

# "Free Agents"

Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1

May the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ lead you to contemplate and appreciate the priceless gift that was thereby earned for you – the forgiveness of your sins and Eternal Life. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Those in withdrawal will be happy to hear that free agency start March 15. Some will undoubtedly have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about. Football fans get it. To football fans a free agent is a player whose contract has expired and who is therefore free to sign with any team he chooses. The most talented players tend to cash in as teams try to outbid each other for their services. Mediocre and aging players just hope to sign with a team – any team.

Interesting thing about free agents is that, no matter their talent, potential or experience, until someone signs them they have no team, no job, and no income. Another way to look at it is that every member of every team is an adversary – until they are signed by one of those teams.

Yet especially for the best players that's certainly not how it looks. It looks like these superbly gifted athletes have the football world at their feet, but in reality it's all just potential. They have absolutely nothing until they sign on the dotted line and become part of an organization.

What's this have to do with anything? Take a look around. Free agency in the real world never ends, and in this case there is only one team. No matter how gifted, charismatic, or wealthy, we are surrounded by those who really don't have anything at all – just potential. Those who aren't on the team aren't "us," they're "them." And that's how we need to see them. It's also what we should be working to change.

Our text for this morning will clarify all of this as it draws up sides and forces us thereby to reexamine both which side is ours and who really isn't on our side. That text is found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, beginning in the Third Chapter:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Philippians 3:17 - 4:1** *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his*

*glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*

These are the words of God. Here – when dealing with the Word of God – we never need to be on our guard or skeptical, for here we have only truth and light. That our God would today guide and strengthen us through these words, so we pray: ***“Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.”*** Amen.

How important do you suppose it is today for the Christian Church to clearly identify who is a friend and who is an enemy – who is one of us and who isn't? Our text teaches us that this sort of identification is absolutely necessary in the spiritual realm. In fact that is the sum and substance of our text for this morning, where we are not only encouraged to identify both friends and foes, but also how to do so and *why it is so important*. Surely this is the kind of nuts and bolts practical advice that every single child of God ought to treasure.

First of all, then, just who are your true enemies? Who are the free agents out there that need to be identified as the opposition?

It is probably safe to say that gentle Christian folk don't tend to think in terms of having enemies. Enemies – as the world thinks of enemies – are for the cut-throat movers and shakers of this world. The rich and powerful are the ones who have enemies, for the most part because they *make* enemies. Those who want to be something in this life are generally not afraid to grapple, claw and scratch their way to the top, stomping on anything and everything in their path. Folks like that just come to expect that they will have enemies – and pretty much always do.

But what about those who care very little for the things of this world? What about those who live instead for the world to come – those ***whose citizenship is in heaven?*** How or why should we be concerned with the identification of enemies?

The fact is it is precisely because we don't tend to think in those terms that we need the warning of the Holy Spirit in our text for this morning. We need to be reminded of the facts of life *as they apply to Christians living in a sinful world*.

So just who are our enemies? Pay attention here because the answer may surprise you. Everyone can identify those who pose a physical threat as at least a potential enemy. No one has any trouble identifying ax murderers and sexual predators, for example, as those that you are probably not going to invite to backyard family cookouts. But that's not the

sort of thing that Paul is talking about, is it? He's talking about "mutilators" of a much more dangerous sort.

Some of the history of the congregation in Philippi might be helpful here. The congregation was founded by the Holy Spirit during Paul's Second Missionary Journey. You may recall how Paul first preached to some women as they prayed on the banks of the Gangites River. There were apparently so few Jews in the area that no synagogue had been established in Philippi, so those who worshipped did so at a spot along the river. The first converts to Christianity in this area were Lydia and her family, with whom Paul later found lodging. The city, you may also recall, was thrown into an uproar by those who suffered economic loss when Paul cast the demon out of their fortune-telling maiden. On a subsequent visit, Paul was imprisoned and there met and converted the jailer and his family. The congregation eventually grew to be one of the most important in Macedonia.

So who were the enemies against whom Paul warned? The pagan Romans? The unbelieving Jews? The Philippians actually had no trouble identifying such threats. The hatred and animosity of the Jews and Romans was painfully evident. Who then? Who was it that represented such a subtle yet deadly threat that Paul found it necessary to send this warning to his beloved Philippians? The problem was not those who had already identified themselves as enemies; it was those who had been identifying themselves as friends. The threat did not come from without; it came from within. This enemy wasn't standing outside the locked front door; he was already hiding in the broom closet. Paul needed to make sure the Philippians knew where to look.

There was in Philippi a group that came to be known as the Judaizers. Maybe you've heard of them. In general, the Judaizers were those who tried to blend Christianity with the religion of the Jews. What made the problem so difficult was that what these false teachers promoted *seemed* right. The Judaizers held to a perverse form of the Jewish religion. Old Testament Jews were saved the same way we are today – through faith in the Savior. The Old Testament faith looked forward, while ours looks backwards. Over the centuries, however, the Jews had corrupted their faith, opting instead for a religion by which they tried to earn their path to heaven by keeping the law. The result was that when Christ finally appeared, some Jews developed a perverse sort of religion by which one must not only believe in Jesus, but supplement or augment that belief with certain works that had to be performed. The most notable was circumcision – and so it was that Paul came to label them *"the mutilators."*

Any of this starting to sound familiar? If it doesn't yet, it almost certainly will in a bit.

It really isn't hard to see how this perversion of the true Christian faith would resonate with the Jews. Many of the Jews had been raised on the idea that

God's love had to be earned by human action. They had been taught, from little on, that only the wicked failed to celebrate the prescribed festivals, eat the proper food, and offer the required sacrifices. To fail to circumcise your son, in their minds, was to exclude that son from God's love and the kingdom of heaven. That's what they'd been taught; that's how they'd been raised.

While God certainly had commanded things like circumcision as symbols and reminders of the coming Savior, everything changed when that Savior finally arrived. Paul described all of these things as ***"shadows of things to come."*** (Colossians 2) The need for all such things ended (they found their completion) in Jesus.

That is why Paul had to identify the Judaizers as enemies, as free agents who really weren't on our team. They didn't *seem* like enemies or outsiders. They undoubtedly *seemed* like good, moral, highly religious people who were just trying to do the right thing. I have little doubt that for the most part they were compassionate, conscientious, and moral – good people all in the eyes of society.

Yet Paul described them as ***"enemies of the cross of Christ."*** Hear his words well. Allow them to sink in and struggle to come to terms with their full import. ***"Enemies of the cross of Christ!"***

How could they be? How was that possible? The same way that it was possible for Jesus to have to say to Peter, ***"Get behind me, Satan."*** The "cross of Christ" is not just an object; it is the symbol that represents an entire religious conviction. "The cross" represents the simple truth that Jesus Christ alone saves. It was Jesus, not man, who appeased God's wrath toward sin through his innocent death on the cross. In this way "the cross" stands in direct opposition to any and all work righteousness. To imagine that man must add *anything at all* to pay for his sins is to exist as an enemy of Christ Jesus and the cross that he alone could bear. ***"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law."***

Our text says of such enemies that ***"their god is their belly."*** What in the world does that mean? Were they drunkards and gluttons? Maybe, but there is probably more, since such perversions would have been easily identified by God-fearing folk everywhere. While we tend to think of the heart as the seat of emotion, the people in Paul's day thought in terms of the stomach or "belly." (We actually have something similar when we say things like *"Go with your gut."*) Thus these enemies could very well have been very pious individuals *who were nonetheless guided by their own gut instincts of what was true and right, rather than by the Word of God.* To them it just *seemed* right that man must do his part – and that idea then became their truth, their religious conviction.

What were the stakes here? They couldn't be higher, since Paul says of these enemies, these outsiders: **"Their end is destruction."** Clearly time to sit up and take notice, for not only is this a question of heaven or hell, the Church today is under attack by the very same enemies.

Though Paul took no pleasure in pointing out such adversaries ("**...of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears ...**") he nonetheless felt the need to identify them – repeatedly. The danger is that great. Across the ages he now calls out also to you and me, and today, if anything, the danger is even greater. Every Christian church today that preaches spiritual mush poses a clear and present danger to the true faith. Every church body that is guided not by the Word of God but by their own "bellies" or emotions – by whatever *feels* right – represents a threat to all who cling only to the truth of God's Word and what that Word teaches. Make no mistake. Those who truly understand and trust in "the cross of Christ" could never allow that there are many paths to God. Every such instance is a denial of Christ and of the absolute truth of God's Word.

Our text represents the New Testament equivalent of Joshua's call, challenging you to identify which side you are really on. Friends, family, co-workers – *anyone* who adheres to something other than salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ – all such our text here identifies as **"enemies of the cross of Christ"** – free agents, if you will – those who really aren't on the team. Harsh? Certainly. Bitterly frustrating? Clearly. Yet nonetheless true? Without question. Why else do you suppose Paul wept at the very thought? Denying the reality does nothing at all to help the situation.

This is exactly the sort of thing that Jesus was talking about when he referred to the sword that would divide even the closest family ties. Today, more than ever, we need to recognize that there are two sides in this struggle. All who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are outsiders and therefore enemies of the cross.

*But don't miss the point here. We are to identify them as such because they are souls that can and must be won.* That's exactly why Paul also said that Christians are supposed to be **"more than conquerors."** Our goal is not to defeat our enemies but to win them over, to get them signed. How can we do that if we refuse even to identify who they are? How is it loving to allow someone, anyone, to die peacefully in unbelief?

Do not lose sight of the nature of the struggle we are in, nor of the very clear line between the friends and enemies of the cross that has been established by our God. Ignorance is not bliss and apathy damns. There is one narrow road to heaven, and that is through faith alone in Jesus Christ. In him alone we have full and complete forgiveness for our countless sins. Because of Jesus Christ, we too will one day share in that glorious transformation

described by Paul in our text. Therefore **"stand fast in the Lord."** Because of your God-given faith in Jesus Christ, you are on the right side – the winning side – and you have the mandate to make that winning side even bigger. Identify God's enemies, and by the application and power of the Word of God turn them into true children of God and heirs together with you of eternal life. Amen.

## Scripture Readings

<sup>ESV</sup> **Jeremiah 26:8-15** And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die!" <sup>9</sup> Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, 'This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant'?" And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD. <sup>10</sup> ¶ When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the LORD and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the LORD. <sup>11</sup> Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, "This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears." <sup>12</sup> ¶ Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. <sup>13</sup> Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you. <sup>14</sup> But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. <sup>15</sup> Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 13:31-35** At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." <sup>32</sup> And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. <sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.'" <sup>34</sup> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! <sup>35</sup> Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

**Second Sunday in Lent – February 21, 2016**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 721 (Brown Hymnal)

"Cross of Jesus, Cross of Sorrow"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The First Lesson:** (Jeremiah 26:8-15) Speaking God's Word faithfully has always involved a risk. The first is that man might hear and reject the path to life. The second danger is that those who reject the message then vent their rage and frustration upon those who brought them God's Word. Note that both of these dangers lie outside of our control. The same One who called us to speak has also promised to protect us and to bless our witness.

## The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 51 (Page 31)

**The Second Lesson:** (Luke 13:31-35) Hundreds of years after Jeremiah spoke the words of our Old Testament lesson, the Jews still had not learned their lesson. They still refused to hear the words of those sent by God. Their rejection, finally, of the Son of God himself sealed their doom. Be aware, however, that we today share the unbeliever's natural tendency to reject that which we don't want to hear. We too need to be open to correction.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 756 (Brown Hymnal)

"Jesus Lover of My Soul"

## The Sermon – Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**"Free Agents"**

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Post Sermon Hymn -762 (Brown Hymnal)

"This Is He"

## The Offering followed by the Prayers

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn -49 (Red Hymnal)

"Almighty God Thy Word is Cast"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

**Attendance** - Sunday (31) Ave (46) Wed (29) Organ Fund (\$19,630 of \$22,000)

## This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Coffee/Fellowship Time
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-4:00 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Lenten Service
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday Worship w/communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Coffee/Fellowship Time

**CLC News** – Pastor Luke Bernthal is considering the call to Mt. Zion of Detroit. Pastor Neal Radichel has returned the call to Holy Trinity of West Columbia, SC. The CLC Call Committee on Educational Institutions has called Pastor Paul Naumann to the faculty of ILC.

**Easter Flowers** – The deadline is approaching for ordering Easter flowers. Please see the sign-up sheet on the mailbox table.

**Mid-week Lenten Services** – Please make use of the special opportunity afforded by our mid-week Lenten services. It is a unique time set aside for repentance, which always serves to magnify our Savior. This year's series, "Cross Examination," examine questions asked of or by our Savior, which we then apply to ourselves.

**Confirmation Class** – Please note that Confirmation Class is scheduled for 4 pm on Wednesday this week.

**Tables** – We still have tables available to any members who want them. Please speak to President McEnroe if you are interested.

**Delegates** – Delegates are still needed to represent St Paul in the upcoming West Central Delegate Conference in Jamestown (May 31-June 2) and at the CLC Convention in Eau Claire (June 23-26).

**Council Notes** – At their request, Stephen and Johannah Mayhew were transferred to Grace of Valentine. Offerings for January were \$2,017 below budgeted needs. We will commemorate Good Friday this year with a Tenebrae service. Communion will be offered in March on March 13<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> (Maundy Thursday). Next Council meeting is March 13<sup>th</sup>.