

The Message of the Cross

Sunday, January 29, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Isaiah 29:13-16; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

1 Corinthians 1:18-19 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."

- Introduction: The Cross is Offensive to the Modern Mind

Oswald Chambers, famous for his devotional book My Utmost for His Highest, once wrote "All heaven is interested in the cross of Christ, all hell is terribly afraid of it, while men are the only beings who more or less ignore its meaning."* It is true in modern times and was true in ancient times, that the Cross of Jesus is controversial and offensive. The Bible speaks of it as the great divider for those who are perishing, and the great equalizer for those who are being saved. It is ridiculous to some, most precious to others. People have mocked it, governments have tried to ban it, but other people will not let go of it.

the Government of Poland tried to rid the country of crosses

Chuck Colson documented an episode in which the Government of Poland, then under Communist rule, tried to banish crosses from the country. "The government...had ordered crucifixes removed from classroom walls, just as they had been banned in factories, hospitals, and other public institutions. Catholic bishops attacked the ban that had stirred waves of anger and resentment all across Poland. Ultimately the government relented, insisting that the law remain on the books, but agreeing not to press for removal of the crucifixes, particularly in the schoolrooms. But one zealous Communist school administrator...decided that the law was the law. So one evening he had seven large crucifixes removed from lecture halls where they had hung since the school's founding in the twenties. Days later, a group of parents entered the school and hung more crosses. The administrator promptly had these taken down as well.

it did not go over well

The next day two-thirds of the school's six hundred students staged a sit-in. When heavily armed riot police arrived, the students were forced into the streets. Then they marched, crucifixes held high, to a nearby church where they were joined by twenty-five hundred other students from nearby schools for a morning of prayer in support of the protest. Soldiers surrounded the church. But the pictures from inside of students holding crosses high above their heads flashed around the world. So did the words of the priest who delivered the message to the weeping congregation that morning. "There is no Poland without a cross."¹⁹ Please note that while the upheaval that took place in Poland happened some years ago, the government of China took crosses down from churches just last Summer. The Cross is offensive to the modern mind.

- The Cross was Offensive to the Ancient Mind

Alexamenos worships his god

The Cross was also offensive to the ancient mind. Author Judith Couchman described an example of how the revulsion and opposition to the Cross and what it represents was as strong in ancient times as it is in parts of the world today. She wrote: One of the earliest forms of Christian art isn't a painting, sculpture or even a catacomb fresco. It's a patch of graffiti on plaster...dated around 200 AD. The drawing depicts a man with an ass's head, hanging on a cross. Viewed from behind, the crucified man turns to the left, looking down at a youth with a raised arm. An inscription underneath the cross figure claims in Greek, "Alexamenos worships his god."...To pagans the cross represented humiliation heaped on criminals, and anyone who worshiped a man hanging on this torture-and-death device deserved to be mocked. Why would anyone adore defeat?²⁰

- But here is the Main Point: The cross leaves us with nothing but grace before God. To embrace the Cross is to admit defeat, to admit that we cannot save ourselves from ourselves, that we are dead in our sins and helpless and that all the wisdom and greatness of humanity amount to nothing compared to the wisdom and greatness of God. Consider what Isaiah says:

¹⁹ For it is written: *"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."*

Paul, in our passage for today, quotes Isaiah 29:14 to remind us that God's has a wisdom that runs counter to the best thinking humanity can offer. In fact, it is a slap in the face to the notion of our own brilliance as the human race. Offering an external religiosity with no heart, the people of Israel in Isaiah's day responded to challenging times in a way that made sense to them, but was counter to God, and it led to failure. The same is true with the Cross. The whole idea that the sins of the world are such that Christ alone can pay for them on a cross is offensive. The cross leaves us with nothing but grace before God, and as such it is the great divider and the great equalizer.

- And Here's the Application: The cross is the great equalizer and the great divider

It is the great divider to those who are perishing

The Cross is the great divider in that it is offensive and unacceptable, but is so for people the Scripture describes as "perishing." The word means to lay waste, destroy, disintegrate. It is not the loss of being, but of well-being. To perish, spiritually, is to be separated from God, which is the essence of Hell. Those who are perishing are veiled or blinded. They fail to see the significance (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

To the perishing the Cross has the "stench of death" It is repulsive and people can even have a visceral response to it (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). Scripturally, we should not be surprised that people find the Cross offensive and useless, but we should be sobered by it.

To all who are saved are saved by grace the Cross is the Great Equalizer

Conversely, those who are being saved find the Cross precious, a salvation of grace beyond comprehension that makes us all equal. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." It is the great equalizer in that if we embrace salvation through the Cross we must give up all notion of superiority to anyone. We are all in need of grace at the Cross, and all who come to the Cross are forgiven equally.

- Conclusion

In conclusion, I'd like to share a prayer written by Pastor Greg Ellcey, placed in our hymnal and shared during his funeral yesterday. Notice how often he brings up the cross. "Lord Jesus Christ,

Your Cross brings healing, it brings life, it brings victory, and it brings joy. Draw me to You and lift me up to Your Presence, where I may see the wounds of the crown, I may see Your pierced hands, see the wound in Your side, see the stripes on Your back, and see Your pierced feet. Sorrowing Christ, You wept over Jerusalem. Patient Christ, You were condemned to death. Forgiving Christ, You were beaten. Suffering Christ, You carried the cross. Saving Christ, You died on the cross. Jesus my Savior, You are the Lamb of God; You willingly suffered pain and sorrow for my sinfulness; You died in my place and forgiveness is mine; my life may be lived with purpose, and I will join You and all others in eternity. Lord Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit, inspire me to take up my cross each day and follow You with confidence and with a desire to live in Your image. Amen."

* Oswald Chambers.

** Chuck Colson, Kingdoms in Conflict, pp. 202-3.

<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/c/cross.htm>

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<https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-the-cross/>

Children's Message

point out the pretty cross

note to the children that a real cross is ugly and terrible

point out that sin has a price and Jesus paid that price

To the Older Students

point out Galatians 3:13 and in one of the mysteries of Scripture, note that Luther was at pains to point out that Jesus did not just play the role of being cursed, but rather was cursed for us. It is as if He committed all the sins over committed, and ever will be committed, and we are as innocent as can be.