

INTRO: Who is the greatest enemy of Christianity in the world today?

Is it Islam in the Middle East or in Africa or in Europe?

Is it Communism in China?

Is it nationalistic Hinduism in India?

Is it the atheists, and secularists, and militant homosexuals in the USA?

What do you think? Who is the greatest enemy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Chapter five of John begins a new theme,

a theme of enormous importance in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is the theme of opposition.

The first four chapters of John basically cover the first year of Jesus’ ministry.

The response to him had been positive at times. Many Samaritans believed.

Not so many of the Galileans believed, though they were interested in him.

Then Jesus went to Jerusalem where he performed another miraculous sign.

He healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years.

Jesus saw this man’s pitiful condition, singled him out of the crowd,

took the initiative, and without even being asked, made him whole.

But instead of this miraculous sign generating faith in Christ,

or even glory and praise to God, or even wonder and amazement and humility,

it provoked strenuous, sustained, determined opposition.

After performing this miracle, Jesus was persecuted.

He had conversations with his persecutors

about this miraculous healing and what it meant about him.

But those conversations did not lead to understanding and reconciliation.

Instead, it so hardened the opposition that they started plotting to bring him down.

Much of Jesus’ attention and energy from this point forward

was is directed toward responding to these enemies—

answering them sometimes, avoiding them at other times.

They kept after him and kept after him until they finally achieved their purpose,

and saw him hanging bloody and lifeless on a Roman cross.

So, who were these terrible enemies and opponents of Jesus?

John calls them “the Jews.” What he meant by that term was not Jewish people.

John himself was a Jew. All of Jesus’ disciples were Jews.

By “the Jews” John meant the religious leaders of the Jews.

This becomes more clear as John continues his Gospel.

He tells about the Pharisees, the biggest Jewish religious party, denomination.

Tells about their alliance with the chief priests, the ordained ministers, many of whom were in a different party, the party of the Sadducees.

Although they were hostile to each other, they formed an alliance to kill Jesus.

We’ll get to that later, of course.

But this passage is important because here is where the opposition to Jesus Christ and to his message of grace and forgiveness begins. His first and worst enemies were the religious leaders of the worshipping community of Israel.

So, back to my opening question:

Who is the greatest enemy of Christianity in the world today?

Or to expand the question:

Throughout history, who has been the greatest enemy of the Gospel of Christ?

It’s the church. The greatest enemy of Christianity in the world has always been the Christian church. It isn’t the atheists or the Muslims—it is Christians themselves, or at least a large number of people who call themselves Christians. And even more specifically, it’s often been the religious leaders of the church—ministers, teachers, theologians, and especially those leaders meeting in counsels and committees and assemblies who plot against the good news of God’s grace.

Do you believe that? It’s true.

Let me show you, and then we’ll see why this is so important for us to know.

Three points for you note-takers:

1. A historical survey of the church’s opposition to Christ and the Gospel.
2. A doctrinal analysis of this opposition
3. A practical warning.

Credit where credit is due: Sermon on this passage by Dr. Robert Rayburn, Faith Pres, Tacoma, Washington.

MP#1 A historical survey

Historically, the worst, most common enemy of the Gospel has been visible church. Notice I said “visible church.”

That’s an important concept—a biblical concept.

The visible church is the church we can see.

The visible church is everyone who says: I’m a Christian. I’m a believer. Family.

Or you might say visible church everyone who has been baptized.

It was the same in the Old Testament. Everyone circumcised part of Israel.

Baptism is the outward, visible sign of church membership, like circumcision.

Alongside this is another important biblical concept—the invisible church.

The visible church is the church we can see.

The invisible church is the church only God can see.

It is made up of all the elect, all God’s true children, all truly regenerate people, all true believers. So the invisible church is completely pure.

But the visible church is a mixed bag, sometimes more pure sometimes less pure.

There have been times when the visible church is so impure that

true believers reduced to such a small remnant, and the church itself has become an enemy of Christ and the Gospel and true believers.

This is one of the major themes of the Bible.

The first time there was an institutional church organized around priests and elders was during the Exodus. Right away that church began to slide into compromise. Aaron, first high priest, made a golden calf as a worship aid.

Again and again the same thing happened.

The pure worship and church life God had instituted under Moses was corrupted.

The message of God’s grace through a coming savior was compromised.

The priests and ministers were the worst offenders.

Who did God send over and over to reform the church and call them back to him?

The prophets—Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah. They reached same message.

People of Israel, turn back to Lord who brought out of Egypt and blessed you.

Priests of Israel, you’ve corrupted worship and compromised message of grace.

Over and over again the prophets suffered ridicule, abuse, death from church.

When Jesus, the great Prophet came to call the Jewish church back from it’s

legalism and worldliness, it rose up against him through its leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and killed him.

But it's different now, right? That was OT, stubborn Jews. We're the NT church.

That was before Resurrection and Pentecost—this is after. We're better.

But look at the past 2000 years of church history and you will see same story.

The visible church at various times fallen into idolatry, compromise, pride, legalism, ritualism so thick that simple Gospel message is covered up.

You will also see that through the past 2000 years God has sent prophets—

not inspired prophets like Isaiah—but he has raised up sons and daughters to call the church back to Christ and the Gospel. What has the church done to them?

In 1415 John Hus, minister in what is now Czech Republic, said Christians ought to be able to read Bible themselves so they could know God's grace more fully.

For advocating that position, a church council had him burned at the stake.

In 1498 Savonarola, Italian priest, condemned immorality of priesthood, pope.

The church ordered that he be hung, and before he was hung that he be tortured.

Martin Luther said church shouldn't sell indulgences—pieces of paper blessed by pope that forgave your sins. The church tried to kill him for that.

But that's the Catholic church. Those nasty Catholics. Protestants don't do that.

In the 1600s, the Scottish Presbyterians had a vibrant spiritual life. Lovers of Christ, lovers of grace, lovers of God's word—truly extraordinary believers.

They were murdered, sometimes in cruel and inhumane ways by

Episcopalians who were sure they were serving God by doing so.

Fifty years later, when the Great Awakening broke over England, the chief opposition to that great work of the Holy Spirit was the church herself.

Ministers and bishops refused to let Whitfield and Wesley preach in their pulpits, spread vicious rumors about them, sicced the law on them.

Men whose job was the care of souls were chief enemies of the salvation of souls.

But that's weird Europeans. We're American Christians, would never do that.

In 1935 the great Presbyterian theologian Gresham Machen said it was wrong

to take tithes of God's people give to so-called missionaries who were not sharing Gospel but promoting Communism in Central America. For that he was

excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church, the church of his childhood.

But those are liberal denominations, those godless liberals. We are evangelicals.

Would never be enemies of those God raises up to call us back to Gospel of grace.

Really? Look at the Bible. Look at church history. We can't be so self-assured.

Every era and every branch of church is capable of hostility to Christ and Gospel. And the most sobering thing about this brief history I've related

is that the guilty parties sincerely thought they were serving God by doing so. So how does this happen? What's the cause of it?

Why has the church often been the very worst enemy of the Gospel?

That brings us to the second point . . .

MP#2 A doctrinal analysis of this opposition

The Jewish religious leaders in this story were Pharisees.

I'm afraid we have a one-sided view of the Pharisees that

makes it hard for us to see exactly why they were opposed to Jesus.

We've all grown up with a purely negative impression of them.

We imagine them refusing to help little old ladies across street and kicking dogs. But they were nothing of the kind.

The Pharisees were very popular with common Jewish folk.

They had a high view of the Bible. They believed it authoritative, inerrant.

They were champions of the doctrine of election—the Calvinists of their day. And they took a hard line against the Sadducees, who were the liberals of day.

Sadducees denied resurrection, angels, books of Bible. Pharisees fought them. And they were patriots. Refused to swear loyalty to Herod as a tool of Rome.

We identify with the Pharisees on many points and would have admired them.

So what was the problem with the Pharisees?

Why were they immensely bothered that a man who had been an invalid for 38 years was carrying his mat on the Sabbath, but not interested at all in the amazing fact that he had been healed?

Why did these religious leaders who knew the Bible backwards and forwards persecute Jesus for healing a man instead of worship him as Messiah and Savior? And why have they come down through history as the epitome of hypocrisy?

Here's the answer: They went wrong where people always go wrong religiously.

They went wrong over sin and over grace.

People who take God's law seriously, as the Pharisees did, as we do, are inclined to downplay the seriousness of sin and think we don't need God's grace. Follow me carefully. This is complicated but important. This is our danger.

The Bible says our problem is sin. Sin's fundamental root is rebellion against God.

It is a moral stain on our hearts that pollutes everything we are and all we do.
Sin is wretchedness and selfishness and all the evil that comes from within us.
And what God's law does, first and foremost, is shine a light on our sin.
It shows our utter spiritual helplessness and need for God's grace.
It shows we are spiritual invalids like this man, utterly unable to help ourselves.
But the Pharisees paid so much attention to the law of God,
that they re-defined sin as breaking the rules.
For them, sin was not first and foremost the corruption and rebellion and
selfishness of my heart that renders me a spiritual invalid.
No, sin is breaking the rules. And here are the rules, spelled out in the Bible.
So the Pharisees became more concerned about individual, particular sins
than about the sinfulness of their own hearts.

Now, once you do that, you very logically take the next step.
You grade sins from the worst to the least.
These are the really bad sins. These are the sins that aren't as bad.
It becomes much more important not to commit the greater sins than the lesser.
And once sins have been graded that way, it is possible to think there are many
sins you have never committed—like murder or robbery, for example.
So the end result is that sin becomes something you can control.
You think able not to sin in large areas of life. And you make up extra rules.
Because keeping those extra rules makes you a better person, more deserving.

This is what Jesus attacked in the Sermon on the Mount.
He said that hatred and lust in your heart are murder and adultery.
And he was constantly disdaining these extra, non-biblical rules. Sabbath rules.
But what I want you to see is that once this view of sin is accepted—
that it is something that can be controlled.
And once this view of obedience is accepted—
as something that can balance everything out in your life,
then the entire sense of a need for God's grace and salvation by grace falls away.

That's how it was in Judaism in the time of Christ.
And that is how it has been many, many times over the years in Christianity itself.
Salvation becomes predictable. It's a matter of doing the right things.
There is no "amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."
Instead, God favors those who live a good life.
And there is nothing exciting or amazing about that.

So when Jesus came to save them from their sins, they had no sense of need.

They wanted a political Messiah, because they thought they were fine spiritually. And his message of grace and his free expressions of grace, like healing this man, irritated them, and then infuriated them, because it felt to them like he was disregarding the law of God and their whole religious system. That brings us to . . .

MP#3 A practical warning

This is the warning: We are inclined to do the very same thing—
both as individuals and as a church body.

We are inclined to downgrade our definition of sin to breaking the rules.

We are inclined to categorize sins into the worst and the lesser.

We are inclined to think that because we haven't done the really bad ones, all right.

We are inclined to make extra-biblical rules to feel good about selves, judge others.

And so we are unable to sing from our hearts:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

As we think about this miracle story, perhaps the most important thing to see is that these religious leaders could not see themselves in this paralyzed man.

They couldn't see the parallels—

that they were once so paralyzed by sin they couldn't move,

that they were utterly dependent on the initiative and mercy of God.

And that kept them from rejoicing with this man and identifying with him.

This happens all the time. It's happening in our hearts today.

The amazing grace of God to sinners recedes into the back of our minds, even in church, even when we sing songs about his grace.

As clean, hard-working, conservative, patriotic, Bible-believing people we are particularly susceptible to it.

The principle of the Pharisee is in all of us.

It is lurking near the surface of our minds. It is embedded in our attitudes.

It must be stood against, watched against, prayed against and torn out.

Over and over we have to be reminded that we were dead in our transgressions and sins and that God made us alive in Christ.

We were ugly in our sins, but God loved us anyway, and lifted us up, and embraced us, and gave us hope and life and an inheritance and a future

that we could not deserve in a million years.
We have to be reminded—that's why the Bible says it over and over.
And we have to push it down deep and work it out.

I'll try to be more specific.

Which is hard to do, because our inner Pharisee comes out in different ways.
The first thing I would say is to rejoice in any and every expression of God's grace.
Rejoice and don't be critical.

I have to remind myself of this all the time. Just a silly example.

A few years ago I read a biography of Paul Hewson, better known as Bono.

In that bio was part of an interview he did with a secular reporter who started asking him some spiritual questions and mentioned karma. Bono said:

“At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth . . . And yet, along comes this idea called Grace . . . Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff . . . I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I'd be in deep shit. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.”

That's wonderful, and I should have rejoiced in that.

Jesus said easier for a camel to go through eye of needle, than rich man . . .

If I had the same wealth and popularity as Bono, it would destroy me.

What amazing grace that God has saved this man and given him a voice.

That's what I should have thought.

But then I read about his liberal political views, and his messed up views of the church and some goofy theological ideas and it soured me. What an idiot he is. I was just like the Pharisees who were more focused on this man carrying his mat and violating one of their extra-biblical rules, than on his miraculous healing.

And I'm not going to give you examples of how I have thought the same things about members of this church, because that would be too embarrassing.

But I have. I do. I have to fight against it all the time.

If you catch me doing it, call me on it. Ministers are the worst.

I smelled the chicken houses across the road when I got to church this morning.

If you catch of whiff of Pharisee on me, whop me upside head.

Swear to the Lord right now in your heart:

O Lord, I will not forget your love and my hopelessness.

When I see wicked people sliding away into hell, I will not forget—

“There but for the grace of God go I.”

I pledge, O Lord, to share it with others.

And I promise to rejoice when others receive it,
however different they may be from me.

Lord, I want to prove to you, and to other people, and to my own unreliable heart
that I understand how unworthy I was of your grace,
and how kind and generous you were to give it to me.