

## “CHEERING CROWDS – JEERING CROWDS”

Reverend Jim Dennis, Jr.  
March 20, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 27:11-54

The story goes that a friend of Mr. And Mrs. George Bernard Shaw tells of an evening that he spent with them, and while Mr. Shaw was telling one story after another, Mrs. Shaw was busy knitting. The guest leaned over and whispered, “What are you knitting?” She whispered back, “Oh nothing, nothing at all. It’s just that I’ve heard these stories of his 2,000 times, and if I don’t do something with my hands, I’ll choke him!” The same with sermons. I appreciate your indulgence, and encourage your knitting if that’s what it takes. But I don’t think you’ve ever heard this one before, definitely not from me.

I’ve been thinking about my confirmation class. We have five young people filled with many questions and seeking to deepen their faith so they can make a public proclamation that the promises the parents and the church have made have taken in their lives. These young people have many questions, and perhaps not the background we had at that same age. Now, older members, please don’t stop listening. There will be a word here for all of us, but they are on my mind.

Oh, the crowd cheered, and we’ve already seen that part of the Scripture enacted. We didn’t read it, but we had it enacted before us. The cheering crowd crying, “Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest!” They thought, boy, this Jesus is something! They praised him, and then they stopped. Then they turned on him, and said, “No, He is nothing. He can do nothing for us. Not like we wanted. Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” Now, why did the cheering stop? Well, one reason the cheering stopped is Jesus began to talk more and more about commitment, and take up your cross, and follow me, and He wasn’t the kind of Messiah they wanted. During the last week of Jesus’ life, a very interesting scene occurred in full view of all the people. During that last week was when the rich, young ruler came enthusiastically running to Jesus, and Jesus said, “Go and sell all that you have, and give it to the poor, and then come follow me.” The masses were stunned. They were troubled. First, for a theological reason. They had been raised to believe that God had especially blessed rich men. And they were bothered for a second reason. Prior to this, Jesus’ message had largely been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry, He fed them. When they brought their sick to Him, He healed them. When a woman was caught in the very act of adultery and was about to be stoned, it was Jesus who rescued her. The message of his ministry was grace upon grace. Now he seemed to turn and be saying, “The time for miracles is over. The time for commitment is now.” While there are no miracles recorded in the final chapters, until the Resurrection, what you will find is a persistent call to commitment.

Hungry one morning, Jesus stops by a fig tree, and he finds no figs, and he does something most un-Jesuslike. He withers the tree because it has produced no fruit. Jesus demands fruitful, committed lives. Again, a parable is told. Who is more committed, the son who says I will work and then does not do what he said, or the son who says, I’m not going to work, but repents of it, and then goes and does the work? The answer is the son

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who actually does the work. And the greatest Commandment is given, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Again, a call to commitment, to follow through, to doing. You know, I bet when that rich, young ruler walked away sorrowfully that day, he was not the only one. I think it is safe to assume that a host of uncommitted people also walked away. Jesus was no longer talking only about grace. He was now speaking about the other part of religion, obligation. He began to talk about the obligation that rests with a person who has accepted God’s grace. The cheering began to stop, I believe, when Jesus began to speak of commitment. “Take up your cross, and follow Me.” And secondly, the cheering began to stop when Jesus dared to suggest that all people were beloved by God, not just me and mine, but all. And thirdly, the cheering began to stop when Jesus began to talk more and more about the Cross. No one, not even the disciples, wanted to hear about the Cross. God’s love, God’s justice, God’s grace and righteousness, these things often seem intentioned, but none of them may be thrown out in the Gospel, and every one of these aspects are involved in the Cross. All were in Jesus’ ministry. We are called to display all of these in our lives. Not only love, but justice, God demands. Not only grace, but also righteousness, God displays and requires of you and me. Less than that is less than faith. Less than that is joining the crowd that walked away.

One day, a Rabbi and a soap maker went for a walk together. The soap maker was a cynical man. He said, “What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery in the world after thousands of years of preaching and teaching goodness and truth. If religion really were good and true, why would this misery still be here?” The Rabbi said nothing, and they continued walking until the Rabbi noticed and pointed out a little dirty boy playing in the gutter. The Rabbi said, “Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, over all these years, that child is still filthy. I wonder, how effective is soap after all?” The soap maker said, “But Rabbi, soap cannot do any good unless it is used.” The Rabbi said, “Exactly, exactly.” Some folks reframe Christianity where it requires nothing. With God cast as what I see as an indulgent old grandfather, who just lets you do what you do and never says a word, whatever you want is just fine, I will give no advice, make no demands, there are no boundaries on your behavior, no expectations, just a doddering old grandfather sitting in the corner, if you need him, not much to say about real life. Jesus had plenty to say about how to live with God and how to live with others. People say they are Christian, and some say they are Buddhist, or Islamist, or Hindu, and I say let’s see, how does that faith you talk about show up in your life? A fig tree that produces no figs is not much of a tree. It seemed to make Jesus mad. A Christian who no one at school, no one at work, no one at home even suspects of having a faith at all, is not much of a Christian. By your fruits you will be known, and by what you produce in your life, you will be classified. If you produce no love, no concern for justice, share no

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grace, strive toward no righteousness, then how is it that you are a Christian? Words are not equal to faith. Let me make it stronger, doing nothing, makes you nothing. The crowds said, “Hosanna, hallelujah,” and then later on when Jesus started talking about commitment and obedience and the cross, that same crowd said, “Crucify him!” Words don’t define a faith. A life filled with the struggle, the wrestling with God and with God’s spirit over how to love and how to do justice and how to reflect grace and how to live out righteousness, that defines a Christian faith. Listen to me, please. I’m going to quote a verse you very often hear at weddings, but it says very much more than just a good wedding Scripture, and when you hear it clearly, you may find it hard to hear because it talks about how really, really apparently religious people can amount to nothing. It’s I Corinthians 13, just the second verse, “And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” No compassion for others in your heart, and no matter what sort of faith you seem to have, your life amounts to nothing. You are nothing until you are born into and are growing into the new person that God had in mind from the beginning. There are people alive in God’s Kingdom and there are walking dead who cannot see past themselves.

The last book in the Bible talks about those who think they have it made because they have wealth, and this is not a point about wealth. It is a point about needing God more than anything else. Revelation 3:17, “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing, not knowing that you are wretched, you are pitiable, you are poor, blind and naked spiritually.” If you think I am pushing this idea just a little too far, the Apostle Paul said the very same thing to the people of Galatia in the sixth chapter. We’re studying Galatians now on Wednesday nights. “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that he also will reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the spirit will from the spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” Verse 10, “So then as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” It matters more what we do than what we say. In matters of faith, what we do proves out what we say or sometimes proves empty what we say. When we are born into God’s Kingdom, we are changed or we are in the process of being changed. Our self-centered spirit is overshadowed by God’s spirit, and through God’s power and urging, we are sent out to love and forgive others and do God’s will even when it’s hard, and I know that it is hard. We wrestle. We struggle. And sometimes we pray with fear and trembling as we grow our whole lives, and we remember before the cross how Jesus was obedient, obedient all the way unto death, for Him that meant death on the cross, for you and me, who knows? But one thing

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I do know, God has some expectations and God has the power to help you live out those expectations. Doing nothing and being nothing is not an option when claiming Christ.

Tommy Smothers said a profound thing. Tommy Smothers from the Smothers Brothers. I'm dating myself now. Some of you in your 30's with children even are sitting around saying, "Who?" Well. He said, "The best thing about getting older is that you gain sincerity. Once you learn to fake sincerity, there is nothing you can't do." Think about it. As I speak to the youth, I'm afraid some of the youth have seen us outside this room. They've seen us. God is not mocked. It does matter what we do. Pretending that God is an indulgent grandfather is ignoring the narrow, hard way. God has some expectations. Ignoring them does not make them go away. Slow or fast, faith causes change and growth in a Godward direction. Change that shows. If there's no change, no growth, no evidence of God within, then where is there faith? And our young people, our children, see that. Our children use us as a role model to grow in the faith or they sometimes use us as an excuse to reject the whole deal. They do. I want you to listen past the money references in this scripture, and hear about the commitment about fighting the fight of faith. It's just happenstance that money is in here. That's not the point. We all want our kids to be successful, but I want to remind you here in I Timothy of the Biblical definition of success. Paul says, "For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world, but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their heart with many pangs." Verse 11. But as for you, man of God, but as for you, woman of God, shun all this. Aim at righteousness. Aim at Godliness. Aim at faith and love and steadfastness and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. Fight the good fight of faith. Remember what you were called to when you became a Christian. The winds of life are like the wind out on the sea as sailboats use it to steer. Imagine two sailboats approaching one another, moving steadily, now these are sailboats, and speedily, but in opposite directions, yet they're doing this by the same wind. The boat's direction is determined not by the wind entirely, but by the set of the sail, and every person has within them the right and the power to set their own sail. The winds of life are not within our control, but the set of your sail is fixed within your heart and your mind. The set of your sail is nothing more than your outlook, your faith. Sometimes we get into horrible messes, and we say, "Who in the world is driving this life?" The answer is, "You are." Aim at righteousness, Godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Remember the profession you made of faith. Remember Jesus' righteous

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obedience, His love, His justice and His grace all wrapped up together on that cross. Remember, “Is it nothing all you who pass by? Is it nothing that he dies here for you?” Remember when Pilate said, “Behold the man.” Yes, look and see Jesus’ righteousness, obedience, love, justice and grace all wrapped up on the cross. Rejected, abandoned and dying for you and for me. I encourage you, for your own sake, and for the sake of our children to live out your faith, here and in all parts of your life. It was bought with a price. You were bought with a price. Amen.