

CROSS OUT

When We'd Like the Cross to Be Just for Jesus

Text: Mark 8:34-38

Leaving the Cross

In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was broken into twice. In the first event, thieves made away with a metal moneybox that had been resting next to a votive candle rack. Three weeks later, vandals escaped with something much more valuable. They unbolted a 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster Jesus from a meditation area, taking the statue of Christ, but leaving behind his wooden cross on the wall. The church caretaker, David St. James, confessed his bewilderment at this. "They just decided, 'We're going to leave the cross and take Jesus,'" he said. "We don't know why they took just him. We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix."¹ If you want Jesus, you take his cross too.

It's a bit embarrassing to admit this, but there is something in me that understands the choice of those thieves. How about you? I like the figure of Jesus. I like the clever and compassionate way he treated people. I admire the clarity and balance of his ethical teaching. I love his stories. The character of Christ seems to me the ideal of health and wholeness toward which I want my family and me to grow more and more. I think the whole world would be better if more of us lived Christ's way. And by almost every research study I read, there are apparently millions of us—even those of us who hardly ever darken the door of a church or who have serious questions about God—who nonetheless are quite attracted to the figure of Jesus.

His cross, now that's a little more complicated. Some of us frankly prefer not to get too close to that. I mean, is there not enough violence, blood, and cruelty in this world? Hasn't religion too often gotten wrapped up in the same, even perpetrating that kind of horror in the name of God? Who wants to associate Jesus with that sort of thing? I can appreciate that sentiment. I'm going to come back to that issue when we gather here on Good Friday. We're going to talk about the blood.

But, you know, there's another good reason why I'm inclined to just take Jesus and leave that cross up on that wall, and maybe you can relate. There are times when I just want to look at it. When I take in there what Jesus did for me, what he suffered there for me, it fills me with awe and gratitude. I don't fully understand why Jesus would voluntarily choose to die on a cross to pay the price for my sins. But along with millions of Christians around the world, I've often thought: "Thank God, that Jesus died on the cross, so that we wouldn't have to." And on one level, it's true, this thing Christians say: "Jesus died on the cross so we wouldn't have to." In 1 Corinthians 15:1-2, the Apostle Paul said: **"I want to remind you of the good news I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures."**

Again, we'll talk more about this in several weeks, but what the apostle is describing here is what theologians have called the *doctrine of substitutionary atonement*. It's the conviction that Jesus voluntarily substituted himself in the place of punishment that should have been ours because of our sin. He threw himself in front of evil's bullet, so that we wouldn't be destroyed by it. He pushed us out of the path of the judgment thundering down upon us because of our sin and took the full blow himself. The one innocent Being in the Universe said to the divine court, "Your honor, I'll be executed in their place. Let them go."

This is the towering mystery around which Christ-followers all across the globe and history have united. "Amazing love, how can it be, that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?" I hope you've taken that in. I hope you've accepted this by faith or will today. Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice worthy and weighty enough to cancel the debt of your sin and mine. He made it possible for any of us who put our trust in him to finally be "at-one" with God. He made possible this at-onement, this atonement. Jesus died on the cross so that we would not have to.

Lifting the Cross

Yes, there are some good reasons why someone might choose to take Jesus but leave the cross on the wall. You might do it because you don't want to get too near his blood. You might do it because you so honor his blood. But there's another reason why any of us might leave the cross right where it stands. We might do it, because we don't want to shed any of our own blood. We like the figure of Jesus. We like being forgiven people. But we are not sure we want to follow this Jesus, or be formed by this Jesus, if that means taking up our own cross ourselves.

And it does. It does. Please listen very carefully to this and give a nudge to your neighbor so that they don't miss it, because it gets missed a lot. Forgiveness of sin and eternal life comes through accepting what Jesus did on HIS cross. But truly following Jesus, truly being formed into the image of Jesus and knowing his abundant life, which comes through accepting what we must do with OUR cross. Hear the words of Jesus himself recorded in Mark 8:34-38. **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."**

Some years ago I heard a message by Rev. Peter Hiatt, which was provocatively titled—*"Marriage: A Sneaky Way to Get a Person Crucified."*¹² At first the title seemed crazy to me. What in the world does marriage have to do with crucifixion? And then I thought about it, and I realized the answer: A lot. You don't sign up for marriage because you're thrilled about the prospect of learning to deny yourself or losing your old way of life. You don't go into it thinking, "Oh good, this is going to be really hard... It's

going to be very painful at times... I'll get to make some really demanding sacrifices. Thank goodness, I'll finally get to a place where my character defects are nailed and my selfishness gets flogged. I'll be in such extremity at times that I'll only have God to lean on and sometimes wonder where even he has gone."

Nobody goes into marriage or parenting or old age or a lot of the other big experiences and covenants of life because they are eager to take up a cross. Who would voluntarily sign up for a summer camp whose symbol was a giant mosquito? "Come to Camp Stinger. Your blood is our business!" Sometimes, when I listen to the way of Jesus, it seems just that crazy. Turn the other cheek? Pray for those who persecute me? Forbid myself not just to touch lustfully but to even look lustfully? Visit the criminal in prison? Give my hard-earned money to the beggar? No way! It's unrealistic. It's overly demanding. It would be VERY hard to walk that way in life.

Loving the Cross

Jesus implies in his teaching in Mark 8 that perceiving how hard and counter-cultural his way is, we might actually become "**ashamed of his words.**" We might come to dilute, diminish, or domesticate his teaching. A.W. Tozer, one of the finest Christian leaders of the last century, became very concerned that this is exactly what had happened to American discipleship in the 1930's and 40's: "We live in a spiritually troubled time in history," wrote Tozer. "Christianity has gone over to the jingle-bell crowd." By that he meant that Christianity had become mainly regarded as a path of cordiality and modest charity, a sort of indulgent Christmas cheer. Tozer goes on: "Everyone is just delighted that Jesus has done all of the sorrowing, all of the suffering, all of the dying."³ This is, of course, not a new syndrome. Writing way back in the 5th Century A.D., Augustine of Hippo—one of the greatest minds in the world at that time wrote: "It is necessary to die, but nobody wants to... We want to reach the kingdom of God, but we don't want to travel by way of death. And yet there stands Necessity saying: 'This way, please.'"⁴

It is crucial to remember that Christ's purpose in calling us to take up our cross is that we might live more fully. He calls us to die to our old selves that his self—his heart, soul, mind, and strength—might come more fully alive in us. This is the whole context of his words to his disciples in Mark chapter 8. Jesus is almost begging his followers not to trade down in life, thinking that they're trading up. Don't buy into this "**gain the whole world,**" *more-for-me mentality* that is the human rage in every century. You'll "**forfeit [your] soul,**" your shot at the most real and renewing kind of life.

Here's the blunt truth: If our goal is to be like Jesus, we must do what few people naturally do, what only those compelled by a call from beyond themselves ever do. We must choose the Cross Road. We must go the way of foolishness in the eyes of the world. We must deny and die to the very self that we are constantly being told to coddle, preserve, and expand. That is what I am inviting us to reflect on together in these weeks of Lent to come. We're going to look at some specific places—some familiar life situations—where each of us has the option to get on or off the Cross Road.

Taking that Cross Road requires some conscious steps. **FIRST**, we have to make a decision as to whether we really do want to come after Christ. After all there are other models and plenty of other pathways. How much do you really want to be like Jesus? If you decide you do want to pursue the way of Jesus, then, **SECONDLY**, accept right here that progressive death is required, not for Jesus anymore, but now for you. Your self has to die more and more that Christ's self might come alive more and more in you. And **THIRDLY**, you have to start down that road and resolve not to turn back even when it gets very hard — it will be. Crucifixion isn't painless or quick. But the outcome, the new life Jesus makes possible, is worth every groan.

I've been married for 18 years now. I've been a parent for almost 15 years. I've been a pastor here for nearly 10. I've been a stumbling disciple of Jesus for almost 30 years now. And you know what, these commitments have been killing me—and therein lays my hope. I am praying toward that day when I can truly say with the Apostle Paul, **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."**⁵

Where are the Cross Roads ahead for you? What needs to be crucified, dead, and buried in you? At what intersections in coming days will you need to make a conscious choice if you want to remain in the company of Jesus or know the fullness of his life? Are you like those thieves in the story I told at the start? Do you think you can have a crossless Christianity—that Jesus has done all the dying necessary? Or are you ready to take the next step to more fully follow Him? Jeremiah 6:16 reads: **"This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'"** What an adventure we have in front of us as we embark on the pathway together.

Please pray with me...

Lord, you bid us come and die that we may truly live. Give us courage to take the next step, to get on the cross road, to stay on the cross road, until that which feels like dying comes to feel more and more like living and your life in all of its fruitful splendor is formed in us for the fulfillment of our calling, the blessing of others, and the glory of your name. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

¹ Andrea Elliott, "Thieves Take Figure of Jesus, but Not the Cross," *New York Times* (8-25-03).

Thanks to Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois, for this citation.

² Peter Hiatt, Lookout Mountain Community Church, Golden CO, March 2, 1997.

³ A.W. Tozer, *Men Who Met God*

⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Baker, 2000), p. 251

⁵ Galatians 2:20