

## **Thieves**

Matthew 21:12-17

March 9, 2014

Who is the enemy? Who is the enemy of God's people?

Ken Ham thinks it's science. Ken Ham is the founder of the "Creation Museum" in Petersburg, Kentucky. You may remember all the hoopla surrounding his live-streamed "Creationism vs. Evolution" debate last month with Bill Nye, the NPR "Science Guy." For Ken Ham, the debate was all about a "philosophical battle over worldviews," with himself cast in the role of defender of the Christian worldview against its smug and godless and sorrily-deceived attackers. He is joined by a host of other believers around this nation fighting too to have the teaching of creationism added to public school curriculums.

Is science indeed the enemy of God's people? Or are Ken Ham, and all those who fight alongside him, fighting the wrong battle?

Bryan Fischer thinks it's the government. Fischer, the Director of Issues Analysis for the American Family Association, blames the murder of twenty children at the Sandy Hook Elementary School on the removal of prayer from schools. He says:

*Where was God when all this went down? Here's the bottom line, God is not going to go where he is not wanted ... We have ... spent 50 years telling God to get lost, telling God we do not want you in our schools ... In 1962 we kicked prayer out of the schools. In 1963 we kicked God's word out of our schools. In 1980 we kicked the Ten Commandments out of our schools. We've kicked God out of our public school system. And I think God would say to us, "Hey, I'll be glad to protect your children, but you've got to invite me back into your world first. I'm not going to go where I'm not wanted."*

The documentary film, "School Prayer: A Community At War" quotes a Mississippi believer saying: "The ACLU is to the Christian faith what the Nazi was to the Jew." Are the ACLU and a government that insists on the separation of church and state the enemies of God's people? Or are Bryan Fischer and his sympathizers fighting the wrong battle?

Steve Hall is a math teacher and a Christian, and with his wife, Vickie, publishes a website titled, "Abounding Joy." He and his wife speak for many like-minded believers when they write:

*We live in a day when there is a great war going on in the society in which we live. There are many battlefronts and aspects to the war, but the primary war in our day is between Christianity and secular humanism ... a religion and a philosophy of life which views man as the supreme being of the universe ... reject[ing] the existence of God and the supernatural [and] see[ing] moral values as relative.*

Is the primary war in our day between Christianity and the “forces” of secularism? Or are the Halls and their fellow “defenders of the faith” fighting the wrong battle?

You may not be in league with Ken Ham or Bryan Fischer or Steve Hall, but you too may see the enemy “out there ...”

“Out there” in a culture that has lost its way, where there seems to be no moral compass, where anything goes, where values of any kind -- family values, patriotism, a work ethic, personal freedom -- are being constantly undermined and eroded.

“Out there” in a society that is marginalizing the church, pushing back against its privileges and prerogatives, crowding out its “turf” and taking away its children, with Sunday sports and seven-days-a-week shopping and non-stop entertainment.

You may see the enemy “out there” among the unbelievers and the scoffers and the increasingly visible and vocal atheists, all those who have little interest in religion and little respect for religious people.

Are these the enemies of God’s people? Or have many of us, too, been fighting the wrong battle?

Who is the enemy?

*We have met the enemy and he is us.*

Walt Kelley coined that phrase, putting it on the poster he created for the celebration of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. His point was that our enemy, the gravest threat to our lives and to the quality of our lives as human beings, is ... ourselves. We are ruining our planet. We are despoiling our own home. “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with a purpose. He came to do battle. He came to confront the enemy. Between the time of Jesus’ entry into the city on the back of a donkey and his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, Matthew’s gospel

records well more than a dozen of Jesus' conversations, stories, sermons, speeches, all intended to expose the true character and threat of the enemies of God's people.

But, astonishingly, all of these conversations, stories, sermons, speeches are directed at the people of God themselves! Jesus is silent about Rome, about its cruelties and debaucheries, about its abuse of power and mistreatment of God's people. The only time Jesus addresses Rome at all is when, in answer to a question intended to trap him, he tells the Jews they should pay their taxes!

*Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God.*

But that's the point, isn't it? The gravest threat to God's people is not what Rome might take from them, but what they might themselves give away, instead of giving to God. And what belongs to God? They do! They are God's people! We are God's people!

And God intends his people, God intends us, to be a witness people, a servant people, shining God's light into this shadowed world, witnessing to the good news of God's love and serving God by bringing back to him all those God loves -- men and women and children -- from every corner of the earth. That's how Matthew's gospel ends: "Go to all peoples everywhere," Jesus tells his followers, "and make them my disciples."

The gravest threat to God's people is not what anyone else might do to us, but what we may fail to do for them. "We have met the enemy and he is us." It is God's people, the Jews of Jerusalem and us, too, whom Jesus addresses. It is among God's people, among us, too, that our enemies are found: thieves, hypocrites, murderers, vultures, faithless servants, traitors.

And the first to be called out by Jesus are the thieves. In Matthew's gospel, there is no delay, no pause for reflection. Immediately after entering the city, Jesus goes to the Temple, and immediately after entering the Temple, Jesus goes after the moneychangers and the merchants. He pushes them out of the Temple and he overturns their tables and stools. Jesus came to do battle!

And he says to them:

*It is written in the Scriptures that God said, "My Temple will be called a house of prayer." But you are making it a hideout for thieves!*

Why thieves? Who are they robbing, and what are they robbing them of? Is Jesus talking about price-gouging? About economic exploitation? About taking advantage of the poor and the vulnerable who come to the Temple just wanting to make peace with God?

Perhaps. But Jesus doesn't reference any such unfair or unscrupulous practices. Instead he simply says: This doesn't belong here. Commerce and prayer don't mix.

The Scripture Jesus quotes comes from Isaiah, and in context, God's statement is made not to God's own people, the people of Israel, but to foreigners.

*I will bring you to Zion, my sacred hill, give you joy in my house of prayer, and accept the sacrifices you offer on my altar. My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations.*

This, Jesus says, is what God means the Temple to be: a house of prayer for the people of all nations, a place where anyone and everyone may come to see. To see what God is like, to see what God is doing, to see what it is God wants, to see God. To come and see, to be embraced by God, and to embrace God's way.

But if they come to a Temple filled with merchants and moneychangers, what do they see? They see merchants and moneychangers! They see people doing business, people making a buck. They see people doing the same things for the same reasons in the same way as everybody else. They see nothing distinctive, nothing different, nothing holy. They don't see God. They don't see God and so they have been robbed. They have been robbed ... of God.

But, the merchants and moneychangers protest, we are simply giving the people what they need. What's wrong with supporting the work of the Temple and making a living at it while we do?

This is what is wrong: commerce and prayer don't mix. It's either/or, not both/and. God's people cannot have a divided allegiance. Jesus said that no one can serve two masters. When we serve any master other than God, we rob God ... of ourselves. And when people see us -- God's people -- serving any master other than God, we rob them ... of God.

When people look at us, when people look at our church, what do they see? Do they see a distinctive people, a puzzling people, a surprising people? People that don't react like everybody else? People that don't act like everybody else? Do they see a compassionate people, a forgiving people, a servant people, a welcoming people, a patient people, a hopeful people?

Or do they see what they might see anywhere? People just like everybody else? People worrying about the same things, wanting the same things, caring about the same things? Do they see a people preoccupied with making a good impression, with protecting what we have, a people putting a premium on reputation, honor, success, growth, winning?

Are we serving God, or robbing God? Are we serving our neighbors, or robbing them?

We are here to do battle, but as Paul reminded the people of the church in Ephesus:

*We are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.*

We are not fighting against human beings! We are not fighting against any human being! Our battle is against spiritual forces, against all the impulses and motives and allegiances that undermine our faith, our trust, our love, our hope, our utter reliance on God's good will.

We have met the enemy and the enemy is us. The only enemy is us. The only enemy is in us. And we need to call on a power much greater than our own to be able to stand up to this enemy.

Thanks be to God, we have one to fight for us! Our king has come to us. Our king has come to us, humble and riding on a donkey. He is humble, but he has come to do battle. He has come to do battle by being humble, not fighting against any human being, but humbly following the path that will lead him to death and us to victory.

This is our king. This is the one we are called to follow. A warrior king leads a warrior people. A fierce king leads a fierce people. A haughty king leads a haughty people. And a humble king? A humble king leads a humble people.

For God's sake -- for God's sake -- let's not be fighting the wrong battles! Our enemy is not "out there." We don't have to defend God. God can take care of that just fine by himself! "Out there," there are only the ones we are called to love, only the ones we are called to serve, only the ones whom we must let see God, as God is.