation already as it stands.

We may *imagine* that someday the state will send us to prison for being Christians. And who knows; maybe they will. I don't know the future. But look: state sanctioned persecution in America is not needed if Christians are already a pleasure-obsessed people who fold the moment the slightest breeze blows upon our faith. We may talk about being ready to *die* for Christ. I think Jesus would say, "try living for me first."

I'm going to say something that I could see being misunderstood: in the early church you had many Christians who intentionally martyred themselves. Why? I

would suggest this: “dying is easy, but living is harder.” Dying takes only a moment. It’s living faithfully over the long haul that is almost more difficult. You die – boom, it’s over. You imagine that you will have a glorious end where you lay it all down. It only takes a moment.

But to live an everyday *ordinary* life week-in, week-out, of dying to yourself and loving the Lord your God above all other things and loving people; daily putting yourself to death? That’s a different kind of challenge... It’s own kind of challenge. And it’s one that we are guaranteed to face in a peaceful pluralistic western society like our own. It’s a challenge we need to put before ourselves.

Jesus set his face for Jerusalem even when he knew it meant suffering and persecution. He made that resolution before the suffering it came. Let’s do the same. Let’s follow the example of our Lord and be resolved during this moment where we are at *peace* that we’ll live for him, so that if he does call us to die for him, it will be a natural outworking of what we’ve already been doing.

3. The Determination of God

Third today we see the determination of God, which is over everything else we’ve seen so far.

Every event even here is under the sovereign power of God. The scriptures clearly teach that everything that takes place is determined by God in advance. Everything here is subject to the plan and determination of God.

Ephesians 1:11 reminds us that God “works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

Daniel 4:35 reminds us that “none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’”

In Isaiah 37:26 God says he holds Sennacherib responsible for ignoring his law. And yet he also says, “Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass.” God is telling us that when world events happen, he is never on his heels responding to them as they happen. Instead, he is the one in control.

We also know that in Matthew 16:21 Jesus predicted that he would “suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes.” So even this moment is part of the plan. It was predicted long before it happened. These men who believed they were powerful had fallen into the hands of a God far more powerful than them.

Peter asserts in his sermon from Acts chapter 2 that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23) And yet Peter also says, “You crucified and killed [him] by the hands of lawless men.” So Peter says, “You did it.” And he also says, “God predetermined it.”

In Luke 22:22 Jesus says, “The Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!” He says, “God may have determined it, but the one who sins is still guilty for it, because he chose to do it.” So the determination of God doesn’t eliminate our responsibility when we make choices. But the plan of God does render these things *sure* and certain. We may never say, “Well God *can’t* hold us accountable, because he determined these things to happen.” But Paul disagrees in Romans 9. “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?” He says human beings are like a pot being formed in the hands of an expert potter, and ultimately it is the potter’s rights and decisions that carry the priority.

But here is the important thing to remember: the potter’s freedom might be something we’re resistant to, but remember who the potter is: the potter is our God, who loves his people. That’s the whole reason that the Scriptures point to it in the first place, because he wants to fortify us in hardship. When painful things happen, God reminds us that he is in control, and that he is good.

God is in the business of overruling human plans for the good of his people. You see this all over Scripture.

In the book of Genesis, the brothers of Joseph hated him, and sold him into slavery. Their plan was to have a world where Joseph wasn’t the favorite son. Their plan was to be rid of their brother. And yet God used that plan and that hatred to save them, so that later Joseph could save his brothers and their families from starvation and death.

And how did Joseph interpret these horrible events? He said, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). Think of that. “On the one hand, *you* had an intention: to do evil. To hate me. To destroy me. But someone else had an intention in this, too (and it’s higher than your intention): God. And he’s more powerful and wise and good than you. So while you were doing evil, he was busy saving you.”

Think of how incredible that is: human determination and intention is so powerful. Powerful enough to kill. Powerful enough to enslave. Powerful enough to destroy. Think of the most powerful men on earth, and what they can do if they want. One dictator can determine that he wants to control another country, and before you know it, 500,000 or more people are dead. Human determination can be an incredibly powerful thing.

And yet human intention, in the hand of God, *always* accomplishes God’s true purpose; even determination by the most powerful leader. Here is Caiaphas; incredibly powerful as far as the Jewish leadership goes. And yet when he accuses Jesus of blasphemy and they say, “He deserves death,” even that is serving the plans of God.

Human determination can never overcome divine determination. In fact, no matter how hard people try, they always end up serving God’s determination. Even here. Even when the life of the son of God is on the line.

Again think of this: why does God tell us this? Why pull back the curtain on such things? The answer is, God is determined not only to have his glory and power seen, but he is also determined that you and I would be filled with hope, and not discouraged. In fact, part of the way he is glorified is *by* us becoming hopeful in him. Because when we hope in him, we’re believing and saying, “You can trust him! He will take care of you! He’s powerful and he’s good. He is maximally trustworthy.” And when you hope in his determination and power, perhaps even in a situation where it is abundantly easier to give up or disbelieve in his promises – when you trust him then – you’re bringing him glory. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 1:12 that God saves us so that we who hope in him “might be to the praise of his glory.” When we hope in him, we give him glory.

This means that while what we read here today is horrible. It's injustice. It's human beings doing their worst and twisting the truth. It's horrible. But it is at the same time beautiful... not because sin is beautiful, but because the power of God is all over it, and his hope and glory is woven into it.

These men are determined to sin.

Jesus is determined to go to the cross.

But even that was because God had determined to love you, and to send his son in the likeness of men to condemn sin in the flesh.

Let's pray.