

Cross of Christ 4-30-17

The Love of the Cross

We come today to our final study on the cross of Christ as we are trying to see what impact the cross of our Lord, the reality of His atoning death, ought to have on our lives. There are lots of directions I could go with this but I have decided to take my cue from the apostle Paul and his prayer in Ephesians chapter 3. Follow as I read it. Ephesians 3:**14-19** *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.* The central longing of that prayer is for a deep knowledge of how and how much we are loved by our Savior. That's an awesome prayer. There are few things in the world we need like we need this. To be rooted and grounded in love, to know the love of Christ - and how is that love described? As something that surpasses knowledge. It is a mindboggling love. And the apostle is praying that we would come to grasp it in its breadth and length and height and depth. Personally, I know of no better way to develop an appreciation for the love of Christ than to look carefully at the cross. So this morning we want to see together what the cross tells us first about the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then secondly about the love of God the Father.

In his book "The Miracle on the River Kwai" Ernest Gordon tells the true story of a group of POWs working on the Burma Railway during WW II. "At the end of each day the tools were collected from the work party. On one occasion a Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing and demanded to know which man had taken it. He began to rant and rave, working himself into a fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. 'All die! All die!' he shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward and the guard clubbed him to death with his rifle. When they returned to camp the tools were counted again and not one shovel was missing." What is it that motivates an innocent man to give his life in order to save others? Jesus says in John 15:**13** *Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends.* The Lord points to the motivation of love. This is using the word "love" in it purest and most godlike. This is not the love of pizza or the love of football or the boy-

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girl love of pop music. This is the self-giving quest for the ultimate well-being of another. This is what Lincoln referred to as the full measure of devotion. And nowhere in human history, nowhere in the stories of men, either true or imaginary is there a greater testimony to true love than the cross of Jesus. For there the perfect Son of God suffered and died in our place, paying the penalty for our sin, taking upon him our punishment, in order to free us from our bondage and give us life abundant and life eternal. It is sadly the case that among some brands of Christianity the cross is explained only as God's way of showing us how much He loved us. Fact is it is much more than that but that it surely is, and the more we understand the cross the more we perceive in it the incredible love of our Savior. When the New Testament talks about the love of Jesus, it can hardly do so without joining that thought with the historical demonstration of that love at Calvary. On occasion I have asked a person if he or she really believes himself to be loved by God. Often the answer is, "Oh sure. God has given me a nice wife, a job I enjoy. Pretty good health." And you know, those things are nice. They are expressions of God's love. But, the supreme expression of Christ's love is the pouring out of his life, the giving of Himself as our sacrifice for sin. Listen to the Scripture. I John 3:16, not John 3:16, but I John 3:**16ab**. Ephesians 5:**2** *Walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.* Sacrifice and love are brought together in every verse and the cross is the sublimest display. Galatians 2:**20** *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.* Therefore it is to the cross that we turn to discern God's heart toward us. It is to the cross we go when we wonder if the Lord cares. One of our hymns asks the question, "Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth and song? Does Jesus care when my way is dark with a nameless dread and fear? Does Jesus care when I've tried and failed to resist some temptation strong. When for my deep grief I find no relief, though my tears flow all the night long. Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye to the dearest on earth to me, and my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks, is it aught to Him, does He see? The refrain says, "O yes, He care; I know He cares." And my friend, the way we know He cares is to look to Calvary. There he forever sealed His love with his blood. John 15:**13** *Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends.*

But doesn't the love of Jesus go a step further than that? Isn't the astounding thing about the love of our Lord that He actually exceeded that highest standard of love by laying down his life for His enemies? Romans 5:**6** *For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the*

ungodly. This is what blows our minds - the nature of the rotten people Jesus died for. **7-8** *For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* What is a sinner? A sinner is someone who has rebelled against God, who has trampled the Holy One under unholy feet, who has rejected the Lord and His law. Paul says the demonstration of divine love is found in this suffering on behalf of sinners, on behalf of those whom he calls God's enemies. Did Jesus die for his friends or his enemies? Well, He died for those He loved, but those He loved didn't love Him. It was for some of those who had yelled "Crucify Him!" It was for some of those who had jeered and mocked as He was nailed to the tree. These are the kind of people that Jesus loved enough to die for. People like you and like me. In his famous hymn Charles Wesley puts the astonishment of this into words for us. He says, "And can it be that I should gain, an interest in my Savior's blood? Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me! Wesley was and we all should be astonished at what our Lord did. We should spend our days in adoration and praise.

But you know, the sincerest form of flattery, and indeed, the sincerest form of worship is what? Imitation. And the Scriptures do call us to that. Ephesians 5:**1,2abc** *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us,* That is what we are to imitate. And the verse just before that text points us then to our enemies, to the ones who offend us. Ephesians 4:**32** *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.* You'll remember that amazing teaching of Jesus in the great Sermon in which he says in Matthew 5:**43-46** *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?* Jesus is setting before us a couple of different standards. There is the standard of the world where there is honor among thieves, where you sacrifice for your buds. But then he pushes that to a new level in his teaching and then with the cross he hammers that teaching home. You forgive, you love, even your enemies, even as Christ loved us when we were hostile to Him. I Peter 2:**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.* The cross has a horizontal dimension and a vertical dimension. We are to apply the love of Christ horizontally to our human relationships by

loving others as the Lord loves us, even those who despise us and abuse us. We are to apply the love of Christ vertically by loving Jesus because He first loved us and gave Himself for us.

On now to learn how much we are loved not only by God the Son, but by God the Father as well. It was the early church heretic, Marcion, who popularized the idea that has been repeated by heretics ever since that Jesus, the nice New Testament God, conquered the mean God of the Old Testament. Nothing could be further from the truth. The New Testament not only presents to us the cross as the grandest expression of the love of Christ, it also depicts the cross as the grandest expression of the love of God the Father. Romans 5:8 *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* The language is a bit different when we read of the sacrifice of the Father, but the language of sacrifice is still there. The Father didn't suffer directly like Jesus, but He still suffered in the Calvary event. And He was involved in the giving. John 3:16 *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.* This is how the New Testament presents the gracious love of the Father. The Good Shepherd lays down His life, but the Father gives His Son. You tell me which is harder. You tell me which displays more love? They both surpass knowledge. But the Father was just as involved as the Son in that great transaction at Calvary. Isaiah 53:10abc *But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering.* Think about that. It says the Father so loved us that He was willing to crush His only begotten for our sakes. Some have considered this and concluded, "Wow, if God would do that for me I must be really special!" I'm afraid that if you have thought that way you missed something. There is another way to look at it that is far more Biblical, which is "Wow, if God would do that for me He must be really special, and really loving." God's love for us doesn't reveal our great value so much as it bestows great value. You understand the difference in those two? A baseball is worth about \$10. But when Barry Bonds hits it out of the park for his record 716th homer it becomes a treasure worth millions. That's the way it is for us. Yes, we are special and valuable, but that specialness and value is not intrinsic to us, it is bestowed on us by the Lord who bought us for Himself. The truth still speaks comfort to my soul but the honor goes to God for His great love, not our great worth.

Imagine the agony that goes into putting your son to death for sinners. 4000 years before Jesus was crushed by His father, there was another son, taken up to a mountain to be killed. His name was Isaac, the only begotten of his father, the child of promise, and his father Abraham must have endured unspeakable agony of soul as he obeyed God. The New Testament tells us it was no

different with the Lord Himself. Abraham's suffering is only a foreshadowing of God's. The great hymn says, "And when I think that God His son, not sparing, sent him to die I scarce can take it in." But when we understand it our souls are filled with wonder. Our hearts are filled with comfort. Listen to the logic of the apostle in Romans 8:32 *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?* Do you follow that? Paul is saying to our hearts, "Listen, if God loves us so much that He gives us His son, then what good thing or blessing could he conceivably withhold?" Paul banishes the notion that our problems are associated with some supposed lack of love in God. No way! God has given His absolute best to save our lives. There is nothing left to withhold.

Maybe you wonder to yourself, *Am I loved? Does anybody, does God, love me? Really care about what I am feeling?* Sometimes, in difficult circumstances, we struggle to believe God really cares. That is not uncommon. I can understand it. But, this I understand too. Our Lord has testified us of His love in as strong a terms as it could possibly be said. At times, sadly, we, the sinners for whom the Creator has crushed his own Son, find ourselves engaged in self-pity, thinking or feeling that we have been mistreated. God help us. God forgive us who live in the shadow of the cross, sprinkled by the blood of God's Son, for doubting that He cares, for daring to accuse God even of injustice, unfairness, toward us. That's how bad we get - that we think the Lord who mercifully sacrificed His son for us has not even given us a fair shake. Granted, there are circumstances of life that can make us wonder. And for times like that we have Jesus. For times like that we have Jesus. For times like that especially we must stand and gaze in wonder at the cross. Don't let the hour of your suffering eclipse the hour of Christ's suffering. I want to say that again too. Don't let the hour of your suffering eclipse, block from your soul's vision the hour of Christ's suffering. Let your heart be renewed, your soul be refreshed in the miracle of Calvary. More than any place I know, it is there at the cross that we learn about the breadth, and length and height and depth of God's love.

Because we need so badly to run repeatedly to the cross, the Lord has given us the ordinance of communion – the remembrance of His sacrifice, His body broken, His blood shed. Let's prepare ourselves now to remember Jesus together so that we leave here today with cups running over with the joy of being loved by the Father and the Son.