

“The Message of the Cross”

Introduction. “The cross is the center of the world’s history, the incarnation of Christ, and the crucifixion of our Lord. It is the pivot around which all the events of the ages revolve” once wrote the British minister, Alexander MacLaren.

So many of our hymns speak either directly or indirectly about the cross. From “At the Cross,” to “A Hill Called Mt. Calvary,” to the classic, “The Old Rugged Cross,” we remember, memorialize, and express gratitude for what the cross means to us.

Every Sunday prayers reference the cross, and, of course, our communion service is solely focused on the cross. It’s at the center of what we do today. But why?

I. Paul and the Message of the Cross

- A. In 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul speaks of “the message of the cross.”
 - 1. The proclamation of a crucified Savior is nonsense to unbelievers: no orator in antiquity ever spoke eloquently about a man dying on a cross. They dismiss it as “foolishness.”
 - 2. For believers the news of the crucified Savior is “the power of God.” It’s powerful for what all it can give us.
- B. Most churches preach about the cross, but it’s not the cross of the New Testament.
 - 1. They diminish its appeal to children with games and food. They diminish its appeal to adults by softening its requirements and making it easier to bear.
 - 2. Many years ago, a man in Lufkin would pull a wooden cross that was padded where it rested on his shoulder, and there was a wheel at the base, making it easier to pull.
 - a) Jesus did want us to take up our cross (Luke 9:23), but He didn’t mean for us to literally take wooden posts and drag them around. He did mean for us to voluntarily serve Him and take up burdens in that service.
 - b) Most religious people are willing to follow Jesus if it’s not too difficult. They want the Lord’s love without labor; salvation without sacrifice. This is unacceptable to the Savior (Acts 14:22; Revelation 2:10).
 - c) Don’t get me wrong — being a Christian is not about misery. There’s great joy in serving the Lord (Acts 8:36-39; Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16) — even in the midst of suffering (1 Peter 4:12-16).

II. It’s a Message of ...

- A. God’s love for us (John 3:16).
- B. Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins (John 10:18).
- C. Reconciliation that restores our relationship with God (Ephesians 2:16-18).
- D. Redemption from the slavery of sin and the dominion of Satan (Romans 6:15-18; Colossians 1:13-14).
- E. Inclusion into the family of God where barriers are broken down and everyone’s accepted (Galatians 3:26-27).
- F. Peace that says, “All is well with my soul” (Romans 5:1-2).

- G. Grace and mercy that reminds us that God gives me blessings I don't deserve and withholds punishment I do deserve (Ephesians 2:5; Psalm 103:10).
- H. Hope that transcends the discouragement and despair found every day in the world (Colossians 1:5).
- I. Our bodily resurrection which says that our death isn't final, but a transition to a better body the Lord will one day give us (1 Corinthians 15:29, 58).

III. The Chambers of the Human Heart

- A. The message of the cross was intended to act upon the human heart, so we need to know about the heart. Just like the physical heart consists of four chambers, so does the spiritual heart. Each has a specific function, and each plays a distinct role:
 - 1. The heart involves the intellect.
 - a) The wise man wrote, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7; cp. Mark 2:8; Romans 10:9).
 - b) So the heart thinks, reasons, and believes. It's the intellectual chamber.
 - 2. The heart involves emotion.
 - a) It can feel pain (Psalm 34:18). The heart may be broken by sin, separation, and rejection. When we say "that breaks my heart" we're not talking about something intellectual, but emotional. But, of course, the heart can also feel joy (Psalm 33:21; 32:11).
 - b) So the heart hurts, grieves, and rejoices. This second chamber of the heart experiences all the emotions known to human beings.
 - 3. The heart involves the conscience.
 - a) In John 3:20-21 the apostle says that our heart "condemns us." When we violate our conscience, we have a gnawing sense of being wrong (2 Peter 2:14; cp. 1 Timothy 4:12).
 - b) This chamber of the heart is our moral compass, an internal ethical governor. It can keep you from dangerous and reckless practices.
 - 4. The heart involves the will of man.
 - a) Will speaks to the volition of a person — to purpose and preference. Barnabas encouraged the Christians that "with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (Acts 11:23).
 - b) This final chamber of the heart involves resolve, intentionality, and determination. This requires a decision.
- B. Now, how do all of these apply to responding to the message of the cross?
 - 1. Intellectually, I know God through His Word. He has given me reasons to believe and love Him. I can think about Him and meditate on His lovingkindness.
 - 2. Emotionally, I feel the joy of God's love. I revel in His goodness, rejoice in His grace, and delight in His mercy.
 - 3. Conscientiously, because of what I both know and feel, I have a moral sense of God's love within me. My conscience is pricked when I hurt Him. And it's soothed when I seek Him.

4. Therefore, my decision is to obey God. My purpose is to praise Him. I have chosen to serve Him. My intention is to draw near to Him. And I am determined to be a disciple who follows Jesus.

Conclusion. The cross. It's not just a shiny ornament to be worn, or a marker at a gravesite. It's not just a self-help resource. It's a powerful, God-given message to be believed, embraced, and lived. It'll change you from the inside out.

We aren't just trying to make better husbands and fathers, wives and mothers. We're making disciples of Christ. Today, like the apostle Paul, I'll "boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

As William Farley expressed it in his book *Outrageous Mercy*, "The cross is our teacher. The cross is a window through which we learn everything we need to know about God, humanity, wisdom, worship, the purpose of suffering, the purpose of life, and a host of other issues. If you knew nothing else but the cross, but you knew it thoroughly, you would know everything essential for this life and the next."

There's a lot of people who work hard every week to get people to attend. And we love it when people join us for our worship. But we must emphasize that people who want to do God's will do more than simply attend. They have to let the message of the cross sink deep into their hearts. Otherwise, they're only covered to (and I'll use a new word for me) "churchism." So come and obey God from the heart, and become His child through your repentance and determination to follow the Scriptures.

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