

"THE WAY OF JESUS"
V. With His Enemies

INTRODUCTION Today's sermon is the fifth in a series of sermons all of which have been cast in something of the same form. On these Sundays in Lent, we have been considering the "way" of Jesus - his way in a time of decision, his way as a teacher, his way in prayer, his way with his friends and now today - his way with his enemies.

DEVELOPMENT It is true, is it not, that a man of consequence will have enemies and will be controversial. I remember reading that Lyndon Johnson, upon assuming the presidency, had difficulty adjusting to this phase of life in the White House. Former President Harry Truman, when asked about his political enemies, answered in his blunt, practical way by saying, "If you can't stand the heat, then get out of the kitchen". While we much prefer approbation and approval, we must however recognize that if we have a point of view we are presenting with conviction, it is inevitable that there will be a measure of adverse criticism and even hostility.

Jesus stirred up controversy. He challenged the status quo. Because of this he made enemies. And when you read through the Gospel account, you wonder how a person who lived such a life of great service and unlimited love could ever incur such deep hostility and savage opposition.

THE OPPOSITION Suppose we look for a few moments here at the beginning of the sermon at those who opposed him. The opposition, for the main part, was centered in three groups - the Scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees.

To understand the opposition of the scribes and the pharisees we must study the place of the law in ancient Judiasm. Israel was a theocracy in that religious laws governed civil life. The law was sacred. Everything necessary for the good life was to be found in the law. There were rules and regulations to meet every possible action and situation. The law determined not only what they believed and how they prayed, but also how they washed and dressed and ate. From circumsion and phylacteries to Kosher food and tassels on their garments, the law covered it all. From our point of view, the great moral principles of the Old Testament had been turned into petty rules and trivialities.

In our own American history there was a period when an attempt was made to develop a religious law to cover all situations of life. In Puritan New England there is a documented instance of a sea captain who returned on a Sunday after a voyage of three years. His wife greeted him at the door with a kiss and because he kissed his wife in public on a Sunday, he was arrested and placed in stocks.

Into this situation came Jesus. The scribes and the Pharisees naturally resented his posing as a teacher; after all he had not attended the school for rabbis. Only the scribes knew the immense ramifications of the oral law, and only the pharisees could keep it. There was a reason for all of these regulations. They were the distinguishing marks of the Jew, the necessary guardians against assimilation. The evidence began to accumulate that Jesus was a breaker of the law. He treated their ceremonial and legalistic traditions and customs with great casualness. While giving allegiance to the religious and ethical profundities of the faith, he ignored the minor rules and regulations.

I suppose it is easy for us, from the vantage point of our century, to say that he did precisely what he should have done. But I can't help but wonder, if we had lived then, how we might have felt. On whose side would we have been. As the Pharisees saw it, he was dangerously undermining the very foundations of religion and was a threat

to their national integrity, perhaps even their national security. I suppose that anyone who challenges the status quo is bound to come in for a measure of opposition. It became absolutely necessary, therefore, to destroy him before he did damage to the Jewish tradition. William Barclay, in one of his books, tells us that:

"It is one of the supreme tragedies of the death of Jesus that he was hounded to his death by the most fanatically religious people of his day, by men who genuinely believed that they were serving God and protecting the rights of God by killing him".

THE SADDUCEES The Sadducees were also a part of the opposition. They were an older and a more conservative group. In many points of doctrine they differed from the scribes and the pharisees. Numerically, they were smaller, but politically, they were more powerful. They formed the power structure of the community. Rome governed Israel through them. And the last thing they wanted was any disturbance that might disturb their relations with Rome. They would lose their power, their prestige, their wealth.

The Sadducees misunderstood Jesus. They thought he was a political revolutionist. They thought his teachings would cause a rebellion. Therefore, they too were prepared to stop him. Barclay sums up the hatred of these three groups toward Jesus in these words:

"It was a queer tangle of human motives which hounded Jesus to the cross. All the loveliness of his life mattered nothing. The Pharisees honestly and sincerely believed him to be a bad man and an evil influence on other men. The Sadducees wished only to remove a possible threat to their civil and political power and social standing. The priests were determined to eliminate a teacher whose teaching spelt the end of their dictatorship. Jesus cut across blind and rigorous orthodoxy, political and social ambition, ritual and spiritual aristocracy; and so men came to the conclusion that he must die"

WHAT THIS SAYS ABOUT JESUS If, in a sense, a man is known by the enemies that he makes, what does this study tell us about Jesus. I would sum it up in this sentence: He was inwardly secure in that he did not shrink from controversy, yet he was mature in that he did not return hate for hate. Let us examine these two thoughts.

CONTROVERSY First of all, controversy. There are those who enjoy controversy, who have so much hostility pent up within them that they must find justification for it by having people angry at them. Such persons seek controversy. Rebels for rebel's sake. But Jesus was not hostile; he did not go around seeking conflict, sowing seeds of controversy purposely.

At the same time, he did not shrink from controversy. You may have heard the classic story of Pat the Irishman, on his deathbed. The priest was present to administer the last rites. The priest said to him, "Pat, will you renounce the devil and all of his works?" To which Pat, replied, "Father, in the condition I'm in, I don't think I should antagonize anybody". Some of us are like Pat - we shrink from controversy. I wonder - is it that we are so insecure and unsure of ourselves inwardly that we will make almost any compromise in order to have people think well and speak well of us. It may be. But this was not the case with Jesus. He was willing to be involved in controversy where a principle was at stake. He knew what he believed and he was willing to stand by it even though it meant criticism and controversy. He could accept the fact that not everyone would approve of him. It takes strong inner security to recognize that each of us must on occasion expect some measure of disapproval and opposition if we are to remain true to our ideals and beliefs. "Beware when all men speak well of you"

We often speak of the skill of Jesus in human relationships, but when I read the New Testament I am made aware that he did not follow all of the rules of a Dale Carnegie course. On occasion, he could be blunt, direct and forthright, speaking the truth openly, but always in a spirit of love. We find in some instances that he even called men "hypocrites", "whitened sepulchres", and "Son of your father, the devil!" Now you don't go around talking to people in that fashion without creating some opposition.

I think we can sum up this paragraph by saying this that Jesus was not overly concerned with whether people liked him or not. His main concern was to call men to repentance and to share with them the knowledge of God's way. He did not shrink from controversy. In all of this, he is a challenge and a disturber to us. He disturbs because he asks us to look into our own lives and to change. He stood by his convictions and this involved him in controversy.

HE DID NOT RETURN HATE FOR HATE

Suppose we examine then the second observation concerning his way with his enemies. He was mature in that he did not return hate for hate. He sought the conversion of his enemies and loved them in that he desired good to come to them. Most of us are not mature in this sense. Our response to criticism can be so emotional that we quickly lose our common sense, our balance, our ability to judge a situation correctly. We quickly and angrily last back. We are apt to be betrayed into unwise actions and thus injure our relationships with others. How easily we develop a strong dislike, even a hatred, for those who disagree with us, or offend us in some way!

Central, of course, in the teaching of Jesus was his great emphasis upon forgiveness, a willingness to forgive and to forget. We are to forgive, as he put it, "till seventy times seven". In other words, our willingness to forgive is or should be limitless. When he told us to forgive our enemies, he was talking about those with whom we find it difficult to get along with, those persons, perhaps, within our own organization with whom we have a conflict, or that person in our own home with whom we are temperamentally incompatible. There are situations in everyday living which involve pride, greed, and the clash of personality which confront us with the constant need to be loving and forgiving.

It was Jesus who said, "Love your enemies, and do good to them that hate you and pray for them that despitefully use you". This forgiving, this forgetting, and returning good for evil requires a real maturity of spirit that most of us find it difficult to achieve. Someone has said that a woman may consent to forget and forgive, but she will never drop the habit of referring to the matter every now and then. We know, of course, that this is not just a characteristic of women.

There is a true story that Wallace Hamilton tells. To me it is one of the loveliest parables outside the Bible that I know. A boy in his late teens was riding on a train and fell into conversation with a fellow passenger who happened to be a minister. The boy was upset and eager to talk to someone. "Are you acquainted with a little town named Springvale?" he asked the minister. "Well, not exactly. I know of it. It's the next stop isn't it?"

"Yes" said the boy. "We'll soon be there. I use to live there. My father and my mother still live there, just a mile or so the other side of town. Three years ago I had a quarrel with my father. I said to them, 'You'll never see me again' and I left town. That was three years ago and they have been three tough years. I've kept in touch with my mother. I wrote her last week and told her I would be on this train passing through. I told her I would like to come home just for a day and asked her if it would be all right for me to do this, and if it was, to hang something white outside the door of the

the house so that I would know that dad had agreed to let me stop. I told her not to do it unless he wanted it". The boy looked out the window and turned quickly back to the minister. "Look, sir, my house is just around the bend, beyond the hill. Will you please look for me and see if there is anything white?"

As the train made the slow curve, the minister kept his eye on the rounds of the hill, and then he exclaimed, "Look, son, look" - for there was a little farmhouse all but obscured under a blanket of white. The parents of that boy must have taken every sheet, every pillowcase, every tablecloth and towel and handkerchief and hung them out on every bush and tree. And the boy was out of the car and up the hill before the train had stopped.

Jesus came among men as God's ambassador - an ambassador of love and forgiveness. It's well for us to be reminded from time to time that the white sheets are out on the ternal hills of God. The ultimate illustration of how to deal with enemies came when Jesus was on the cross. There his heart gave expression to the supreme act of selflessness and selfless love when he prayed, "Father, for give them for they know not what they do". Praying for his enemies, seeking for them restoration and forgiveness. What a lesson there is in this for us as individuals and as a nation.

LET US PRAY O God, who hast shown us the perfect life of Jesus, help us as we are drawn to that unattainable ideal. Save us from discouragement, and give us the strength and wisdom to go steadily on our way, always seeking to follow his way, cultivating the qualities we admire. We ask this because we love and admire him and want to be like him. Amen