

“The Enemies of Jesus”

Luke 23:13-25

December 4, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

If we are to understand Luke’s gospel, it is important that we appreciate the fact that he is writing to a very different audience than people like us. We have the benefit of 2000 years of familiarity with the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. Imagine, though, that you are hearing this story for the first time. A poor Galilean carpenter with no formal education claims to be the Son of God and gathers a large following among his Jewish countrymen, who later turn against him. In the end, he is executed by Roman authorities on the charge of treason. Then some of his small band of remaining followers claim that he has been raised from the dead and is able to walk through walls. Such a story strains credulity to the breaking point for those who are hearing this for the first time.

Luke is writing to people who would find this story hard to believe, and he tries to anticipate and help them with some of their problems. One of those problems is addressed in this passage. Why does Jesus have so many enemies? And why does the Roman governor, Pilate, see fit to condemn him to death for treason? Luke reports in this passage that the two authorities in place when Jesus died, Herod and Pilate, both found him innocent of any crime. Pilate says three times that Jesus has done nothing worthy of death.

It is still the case, though, that Jesus has many enemies. They surround him in this passage like a pack of hungry wolves ready to pounce on their prey. Jesus’ enemies have been pursuing him for quite some time, and it seems now that they have finally cornered him. Who are these enemies, and why are they so opposed to Jesus? Why should this man, at whose birth the announcement was made that he came to bring peace to the earth, have so many enemies? If we are to avoid becoming his enemy too, we must understand what makes people Jesus’ enemies and what makes them his friends. In pursuit of this understanding, let’s consider three groups of his enemies.

I. The Cowardly Enemy

Pilate is one of only three humans named in the Apostle’s Creed. Jesus is named there, as is his mother, Mary. Pilate appears in the phrase where we are told that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Pilate was the Roman governor of Israel, put in place to protect the interests of Rome, which were really only two. They wanted to prevent rebellious uprisings and keep the tax money flowing to Rome. Jesus is brought to Pilate early on the morning of Passover

because the Jewish leaders want him put to death, and only Pilate can authorize an execution.

The Jewish leaders who bring Jesus to Pilate are members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. They are a bit deceptive when they come to Pilate. Jesus was taken to the Sanhedrin right after his arrest, and he was convicted by them of the charge of blasphemy because he claimed to be the Son of God (Mark 14:64). No one in the Sanhedrin said anything about treasonous behavior. But now, when they bring him to Pilate, they know that Pilate will not care that they consider Jesus guilty of blasphemy. He will see it as a religious dispute that has nothing to do with him. So they must come up with some charges that will move Pilate to take the action they desire, Jesus' execution.

Three charges are brought against Jesus: misleading the nation, forbidding the paying of taxes and claiming to be a king. The first charge is a bit vague, and lacks sufficient clarity to be of any real use. The second charge, urging the nonpayment of taxes, is very specific and would indeed get Pilate's attention and lead him to order Jesus' execution. The problem with the charge is that it was completely untrue. They had already attempted to get Jesus to fall into the trap of saying that taxes should not be paid to Rome, but he had escaped their trap by telling them to render to Caesar what belonged to him and to God what belonged to God. The third charge, that Jesus claimed to be a king, was also a serious charge that could easily result in Jesus' execution.

Pilate seemed to be aware from the start that he was being set up by the Sanhedrin to do their bidding. Since when did they care to guard Rome against treasonous behavior? Pilate knew that if there were a serious attempt to overthrow Roman occupation, they would be all too glad to lend their support. So he questions Jesus and concludes that he is no threat to Rome at all, pronouncing him innocent of the charges. **"I find no guilt in this man"** (v. 4). But the Sanhedrin is not satisfied with this acquittal and they urge Pilate to reconsider his verdict. There is a veiled threat behind their urgings. They can complain to Caesar that Pilate is protecting an insurgent, and Caesar may respond by removing Pilate from his position. So Pilate is caught on the horns of a dilemma, having to choose between condemning a man he knows to be innocent and risking his position by antagonizing the Jewish leaders.

He makes four attempts to escape his dilemma. First, when he hears that Jesus is from Galilee, he attempts to defer the whole matter to King Herod, because Galilee was under his jurisdiction. But Herod only wanted to be entertained by Jesus, and sends him back unsentenced. Next, he proposes the half measure of punishing Jesus with a flogging and then releasing him. But it becomes evident that the Jews will not be satisfied with this. Third, he attempts to persuade the crowd to choose Jesus for the annual Passover pardon of a criminal. In this way, he can say that Jesus was condemned (thus

satisfying Caesar and the Sanhedrin) and also release him (satisfying Roman justice and his own conscience by not executing an innocent man). But they call instead for Barabbas. Finally, as Matthew reports, he washes his hands in a symbolic gesture of his own innocence in the matter, and turns Jesus over to the soldiers for crucifixion.

Pilate becomes a warning to us all, for the simple reason that he becomes a reluctant enemy of Jesus. He didn't set about to be against Jesus, but ends up being the one most responsible for Jesus' death. His error is found in his lack of courage. He knows what is right, but lacks the courage to do the right thing and let the chips fall where they may. The last sentence of verse 23 is significant, and provides us with a good application. **“And their voices prevailed.”** The reference is to the voices of the crowd calling for Jesus' crucifixion. It is possible to become a reluctant enemy of Jesus simply by giving heed to the wrong voices.

Which voices prevail in your life? There are two voices that shout in my own life, the voice calling me to be comfortable and the voice urging me to be right. I want to be comfortable and I want to be right, and there are many times when those voices prevail. When I want to be right, I become very defensive. Wendy and I were riding in the car recently when she told me that I should have used my turn signal. My instinctive response that emerges so quickly is to be defensive. “I didn't use my turn signal because there was no other driver who needed to know.” Or I can defend myself through a counterattack, pointing out that I've not been at fault in any accidents throughout my almost forty years of driving, unlike her.

There is only one voice that ought to prevail in our lives, and that's the voice of God. When any other voice prevails, we could become the inadvertent enemy of God, just as Pilate did. The movie *A Beautiful Mind* is about John Nash, a brilliant mathematician who struggled with schizophrenia. In his schizophrenic state, he lived in a world in which the CIA director employed him in dangerous and clandestine operations. Despite seeming so real, all these characters were figments of his broken mind. When he is first diagnosed, he is treated medically, but finds that the medications stifle his personality. So he decides not to take his medicine and deal with the voices. Through his wife's patient help, he learns not to listen to the voices his mind invents. If we would avoid Pilate's outcome, we must do the same, silencing all voices but God's.

II. The Competing Agenda Enemies

Two enemies can be grouped under this heading. The Jewish leaders and King Herod became Jesus' enemies because Jesus refused to endorse their agenda. The Jewish leaders, as well as the crowd of Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover, had an expectation of their Messiah. They expected a

warrior Messiah who would return Israel to its glory days under David and Solomon. They wanted someone to throw out the Roman oppressors and make Israel once again the envy of all other nations. The only powerful foreigners they wanted to come into the nation would be those who would come like the Queen of Sheba, bringing tribute and amazement at the splendor of the kingdom. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, hopes were raised that he might be the leader who could bring this about. But now they were putting their bets on Barabbas over Jesus.

Herod also had an agenda for Jesus. **“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”** (v. 8). Herod wanted to be amused by a miracle from Jesus, like someone hiring a sleight of hand illusionist to perform at a party. Jesus was completely uncooperative, remaining silent throughout Herod’s examination of him. What a fool Herod was here! The Creator and King of the universe was before him, and his greatest desire was for a moment of amusement. What could Jesus possibly say to Herod? His silence was in keeping with the proverb that says, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly” (26:4).

Do you have an agenda for God in your life? For some, God’s chief role is that of helper in achieving a personal agenda. I want to remain in the driver’s seat, but I need God to help provide what I can’t provide for myself. That’s exactly what the Jewish leaders had done with Jesus. They were so focused on what they wanted that they couldn’t see that the one before them was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises they were longing for. The distraction of their own wants blinded them to the glory of the one right in front of them. Others are like Herod, wanting God just to entertain them for a while. God’s role is to provide a brief, amusing distraction. The value of church is its entertainment value. Someone once insulted me about a sermon without even realizing they were insulting me. This person (not someone from this church) said after a sermon I had preached, “I wasn’t bored.” I wanted to say, “Is that all? Is that your goal regarding the preaching of God’s word? You can hear the life-transforming voice of God, and you’re satisfied with non-boredom?”

In the autobiographical account of his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis calls God “a transcendental interferer.” Lewis came to faith in Christ through a series of God’s surprising interferences in his life. How do you respond when God doesn’t do what you want, when he behaves in a way that leaves you puzzled? If we are not willing to submit to him at such times, then we can become his enemies without realizing that we are doing so.

III. The Compassionate Enemy

There is one more enemy in this passage, one that is a little more difficult to discern. There seems to be an invisible hand guiding things to the bitter crucifixion. Why, for example, did Pilate care so much for the opinion of the Sanhedrin? It is likely that he had misstepped in the past and now has to make up for it lest the Jewish leaders complain to Caesar. Luke 13 records one of those missteps. Pilate's soldiers had recently killed some Jews in the temple area, and feelings are still raw over that. He can't afford any further opposition.

The unseen hand conspiring against Jesus here is identified in a prayer of the early church that Luke records in the book of Acts. **“For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place”** (Acts 4:27-28). It was the hand of God directing events to this end. Why did God direct things like this for his beloved Son, Jesus? Barabbas gives us the answer. While Luke is clear in stating that Jesus was innocent of the charges against him, he is equally clear that Barabbas was guilty. He was in prison for **“an insurrection started in the city and for murder”** (v. 19). After all was concluded, the guilty one, Barabbas, was released and the innocent Jesus was condemned. Jesus should have been released and Barabbas crucified. There is irony in Barabbas' name, which means 'son of the father.' Israel released the wrong son.

Just as Jesus took Barabbas' place on the cross, so he takes yours and mine. The reason God directed things as he did was to provide a substitute for sinners like us. Octavius Winslow sums it up well like this. “Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy;-but the Father, for love!”

CONCLUSION:

This passage shows that there are many ways to become an enemy of God. No one in this story set out to become God's enemy, but many of them did. All they did was to insist that their own will be done. The Jews wanted Jesus out of the way because he got in their way. Pilate just wanted to keep his job and Herod wanted a temporary diversion. But in seeking these things above all else, they inadvertently became God's enemies. While there are many ways to become God's enemy, there is only one way to become his friend. We must acknowledge our natural status as his enemies and surrender to his mercy. In the book of Romans, Paul says that we are all by nature God's enemies. **“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”** (5:10). We surrender to God by faith, believing that his prisoners are released, as was Barabbas, through the substitutionary death of Jesus.