

Empire Church of the Brethren

Sunday Service Sermons

19 March 2023

The Consequences of Bad Religion

You have heard of behaving badly, how about believing badly?

That is, WRONG.

Believing wrong has great consequences in how we live.

“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go like this, everyone will believe in him. . . So from that day they plotted to take his life.’ *John 11.*

Jesus was, is and will always be disturbing.

Disturbing because he goes against our natural tendencies.

He represents the spiritual dimension.

Our new being, when we give ourselves to God in Christ, is spiritual.

And we begin the struggle between the old person who lives within us and the new person God is developing in us.

The one that wins is the one we feed.

Feed the natural and you will always struggle with the spiritual.

Feed the spiritual and the natural will be put in its place.

Jesus came to declare God’s love and to make it possible for us to win the spiritual battle within.

Remember we are headed to Jerusalem.

Headed into the midst of the battle.

Jesus came into Jerusalem during the Passover week.

The high holy week of the year.

Jerusalem was crowded with religious pilgrims.

Jesus was crucified by these religious people.

Both the leaders and the crowd thought that they were doing the Godly right action.

Those that shouted, “Crucify him!” were the same people that prayed regularly in the temple.

The cross is an example of the evil that can be accomplished by wrong religious beliefs.

Religion and the cross.

Jerusalem; the Holy City.

The Gospel of *Mark* records an impressive list of religious leaders who participated in devising the death of Jesus.

The Sadducees were the priestly party whose work and interest focused on the temple.

They loved a smooth, formal worship service; they had a flair for pomp and ritual.

The Pharisees were the legalists whose pride in keeping the fine points of the law separated them from “sinners.”

The scribes interpreted and preserved the law.

The chief priests officiated at worship and spoke the words of forgiveness.

Completing the group were the elders, the community leaders and other leaders.

All of these leaders mingled with a crowd of zealous Jews, many of whom journeyed many miles for the annual exodus deliverance celebration.

It was not the down-and-out group who crucified Jesus.

It was the up-and-in crowd that did it, the law-abiding, hardworking, religious people.

The Jerusalem-Rome connection.

The ease with which these religious leaders became a party to evil was partly the result of an unhealthy connection between them and the state.

The Romans controlled the Sanhedrin; the high priest was a Roman appointee who acted at the bidding of the Roman officials.

One of the chief priests expressed their dilemma: "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.: *John 11:47*

The leaders of the church had bowed before the state.

God was no longer acknowledged as the supreme authority.

But the alliance never paid off.

The power with whom they cooperated turned on them in 70 AD and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

Only evil can result from an unhealthy connection between church and state.

A free church in a free state is the ideal.

Then the church can exercise its prophetic role and petition the state to use its God-given authority responsibly.

Out of self-interest Caiaphas said it was better for Jesus to die for the nation than for the entire nation to perish.

Jesus did die for the nation but for an entirely different reason.

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." *Proverbs 14:34*.

Only through Christ's death can a nation have the reproach of sin replaced by the righteousness of God.

Lost concern for people.

People or place.

Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus was the immediate experience that precipitated this religious conspiracy.

Some people put their faith in Jesus, while others "went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done." *John 11*

For the Pharisees, new life for the dead was not as important as retaining their religious leadership. Stones and mortar took priority over sin and mortality.

The people whom God called to be "a light to the nations" had replaced their world vision with concern solely for their own nation.

Religion is an evil force when it becomes an institutional care-taker and loses concern for people.

The missionary Billie Pate said, "The church must translate its heart from the empty cavity of brick and mortar to the throbbing marketplace of human need. Too long it has lifted the cup of cold water to its own lips."

Rules or right.

One Sabbath day when Jesus entered the synagogue, a man with a withered hand was among the worshipers.

The religious authorities watched Jesus to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath in order to accuse him.

The Lord is in the business of putting things right; religious rules are of secondary importance.

Bad religion, on the other hand, is concerned with the status quo.

The "old time religion" that some people yearn for may only be an emotional, action less, and archaic relationship to God that is totally foreign to the abundant life Jesus imparts.

Something greater than religion.

Jesus once answered the criticism of the Pharisees saying, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here." *Matt. 12*

Heaven will have no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. *Rev. 21*

It has been said, "One man's religion is another man's burden."

Religion had become a burden in Jesus' day.

The religion of the Pharisees brought despair and futility.

Christ offered joy, hope, life.

He offered himself instead of a religion.

He asks us to accept him rather than a creed or dead religion.

Caiaphas and his religious conspirators thought they had put an end to the Nazarene.

Instead, his death let life loose for all the world.

German pastor Martin Niemoller tells of "the sermon of the gallows":

"There was in front of my cell window in the Dachau concentration camp a gallows, and I often had to pray for those who were hanged on it, poor souls. This gallows put a question to me: What will happen when one day they put you to this test and lay the rope around your neck? Will you then with your last breath cry out, 'You criminals, you think you are right in executing me as a criminal, but there is a living God in heaven, and he will show you!' And then the second question followed: What do you think would have happened if Jesus had died that way, cursing his enemies and murderers? You know the answer: Then you would be rid of him; for there then would be no gospel, no good tidings of great joy, no salvation no hope! Not for anyone, not for you! But, thank God, he, Jesus, died otherwise, differently, not cursing his murderers, but praying on their behalf: 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do!' They could not get rid of him, for he held on and kept them in his forgiving love; and his Father heard his prayer and was well pleased with his son. So there was no escape. This death worked too well, and there is no escape, this death marks his final victory: 'I have overcome the world!' How? By overcoming hatred with love, evil with doing good!"

Look at the cross.

Religious people killed Christ!

The right lost out to rigid rules; self-interest prevailed over service to others; religion took the place of a relationship with God.

Evil was the result, but Jesus triumphed over evil, and he lives.

To all who receive him comes faith that changes the world, faith that overcomes evil with good.

Faith that gives life forever.