

Where Is Your Heart? Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

February 21, 2016

2nd Sunday in Lent

Where is your heart? Now if I mean that blood pumping muscle, then you'll answer, "Right here in the middle of my chest." But what if I mean something else like, "Where is your passion and your drive? What shapes and controls your life? What gives you the greatest pleasure?" Would any of you answer, "The heart of my life is living in opposition to the cross of Christ?" Of course you wouldn't. None of us would. We are all Christians – friends of Christ, right?

Yet when Paul talks about "enemies of the cross of Christ" in our text, he is not talking about pagans and unbelievers. He is talking about those who actually profess to be Christians. It pains him to say it (and he says it only through tears of sadness) but those who live as the enemies of God are often the people of God. This, sadly, has been the case for a long time. In our Old Testament lesson, the religious hierarchy of Israel reject and want to kill Jeremiah, a prophet sent by God for speaking the Word of God. In the Gospel reading, Jesus laments the fact that He wanted so badly to gather His people in Jerusalem like a hen gathers her chicks but they refused. The next time He came to Jerusalem, Jesus would weep over their unbelief.

Do the people of God today still live as the enemies of the cross of Christ? Does that include you and me? Living as an enemy of the cross of Christ means living in opposition to the Gospel – the Good News that, for the sake of Jesus' death on the cross, God graciously forgives the sins of repentant sinners. There are two ways for a professing Christian to do that.

The first way is to say and believe that the cross of Christ is insufficient to forgive and save sinners. Something more must be added. Paul was dealing with people in his time who said that faith in Jesus Christ was good but insisted that the Law of Moses must be obeyed in addition to that. Today, some people might insist that God's grace given through the cross of Christ and received by faith is not enough. Something must be added: a decision for Christ, an opening of one's heart to receive Him, or obedience to certain religious rules and rituals.

A second way to live as an enemy of the cross of Christ is to willfully and intentionally participate in that which caused the crucifixion of Christ, namely, sin. This is a problem running rampant in the Church today. Study after study shows that the moral behavior of professing Christians is not very different from the behavior of unbelievers. We are in opposition to the cross of Christ when we deliberately and unrepentantly continue to engage in behavior that caused Christ to be crucified.

How do enemies of the cross of Christ live, according to Paul? Paul says, "Their god is their belly." For the Jewish Christians of his time, that meant they were so insistent on following Jewish dietary laws that their own bellies and what they put in them became idols. Their right standing before God was based on whether they ate the right things – kosher foods - instead of what Christ had done for them on the cross.

For us, that phrase might be understood a bit differently. For us, our belly represents more than just our appetite for food but it symbolizes our desire for all kinds of material goods. We have become slaves to our material desires and they have become our gods. We work hard, use much time, and invest a lot of money to acquire stuff and more stuff to serve our desires. Our appetites are often insatiable. And it is these desires (and not so much that which is desired) which gets in the way of and even prevents us from faithfully following our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul also says, of enemies of the cross of Christ that "they glory in their shame." The Jewish Christians at his time were proud of their obedience and self-righteousness which, compared with the holy Law of God, was absolutely shameful. For professing Christians today, it might be the same. We might glory in our religiosity or spirituality and become quite proud and self-righteous. That's simply shameful.

Or it might be just the opposite for some Christians today. Many Christians today engage in all sorts of immoral behavior like the people of this world. Not only do they not regret their behavior or repent of it, but they intentionally and gladly do it. They are not ashamed of what they have done, but glory in their shameful behavior.

The problem is all summed up in the last descriptive phrase, “minds set on earthly things.” Sometimes I get the impression that people think that preachers preach against sinful behavior and materialism because we are grumpy or just want to spoil your fun. That’s not it at all. I’ve known many a preacher who, like Paul and like Jesus, have shed many tears for the people they love and care about and who have been put under their spiritual care because the people do not see or cannot see how much their minds are set on earthly things and what the outcome of that will be.

Why is that such a big deal? It’s not because material things are bad or inherently sinful. The things of this world are blessings from God for us to enjoy. (We can *use* material blessings in a bad or sinful way, but that’s a different topic.) The main problem is our attitude toward God and His creation and what will happen because of that attitude. Paul has something startling to say about it. For those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ, “their end is destruction.” If you rely on your own behavior to be right with God, your end is destruction. Conversely, if you blatantly sin without caring that you are doing so, even glorying in it, your end is destruction – body and soul in hell forever. If you devote your life just to obtaining and enjoying the things of this life, your end is destruction and the end of all of your possessions is destruction.

Paul (and any pastor who preaches on this text) does not speak these words simply to scold or shame individuals for their behavior. It is to remind them that what we have in Christ is so much better and lasts so much longer. First of all, Paul says, “our citizenship is in heaven.” Instead of this world which is corrupted by sin and is eventually doomed to destruction being our home, our true home is in heaven which is uncorrupted and shall last forever.

That’s great news for the future but it is also great news for the present. Paul’s words here are crucial for the Philippians. Although Philippi was in the country of Macedonia, it was also a colony of Rome. That meant it’s citizens were also Roman citizens and were entitled to all the rights and privileges of such citizenship. Philippian soil was considered to be Roman soil. So, while they lived in Macedonia, their real home – even at the present time was Rome.

We are a colony of heaven. Citizenship in heaven has already been purchased for us by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Although we live here in Montana, our real home is in heaven where citizenship is. But this place here is literally heavenly soil. When we gather together here with Christ in our midst, hear His Word, gather around His table, and participate in the feast as a foretaste of the feast to come, we are already experiencing heaven on earth.

Secondly, we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven. He who died for our sin was raised from the dead for our life and ascended into heaven. He has not forgotten us nor abandoned us. Instead, He is returning for us to bring us from this colony of heaven to heaven itself.

Thirdly, He will raise us from our graves in the resurrection of the dead. He will transform our lowly bodies which have been corrupted by sin, weakened through sin, and died because of sin. Our bodies shall become like His glorious body – uncorrupted, strong, and never to die again. We will experience life as God always intended for it to be in the Garden of Eden – no sin, no pain, no suffering, no conflict, no fear, no loneliness, and no death.

Rather than living as enemies of the cross of Christ through self-righteous or immoral attitudes or behaviors, cling to that cross in faith. For, in the cross of Christ, there is always full and complete forgiveness for all sin.

Rather than setting your minds on earthly things which only leads to destruction, set your minds on the things above which leads to perfect and everlasting joy and peace. Rather than depending on your own strength to do this, stand firm in the Lord and His strength. Gather together often in this little colony of heaven on earth to receive that strength by hearing His Words of forgiveness, love, and encouragement and by eating and drinking His very body and blood given and shed for you.

Rather than living the life our culture attempts to sell you but which only leads to death, join in imitating Paul and the other saints who have gone before us. And while you live here and now, always eagerly await the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will come from heaven to save us, transform us, and bring us to our true home in heaven.

May that cross, that Savior, and the joy which is already ours in part now and shall be ours in full forever be your passion and your drive. May these things shape and control your lives. May they give you the greatest pleasure. May they always be the heart of your life! Amen