

Enemies of the Cross of Christ

Philippians 3:18-19

“ENEMIES OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST”

Or

“WHAT ABOUT LOST CHURCH MEMBERS?”

(Philippians 3:18-19)

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.

In the early verses of Philippians chapter three, Paul has warned his readers against *legalists* who often show up in the Christian fellowship and misrepresent the Gospel of Christ (Phil. 3:1-3). Here at the end of Philippians chapter three, he warns against *libertines* in the fellowship who disgrace the Gospel of Christ (Phil. 3:18-19). A legalist is a person who tries to operate his life (and the lives of others) by law instead of by grace. He operates by rules and regulations instead of by relationship and romance with Christ. A libertine is the opposite of a legalist. He acknowledges no law for his life, living instead by license. The very fact that both warnings are given at the extremes of the same chapter suggests that sinful human nature is very prone to jump back and forth from one of these extremes to the other. Indeed, it is a testimony of the weakness and willfulness of human flesh that these extremes are found in the fellowship of believers. It is likely that there is no fellowship of believers anywhere that does not have people at both extremes.

Christians are forever expressing wistful desires for a “pure and holy” church. It is ridiculously naive to even dream of such a church. We refer idyllically to “the New Testament Church,” but *which church do we mean?* We must remember that *the Corinthian church* was a “New Testament church,” but it was absolutely loaded with the most lewd and ludicrous carnality. *The Ephesian church* was a “New Testament church,” but it went from a fellowship with a hot heart for Christ to a fellowship which had “left its first love” (Revelation 2:4), and it finally lost its identity and existence (see Revelation 2:5, a threat by Christ which was literally fulfilled). So we must not be unrealistic by becoming more idealistic than Jesus Himself! There was no “pure and perfect church” in the days of Christ or the apostles, and there is certainly no such church today.

After such a caution, we still must give serious attention to such warnings as the one contained in our text. The Apostle Peter also warned against libertine practice when he wrote, “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (I Peter 2:11). But Paul’s words in our text are especially tragic and poignant. Notice that he clearly calls libertines “the enemies of the cross.” We are reminded again by these words of how very much the cross meant to Paul, and of how much it means to the Gospel and the Christian. According to I Corinthians 1:18 and other related passages of Scripture, the cross of Jesus Christ is the touchstone of human destiny. It is the great divider of human history.

It is the great determinant of spiritual life. One's adjustment to the spirit of the cross will reveal his character as a Christian, and will determine his reward (or loss of reward) in eternity.

Our text divides all people into either friends or enemies of the cross of Christ. The friends of the cross are those who have caught the *spirit* of the cross, namely, that of *self-denial*; so the "enemies of the cross" are those who manifest the opposite attitude, namely, that of *self-indulgence* and *self-pleasure*. ***So the millions of people on earth who are "marooned on an 'I-land' of self-centeredness" are enemies of the central principle of the Christian life.*** The Cross is the symbol of death to self and sin. By their sin and/or self-indulgence, these people are bringing into disrepute the cross and all the spiritual realities the cross represents.

The text does not allow us to feel that Paul is extremely harsh or hard in his dealings with these people. Quite the opposite. He says, "I have warned you often of them, and now tell you even weeping." Paul's heart was not only big, it was also tender. In Acts 20:19, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had "served the Lord with all humility of mind, and *with many tears*, and temptations." In verse 31 of the same chapter, he asked them to "remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day *with tears*." We have often misled ourselves by saying, "Big boys don't cry," but the truth is that the person is *too little* who can't cry. Tears may be the measure of a man's character.

Luke 19:41 says of our Lord Himself, "When he had come near, he beheld the city (of Jerusalem), and *wept over it*." The tears of both Paul and Jesus indicate *the tenderness of the mourner* and the *terribleness of the coming judgment and ruin*. When Jesus weeps, crucial matters are on his heart. When Paul testifies of his tears, vital concerns are in his mind as he writes. He echoes the heart and words of the psalmist who said, "Rivers of water run down my eyes because men keep not Thy law" (Psalm 119:136), and of the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote, "My soul shall weep in secret places for your pride." When such a man as Paul weeps, he must have strong reasons for his tears. Here, the reason is overwhelming. He wept because the conduct of these counterfeit Christians was a terrible misrepresentation of Christ and His Cross. You see, every nominal Christian slanders our Redeemer and Lord. Each of us should cultivate a heart that is tender and tearful over our own sins and the sins of others.

The "enemies of the cross" Paul refers to are people who had joined the Christian fellowship, but whose hearts were unchanged and whose theology was liberal enough to accommodate sin. So we will examine in these pages these "enemies of the cross."

I. THEIR DISGUISE

First, we will consider the *disguise* of these enemies of the cross. These people paraded as Christians. This made them different from the particular kind of legalists we find at the beginning of the chapter. Those legalists were the Judaizers, unsaved Jews who hounded Paul because they believed he was depreciating the law of Moses and the Jewish religion. The libertines of our text were in the fellowship of believers and considered themselves to be Christians. Thus, they represent all of those people throughout Christian history (or in any local fellowship) who *pose* as Christians, but do not *possess* Christ. They *profess* Christianity, but do

not *practice* it. Their *lips* profess Christ, but their *lives* deny Him. They pretend to be *friends* of the cross, but their lives make them in fact its *foes*.

So these church members are classic hypocrites, wearing an outward mask that pretends something to be true, when in reality the person under the mask is quite different. Jesus spoke of them as “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Actually, the presence of hypocrites in the church should not be at all surprising. *Hospitals exist for the eradication of disease, yet they are filled with diseased people! Schools exist for the eradication of ignorance, yet they are filled with ignorant people! Churches exist for the eradication of sin and hypocrisy, yet they may be filled with sinners and hypocrites!*

Jesus told us at the very beginning that many hypocrites would be found among true believers, and that they would not always be easily detectible. Furthermore, we are to leave their judgment to God (Matthew 13:24-30). Peter was referring to such people when he wrote (II Peter 2:22), “It has happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.” Read and study these words carefully. They have often been used by those who teach “probated salvation” (that you can have salvation at one moment and lose it the next) to “prove” their belief. However, it must be noted that the person in question was never pictured as anything *but* a “dog” and a “sow.” And that person had *always* and *only* been such. Read the verse again to see this. Friends, *no Christian is ever picture in the Bible as a dog or a pig! A Christian is pictured as a sheep.*

Peter’s verse could be called “the proverb of the Prodigal Pig.” In Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, the boy was in the far country, but *he was still his father’s son*. When he went home, he was only returning to his native environment. However, in Peter’s verse, the pig might have been washed, perfumed with “Canal Number Five,” dressed up with a ribbon attached — and yet, when given a chance, that pig would still have made a bee-line for the mud hole! Put the pig anywhere but in the mud, and the pig is a prodigal waiting for an opportunity to go “home.” The people pictured in Peter’s verse are hypocrite church members, professing and pretending to be Christians, but with heart and nature completely unchanged. They may have a “show of godliness,” but their lives “deny the power thereof.” So they are sinners traveling “incognito” in the Christian community. If they remained in the church, they would likely lead genuine Christians into an abused and degraded practice of Christian liberty. They would lead them to believe that grace covers sin and thus it makes little difference how much a Christian sins! The argument would be, “*Since grace abounds where sin is, let sin abound that grace might super-abound!*” What a tragic distortion of the Gospel of Christ and of the Christian life! While professing grace, they actually pervert it! This is the disguise of these enemies of the cross.

II. THEIR DESTINY

Then Paul points out the *destiny* of these enemies of the cross of Christ. He begins his description of them by pointing out their “end.” As Judas “went to his own place” (Acts 1:25), so their course leads to a certain “end.” How abrupt is the word “end.” How final and hopeless! What end can they expect?

Their end is “destruction.” Destruction in the Bible is not to be confused with *annihilation*. The word does not refer to the loss of *being*, but to the loss of *well-being*. The word refers to the loss of all that makes for true life, both now and in the world to come. This “end” is the necessary continuation of their chosen lifestyle. I Corinthians 1:18 says, “To those who *are perishing*, the message of the cross is foolishness.” Note that “perishing” is a present and continuing condition in this life, and it merely extends its momentum and direction into the next life. The sin and enmity which caused the destruction continue forever, and the destruction attends them forever. This is the tragic but inevitable destiny of all such unbelievers. Their sin is unceasing, and their destruction lasts as long as the sin. I referred earlier to Acts 1:25, which says that “Judas went to his own place.” Does God send anybody to hell? Only in the sense that He enforces the morality and laws of the universe. No, a man goes to the place for which he has prepared himself, and in the unsaved sinner’s case, that place is hell. It is amazing that a generation which is producing so much hell says that it doesn’t believe in hell. But hell is portable. Millions are carrying it within them, and it is pulling them “home.”

C. S. Lewis attended a church service led by a young preacher. In his message, the young man said, “If those living in malpractice do not radically alter their demeanor, they may experience grave eschatological consequences.” It sounds to me as if the young preacher knew the brilliant scholar was in his audience! When the service was over, Lewis asked the young man, “Did you mean to say that if a sinner is not saved, he is in danger of going to hell?” “Yes,” the young preacher said proudly. “*Then why didn’t you say so?*” roared Lewis.

Clearly, Paul declared that the “end” of these counterfeit Christians will be hell. Tragically, “many” (verse 18) church members will end up in hell.

III. THEIR DEVOTION

Third, Paul reveals the *devotion* of these enemies of the cross of Christ. They, too, have a god, but what a god! “Their god is their belly,” Paul says. The persons described here seem to be of the same group Paul referred to in Romans when he spoke of “those who serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly” (Romans 16:18).

Here we address a very delicate matter. Paul said in Romans 14:17 that “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking.” Why was it necessary to say this? Who would have ever thought it *was*? But these very questions help us to identify the delicate problem among Christians. These “enemies of the cross” were sensual and self-indulgent, disregarding the practical principle that “they who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts” (Galatians 5:24). The language Paul uses is startling. They have made a god of their belly. That is, the place which properly belongs to God has been usurped by the very lowest part

of their nature. Your “god” is the thing or person that comes first in your thoughts, that you most want to please. To these people, the satisfaction of their physical appetite, and, indeed, their sensual, lustful appetite, is all they care for.

To paraphrase Jesus, their supreme concern is, “What shall we eat, and what shall we drink?” One commentator said, “To them, the table was their altar, and appetite was their god.” Another said, “This is the new idolatry: to make the senses and whatever gratifies them our chief delight and our principal reliance.” This is the opposite of “keeping the body under” in self-restraint. Yet another commentator said, “What they can eat, what they can put on, what contributes to their comfort and their convenience, means more to them than anything else.” Jude described them as “sensual, having not the Spirit” (Jude 19). Like religious devotees, they consecrate their thoughts, their energies, their plans, their drives, to this object.

This phrase draws me up short. This idea gives me great pause. The phrase, “whose god is their belly,” presents a great challenge to me. Though I am not one of the “enemies of the cross” Paul describes, could it be true that I have too much of their philosophy and conduct in my life? *How do I regard eating and drinking? Do I eat and drink to live (and serve Christ), or do I live to eat and drink?* Am I always pampering my appetite(s)? What proof have I that I am truly Christian in these matters? Do I ever take measures (such as *fasting*) to break the stranglehold of appetite upon my life? I must give some sober thought to these words.

I found an old English story of a wealthy man who was taking his friend around his magnificent mansion, in which he had dedicated a large chamber as a chapel. The visitor, who thought of little else other than good living, on entering the chapel, exclaimed, “What a great kitchen this would make!” His host replied sharply, “You are mistaken. This is no kitchen. When I have made my belly my God, then I will make my chapel my kitchen, but not before.” Some people have no *chapel* in their life; it is *all kitchen*. “Their god is their belly.” This is their devotion.

IV. THEIR DISGRACE

Fourth, Paul points out the *disgrace* of these enemies of the cross of Christ. He says that their “glory is in their shame.” The J. B. Phillips paraphrase says, “Their pride is in what they should be ashamed of.” So they not only *practice* indulgence, they actually *glory* in it. Remember that these people are unsaved, and they are liberal in theology. They boast of their so-called “liberty,” and pervert it into license. Instead of giving close attention to *remission of sin*, they have assumed that the Gospel gives them *permission to sin*.

Peter was speaking of such people when he wrote, “While they promise liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (II Peter 2:19). Such people think only of their cleverness and enjoyment; they do not see the silent retribution that is always working in their lives. When men glory in things that should inspire feelings of shame, *the next move belongs to God. They do not control their own character or destiny when they reach this point. God intervenes and declares of them, “I will turn their glory into shame.”*

What happens to such people? They throw moral principle and moral pride to the winds and become immoral degenerates. They make a game of shame. They not only sin flagrantly, but they applaud and congratulate themselves and their companions in sin for being free of “archaic and outdated religious regulations which bind other men.” Cornelius Plantinga, in his book, Not the Way It’s Supposed To Be, said, “People who joy in evil show that some wire has gotten crossed in them; their moral polarity has switched. They are in love with death.” Tragically, great pockets of American life, especially in large cities, virtually swarm with such “people.” Their degradation appears to make them more like animals than men. You see, man must boast of something. Some boasting is perfectly valid and vital for a Christian (see Philippians 3:3). But if man does not know and acknowledge God, *he will pride himself in that which one day will prove to be his eternal embarrassment*. This is their sad and tragic disgrace.

V. THEIR DISPOSITION

Finally, Paul points out the *disposition* of these enemies of the cross of Christ. “They mind earthly things,” he says. One paraphrase of the New Testament says, “This world is the limit of their horizon.” One’s “horizon” defines how far he can see. Konrad Adenauer said, “We all live under the same sky, but we don’t all have the same horizon.” This statement of Scripture proves his point. The people described here only have a focus in this world; they have no frame of reference in the next world. They “set their affections on the things of this world”(Colossians 3:2), seek their glory from them, and look for their happiness in them. Samuel Rutherford, the great Scottish Christian, wrote these words to Lady Huntingdon, the British noblewoman: “Madam, don’t build your nest in any tree here, because the Lord of the forest has condemned the whole woods to be demolished.” But these people are bounded on all sides by this world.

What does Paul mean when he says that such people “mind earthly things”? To “mind” them is to admire them, to desire them, to labor for them, to concentrate thought and effort upon them. Jesus spoke to a man who lived that way and said, “Thou fool!” When *God* calls a man a “fool,” that man is foolish indeed! The word Jesus used is “aphren,” which means “no sense.” Jesus called this earth-bound man, “Mr. No-Sense”! Think of it — *no sense at all!* Not merely silly or stupid, but without sense altogether! Why did Jesus use so drastic a description? Simply because *the man was totally horizontal in his interests, without any vertical relationship*. He was “all soil and no sky.” James Hilton wrote a classic book entitled, Lost Horizon, and that title would aptly describe these people as well. They have lost the horizon of eternity, and are completely bounded by time. They are like Gulliver among the Lilliputians — totally tied down to the earth by a thousand petty strings.

You may recall John Bunyan’s parable, “The Man With the Muckrake.” The man in the parable has a garden tool in his hand, his eyes are fastened on the ground, and he is completely occupied with the menial task of sweeping together the refuse that is around him. He is quite unconscious of the angel who is holding a golden crown over his head. He minds earthly things — and misses the heavenly crown! The message is simple — men were made to face God like kings, but instead they are always rooting in the earth like swine.

Note the five descriptive terms again. These people are “enemies of the cross.” Their “end is destruction.” Their “god is their belly.” They “glory in their shame.” And the final one: they “mind earthly things.” Look at these again, and note their order. The last characteristic — they “mind earthly things” — may seem *mild* in comparison with the others. But the sentence builds up to stress the greatest danger of all, to “mind merely earthly things.” Like carbon monoxide gas, this frame of mind is all the more lethal because it is so often undetected. It settles upon a man before he is aware that his drowsiness to spiritual things precedes the sleep of death.

This phrase, “they mind earthly things,” points to the very *source* of their depravity. Their thoughts, their feelings, their interests, are fixed solely upon the things of time and sense. If they were truly Christians, their minds would have been set on heavenly things. This is one of the by-products of the new birth. “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:1-2).

We will close this study by noting the contrast between “those who mind earthly things” and those whose “citizenship is in heaven” (verse 20). One translation says, “But *our* commonwealth is in heaven.” The word “our” bears major emphasis in that sentence. A “commonwealth” stands against those who do not belong to it, especially against any enemies who try to invade it. This commonwealth stands against “the enemies of the cross” of Christ. The contrast is stark and vivid. *They* “mind earthly things” and are gravitating downward to destruction; *we* are “a colony of heaven on earth,” waiting for a Visit from our Savior (verse 20). Meantime, we “look upward, because our final redemption draws ever nearer.”