

The Glory of the Cross

Galatians 6:14

As we approach Holy Week, we are in a three-week series on the significance of the cross of Christ. Our text today is Galatians 6:14 where Paul writes:

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

I'd like to begin with a personal story to illustrate Paul's assertion that the only thing that really matters is the cross of Jesus.

I have been actively involved in worship since I was a teenager. The guy who was my youth pastor was also the worship pastor of our church and taught me piano from the age of twelve. He recognized pretty early on that I didn't have the chops for Bach or Chopin, so he trained me to be able to listen to a piece of worship music and then play it on the piano. For the last 25 years I've studied the musical, historical and theological aspects of worship. After all those years of study and leading hundreds of worship services I have come to the conclusion that there is only one thing that matters when it comes to worship music, and that one thing is congregational participation. You didn't come here today to watch those of us on stage worship, you came here to have a sacred conversation with God. We are not here to perform for you, we are merely accompanists to your worship. Many times when I'm not leading I'll stand up there in the sound booth where I can watch the congregation. I'll turn off my listening to the music and watch, because I am absolutely convinced that the only thing that matters is your participation. Now, as a musician and worship leader, I know that many other things are essential. The instruments have to be in tune, the media has to work flawlessly, the design of the service must be rooted in the gospel, the ushers have to know when to collect the offering. But over and above and primary to all that is your participation in worship. It is really the only thing that matters.

Paul wrote the book of Galatians to a church that was struggling to understand what was really important. They had heard the truth about the freedom and forgiveness that was theirs through Christ's death, but false teachers and those who thought that salvation was a mix of God's grace plus human effort were leading them astray. You can hear the exasperation in Paul's voice as he writes:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Gal 3:1-3)

This brilliant man who had a mastery of the Law of Moses and had lived an impeccable life of moral excellence prior to his conversion now knows the true meaning of life, and he says to the Galatians, "The cross is everything; the cross is the only thing that matters!"

Very little has changed in 2000 years. When we buy in to the modern credo that financial success, social standing and educational achievement are the keys to happiness and the real meaning of life, we become like the Galatians of old who believed they could find life's fulfillment, meaning and significance through their own effort. Paul's words ring true to us today as they did back then. We must be defined by the cross; the cross is the only thing that matters, or as he puts it:

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

Today we are studying "The Glory of the Cross" by asking the question, "Why is the cross the only thing that matters?" There's an outline provided in your bulletin if you'd care to follow along.

The first reason why the cross is the only thing that matters is

I. Because of who is there.

I hope this story is not true, but I heard once about a young woman who went into a jewelry store to buy a necklace. The clerk asked what kind of necklace she was looking for and she replied, "A cross." He pulled out a display of cross necklaces for her, but she quickly added, "No, I'm looking for one with the little man on it." She had probably seen her favorite pop singer or movie actress wearing a cross necklace and she wanted one, too. But she had no idea of the meaning of the cross, and she certainly didn't understand who suffered and died there.

All of the religious art related to Christ's passion depict his physical torment and show a man who had been beaten to the point of death, and we may be tempted to see in those portrayals a man overcome by the circumstances around him. But what does the Bible tell us about the person who was crucified that day? First, it tells us that

A. He is the sovereign king

A brief sampling of verses reveal to us the majesty of Jesus Christ. Paul tell us,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15-17)

Daniel's face turned pale in fear when he saw Christ. He writes,

...I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14)

When the apostle John heard the voice of Christ, he collapsed before him and wrote:

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lamp stands, and among the lamp stands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like

blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (Rev 1:12-17)

When one of the disciples drew their sword to prevent Jesus' arrest in the Garden, Jesus shouted:

"Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (Mt 26:53)

The cross is all-important because Jesus is the sovereign king of heaven and earth, but the Bible tells us also that

B. He is the suffering servant.

While his disciples argued with one another to attain a place of prominence, Jesus reminded them that

...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt 20:28)

No one spoke more eloquently about the sufferings of the messiah than the prophet Isaiah. He writes:

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. (Isa 50:6)

And later in chapter 53,

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. (Isa 53:3-4)

The cross is the focal point of human history and the only thing that matters because of who is there. Jesus Christ, the King of kings suffered there for us.

Secondly, the cross is the only thing that matters

II. Because of what he did there.

Most of us could probably give a pretty good rendering of the gospel; how Jesus bore our sins on the cross and how believing in Jesus' atonement and resurrection gives us the gift of eternal life. You could listen to any sermon preached by Billy Graham over the course of the last sixty years and this is the message you would hear. However, I want to confess to you that for me, an incomplete understanding of Christ's sacrifice has been the source of spiritual frustration for many years. So let's take a moment to look more deeply at what he did there on the cross. The first point I want to make is that

A. At the cross, Jesus became sin for us.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul writes:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:21)

Now, all my life I've known and believed that Jesus bore my sins on the cross, but I've learned that a weak understanding of the first part of that verse led to a weak understanding of the second part of the verse. Let me illustrate this way,

We all know the typical story of the group of boys who go out into the yard to play baseball. Inevitably, someone pitches the ball too fast and someone else swings the bat too late, the ball goes sailing through the neighbor's window and the boys go flying behind the hedges. In time, one of the boys timidly rings the neighbor's doorbell, confesses to the evil deed and has to mow the lawn three Saturdays in a row to pay for the broken window. Great story, but it's terribly inadequate as an illustration of Christ's sacrifice. You see, in this story, one boy volunteers to take the blame but in fact all the boys retain their guilt. In 2 Corinthians Paul did not write,

God made him who had no sin to take the blame for us...

In the same way, the one boy took the penalty and cut the grass, but to be fair each of the boys should have borne their part of the punishment. And by the same token, Paul did not write:

God made him who had no sin to bear the penalty for us...

Now, Christ did take our blame and bore our penalty, but these are secondary results to the greater act Paul describes:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...

Think of it this way; if Jesus did nothing more on the cross than take the blame for my sin and suffer the consequences of my sin, the sin is still mine, not his. The reason why so many people labor under a constant feeling that God is angry at them is because they don't fully grasp that Jesus BECAME our sin and that at Christ's crucifixion, God poured out the totality of his holy anger on Christ. The reason why so many people labor under a constant sense of guilt is because they don't fully grasp that Jesus BECAME our sin and that at the cross, Jesus became personally and solely guilty for every evil deed ever done throughout human history. Jesus became every sin you and I ever have or ever will commit, and God held him personally and completely responsible for that sin. God did not pour out most of his anger on Jesus but reserve a little bit for my yet future sins, nor did he hold Jesus partially responsible but considers me guilty for my contributions to the evil of humanity. No,

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...

In his holy purity, God absolutely despises sin. In his holy righteousness, he must pour out his unbearable wrath on sinners. At the crucifixion, God despised the man hanging there and poured out unrestrained condemnation on his own Son. Isaiah saw the messiah bearing the guilt of mankind's sin and wrote:

...it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. (Isa 53:10-11)

Perhaps we cringe at the horror of this and wonder if Jesus really became personally and solely responsible for all the evil of humanity, but did not Jesus himself – the one who had always known full and perfect intimacy with the Father – cry out on the cross, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”

Because Jesus became sin and was judged completely guilty before God, I am released from the bondage to sin and I’m considered completely innocent before God. Do you grasp that? You are completely innocent before God; loved, approved and filled with his presence. Paul takes four chapters in the book of Romans to explain this miracle of forgiveness and concludes with the stunning pronouncement,

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Rom 8:1-2)

I want to move quickly to the second half of the verse and say that not only at the cross did Jesus become sin for us, but secondly,

B. At the cross, we exchanged lives with Christ

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:21)

Now you know why the cross of Jesus Christ is the only thing that matters. Until in faith I choose to embrace the truth of the first half of this verse I can never comprehend the unspeakable peace and joy that will be mine by embracing the second half of the verse. In Him, we have fully become the righteousness of God. God cannot allow you into his presence until you are made perfectly righteous, and that’s who you are in Christ. God could not fill your heart with the presence of his Holy Spirit if you were not completely righteous, and that’s who you are because of Christ. At the cross, we exchanged lives with Christ. He becomes the totality of our sin and we become the totality of his righteousness. Here’s how Paul puts it earlier in the letter to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20)

Now, you might be saying to yourself, “But Bill, I still sin and I still feel guilty.” Good! The only reason you still sin is because in that moment you believe that you’ll find more fulfillment and happiness by pretending to act like Adam instead of abiding in Christ and what he offers. Now confess that sin, discipline your mind to abide in Christ and fully embrace the fact that you are completely forgiven by God. I have found that Gratitude for the cross will stop me from sinning, and it’s very hard for me to sin when I’m spiritually on my knees looking up at the cross. How else can you explain Mike’s powerful faith story except by the power of the cross? If you are in Christ, God the Father looks down on you as He did his own Son, with unrelenting joy every moment of every day and says about the redeemed you, “This is my beloved one in whom I am well pleased!” The cross is the only thing that matters because of who is there and what he did there.

Let me finish with our text very quickly. Paul says,

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

The final reason why the cross is the only thing that matters is

III. Because of what happened there

Now with a fresh understanding of what Jesus did there, the last part of the verse leads us to an obvious conclusion. First,

A. The world is dead to me.

When Paul uses the word “world” here, he is not speaking either about the planet earth or the people who live here. He is speaking of the misguided values and expectations of a fallen human society that ever since Adam, has lived in rebellion to God.

Every person seeks the meaning of life. All of us want to know our purpose, what is success, what will bring me happiness, fulfillment and meaning. Because of the cross, I can't go to the world for the answers to these questions. Because of the cross, the world is dead to me. Everything that's important to the world is absolutely meaningless to me. Now that doesn't mean I don't still read Sports Illustrated or Newsweek; it does mean that I don't model my life after Joe Mauer or Newt Gingrich. I can only find my purpose, define success and know happiness, fulfillment and meaning in the cross of Jesus Christ.

But it is also true that

B. I am dead to the world

When I go to the world to help define who I am, I find that because of the cross, the world is dead to me. In the same way, when the world comes to me to make me conform to its ways, because of the cross, I am dead to it. Here's what John wrote to the early church:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 Jn 2:15-17)

This world wants me to gratify my sinful flesh as if the cross meant nothing. The world wants me to love the things it loves as if I were yet unredeemed and still living according to the old sinful nature that used to resonate with the world. This world wants me to join in its pride and rebellion against God's loving rule as if Jesus had not rescued me from sin and death and translated me into his kingdom of light. When the world comes looking for me, they should find me in a morgue; crucified, dead, unresponsive. I was crucified with Christ. I am dead to the world.

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

There's an invitation here for all of us today. Perhaps you're here today and you've heard the story about Christ's sacrifice on the cross, but you've never come to that place of personally putting your trust in Christ and exchanging your sin and its penalty for his

righteousness and the forgiveness he offers. If so, eternal life is only a prayer away. All you have to do is come to the cross; Christ has done everything else.

Many of us made that decision many years ago, but we're yet to fully grasp the completeness of God's love and forgiveness for us. We walk around falling back into sin and carrying a sense of guilt as if we were still in Adam instead of being in Christ. Fundamentally, our problem is that after starting our spiritual journey at the cross, we've slowly wandered away from it. Again, fullness of life is only a prayer away.

We have many people available today who would like to pray with you. Our pastors and elders are stationed at the back doors of the sanctuary after each service and would love to pray with you, or you can fill out a welcome card and put it in the offering bag and someone will contact you this week.

Let us pray.