

Cross of Christ 4-30-17

The Demands of the Cross

We have been living in the shadow of the cross for these last two months. Each Sunday morning has been devoted to the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified. We have seen all that God has done for us, all that Jesus has won for us. We have studied all the triumphs of the cross. Today we conclude that study. Each week we have ended our teaching time with worship. We have sung of the grace of the cross and the glories of our Redeemer and our redemption. We have pondered, with hearts full of adoration, the sufferings of our Lord. And that is great. That is critical. But, if faith and worship is your only response to what Christ has done there is something you haven't quite gotten. Paul Spence wrote a poem that is meant as a rebuke to modern American religion which has so terribly ignored the moral and practical implications of Calvary. The poem is called, "The New Plastic Cross." *On a hill far away stood a new plastic cross, so lovely, popular and nice. So easy to hold for it promised me gold and a life without sacrifice. So, I'll cling to the new plastic cross for it guarantees me no loss. What a relief to be told that to heaven I'll go by the way of the new plastic cross.* Ouch! Is his mockery deserved? Have we wanted all the bennies and perks of the cross with none of the demands? Surely, the Christian is not free to simply gaze at the cross and say, "Wow, isn't Jesus something!" and then go on about our business. The cross, when rightly understood, cuts across our lives and totally redefines it. And the reason this is so is because Christianity is a relationship with Jesus. We hang with him. We watch him and imitate him and go where He goes. And the cross is the place where our Master goes. Do you see what that means? Today we will look at two things that certainly means as we ponder the demands of the cross.

The first demand of the cross is that we suffer patiently. We do this because Christ did it. Christ did it. Our calling is to follow Him, to imitate Him. I Peter 2:**19** *This finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.* Suffering as Christians is the major theme of I Peter. Notice where the apostle goes next **20-21** *For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. 21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.* That is as clear as it can be. When you hear some, in Jesus' name, teach that suffering is the devil's calling, not God's, that God's plan for you is all peaches-and-cream, wealth and health, peace and prosperity, go back to the real New Testament. **21-23** *For you*

have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps. 22 Who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously. Jesus, our example, endured unspeakable suffering with patience and grace. Therefore, so ought we to endure our sufferings, both great and small, for in doing this we identify with Jesus. Paul writes about sharing in the sufferings of Christ. There is this sense that in suffering we learn more of what Jesus has endured and we grow closer to Him. Suffering also gives us a chance to say to Jesus, *Precious Savior, you are worth it all. Precious Savior, you are worth it all.* Acts 5 contains a wonderful story of the early saints, walking in the fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Having been arrested for preaching Jesus in Jerusalem, the apostles were thrown in jail. An angel brought them out of jail so that the temple guard had to come and arrest them again. This time they were beaten and ordered to keep quiet about Jesus. Listen to how these crazy apostles responded to the persecution. Acts 5:**41** *So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.* Don't you love that? They rejoice in the opportunity to express their love for Christ by following him in suffering patiently. Jesus had told them this was part of the deal. He never led anyone to think that following Him was a walk in the park. He made it as plain as could be that being Jesus-people could be very uncomfortable. John 15:**18-20** *If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.'* *If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.* So, the disciples said: "Cool, we got to suffer for His name, just like He promised."

There is no reason for us to be caught off-guard by suffering. We read of the entrance of sin into the world and the trouble that comes with that. We read of our God, who doesn't sit impassively in the heavens, but who sympathizes with us enough to come and be a part of our suffering, to share in our pain. The people of this world find suffering incomprehensible. *How can this happen to me? How can this happen to others?* Human suffering is difficult for Christians to explain and even more so for unbelievers. Suffering makes unbelievers angry at the God whose existence they deny. But the Christian understands that we have a God who has suffered with us and for us. A little play called *The Long Silence*, says it all. At the end of time, billions of people

were scattered on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly and with belligerence. "Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering," snapped a young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror, beatings, torture, death!" In another group, a black boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched I was, for no crime but being black." In another crowd, a pregnant school-girl with sullen eyes. "Why should I suffer?" she murmured. "It wasn't my fault." Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? They agreed that God live a pretty sheltered life.

So, each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a black, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a leper. In the center of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their judge he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man! "Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted. Give him work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. At the end let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Let him die a shame-filled, pain-filled death." As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served His sentence. The END. Indeed, on that final day in court, when all rise to honor the judge they will behold as Judge a Man with scars. It is the Lamb, slain and bleeding who sits upon the throne.

It helps to remember Jesus when we try to bear patiently our sorrows. Remember Jesus. Another motivation for patient suffering is also found at the cross. It is the promise of future gain. The promise of future gain, or future grace. God does not suggest that you should and does not teach that Jesus did suffer without any expectation of reward. Hebrews 12 exhorts us to consider Jesus. There in **3** *Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that*

you will not grow weary and lose heart. To consider Jesus means to look to His example. Hebrews 12:2 *Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* Why did Jesus, how did Jesus endure the cross? By looking to what is called “the joy set before Him.” Christ did all that He did in order that He might find joy in your deliverance. Think of that. While He suffered Jesus did not dwell on the pain. He despised it, thought little of it. He considered the suffering of this present time unworthy to be compared with the glory to come. Jesus concentrated not on the obstacle he faced but on the objective, not on the pain but the prize. He saw us at peace with God. He saw lost sinners at home with their maker and He endured, leaving us an example that, as we consider His agony we might also look at His reward and be assured that His prize and ours is worth all the pain. It is a fatal mistake to consider Jesus on the cross and forget that he is now in glory. Philippians 2:8-9 *Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name.* Do you see the connection between the patient suffering and the exaltation? That is a major, major theme of the New Testament. The Lamb that is slain becomes the Lion who rules. There is victory through sacrifice and glory on the other side of anguish. Romans 8:18 *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* The cross rules out the possibility that we suffer because God doesn’t love us and it rules in that great good can come from the most terrible evil. So, when we look at the cross we are reminded of our example and our hope.

So, how are you suffering? Physically, emotionally, financially, relationally? AW Pink exhorts us this way: *Draw an analogy between His sufferings and yours, and what proportion is there between them? Weigh well who He was and the place He took, the infinite perfection of His character and deeds and then the base ingratitude, the gross injustice, the cruel persecution He met with and what are our trifling trials compared with His agonies? O my soul, blush with shame because of thy murmurings. When you are tempted to throw down your colours and capitulate to the enemy or ever to murmur at your hard lot, consider Him who even here had nowhere to lay His head. For consider Him who endured such contradiction. Though the incarnate Son of God, He was spat upon, contemptuously arrayed in a purple robe and His enemies bowed the knee before Him in mockery. They beat Him and smote Him on the face. They tore His back with scourgings.*

They condemned Him to a criminal's death and nailed Him to the cross. End quote. When we look at the cross we are reminded that we must endure our trials with patience, encouraged by the example of Jesus and by the hope of glory.

But, there is yet a second demand on us that we find at the cross. When we embrace Jesus as Lord and Leader we discover that, in addition to bearing our trials patiently, we must lay down our lives willingly. We bear our trials patiently; we lay down our lives willingly. Why? For the simple reason that he did. Mark 8:**31** *He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* And then, right on the heels of telling His men what He had to do He tells them what they have to do. **34** *He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. Follow Me.* We speak much of following Jesus but we usually forget where He went. Where did He go? He went to the cross. Following Jesus means that we too march up the bitter hill of self-renunciation. Following Jesus means that we too die for the sake of others and the Lord. That dying for them may mean living for them, but the internal mechanism of dying to self is still the same. Jesus calls it "denying yourself," "taking up the cross." And what do you do with a cross? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, said that when Jesus calls a man He bids him, "come and die." How many in churches today have come to grips with this? Are we too much about the new plastic cross? Listen to a lengthy word from AW Tozer who says:

The cross is a radical thing. The cross of old Roman times knew no compromise; it never made concessions. It won all of its arguments by killing its opponent. It did so with Jesus. That was the cross the first time it appeared in Christian history.

After Christ was risen from the dead the apostles went out to preach His message and what they preached was the cross. Wherever they went they carried the cross and its revolutionary power went with them. The radical message of the cross transformed Saul of Tarsus. It's power changed bad men into good ones. It shook off the long bondage of paganism and altered completely the whole moral and mental outlook of the western world. All this it did as long as it was permitted to remain what it had been originally, a cross. Its power departed when it was changed from a thing of death to a thing of beauty. When men made of it a symbol, hung it around their necks as an ornament or made its outline on their faces as a magic sign to ward off evil, then it became at best

a weak emblem, at worst a positive fetish. As such it is revered today by millions who know absolutely nothing about its power.

The cross effects its ends by destroying one established pattern, the victim's, and creating another pattern, its own. Thus it always has its own way. It wins by defeating its opponent and imposing its will upon him. It always dominates. It never compromises, never dickers, nor confers, never surrenders a point for the sake of peace....With perfect knowledge of this Christ said: "Take up your cross and follow Me." So the cross not only brings Christ's life to an end, it ends also the first life, the old life, of every one of his true followers. It destroys the old pattern, the Adam pattern, in the believer's life, and brings it to an end. This and nothing less, is true Christianity...A shallow and worldly leadership would modify the cross to please the entertainment-mad saintlings who will have their fun even within the sanctuary, but to do so is to court spiritual disaster...We must do something about the cross, one of two things, flee it or die upon it. If we are wise we will do what Jesus did.

As you can see, your cross is not to be equated with your trials. Some speak in that way, as if their cross is their irritable spouse or their bad back. But a cross is not a trial, it is something you voluntarily take up as a means of mortifying your flesh, your sinful self. You embrace the cross. You commit yourself to lay down your interests for the Lord's interest, for the interest of your brothers. In I John 3:16 we read **16** *We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.* The cross then calls us to missions, to sacrifice for one another. I intentionally chose to bring this word today on *Love Our Kids* Sunday because this is precisely the choice that parents make. I hope you parents see yourself as serving Christ in your role and through your children. You are! You are missionaries to the next generation. You can easily note that as Christian values diminish in a society so too does the birth rate because those operating from a secular world-view can find no place for the kinds of personal sacrifice that raising children involves. But you parents know what it is about. Many learn through the parenting process, for the first time, how to lay down their lives. You see, you can't really love others as long as you are committed to advancing yourself. You die to self and then you are ready to live for Christ. And you die to self when the reality of the cross breaks in upon you. Count Von Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravians, a missionary movement in the 18th century constantly made the cross his focus. Sent as a young man of 19 to visit the capital cities of Europe he found himself one day in the art gallery of Dusseldorf. He stood before Domenico Feti's *Ecce Homo*, or *Behold the Man*, in

which Christ is portrayed wearing the crown of thorns and under which the inscription reads: “All this I did for thee; what hast thou done for me?” Zinzendorf was deeply convicted and challenged. There and then the young count asked Christ to draw him into the fellowship of His sufferings and to open up a life of service to Him.

That is the cross-life. It is the life that takes a missionary to Cameroon. It is the life that loves and honors a self-centered husband for Jesus’ sake. It is the life that puts the interest of children above the interest of parents. It is the life that is laid down for the body of Christ, in service, in giving, in praying. It is the life of Christ being lived out in another human. And it is wonderful. And, when we think about it rightly, it is joyful. Ask yourself today, “What would embracing the cross mean for my conduct as a church member? What would it mean for my relationship with my spouse? What would it mean for my political and business interests?” Jesus tells us what it means for leadership. He established a new paradigm for leaders – the servant leader, who is the head sacrificer. That is the role of the husband according to Ephesians 5. He is the head who gives himself for his wife. That is the role of the pastor or elder, who rules in the church but also sets the pace for giving and praying and serving. Mark 10:44-45 *Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for man.* He is the model isn’t He? That is why I like the line of the hymn we recently sang that says, “Oh, living, dying, let me bring my strength, my solace from this spring, that he who lives to be my King once died to be my Savior.” Embrace the cross.

Embrace the cross. Jesus could only do it if He believed there was a joy awaiting him. I know the same is true for me and for you. Tozer says: *The cross will cut into our lives where it hurts most, sparing neither us nor our carefully cultivated reputations. It will defeat and bring our selfish lives to an end.* Why embrace it then? He goes on: *Only then can we rise in fullness of life to establish a pattern of living wholly new and free and full of good works.* Amen. Jesus said that if you would gain your life, then lose it. If you would know resurrection then know suffering and a cross. Because for Christ and for us the cross, in the final view, is the way of joy. When we lay down our lives willingly, the Lord will lift us up. He promises it. He showed us the way. Believe it! Live it! Embrace the cross.

This we must take to the Lord in prayer and as we do ponder where you can die to self. What in your life needs to be nailed to the cross? What does the way of the cross mean for you in your family, in your habits, in your finances, in your personal mission for your Master?