



A SAVIOR APPEARS: APOSTLES & OPPOSITION

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A “flash mob” can create buzz. Widespread, real-time communication beckons a group of people to a mass event: a political protest, spontaneous theater, a carnival. The mob dissipates as quickly as it begins and leaves no mark. Groups of people can, sometimes, gather to accomplish important things. But more often crowds have only the appearance of significance. They ‘flash’ with no lasting purpose. The crowds which followed Jesus were mostly of this type.

In this series of messages we are working our way through the chronology of the Bible and now are at the point of telling Jesus’ life story. We left off at the beginning of his public ministry in Galilee. His preaching and miracles gathered enthusiastic crowds but they didn’t last. Those who were gladly fed by Jesus turned away from his teaching. The ones who cheered his miracles didn’t want to be challenged by their significance. Crowds then and now can be fickle.

However, there are two groups who followed Jesus faithfully, who attended to him fully, and who were present from beginning to end. They are the same two groups who take him most seriously today: his enemies and his disciples.

Our task in this study is to move at a rapid pace in order to bridge the distance between the early days of Jesus as a public figure and the dramatic events of the final week of his life—a span of about two and a half years. Moving quickly, we will try to see events through the eyes of both Jesus’ enemies and his disciples.

How did Jesus’ enemies see him? First, some regarded him as a pretender. In Nazareth he was chided for putting on airs. “You are nothing special—just the carpenter’s son. We’ve known you all your life.” And Jesus said “a prophet doesn’t receive honor in his own country.” As had been the case with earlier prophets, small-minded people saw pretense and missed out on God’s presence.

Later, Jesus was called a blasphemer by his enemies. A man who was crippled from birth was brought to Jesus in the presence of a crowd. The Lord declared first, “your sins are forgiven.” His enemies, who were looking for trouble, regarded this statement as blasphemy—saying that only God can forgive sins. Jesus’ subsequent healing

of the crippled man was offered as evidence that the “Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” On this occasion and others, Jesus’ enemies paid him close attention—not for discovery or learning but to strengthen their opposition.

Jesus’ enemies called him a pretender, a blasphemer and taking it a step further, a rebel. His message was regarded by them as a source of lies that needed silencing. He saw clean and unclean as matters of the heart, not of appearance, and said that the Sabbath was made for man, not the reverse. And as he welcomed outcasts and the poor it became clear that his enemies were intent on fortifying the privileges of a few, not on protecting common people from spiritual danger.

Jesus’ message remains one of liberation that is offered to all and it continues to rankle those who would use religion as a source of personal gain. Jesus indicted his enemies in no uncertain terms.

Luke 11:39-52:

³⁹[You Pharisees] clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?

. . . ⁴²“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

. . . ⁴⁶Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

. . . ⁵²you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

We would do well to examine ourselves in these matters. Do we focus on small things and neglect justice? Do we bask in self congratulation and hinder those who are

seeking God? Do we see ourselves clearly?

Jesus' enemies, building in their opposition, finally declared him not just a blasphemer or rebel, but a sorcerer saying that he was in league with Beelzebub and was himself demonic. Jesus answered this charge with the commonsense observation that he was casting out demons, setting prisoners free, and breaking down dark strongholds. He was clearly the adversary, not the servant, of the devil.

Finally, his enemies determined to silence Jesus once and for all and began to plot his murder in earnest. Shortly we'll consider a text in John 11 in which this plan is made clear. But first let's trace the experience of Jesus' disciples as they followed the Lord.

His initial followers had been disciples of John the Baptist and at first were mere companions of Jesus ('come and see' John 1:39). Investigation led to allegiance and after John was imprisoned Jesus bade his followers to leave their fishing nets and follow him. Their choice to obey at this point is similar to the one made in every generation by those who give allegiance to Jesus and become 'born again'.

Followers became servants. Jesus sent out disciples two by two to proclaim the kingdom of God with dramatic results. Healings, conversions, exorcisms were the experience of these young missionaries. "The seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name'" (Luke 10:17).

Just as Jesus' enemies grew more determined, so did their opposition to him, and so too his followers grew in obedience. Investigators became followers and followers became servants. Finally, servants became soldiers who were called to suffer for the sake of the Savior.

Luke 9:23-25:

²³Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?"

We have noted that both Jesus' enemies and his disciples experienced a deepening of their convictions over time. We turn now to two texts that bring each group—enemies and disciples—into clear view near the end of his life just before he entered Jerusalem for the last time.

First an encounter with those who were determined to kill Jesus as they reacted to the miracle of Lazarus raised from the dead.

John 11:45-48:

⁴⁵Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷Then 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. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

Notice the absence of denial. It is clear to Jesus' enemies that he had performed miracles and these miracles were signs of something greater. They acknowledged the extraordinary works which testified to Jesus as Messiah but feared the power of Rome more than the power of God.

John 11:49-50:

⁴⁹Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

Caiaphas had long since passed the 'what shall we do' stage and is contemptuous of those who are not yet planning Jesus' death. His concern that the nation might perish is a smoke screen. Caiaphas is concerned for his own status.

John 11:51-53:

⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Some observations:

1) The Jewish leaders imagine that their decisions will drive events. In fact they are in charge of nothing important. Jesus gave up his life, it was not taken from him.

2) The Sanhedrin existed to give spiritual leadership to Israel, but there is no reference in their deliberations to God or his purposes. Their true allegiance was to Rome.

3) The high priest (Caiaphas) prophesies truthfully but does so unwittingly. Jesus' death is for salvation—from sin and death—not from the wrath of Caesar.

4) The efforts on the part of the Sanhedrin to placate Rome by killing the trouble-maker from Nazareth accomplished the opposite of what was intended. Less than forty years later Jerusalem was sacked, the temple leveled, and the nation dispersed when God judged his people for rejecting the Messiah. Jesus' prophecy was superior to that of Caiaphas.

Luke 19:44:

⁴⁴They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Having considered a text that tells of the plots of Jesus' enemies, let's also look closely at Jesus in conversation with his friends.

Mark 10:35-37, 41-45:

³⁵Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

³⁶"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

³⁷They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

. . . ⁴¹When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴²Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Son of Man came to die so we might live. His is the ultimate example of sacrificial love—serving others, denying himself. But the Lord also expects his followers, on a different scale, to take up a cross and follow him; to

choose sacrificial love. In many ways, Jesus' teaching here is an explanation of what it means to take up a cross.

Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus sees sacrificial love as the path to greatness. Trusting God to raise up those who honor him, we do not need to promote ourselves or keep track of what we are due. Among unbelievers greatness is measured by 'lording it over' others, by numbering of those who are required to obey. In Christ authority flows from a heart of service and the presence of God. Their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.

This conversation began when two disciples attempted to grab the highest seat and incited jealousy among the other ten who wished they had thought to ask first. But Jesus makes clear that discipleship is not a competition. Servant leaders build one another up and a successful leader must be seen as a blessing for all.

Finally, we should be clear that Jesus intends his instruction to change the way we act. This is not a poetic vision that has only theoretical value. The Lord expects his followers to identify selfish thoughts and behaviors and to crucify them. We must acknowledge the inclination to jealous competition and then turn from it.

It is striking to see how many observers (believers and unbelievers alike) have noted the humility that characterizes the newly installed Pope Francis. The way he lived when he was a cardinal in Argentina (living in a small apartment, riding a bus to work) and his early disinterest in status markers as Pope are extremely attractive. True witness occurs when Jesus' own way of life is reproduced in his servants.

Jesus' enemies and his disciples followed him closely and deepened their convictions as they did so. Casual observers drifted away. The pattern remains apparent today. For those of us who call him Lord, discipleship requires a cross—elevating others above ourselves and trusting God to honor those who love him.

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