



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 2ND LENT
LUKE 13:31-35 & PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21
MARCH 13, 2022
“ENEMIES OF THE CROSS”

What does it mean to be “*an enemy of the cross?*” Paul used that phrase in our lesson from Philippians – he seems to be applying it to certain persons. There are over 175 references to “enemy” in the Bible, all but 13 in the Old Testament. If Paul would have said “enemy of God” that would have made sense to his listeners – the Old Testament is chock full of such references - enemies of God were just about anyone not of the house of Israel. In the New Testament however, the enemies list is expanded to include death and the devil, in addition to a few general references to enemies such as one to whom you should as a Christian “turn the other cheek” or if he is hungry...feed him.

But an enemy of the cross – what would that be? Well, a clue is found in those few New Testament references to that “enemies list of God’s”, and unlike the Old Testament, people aren’t on that list – as awful as we can be – but sin, death and the devil are. So we have to assume an enemy of the cross would be someone who either doesn’t believe the cross (crucifixion of Jesus) did a darn thing – it was just another Roman execution in other words...are scandalized at the notion that God would require the death of his own son to forgive other people’s sins...or else, and this is where I think Paul is taking us, recoil at the claims the cross (crucifixion of Jesus) makes on them.

In our gospel lesson today, our Lord encounters two enemies of the cross – and they could not be more dissimilar. Pharisees were men who fiercely pursued holiness by way of the Law of Moses, who believed that law was God’s definitive revelation of his will, and therefore tried to apply it to just about every aspect of life. They hadn’t cared much for Jesus frequent episodes that ran afoul of the law – healing on the Sabbath, touching lepers, that sort of thing.

Still, they warn Jesus about another enemy - the Jewish king Herod who apparently wants to kill him. Funny thing is it’s not clear who the Pharisees disliked more – Jesus or Herod. Herod was about as unlike them as you could get – he didn’t give holiness a second thought – he was a law unto himself. Herod was a blight on the Jewish nation and the Pharisees knew it. John the Baptist had tried to confront him, and we know how that ended. Now Herod’s sights are set on that other preacher of repentance, Jesus.

So, in this first line of the gospel our Lord is getting it from both sides – Herod who can’t tolerate anyone who takes him to task for his sins – and Pharisees who couldn’t stomach anyone who said he had the authority to forgive sins apart from the law. Enemies of the cross on all sides, legalists who pursued personal holiness at the expense of mercy...a king who denied himself no pleasure and didn’t want to be bothered about it one bit.

The Apostle Paul had his hands full with Pharisees – heck he even was one once! It’s one thing to be passionate about God and the church and our Christian witness to the world – Paul was, far more than most. It’s quite another to do so without love for anyone whose passions are not aimed where yours are or whose performance of the faith doesn’t rise to the level yours does – and leave no room for God’s endless mercy. Enemies of the cross are the self-satisfied, who might say the cross was a monstrous injustice but not an indictment of them.

But the Philippian letter is written to non-Jews, so legalists were hardly the concern of Paul. Yet some of them proved to be no less a source of sorrow – they were people who believed that liberty was the name of the game! Masters of their own soul...captains of their own ship...Paul goes so far as to call them idol worshippers – saying *“their god is their stomach”* – whatever looks good, whatever I haven’t tried yet, whatever someone tells me they enjoy, let me have a try. What a searing description of a miserable, empty existence.

Enemies of the cross of this ilk, you could call the “never satisfied” – if I haven’t had it yet I want it soon. If I have too much of it...it’s none of anyone’s business...if it’s bad for me keep your opinions to yourself. We have, I’d say became a nation of such, and with tears, forced to admit many who share the name Christian are among them. They belong not to the church of legalism, sad and wretched as that has been, but to the church of *“all things are lawful for me.”*

Enemies of the cross don’t deny the crucifixion – they deny it’s power. Paul said so in I Corinthians 1:12 *“we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”* So, if this is what *“an enemy of the cross”* is, can one be a “friend of the cross.”

Well, I’m not sure I’d quite put it that way – we may use phrases like *“the dear cross”* or the *“wondrous cross”* or even the winsome phrase from that famous hymn *“the old rugged cross”*. What we can say is we believe God so loved this sinful self of mine that he would spread his hands to receive those nails, and yet forgive me for doing it. You can confess that you are a citizen of heaven whose lowly body will one day be like unto His glorious body – and in so doing not confuse or exchange the lusts of that body for the will of God. And you can be humble enough to confess you can do nothing to make God love you anymore, and simply let that cross say it for you. AMEN