

The Cross, More Than a Necklace

Summary: The cross is more than a symbol. It is a way of life for those following Jesus.

1st Service Hymns

Beneath the Cross of Jesus #297
The Old Rugged Cross #504
Take up Thy Cross #415

2nd Service Praise Songs:

Lord I Lift your Name on High
Above All
At the Cross
This is Amazing Grace

Scripture

Proverbs 1:20-33

- ²⁰ Out in the open wisdom calls aloud,
she raises her voice in the public square;
²¹ on top of the wall^[a] she cries out,
at the city gate she makes her speech:
²² “How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery
and fools hate knowledge?
²³ Repent at my rebuke!
Then I will pour out my thoughts to you,
I will make known to you my teachings.
²⁴ But since you refuse to listen when I call
and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand,
²⁵ since you disregard all my advice
and do not accept my rebuke,
²⁶ I in turn will laugh when disaster strikes you;
I will mock when calamity overtakes you—
²⁷ when calamity overtakes you like a storm,
when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind,
when distress and trouble overwhelm you.
²⁸ “Then they will call to me but I will not answer;
they will look for me but will not find me,
²⁹ since they hated knowledge
and did not choose to fear the LORD.
³⁰ Since they would not accept my advice
and spurned my rebuke,
³¹ they will eat the fruit of their ways
and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.
³² For the waywardness of the simple will kill them,
and the complacency of fools will destroy them;
³³ but whoever listens to me will live in safety
and be at ease, without fear of harm.”

Mark 8:34-38

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Call to Worship

L: We are called to follow Jesus.

P: But following Jesus isn't easy.

L: No. It will demand our dedication and our energy.

P: It will change our whole lives.

L: Come, all of you. Come and learn of the Lord Jesus.

P: Lord, we come, seeking your wisdom and your guidance. AMEN.

Prayer of Confession (unison)

Lord, it is easy for us to say that we will follow you; and then turn our backs and act as though our commitment to you does not mean anything to us. Jesus challenges us to take up our crosses, and when we don't understand what that means, we just shrug and turn away. Forgive us for our lack of commitment and faith. Heal us of our greed and fears. Give us courage to be disciples and enable us to joyfully proclaim your healing mercies and your transformational love. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

Message The Cross, More Than a Necklace

When I say the word cross what comes to mind when you hear that word? Do you think of a decorative altar ornament? Is it something that rests on top of a church steeple? Is it a piece of jewelry hanging around the neck?

Mention the word "cross" to the people of Jesus' day and a very different image came to mind. Too many times they had seen the road leading into a city lined with stakes and the enemies of Rome nailed to them. In Jesus' day, more than 100 men had been crucified at Caesarea Philippi. Crucifixions on a smaller scale were also a common sight. It has been estimated that perhaps some 30,000 crucifixions occurred under the Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ. If Jesus was out to win a lot of followers, He picked the one image that would turn away most people. For when He said, "**Take up a cross,**" they knew exactly what He meant. The most painful, humiliating and disgraceful thing of Jesus' day and the one thing that everyone wanted to avoid.

The cross was the ultimate symbol of shame and defeat. It was the Roman form of capital punishment that sought not only to kill the person but to strip them of every ounce of dignity on their way to death. They did this through public crucifixions on the most traveled roads into a city, so the most people possible would see the criminals being crucified and the agony and pain they suffered which often lasted for days. The Romans thought the very word cross was obscene, never to be uttered in daily conversation. It was considered to be such a terrible death that Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, no matter their crime. So, the cross was the worst thing imaginable, and it's shocking to say the least that Jesus used this imagery for following Him. In Jesus' day, it was the greatest symbol of shame. But Jesus changed all of that. Two thousand years later, the cross is no longer a symbol of shame and humiliation but an enduring symbol of sacrificial love, grace, and forgiveness.

But the cross is not just a symbol we look to or place our faith in. It's not just what Jesus did for us. It is what Jesus invites us to. It is a way of life for those following Jesus. The Latin word for cross is "cruz" and means

“a vital, basic or pivotal point.” It’s the moment when everything changes, and it is the point of no return because when it happens, there is no going back. On a cosmic level, the cross is the vessel through which God’s redemptive love was revealed to the world. But on a personal level, the cross is this intersection where when a person decides to follow Jesus and one life ends and another begins in Jesus.

Just prior to our Scripture today, the disciples were in the midst of a discussion about having no bread to eat when Jesus, the Bread of life, was in their midst. Jesus asks, “Do you have eyes to see and fail to see...?” They travelled to Bethsaida which was one of three main cities on the northern tip of Galilee where Jews in the first and second century BC had returned from Babylon and settled to live out their faith and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. This is the heart of the observant Jewish triangle in the North. These Jews were waiting, preparing and looking for the Messiah. So, if anyone would know when the Messiah arrived, it was them. It was here that some people brought a blind man to Jesus to be healed. Jesus put some spit on his eyes and asked him if he saw anything. He answered that he had cloudy vision, seeing people but they looked like trees walking around. So, Jesus puts his hands on the man’s eyes again and his eyes are restored, and he is able to see clearly. This man was healed in stages which is unprecedented in Mark’s Gospel but a sign for the disciples that not only does faith come in stages but so does coming to understand the true nature of Jesus’ Messiahship and His call of discipleship. As Jesus and the disciples continue to travel north, they reach the foot of Mount Hermon and Jesus asks, “Who do the people think I am?” They give various answers but then Jesus gets to the crux of the matter and asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter professes: “You are the Christ.”

Jesus uses these two events as a springboard to begin sharing with the disciples the nature of his discipleship: that he must suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders and then crucified. This must have been a shock to the disciples and their hopes and dreams for a triumphant Messiah who would rise to power and throw off the bonds of Rome. How could a rejected and crucified Jesus, usher in God’s kingdom? So, Jesus’ words were both inconceivable and intolerable. We can understand Peter telling Jesus this must not happen and Jesus rebuking him by saying, “Get behind me Satan!” How those words must have cut to Peter’s heart, for Jesus was saying that Peter and the disciples stand in the way of Jesus’ path of Messiahship! It’s at this moment that Jesus looks up to the crowd and says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

We learn three things about the call of the cross. First, it’s giving up our whole self. We are to deny ourselves. And that may be the most difficult thing of all. In a culture which teaches us to pursue our desires and fulfill them, Jesus instead calls us to deny ourselves. Taking up your cross and following Jesus is not denying ourselves Cold Stone ice cream, new cars, Ultra HD 4K 70” TV’s, or the latest iPhone or iPad. Jesus is talking about something much worse – denying your whole self. In other words, if there is something more important than Jesus, then that is what you need to deny in your life, because if you’re not following Him and if you are unwilling to change, you won’t. The Greek word that is translated as "deny" is *aparneomai* (aper-neo-mii), which means "to refuse to give any thought to, to express concern for, or to pay attention to." The idea is that we do not even think about ourselves or our needs and desires but only that of God’s will and the mission of Christ.

Second, it’s choosing the cross. That’s a sharp contrast to the prevalent situation of Jesus’ day when the cross was forced upon you. No one in Jesus day chose crucifixion. It was something which was thrust on you because of your criminal actions. Crucifixion was used for a number of different crimes. Two of the most prevalent though were lowlife criminals who had committed repeated crimes (like the two bandits crucified beside Jesus) and for actively seeking to overthrow the Roman state. So, in the minds of those who heard Jesus that day, he certainly wasn’t calling people to a life of petty crimes. Some must have thought that Jesus was calling them to take up arms and lead a revolt against Rome. But when you look at the life, actions and teachings of Jesus, this cannot be the case either. The call isn't to take on actions which will then lead you to

be crucified. Instead, the focus is on what is being crucified. For Rome, it was criminals but for Jesus, it is about that which keeps you from fully committing to the ways of Jesus and the purposes of God. Remember Jesus' rebuke of Peter? And so, the question for those who take up their cross is this: what needs to be crucified, destroyed or killed in you so that you might fully give yourself to God and commit to His purposes?

This is why Jesus calls us to choose the cross. In other words, Jesus is calling us to choose to die to the life we're living but to die so that new life, life in him, may be born in us. It's a voluntary decision. It's a daily decision. It's borne out of love. For Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commands. John 14:15 and **"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:12** And here's the thing: this is not a journey we have to take alone. Jesus has already walked that path. He made that choice when he was baptized, led into the wilderness and then began his ministry. And so, Jesus' invitation isn't just to follow Him, it's to join him. We are called to lay our life on the line. Paul echoes Jesus' invitation when he writes, **"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship." Romans 12:1**

Third, you have to be willing to die. In other words, you have to be willing to sacrifice and give up everything, even your life, to follow Jesus. It's very easy to wear a cross around your neck. There are places we could go in this world today where some people may kill you because you are wearing it. If our lives depended on it, would you still wear it? If we lose our life for His sake, we will gain new life in Him. But it can only happen when we take up our cross. Bass Mitchell writes, "For some of us to "take up the cross" may mean at some time that we have to literally die for our faith. But I think something else is meant here for us, a different kind of death, of sacrifice. Jesus is asking us to be willing to sacrifice our lives for him by taking up crosses. You see, our crosses can be the difficult tasks we choose to take up which we could avoid. Our crosses can often be responsibilities, ministries which we know will cost us dearly, but we take them up anyway. Some people speak of a grouchy boss, or some affliction or other situation as "a cross I HAVE to bear." But the crosses Jesus speaks of here are not ones we HAVE to bear, they are tasks, things we CHOOSE to bear for Christ's sake. He said, **"TAKE up your cross."** That's a conscious, free decision. Our crosses are the difficult, costly, even distasteful tasks we willingly accept."

He then tells the story of meeting a man in an inner city whose name was "Brother Love." In that city there are many homeless and hungry people. This man saw this great cross laying in his city and placed it on his back. He started a mission downtown. Everyday he's there feeding them, finding them places to sleep, helping them get jobs, calling the parents of the runaways he takes in, and witnessing to them. In a few short years, this mission has ministered to thousands of persons. But it would not have happened without the sacrifices he's made. He gives his time and a lot of his money. He cooks. He cleans up. He's called at all hours of the day and night. He goes to the jail and takes custody of them. And there's always on him the burdens and problems of these needy persons. In many ways, it's been a heavy cross for him. It's taken much out of him. But you would not know this from talking with him. I don't know if I've ever met a Christian more full of joy than Brother Love. And he'll be the first to tell you he'd do it all over again. The sacrifices don't bother him. Brother Love says, "It's been worth it all. No one made me do this. It wasn't forced on me. It was a cross no one else saw or cared to see. I saw it! And I took it up!"

And then he writes, "All of us have a cross. In fact, most of us have more than one. There is some work, some ministry Christ wants you to take up for him, to do in his name. It's a cross, a work that you freely choose and that demands much of you. We have to be willing to say yes and take it up!" When you wear a cross today, don't only think of it as what Christ did for you, but think of it as Jesus inviting you to a new way of life in Him.