

## **“The Bottom Sin”**

**John 11:45-57**

**December 10, 2000**

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### Text Comment

- v.45 One of a number of instances in John where the use of the term “Jews” carries no negative overtones.
- v.47 Under the Roman rule, the Sanhedrin was permitted to exercise authority over Jewish internal affairs. At this time the Sadducees, the party of the priests, made up a majority in the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees an influential minority. Most of the Pharisees were scribes, teachers of the law. The remainder of the Sanhedrin were elders, men of standing of probably a mixture of theological viewpoints.

The question is, of course, rhetorical. They haven’t accomplished anything. They had been completely ineffective in stemming the floodtide of Jesus’ popularity. Everyone knows that Jesus is performing miracles. A very important point. Real miracles, miracles of the biblical type, are self-authenticating works of supernatural power. No one ever disputed that they had occurred. Today, a minority of the church can’t even convince the rest of *the church* that miracles are occurring, as they claim, much less the unbelieving world. But the healing of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus were facts that no one could dispute.

- v.48 What they meant was that they were afraid that if messianic expectations were raised to a fever pitch, as Jesus was raising them, because of the resulting political disruption, the full might of the Roman empire would fall upon them and would take away *their place* – mostly likely a reference to the temple in Jerusalem – and *their nation* – that is the semi-independent status of the Jewish nation at that time.
- v.49 “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” The Sadducees were known for rudeness, for the contemptuousness of their speech. Josephus said of them, “The Sadducees...are, even among themselves, rather boorish in their behavior, and in their intercourse with their peers are as rude as to aliens.” [*Bell.*, ii, 166]
- v.50 This is realpolitik coming from Caiaphas. Better one man die than that the nation suffer retribution from Rome. It’s tough, but that’s the way the cookie crumbles. It’s him or us at the end of the Roman rope! Of course, in the event, the murder of Jesus would be the cause of the divine judgment falling upon the nation and its utter devastation in A.D. 70, but, at the same time, would be the cause of the salvation of God’s people. But Caiaphas knew nothing of that.
- v.52 John does not mean that Caiaphas was consciously uttering a prophecy or that he had any idea of what it would mean for Jesus to die. He was speaking callously, happy to give up a single life to secure the interests of the ruling class. But what he said was true in a way

he had no inkling of. This is powerfully ironic. Christ's enemy speaking the truth about the Lord's death without even realizing it. Here is God, once again, using sin sinlessly.

Both Caiaphas and John understand Jesus' death as substitutionary: either Jesus dies or the nation must die. But Caiaphas is thinking only politically; John is thinking of the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And it is the world, not the Jews only. We have in v. 52 in view the "sheep that are not of this fold," the Gentiles who would be called by the Shepherd, who would hear his voice and follow him.

- v.53 Caiaphas' open and cold-blooded willingness to sacrifice Christ for the larger good crystallized the thinking of the rest. Yes, that is what must be done. Jesus must be got rid of. They would have to move carefully so as not to offend the people or the Roman authorities, but the deed must be done.
- v.54 We know that there were some in the Sanhedrin who were sympathetic to Jesus, so it is not surprising that he soon learned of their intention to kill him. He withdrew far enough to be safe for the time being, but remaining close to Jerusalem (about 12 miles away), the Passover being near. No one would take his life from him, he would lay it down of his own accord, in his own way and at the proper time.
- v.56 In other words, even before the Passover week began Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims who had arrived early to complete their ceremonial purification so that they could participate in the worship of that holy week. The "whitewashed tombs" of which Jesus spoke in Matthew were whitewashed at this time of year to make them conspicuous so that no one would touch them accidentally and contract ceremonial defilement. The name of Jesus was on every tongue. But the form of the second question actually suggests that the people doubted that Jesus would be so foolhardy as to make a public appearance at Passover. He would be virtually handing himself over to death.
- v.57 In other words, the antipathy of the religious leadership toward Jesus was well known.

Now, here is the long and the short of it. A man was raised from the dead. Not many weeks before, a man who had been blind from birth had his sight restored to him. And these, as everyone knew, were but the last in a long series of the most astonishing works of power – events such as no one had ever seen before, such as staggered everyone (they were staggered just as we would be if we saw such things today) – *and everyone of those works was a blessing to some sorrowing, or struggling, or benighted human being.* The miracles the Lord performed made the sick well, restored soundness and purity of life to lepers, restored them to human society – lepers were the scourge of the earth in those days – restored hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, fed the hungry, and returned dead people to their broken-hearted loved ones. All of this was surpassingly wonderful and good. Who could possibly resent all of this supernatural kindness, these powerful good deeds? Who could possibly feel anything but pleasure at the happiness of so many who had suffered so long and so terribly until Jesus of Nazareth lifted them up?

Well, the religious leaders could resent all of this and complain against the very things that had been life and happiness to so many of their people. We have already seen, earlier in the gospel, that these men envied the Lord for his popularity with the people, for his power, even, alas, for his goodness. They hated the fact that the people had this great enthusiasm for Jesus. It made them smaller in comparison. They couldn't stand for the people's loyalty and love to be taken from them and given to another. And it was all made so much worse by the fact that Jesus publicly charged them with teaching falsehood, with hypocrisy, and with disloyalty to God and the covenant. How dare he accuse them! This upstart! And, then, how dare the people to love their enemy!

But, we think, surely the miracles must have given them pause. Surely the raising of the dead must have made them think twice. "Perhaps Jesus is the Messiah. Perhaps he knows of what he speaks. Perhaps he is right about us and that we really do need to repent as he says we must." But it was not to be. And we must know why? How could men remain blind to the truth when it shown before them in such brilliance? How could they not hear the voice of God when it thundered in their ears?

Well, our text tells us. John knows the answer to that question and he gives it to us twice in these few verses. The first instance is in v. 48 where the members of the Sanhedrin are reported as saying to one another that if Jesus isn't stopped the Romans will come and take away both *our* place and *our* nation. The wording is unusual in the Greek and scholars say that the result is that emphasis falls especially on the pronoun "our." It occurs but once in the Greek but first in the phrase. In other words, they fear that the Romans will take these things away *from them*. They are, in other words, less worried about the well-being of the nation and its people than about their own positions of power and prestige. [Carson, 420-421]

The second instance in v. 50 confirms that interpretation. There John quotes the priest Caiaphas as saying, "You do not realize that it is better *for you* that one man die for the people..." Caiaphas is making a naked appeal to their own self-interest, to their love of themselves. He knows that they want to hold on to their privileges, their rank, their status, and the economic benefits they bring, and he frames his argument in precisely those terms. Think of what is best *for you*! And they do and agree that it would be best for them if there were no Jesus of Nazareth. It wouldn't be best for the blind and the deaf and the leprous and the hungry and the bereaved, but it would be best for them. These men *loved* themselves, their status, their position, their creature comforts – they *loved these things* – and so they hated anything that threatened them and Jesus posed a direct and dangerous threat to them. Indeed, they were the ministers and elders of the church, but they loved themselves more than the work or the glory of God!

Here is a key that unlocks the mystery of life. Man does not simply behave in ways that displease God, *he loves* those ways. The reason he will not surrender himself to God is because he *loves* himself and does not want to give himself up. He *loves* his sins and doesn't want to forsake them. He *loves* the view of himself that he has and does not want it overturned by the message of the Bible. He loves his pleasures and does not want to sacrifice them for the sake of those things God might demand of them. The Bible is always describing men and women in those terms. They are *lovers of themselves* or *lovers of pleasure rather than God* or, even, as in the last chapter of the Bible, *lovers of falsehood*. Love is a powerful force and when it is placed

in the service of the self it is powerful enough to blind the eye to the clearest sight and to deafen the ear to the most thunderous sound.

Bible-believing Christians must take with full seriousness this description of the human condition, the unbelieving mind and heart of men and women. Even as we honor all human beings as made in the image of God, even as we acknowledge the many very real and powerful factors that shape their lives and their viewpoints, even as we take with full seriousness the pain and sorrow that they suffer in this world, indeed, even as we respect, at a certain level, their reasonings and their arguments on behalf of their unbelief in Jesus Christ, we are also bound to take with full seriousness the Bible's repeated description of them as *lovers of themselves instead of God, lovers of pleasure instead of righteousness, lovers of falsehood instead of truth.*

I was thinking about this again this week in regard to the grip that the theory of evolution has on our culture. I was reading Niles Eldridge, the famous paleontologist – that is someone who studies fossils –, the colleague of Stephen Jay Gould. Eldridge is an ardent evolutionist, but unusual among evolutionists for the candor with which he admits the lack of evidence for evolution.

“No wonder paleontologists shied away from evolution for so long. It never seems to happen. Assiduous collecting up cliff faces yields zigzags, minor oscillations, and the very occasional slight accumulation of change – over millions of years, at a rate too slow to account for all the prodigious change that has occurred in evolutionary history. When we do see the introduction of evolutionary novelty, it usually shows up with bang, and often with no firm evidence that the fossils did not evolve elsewhere! Evolution cannot forever be going on somewhere else. Yet that's how the fossil record has struck many a forlorn paleontologist looking to learn something about evolution.” {*Reinventing Darwin*, 95 in Johnson, *Objections Sustained*, 63]

Why do people cling so tenaciously to a theory so deeply troubled by a lack of evidence, the kind of evidence that according to the theory ought to be abundant everywhere one looks in the fossil record, in the genetic structure of life, in embryology, and so on? The reason is that they *love* evolution, they love falsehood. They love it! They love it because they love themselves and they fear the loss of themselves as they know themselves if they give themselves up to God. Evolution keeps God at bay and so they love evolution! They don't put it to themselves that way at all, of course. But, then, neither did the Sanhedrin. No one stood up in that meeting and said, “Forget the people and forget the miracles and forget what God may be doing in our midst, all that matters is that we, here in this room, preserve our own privileges and positions.” But that was what the real motive that lay beneath their action and from time to time, they let slip what they were really thinking, just as they did here, when they said “*our* place and *our* nation” and when Caiaphas said “it is better *for you...*”

Or, in a similar way, when Richard Lewontin, the Harvard genetics professor, explained, in a piece in the *New York Review of Books* why he rejected out of hand the view of those who see the hand of a creator in the natural world.

“We take the side of science *in spite of* the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite of* its failure to fulfill many of its promises..., *in spite of* the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the [natural] world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our [precommitment] to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.” [*Ibid*, 72]

Or to put it in biblical terms, Prof. Lewontin is in love with atheism and naturalism. He loves it and will not surrender it no matter how many fossils are missing from the record, no matter how many objections have been raised to the theory of evolution for which no real answer can be given. Make no mistake, he is a very bright man. No doubt these Sanhedrin men were very bright as well – some of the brightest in the land. And had they stood up to justify to the people their decision to kill Jesus, many if not most of the people would have been impressed by how seriously they had thought the entire matter through, how deeply they felt the weight of their task, how carefully they had considered the theological and political arguments, how responsibly they had weighed their obligations as custodians of the people’s welfare.

And it would not have occurred to virtually any of them to ask, once more, at the end: but what about Lazarus? Indeed, when, shortly after this, the Sanhedrin decided that they had to kill Lazarus too (as we will read in 12:10) it would have seemed to them and their followers as the natural extension of the logic of their first decision. And even if some of them felt a pang of conscience or a rising doubt, they would have suppressed it for fear of being thought strange or disloyal and so running the risk of losing their place in the group. Nothing can explain this except a force as powerful as love: the love of oneself and of one’s life as one wants to live it and of one’s stature and place and position and pleasure. And such is the effect of self-love upon a person and upon his or her power objectively to consider the truth.

But isn’t this terribly arrogant of us to say of others, for Christians to say of non-Christians? Isn’t it insufferably proud and vain-glorious and pompous for Christians to say that those who refuse to believe in Jesus Christ do so because they are in love with themselves instead and cannot tolerate a rival?

Well, it would be except for this one thing: that what we are saying about the unbeliever we are saying is the universal condition of mankind by nature. And, further, we know it to be so, and we know the terrible strength and destructive power of this self-love, we speak so boldly and so confidently about it as the bottom-sin of human beings *precisely because we have seen it so clearly in ourselves and precisely because even once God has made us his children and broken the back of that self-love we still struggle with it so terribly in our lives every day.*

It was John Calvin, a great Christian of another time, who said that since he had seen God – that is, since he became a follower of Jesus Christ – he saw that it was his own self-love that made him malicious to other men. He never saw that before, but he saw it so clearly after he became a Christian. [Cited in Whyte, *Thomas Shepard*, 185]

Well, every true Christian knows the very same thing. For we struggle all the time with hearts that are malicious toward other people. Oh not to all other people, to be sure. Let a person be fortunate enough to be on our side, to belong to our party, let him serve us and be profitable to us in some way, let her be wise enough to praise and compliment us, and we will love that person. But let the same person cease to be on our side, to belong to our party, let that person have the temerity to criticize us or to disagree with us or to go against us and then let us look up to God and down into our own hearts and be honest about what we see! How much true maliciousness have we seen in Florida and in this country over these past four weeks and, indeed, for months before that.

And where does it all come from? It comes from that passion of love that we have for ourselves. John Newton says that there is a principle of self that causes all men to despise those who disagree with them. “Myself,” says the great Thomas Goodwin, “is the most disingenuous and abominable principle that ever was.” [Whyte, 187] Or as Alexander Whyte translated Goodwin, “‘Self’ in this life, is just another, and a truer, and a keener, and a more homecoming name for sin. My sin is myself.” And that is why the world is so full of every kind of darkness, -- because it is so full of men who are all so full of themselves. [Whyte, *Lord Teach us to Pray*, 159-160] And, let an evangelical Catholic add his voice to those great Protestants. Pascal says, “Of all hateful things, myself is the most hateful to me.”

No wonder then that scene in John Bunyan’s *The Holy War*, right near the end of that great work, when Mr. Selflove, one of the last of the Diabolonians – servants of Diabolus, the Devil, of course in Bunyan’s great allegory – was finally captured. Though Prince Emmanuel had captured the town of Mansoul, some of Diabolus’ chief henchmen were still living safely in the city (people such as Mr. Slavishfear, Mr. Nolove, Mr. Mistrust, Mr. Flesh, and Mr. Sloth). But when Mr. Selflove was taken there were many in the city who were his friends and so his judgment was deferred. It looked as if he might escape punishment, he had so many influential friends. But, then, brave and noble Captain Self-denial stood up – he who had had so much to do with the conquest of Mansoul by the forces of Prince Emmanuel – and said to the court that if a villain such as Mr. Selflove could be winked at in Mansoul he would lay down his commission on the spot. And then he and his men took Selflove out of the court and executed him on the spot. And when Captain Self-Denial’s deed came to the attention of the Prince, the Captain was made a Lord of the City.

Christians and the Christian church for two-thousand years have not accused the world of a virulent and destructive and blinding and deafening self-love without accusing themselves of precisely the same self-love and without giving unending thanks to God that while we were his enemies, loving ourselves so passionately that we had to hate him – for the truth he told about us, for the demands he made upon us – Christ, nevertheless died for us, to save us from ourselves. For we were all, in ourselves, members of that same Sanhedrin, seeking immediate benefit only for ourselves, and willing to give up truth and reason and goodness to obtain it.

And, breaking the power of our self-love by his self-sacrificing love for us, he opened the way to our experience of a love far purer, far more noble, far more life-giving than that selfish love that

ruled our hearts and threatened to destroy our lives forever, precisely because it blinded us to him and deafened us to the sound of his voice.