

# Chapter 1 - The Cross of Christ

## The Example of the Early Church

The Corinthian church was a mess. There were divisions and theological quarrels and pride about obscure knowledge. Gross sexual sins were being tolerated. Church members were suing one another. There was idolatry, overeating at potlucks (while leaving none for others), and a carnal fascination with spiritual gifts. If anyone ever talks about the early church as a model of success, they certainly don't mean this particular early church. Paul wades into this familiar-sounding morass of fleshliness and spiritual immaturity with a very unlikely message:

*18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

*..22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [1 Corinthians 1:22-24](#)*

*2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*

[1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 \(NASB\)](#)

*3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ...*

[1 Corinthians 15:3-4 \(NASB\)](#)

Paul considered the cross of Christ to be so important and central to this mess of a church that he began and ended his letter to them with it. In fact, he was determined to know nothing else among them, and he delivered it to them as of first importance. The question is, how does the cross of Christ speak to these terrible (if all too familiar) problems? Is it possible that the cross of Christ, far from being some obscure point

of doctrine or the subject of strange and dusty old hymns, is in fact the power of God which holds the key to solving the very real carnality and fleshliness in the church?

## The Hole in our Gospel

There really is a hole in our gospel. It has nothing to do with soup kitchens or the homeless or overseas missions, or even a greater commitment to Christ's Lordship, as wonderful as those things might be. Our radical discipleship is not what is missing from our gospel. The cross of Christ is what is missing from our gospel. Many churches preach a great deal of warm friendly useful advice, which frustratingly enough, few people follow. Under the veneer of the smiling Sunday morning welcome, most churches are a carnal cesspool of hidden pornography addictions, mean-spirited gossip, heartless and selfish greed, theological quarrels and factions, and morbid fascinations with the strange supernatural manifestations. That is to say, they are full of sinful humans. In this environment, the cross of Christ seems a strange wart of confusing and even embarrassing theological necessity, more of a required point on a doctrinal statement, rather than a cherished central pillar of spiritual refuge and power. We see little or no relationship between the message of the cross of Christ and the real-life situations we face. Little attention is given to the cross of Christ, lest we push away visitors or struggling (tithing) members with too much strange theology and obscure doctrine.

There is a hole in our gospel because we are ashamed of the cross. We want to make the root Christian message into something we do for God. The gospel is actually the message that God has done something for us. All of this talk about sin and wrath and blood and crosses is a bit embarrassing. We want to get on with the practical stuff. I'm here to say that we need to give far more attention to what we have heard — that we have such a great salvation ([Hebrews 2:1-3](#))!

Let's make no mistake – the gospel is a strange and foolish message indeed! It asks us to embrace the notion of a wrathful God who in His holiness requires some sort of human sacrifice in payment of justice. It seems awful; isn't God supposed to be loving? It is weird and even horrifying to celebrate the Messiah's blood, to center our faith around something that is so universally considered to be evil. Most of us would hear Jesus say that we need to drink His blood and eat His flesh ([John 6:53-56](#)), and if we were honest, we would say that He is a lunatic and walk quickly away. It has become more culturally acceptable to pretend that you get it and to simply ignore the cross and focus on "sanctification." The first step to understanding is to embrace the truth: you have no clue how this icky and repulsive message could be the solution to your problems. You have no idea why Paul the Apostle is so overcome with joy at this strange idea. The gospel of Christ and Him crucified embarrasses you.

I'm here to say that you can come to see that the message of the cross of Christ is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to mankind, and it really does hold the secret to solve your most urgent problems. The key is not to tell yourself to stop being ashamed of the cross of Christ, that's not what I'm saying here at all! I'm saying that the cross of Christ is telling us something important, and if we will stop and focus on it and listen to its message, the light will dawn on our minds and hearts and we will find true release and honest liberation. I love these words from C. J. Ryle:

*Let others, if they will, preach the law and morality; let others hold forth the terrors of hell, and the joys of heaven; let others drench their congregations with teachings about the sacraments and the church; give me the cross of Christ! This is the only lever which has ever turned the world upside down hitherto, and made people forsake their sins. And if this will not, nothing will. A man may begin preaching with a perfect knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; but he will do little or no good among his hearers unless he knows something of the cross. Never was there a minister who did much for the conversion of souls who did not dwell much on Christ crucified. Luther, Rutherford, Whitefield, M'Cheyne, were all most eminently preachers of the cross. This is the preaching that the Holy Spirit delights to bless. He loves to honor those who honor the cross.*

## The Word Made Flesh is a Crucified Word

In the first chapter of the book of John, we learn that the “Word” which was in the beginning was with God, and was God. This is the mystery of the doctrine of the trinity, that the members *are* God, suggesting a unity, and are *with* God, suggesting a distinction. We will delve into this in relation to the cross later. John tells us in [John 1:14](#) that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

If Jesus Christ is the very word of God made flesh, then what is He saying to us? He didn't just speak God's words — He actually *is* God's word. What is the message of this word of flesh and bone and blood? Of all the things He taught, there was no greater word than the cross. You can be certain that every word that Jesus spoke and every action He took was done in light of His crucifixion. When He rose from the dead, He was not raised as a completely healed man as if newborn. He retained the scars. His crucifixion has become an essential part of His identity. This preserved evidence of crucifixion was proof to the disciples of His identity, that the risen Savior is the the Savior who has suffered. He describes Himself to John in the vision as the One who was dead, who is alive forevermore ([Rev 1:18](#)). It is the Lamb standing, as if slain, who is worthy apart from all creatures, to open the scroll in the Father's right hand ([Rev 5:6](#)). He is worthy because He was slain, and purchased men for God with His blood. ([Rev 5:9](#)). He is known as a slain lamb, and His

worthiness is that He was slain. All of heaven understands the centrality of the cross of Christ. The Father Himself deems the suffering and death of His Son as precious and sufficient, and because of His suffering and death He counts Him worthy above all others. This Savior is our lover and advocate, and He has friends in high places indeed!

It is time for the church to understand the tremendous value and power of what He has given to us. With reckless and passionate abandon He has loved us to the uttermost, and His love is sufficient to save us to the end of time and beyond. The cross stands forever as an unassailable word that we have been loved in a way that can never be undone. We have been valued and cherished above life itself by God Himself. The cross declares that we matter greatly to God. The cross of Christ is a declaration, and it deserves a great deal of attention.

## Chapter 2 - The Cross of Christ Declares that God Takes the Initiative

*4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.  
5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.  
6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on Him.*

[Isaiah 53:4-6 \(NASB\)](#)

## Disappointment With God

In his book *Disappointment With God*, Philip Yancey points out that at the time of Christ, the imminent appearance of the Messiah was in the air. They were expecting a conquering hero, a military and political leader who would free them from the oppression of Rome. When a wandering homeless storyteller arrived on the scene, healing people and casting out demons, they couldn't accept Him as the Messiah. They certainly didn't expect to see Him as pierced and crushed and chastened. He didn't fit the mental picture they had built up of a proper Messiah. He was despised, and was not esteemed ([Isaiah 53:3](#)).

We see this same dynamic down to this day. We tend to shy away from the message of the cross of Christ. It is disappointing and weird and embarrassing. Like Cain, we want a bloodless and pleasant offering for which we worked hard. We want to make Christianity about "relationship, not religion", which sounds good until I foul up my side of the relationship. We want to worry about our sanctification, which of course is perpetually lacking. We want to promise (lie to?) people that they can be free in Christ, that there is a liberty in the Spirit which we ourselves haven't really experienced. We want to tell them that God is doing great things in our lives, when many times it seems more like we simply soldier on. We want to tell them that

Christianity is about anything except a crucified savior. It is a profoundly disappointing message; it just isn't enough. We're afraid to admit how true U2's song is for us:

*You broke the bonds and you*

*Loosed the chains*

*Carried the cross*

*Of my shame*

*Of my shame*

*You know I believed it*

*But I still haven't found what I'm looking for*

*U2 – I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking for*

## Resurrection, Not Crucifixion!

Many times when I preach or begin to talk about the cross of Christ, well-meaning people will jump in and remind me that Jesus is not simply crucified, He is risen! Sure, the cross is important, but we should move on and emphasize the empty tomb! Unlike the apostle Paul and the prophet Isaiah, we tend to want to emphasize the resurrection as of first importance. The resurrection really is something to write home about! It is a tale of miracle and triumph, and without it the cross would mean nothing. The resurrection is important enough to be included in Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 15 as what was delivered of first importance. However, it is Christ and Him crucified that Paul was determined to make known ([1 Corinthians 2:2](#)). The resurrection is a validation of the substantive work of the cross. It was the suffering and death of the Messiah that Isaiah was so inspired to foretell. The Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah are explicit about His suffering, but obscure and sparse concerning His resurrection. All of the Levitical sacrifices foreshadowed Christ's death, not His resurrection. It is the savior's blood, not the savior's resurrection, that washes us from all sin ([1 John 1:9](#)). Unlike us, the inspired writers of the Bible emphasized the message of the cross first and foremost.

## Who Would Make This Up?

One of the most distinguishing marks of the cross of Christ is that it is not the kind of thing that any human would have dreamed up. No one would wake up one day and say, "I'm going to invent a new religion! Let's

make the central doctrine a pathetic human sacrifice! In fact, let's make the central figure out to be God in the flesh, and let's make His chief act, that He dies. That will impress people and draw lots of followers!"

Instead, we see that the suffering of the Messiah couldn't have been more clearly foretold (Isaiah 53), but it is such an unlikely and distasteful idea that no one believed it and no one expected it. Of course Peter disputed it when he first heard about it ([Matthew 16:21,22,23](#))! To this day we still have trouble accepting it. No one but God could have dreamt this up. In other religions, the leader may have been sacrificial, but they did not make it their main goal to dramatically and publicly die. As Christians we might think that the Aztecs were closest to the truth with their human sacrifices, but they didn't have the right person at hand to kill. For them, it wasn't the deity who was sacrificed, nor even a religious leader; it was thousands of young "innocents"! For other religions, the significance of their gods and leaders is in their power and success, their teachings and wisdom and inspirational example. The gist of their message is not their sacrifice for us but their demand of sacrifice from us. People try to cast Jesus as the same kind of figure but it doesn't work. His morals and His example and His wisdom are so perfect that we can only despair as we look. Jesus came to be the savior, and all of His ministry and wisdom and teaching worked toward this end: He was the savior come to die for sinners.

## The Fingerprint of God

We have in the cross, the clearest and most obvious fingerprint of God. He made this up, and He executed it by His own sovereign power. You yourself did not make this up, you would never have made it up. There is a strange comfort in saying that the whole thing seems a bit alien and creepy, because it means we didn't invent it. No human invented your salvation. It is clear that God made this up. When you look at the cross of Christ, you are looking most directly at the unadulterated pure action of the living true God on earth. People may dispute about how to interpret certain Bible passages and theological doctrines, but the cross of Christ stands alone, stark and unblemished. In the most dramatic and profound way, He has used the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. It is as if God took a few millennia before creating the universe, to plan something so foolish and unlikely and even repellant that no one would ever think that a human mind would invent it — then He used that as His centerpiece. There is nothing weaker and more foolish and embarrassing than the cross of Christ. In acknowledging this, we see that God Himself has stepped in, quite apart from the idea of any man, and has declared with His own authority that we are greatly prized. He has made a grand fool of Himself for our sake, and by His own initiative has declared for us a very great love. Here is the message of the cross of Christ: God Himself, and only God, has declared a very great love for us.





# Chapter 3 - The Cross of Christ Declares that God has Wrath Against Sin

*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”*

[John 3:36 \(NASB\)](#)

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ...*

[Romans 1:18 \(NASB\)](#)

*Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*

[Romans 5:9](#)

## The Wrath of Chuck’s Girlfriend Sarah

I confess that our family sometimes gets drawn into certain TV shows on netflix, and we’ll watch ridiculous numbers of episodes at a stretch. I’m sure this is some kind of trendy syndrome with an official name. It is embarrassing, really. We went through a phase where we were binge-watching a fun spy show called “Chuck”, and in one of the episodes Chuck, a lovable and unlikely spy, got kidnapped. His gorgeous spy handler/girlfriend, Sarah, got really angry and went into warrior mode. She fought her way across Thailand searching for Chuck, and as she went, rumors spread of a dangerous giant blonde she-male fighter on the loose. Because she really loved Chuck, she had some serious wrath! Once she had found her way to rescue him, after she trounced some bad-guy booty, she suddenly became this tender sweet loving girlfriend. I love that show!

When the life or welfare of a loved one is threatened, we understand wrath. If some bully or teacher treats our child unfairly, we become a mama bear or papa bear. We get upset and angry; threats to our children

seem like threats to us personally, because we love them. We may pretend that we are always loving and patient and forgiving and that we are calm and rational in the face of these things, but we really seethe with anger against the slightest hint of injustice against our loved ones. This isn't a "Christian" thing – it is a human thing.

## Our Sense of Justice

I have an idea that our innate sense of justice towards the actions of others and our conscience towards our own actions are somehow two sides of the same coin. We not only magically know right from wrong, we have very strong feelings about our judgments, no matter if it concerns ourselves or someone else. We can't seem to stop having wrath, even for petty little things! Every single day we encounter new injustices large and small, and every single day we are shocked as if it had never happened before. The horror of our conscience is that it turns this magical sense of justice inward against our most intimate secret guilt. It is very much as if this sense of justice is much bigger than us, and is not something we create. We serve it, we understand it, but we can't control it or shape it.

Make no mistake, we may feel that we don't understand the wrath of God, and we may pretend that wrath is an outdated or medieval notion to attribute to God, but the truth is we delight in wrath. We "get" wrath because we love justice. In a way, even though we are afraid to admit it, the wrath of God is one of our favorite attributes of God. There is some strange comfort in knowing that bad guys will get what is coming to them.

## We love wrath – Mercy is the real Problem

It is not wrath but mercy we have a real problem with, because we think that mercy is a suspension of wrath. People say that they don't believe in God because there is evil in the world, but what they mean is that they don't want God either allowing free will or being patient or permissive — they want a wrathful God. Then of course they turn around and say that they hate the idea of a God of wrath; I guess that some days God just can't win! No matter what you believe, in the midst of day-to-day life, we can't stomach the idea that someone should commit any injustice and then simply get away with it. Something in us requires perfection, even in tiny things. If someone has been slack in cleaning their mess or taking their turn with some household chore or has borrowed underwear without asking, they may as well have gotten away with murder. If someone paints a picture or writes a song, and it doesn't fit our idea of greatness, we find words to criticize them. If some elected official doesn't govern complex matters exactly the way we think they

should, we have no problem judging them harshly; how quickly we condemn if that same person proves to be human and actually sins! We don't want people to be forgiven, we want the line to be drawn, we want fairness to be enforced. The few times in my life I've heard one of my children ask for forgiveness and mercy for one of their siblings, I've almost fainted. Mostly they want justice and they want it to stick, and they are doubly upset if it doesn't. Mercy is always seen as weakness, despite the fact that I have been teaching them this stuff for years and years and years. This is not an indictment on my wonderful children; it is a general observation of human nature regardless of world view or belief. Wrath shows that we have an innate passion for justice, even when it has gone all wrong.

## The Beauty of God's Wrath

The wrath of God is a very good thing. The wrath of God says that we matter. The wrath of God says that we are important. The wrath of God says that He truly cares about us. We may try to work it out that the fear of God means "reverent awe", but in reality when we read that Jesus went crazy in the temple and threw over the tables and drove out the sellers, we love it. We need a fearsome God, a God to whom things deeply matter. Own this: you love that God has wrath. Wrath is excellence in action. Wrath is honesty and power unleashed. Wrath is settling for nothing less than perfect beauty, perfect justice, perfect love, and hating everything that falls short. Wrath means business about its perfectionism, and we all love perfection!

## The problem: We deserve Wrath!

Of course the problem is that we know in our conscience that we ourselves should be the recipients of that wrath. We are far from perfect, we are in fact the kind of people who choose much lesser pleasures and sins. We know we have let petty selfish things lead us to harm other people, sometimes terribly. We want the wrathful eye to turn everywhere else, but not to us. We know it can't work that way! Justice is justice, and far from being blind, somehow it knows all things. The wrath of God truly is being revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness of men ([Romans 1:18](#)). It isn't some dusty obscure theological doctrine. It is a very present visceral existential reality.

We think we can easily be free from all of this. We think it will be no problem to stop judging, we never judge! We aren't the kind of people who hold grudges, we are patient and kind and we love people just the way they are. I've had people tell me that they don't hold grudges in the middle of a rant about how someone else holds grudges! We simply cannot stop it. We can't stop measuring the excellence of ourselves or of each other. We remember the things that people do to us which harm us, and they

remember the things we do to them. We swear we will forgive but we can't really forgive, because we don't know what forgiveness means. Our conscience still simmers over it and worries over it like a dog with a bone. We are trapped by our perfectionism, by our judgments and conditions. We try to measure up, we pretend to measure up, we fear constantly that we don't measure up, and we constantly scrutinize others to see whether or not they measure up. We are tortured by the secret knowledge that we really do not ever measure up.

## Judgment and Wrath are Right

Here's the rub: we are doing this because it is right. Our judgements are right and beautiful and true. We are created in the image of God, and we may be finite and fallen but something in us grasps the infinite beauty and perfection of God. Something in us requires constant perfect justice and beauty and idealistic greatness, no matter how foolish we may tell ourselves it is. All of this dissatisfaction with the world, all of this irritation and disappointment, are real. The world really is supposed to be a better place. I really am supposed to be a better person. You are supposed to be a better person. It is a travesty that we are such isolated posing failed miserable clowns. We ought to be angry. We are supposed to hate evil, even little evil. Patience and forgiveness are truly wrong. If you really face this you can go quite mad.

## The Cross of Christ declares the Wrath of God

The cross of Christ declares that all of this evil really is as bad as we suspect, and that even God won't stand for it. It is so bad that He required His own Son to bear the wrath. The cross declares that you can't water down the gravity of God's disposition against sin and evil. God doesn't just gloss over any injustice, not even the smallest. We're glad that He is unblemished and perfect in judgment, in love, in beauty and power and genius. We need His wrath. The cross declares that He is quite serious: there are tremendous and weighty consequences when we lightly transgress what is right and good. He hates it with a very great hatred, a hatred so great that He required His own Son suffer and bleed and die because of it.

I once spent an afternoon and an evening with a Moslem man who was trying to convert me. He cooked me a chicken and we watched a debate between Josh McDowell and Ahmed Deedat, and we had some fun sparring and trying to convert each other. In the end, he said that if you did 51% righteous deeds and 49% evil, it tipped the scales and God would allow you into heaven. I asked him, how do you measure this? Doesn't this mean that God sanctions 49% of the evil and just lets it go? This is the problem with every form of performancism: it attempts to water down the perfect wrath. If God sanctions 49% of my evil, doesn't that

make God evil? The cross says that 100% of your sin is unacceptable. You don't have to worry about measuring it because the tiniest little shred of evil and injustice has to be accounted for. If you have one little drop of pee in your coffee, or one little roach cooked into your hash browns, you throw them out! God won't accept the tiniest whiff of evil. When we come to have faith in Christ and Him crucified, we believe that all of our sin has been accounted for. All of His wrath has been publicly expressed. There could be no greater show of wrath than the great predicted Messiah, the very Son of God, being brutally and violently killed. Justice has been served completely, it is finished. Very great grace has triumphed over very great wrath. We are saved!

*17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

[Matthew 5:17-20 \(NASB\)](#)

# Chapter 4 - The Cross of Christ Declares that God Believes in Propitiation

*4 Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.  
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

[Isaiah 53:4-6 \(NIV\)](#)

*“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

[Mark 10:45 \(NIV\)](#)

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

[John 10:11 \(NIV\)](#)

*24 ... being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

[Romans 3:24-25 \(NASB\)](#)

*18 ... knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.*

[1 Peter 1:18-19 \(NASB\)](#)

*... if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

[1 John 1:7 \(NASB\)](#)

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There are so many movies which have a savior figure who dies for the benefit of others! In many of them the savior hero later resurrects from the dead. A short list off the top of my head might include:

Movie	Christ Figure
The Matrix	Neo is overtaken and shot by the agents, but Trinity's kiss revives him and he becomes invincible
Iron Giant	The Iron Giant blasts off to collide with the nuclear missile aimed at the town, but at the end his pieces seem to be reassembling themselves
Armageddon	(they're not all good movies!) Bruce Willis' character stays behind on the asteroid to ensure the survival of earth

Enchanted      Giselle eats the poison apple and dies, finally wakened by Robert's kiss. This reveals  
d      he has true love for her, and he is basically saved from a boring loveless life through  
her death

300      300 badass warriors die defending Western Civilization against hundreds of  
thousands of soldiers from the east

E.T.      ET dies to save Elliott then resurrects to ascend to his home world.

Saving

Private      John Miller and his team die in the process of finding and saving Private Ryan  
Ryan

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I think that every action hero story ever dreamt up is a picture or shadow of the saving death (and often the resurrection) of Jesus. To make it story-worthy, it can't be just any run-of-the-mill death; it makes it a compelling story because a protagonist that you've been set up to love dies in order to effect some sort of salvation. We might be tempted to think that the idea of propitiation is an obscure theological concept, but it is culturally a very central human idea. If it was so difficult and theological why would it be such a frequent Hollywood theme?



Jesus takes this a step further. He teaches us that the process of planting and harvesting mimics death and resurrection for the purpose of bearing much fruit ([John 12:24](#)). In fact every time we eat anything besides milk and honey, something has died for our welfare. Jesus Himself welcomes this picture of Himself as spiritual food:

*53 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. 54 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. 56 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.*

[John 6:53-56 \(NASB\)](#)

## The Power of Propitiation

"Propitiation" is a big theological word that we are going to spend a bit of time unpacking. Charles Ryrie defines it pretty well:

*"Propitiation means the turning away of wrath by an offering. In relation to soteriology, propitiation means placating or satisfying the wrath of God by the atoning sacrifice of Christ."*

*Charles C. Ryrie (1999-01-11). Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth (Kindle Locations 5503-5504). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.*

Propitiation, the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, is the central and primary doctrine of Christianity. The cross of Christ is meaningful and powerful because the propitiation is true. Our relationship to Christ's propitiation on the cross is going to drive our walk and our teaching and our evangelism and our assurance and our relationships and everything else about us. There is nothing more important to get straight in your mind than Christ's propitiatory death on the cross.

Why is this? It is because you either believe that you bear the weight of responsibility to justify yourself, or you believe in the propitiation. There is no other way. The propitiation says that Another can justify you. You feel in your conscience the weight of your guilt, how you have not just transgressed the law, but you have indeed fallen short of glory ([Romans 3:23](#)). You may think that by promising to reform, you will gain God's

good favor. This idea is similar to a murderer promising to never murder again, and thinking that they will thereby be pardoned.

If you give lip service to the propitiation as a necessary doctrine, but not a real cessation of justifying responsibility, you will suffer from a constant nagging doubt as to whether you ever measure up. That nagging doubt is true. You do not measure up; others who judge you probably don't know half the story. In addition, if you give lip service to the idea that Jesus died for the sins of those around you, but in the end you want them to behave and suffer the consequences of their actions (perhaps to teach them a lesson), then you live in a world of judgment and condemnation and unforgiveness. Either the propitiation is true and is sufficient, or it is not. Either Christ died for our sins and justice is satisfied, or else we are still under the condemnation of justice.

You may think that you are able to forgive others, but without the propitiation your forgiveness is only a word or a thought or a feeling. Unless justice is satisfied there will be no release for your conscience to let go and stand securely in your acceptance of others. Every relationship you have is with a sinning fool, so if you don't have a means to forgive that your conscience is satisfied with, you are doomed to judgment and isolation. This judgment and isolation is what we are specifically saved from in Christ. Without propitiation, you are doomed to an isolated hell of self-judgment and judgment of others. Satan of course even judges God. If you think about it, the cross says that we would judge God too, to the point of murdering Him. If you do not believe that it is really possible that Christ suffered and died in your place, and that He is the One who has satisfied justice, then you think the burden of satisfying justice is on your own head.

You either think that Christ is God, or that you are God. One or another of you is the standard-bearer of justice. We see in the book of 1 John a consistent courtroom analogy, in which we are the judge and the Son of God is the accused:

*9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. 10 The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. 11 And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

*1 John 5:9-13 NASB*

Only a perfect offering could achieve propitiation. If a man was sentenced to life in prison, and another prisoner offered to serve his time, it would have to be rejected. We would have to say, "You're already in prison, you idiot! You can't serve someone else's time!" There is only One who is worthy to stand in our place and receive the ultimate dictates of justice on our behalf: Jesus. Everyone else is already sentenced.

The cross of Christ declares that God believes in the power of Christ's propitiation. It says that when Christ died, He died for our worst and most inescapable problem: our guilt. The cross of Christ reveals that God doesn't just ask that we believe in the reality of the propitiation; it reveals that He believes in the reality of the propitiation Himself. This was His plan from the beginning of time, and everything He set up from creation itself to the sacrificial laws of the Jews to modern-day action hero movies tell us that others die for our benefit, and that propitiation is the most central and powerful idea given to humanity. Because Christ's suffering and death on the cross is deemed sufficient justice by the Father, we can be assured that our faith is true. If the blood of Jesus, Messiah and Son of God, has been shed for us, and if the Father countenances this on our behalf, then we are indeed saved to the end.

*34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*

[John 8:34-36 \(NASB\)](#)

# Chapter 5 - The Cross of Christ Declares that God is a Father and a Son

Sometimes I wonder how I am part of the same family as my wonderful sons. I grew up very disinterested in sports; I was proud to be a bit of an egghead and a geek and a musician. They are consumed with football, basketball, intense workouts, and the like. They play sports-oriented video games and often wear sports-themed apparel. I love to watch them play, but their passion and obsession with sports did not come from me. At all. Furthermore, they love clothes – when they get Christmas money or earn some money, they actually like to blow it on clothes. They buy certain kinds of socks, shorts, t-shirts, sweats, and especially shoes — and they are very excited about it. I can tell you, they did not get this from me. At Christmas when I was growing up, if I got clothes for a gift it always felt like getting ... well, it felt like getting clothes. Getting clothes at Christmas is a base-line metaphor for me for disappointment. For my boys, that is mainly what they want. I would hope that I have all kinds of influence on my boys, but I don't for a second think that they are some kind of facsimile of me. They are each very much their own person, with their own passions and directions. It is strange to think, but the Bible teaches us that the same is true in the persons of the Godhead.

## The Trinity

The word “trinity” is a mashup of the words “triple” and “unity”. In a nutshell, the doctrine of the trinity says this:

- The Father is God.
- The Son is God.
- The Holy Spirit is God
- The Father is not the Son
- The Father is not the Holy Spirit
- The Son is not the Holy Spirit

We are going to focus on two members of the trinity here, the Father and the Son.

# The Father and the Son in Gethsemane

Because God is triune, we know that God is the Father of a Son, and God is a Son who has a Father. If they were simply “uni-une”, and Jesus was absolutely “mono-God in the flesh”, then the cross would not have held its power. What do I mean? Let's look at Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane:

*36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. 38 Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”*

*39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” 40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? 41 Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

*42 He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.” 43 Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. 45 Then He came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!”*

[Matthew 26:36-42 \(NASB\)](#)

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*41 And He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray, 42 saying, “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.” 43 Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. 44 And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.*

[Luke 22:41-44 \(NASB\)](#)

We clearly do not find Jesus cheerily and joyously going to the cross. He was deeply grieved and distressed. We have an astonishing revelation here: it was not the Son's will to do this, but it was the Father's will for Him to go through with this. The Father was asking the Son to do something which He in fact dreaded and which grieved Him to the point of death. It was something that Jesus so strongly did not want to do, that He prayed three times for this dreaded thing to be removed from Him. Surely, He prayed, there is some other way. You might say, they had a difference of opinion here.

This is astonishing when you begin to reflect on it. Perhaps even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, was asking, "Isn't there a bloodless non-sacrificial way? Look at my fruits! Won't that suffice? Can't I forgive without the cross? Must I endure this horror?" Perhaps in His humanity, He asks what we ask. I won't presume to know, but we do know from scripture that He truly did not want to endure the cross; He sought in prayer for another way.

The cross of Christ declares to us that the Father is not the Son. It says so in flashing neon lights with megaphones and amplifiers turned up to 11. The cross is a division. The Father is God, and the Son is God, but the two are very much individuals. Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane was not some weird schizophrenic self-dialog where an insane person was having an argument with himself. These are two members of the Godhead working out their trust issues. It is amazing, really, how deeply the cross underscores this aspect of the Godhead. The Father is not like ice while the Son is like water – different manifestations of the same substance. They are very much individuals and they very much think their own thoughts. Their unity was not unanimity; it was a visceral hard fought trust, all the way to the death.

## The Takeaway

I know that you, dear reader, want me to make this into a big application takeaway: like Jesus, we need to submit to the Father's will when we don't want to. That may be a good takeaway, but that is not the point I'm trying to make. My takeaway here is this: the Father is not the Son. The cross was a sacrifice because He submitted to the Father's will even when He didn't want to. He didn't just get hurt and slain on the cross; He sacrificed His own autonomy by a living choice. He didn't want to, but He Himself chose to lay down His life ([John 10:17-18](#)). He didn't open His mouth, and He didn't call down angels. By going to the cross, Jesus was willing to say, "I am nothing but a dumb sheep led to slaughter; I do nothing but obey. Nothing. I am simply an icon of loyalty, a living puppet emptied of my own will. Others will take it as a platitude, but I will obey to the point of shedding blood. My desires take a complete back seat. I make nothing of Myself." But — He struggled to *choose* this, because the Father is *not* the Son. If Jesus were simply the mono-God made flesh, there would have been no conflict of will, and there would have been no ultimate pain of the sacrifice

of dignity and autonomy. Perhaps in everything else in the history of eternity the two had no place for the slightest disagreement, because everything else was the Father's will and the Son's will as well. The cross is different. At the cross, the Father wanted something which the Son did not want, but He struggled through and obeyed anyway.

Before Jesus cried out "It is finished!" ([John 19:30](#)), He cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" ([Matthew 27:46](#))? In between these two, He cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" ([Luke 23:46](#)). The Son was so separated from the Father that He deemed Himself *forsaken*. At the cross, the Father and the Son were torn asunder. They are not one, but two. It was at the cross that the Father and the Son worked out their trust issues, where Jesus committed His spirit to the Father, and thus it was finished. The Father is God, and the Son is God. Amazingly, it was through the submission to these sufferings that the Son's trust was "made perfect":

*9 But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.*

*10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.*

[Hebrews 2:9-10 \(NASB\)](#)

# Chapter 6 - The Cross of Christ Declares that Our Judgment is Finished

*10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

*15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*

[1 John 4:10,15-18](#) (NASB)

## Double Jeopardy and Stealing Donuts

In legal matters, the term “double jeopardy” means that you can’t be tried twice for the same offense. If you’ve been tried for murder and convicted or acquitted, you can’t be tried again, because the matter has been decided. In American law there seem to be so many ways around this that it has almost ceased to have any meaning at all, but think about this. If someone has been sentenced to death and has actually been executed, there isn’t really much chance for double jeopardy. There is nothing more you can do to someone once you’ve killed them, it is the ultimate consequence.

Do a thought experiment with me. Suppose you had bought a box of donuts for a meeting, and you told your child not to touch them. Then suppose that as you were leaving for the meeting, you noticed that three of the donuts were missing. Three! What is an appropriate punishment? A lecture? How about a grounding? A spanking? How about the death penalty? Whoa there, right? The death penalty would be ... wait for it ... overkill. You can’t execute capital punishment on someone for stealing three donuts. However, that isn’t the question. The question in each of these instances is, is this enough punishment? Has justice been sufficiently served? In the case of the lecture, maybe not. In the case of the grounding, it depends on (I’m on



a roll!) the grounds. In the case of the death penalty, it may be overkill, but it is certainly sufficient justice — there is no question about that.

## **The blood of Jesus and habitual sin**

If you say that you believe Jesus died for you, but that there is some sin you've battled or some sin you could fall into which would disqualify you from heaven, what you're saying is that the death penalty wasn't enough. You're also saying that God's ideas about substitutionary sacrifices, that someone else could suffer justice in your place, are OK in theory but in reality they are kind of crazy. It boils down to whether or not you believe in the propitiation — the sufficiency of Christ's death for all of your sin, past present and future. The fact is, Jesus didn't just live for you, or swoon for you, or pray for you, or teach moral lessons to you. He died for you. He went all the way. The sentence you fear, the consequence you dread, has been carried out with more severe justice than you could have imagined.

Did you personally murder the one and only central figure in history, the Messiah who fulfilled thousands of years of prophecy, the Son of the Living God? That is a whopper of a sin! If you had, He still would have begged for your forgiveness. How much more is His death sufficient for your actual sins! How much more does He persist as your Advocate ([1 John 2:1-2](#))! It may have been overkill, but His public and humiliating death was certainly sufficient. Because He has died, there is no more double jeopardy; you can be confident that in the day of judgment, you are going to be accepted. The cross declares that you have been cleanly and finally forgiven, that the sentence for all of your guilt has been executed in full and beyond. The slate is clean. Your sins have not been simply glossed over and forgotten, they have been weighed out and judged with a great severity and finality.

## **But what about this or that verse?**

Some little voice in your head is going to say, "yes, that sounds great, but what about this verse or that verse or the other verse?" You want to believe what I'm saying, but in your integrity, you are unconvinced. I applaud you for this, I really do. I and many others have addressed many specific passages in the past. Right now I am going to come at this from a different angle. You can either read scripture from the perspective of the world, or from the perspective of the cross. I am saying that it is the cross which is the blinding sun, the great and central perspective from which all other things must be seen. Do you really think that the right way to interpret any verse is to interpret it in such a way that it nullifies the power and sufficiency of the cross of Christ?

As an example, (and this may get a little technical) let's look at [Hebrews 10:26](#):

*26 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.*

#### [Hebrews 10:26-27](#)

“See!”, you might say, “you can sin and nullify the sufficiency of Christ's blood for yourself. That's what this verse says!” But, as Steve Edwards has shown us in [his post on this verse](#), the intended readers of the book are religious Hebrews, and the sin they are persisting in willfully is thinking that the blood of bulls and goats ([Hebrews 10:4](#)) is better than the blood of Jesus. The reason they would sin in the sense of forsaking the assembly ([Hebrews 10:25](#)) is that they judged the members unworthy — because the assembly considered the blood of Jesus to be final and had ceased worrying with animal sacrifices. In other words, the sin the writer of Hebrews is referencing is a sin of unbelief, specifically unbelief in the propitiatory power of Jesus' blood. If this were not so, how could he say this:

*12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.*

#### [Hebrews 10:12-13](#)

Unless he is incoherently mad, he wouldn't say this and then a few verses later say that any willful sin could take away our sacrifice for sins. Think about it like a normal person for a moment: how could you say He was sacrificed for sins and then say that if you sin, the sacrifice is no good? It is complete nonsense. Thinking that way is the very sin he is addressing, do you see it? Indeed the general and central message of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus' blood is better than the old Jewish animal sacrifices, and he would naturally define fatal sin in reference to this. We assemble together to strengthen one another in Christ, and to stimulate one another to live fervent lives rooted in grace and truth ([Hebrews 10:24](#)), to affirm the sufficiency of Christ's blood for one another.

**Rest assured, your salvation is final**

In every case, the question is this: is your salvation final? Are you eternally loved, forever accepted? Are there any conditions to your favor and acceptance by the Father? The cross of Christ declares that our judgement is complete and finished. Jesus Himself declared from the cross, that it is finished. You are now the one in the judgement seat, and God is on trial. Was He right, or was He wrong? Is the cross of Christ sufficient to save you? What deed of yours, good or bad, will you place above His death for you? If there is none, and your conscience is satisfied before God, then consider this: your judgement is over with! You are clean and clear, set free for all time from judgement! The favor of God is forever with you, because His death was final. You are truly saved. Bask in it, glory in it, rejoice in it, give thanks for it, and most of all, *believe it!*

# Chapter 7 - The Cross of Christ Declares that Jesus is the Fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets

I have a confession to make. When I do one of the “read through the Bible” plans, I always hate it when I have to wade through one of the genealogy sections. I mean honestly — it is the worst reading in the world. It goes on and on and on and on and on, page after page of who begat whom. That would be bad enough, but it is filled with strange names that I have no idea how to rightly pronounce in my head. Since I am an idealistic perfectionist, I always feel bad that I never look up the pronunciation of any of them. Besides, not only am I an American, I am a Texan. I come from a deeply entrenched culture where it is not at all about who your parents are, but what you make of yourself. I understand rugged individualism — not long lists of genealogies! They really don’t keep genealogies in Texas, as far as I know. In my whole life, I’ve rarely heard anyone mention it. I rejoice when I read that Paul condemns disputes about genealogies ([Titus 3:9](#)) — does that mean I can skip those sections in my Bible reading? I suppose I can, as long as I don’t care if I can say that I read the whole Bible!

However, there is something that is very important to notice about these genealogies: in Jewish culture, they really matter. Only descendants of Aaron, Moses’ brother, could be priests. It really meant something to be descended from Judah. It was important that the “blessing” was handed down through a certain descendant (e.g. [Genesis 28:13](#)). Paul was even careful to list that he was of the tribe of Benjamin ([Philippians 3:5](#)), because the geographical and demographic divisions in the Jewish nation were determined by your lineage. This is a foreign idea to democratic free west societies, so we lose the emotional impact of the idea that Jesus is “the son of David” ([Luke 18:38](#), [Romans 1:3](#)). Your lineage meant something in that culture.

## The Pedigree of John the Baptist

So, it is important to notice that John the Baptist is a descendant of Aaron on his father’s and his mother’s side, and that he is a Levite through and through. In that culture, he could not be more clearly associated with the law. Also, perhaps because he tended to hang out in the wilderness and give fiery sermons, he was associated with Elijah the prophet. We can debate the reason that John represents Elijah, but we know it is so because Jesus confirms it:

*7 As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces! 9 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written,*

*'Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,  
Who will prepare Your way before You.'*

*11 Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [he](#). 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until [John](#). 14 And if you are willing to accept it, **John himself is Elijah who was to come**. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

[Matthew 11:7-15 \(NASB\)](#)

The point is, when John the Baptist affirms Jesus, it is a very much bigger deal than we might have imagined. John is the greatest prophet, because he is the end game. He is the prophet who embodies the law and the prophets; the law and the prophets culminated in John the Baptist. He is the last of the line, the final flame of the old covenant and the witness on the stand who acknowledged the greater glory of the new covenant which was ushered in through Jesus Christ.

## The Witness of John the Baptist

From the very beginning of their relationship, John the Baptist saw Jesus' chief work to be His propitiatory death:

*29 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'*

[John 1:29-30 \(NASB\)](#)

John the Baptist was so publicly respected and so known for supporting Jesus that the chief priests and elders were afraid to give an opinion on him:

*23 When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" 24 Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?" And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet." 27 And answering Jesus, they said, "We do not know." He also said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

[Matthew 21:23-26 \(NASB\)](#)

Isn't this amazing? Others may have seen Jesus as a prophet, a healer, a leader, or a great moral teacher. However, before He had spoken a word in public ministry or done a single recorded deed, John identified Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The whole country, all the way up to the chief priests, knew this — so much so that Jesus was able to exploit this knowledge to keep the pharisees under control. From the very inception of His public ministry, He was known to be the Lamb who would be slain.

## Not Just John the Baptist

It is a strange thing to consider that an unexpectedly large amount of the Old Testament law is not devoted to outlining a moral code, but rather to sacrifices. In the book of Leviticus we have burnt offerings, meal offerings, animal sacrifices, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and every kind of offering you could think of. The job of the Levitical priest was a very bloody one. In fact it would appear that the main job of the priest was to make offerings. These offerings were the heart of the law.

The writer of the book of Hebrews makes the point that these things worked because they were pretend atonements for copies of heavenly things ([Hebrews 9:23](#)). In fact, the whole book of Hebrews leads us through various stages of Christ's superiority: He is superior to angels, He is superior to Moses, He is superior to Aaron the High Priest, His new covenant is superior to the old covenant, and finally the book climaxes with the declaration that the blood of Jesus is superior to the blood of animal sacrifices. This is the

perspective from which to read the entire book of Hebrews, just as it is the perspective from which to read all of the scriptures.

So we find the entire Jewish religious practice to be a picture of Christ. It isn't simply that Jesus acted out a few isolated predictions from the Old Testament. It is that their entire culture was predicated on the coming of a Messiah who would be our savior through His own sacrifice. Their whole culture was law and gospel, morals and blood atonement. From Adam and Eve ([Genesis 3:15, 21](#)) through Abel and Cain ([Genesis 4:5](#)), Abraham ([Genesis 15:9-10, 17, 22:12-13](#)), and many other passages, the practice of the generations leading up to the Mosaic sacrificial practices had propitiation at their heart. The prophets also have many passages alluding to Christ, climaxing with the famous passage in Isaiah 53. The message of the law and the prophets was not simply that we should be good and obedient, nor simply that a Messiah was coming, but that a savior was coming who would save His people through His sacrifice.

## **The Cross of Christ fulfills the Law and the Prophets**

When Jesus says that He came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill ([Matthew 5:17](#)), He does not mean that He came to press us more strictly into a higher and better obedience. He means that He came to fulfill the entire intent of the Law and the Prophets, that He was the Savior/Messiah come to embody all of the things of which they were only copies and shadows. The law proposed that we should behave like this and that, while Jesus came and in His person acted out that perfection. Nothing is more condemning than the perfect life of Jesus. The law declared that we should sacrifice a lamb or goat as a blood atonement for our sin, but Jesus died once for all as our redemption. He is the exact embodiment and fulfillment of the law and the prophets in His very person, and it is the cross itself which is the moment when this was all realized.

*For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.*

[John 1:17 \(NASB\)](#)

# Chapter 8 - The Cross of Christ Declares that Jesus is the Fulfillment of the Law for Me

## Wearing Masks to be Accepted

When my son Jonathan was around 18 months old, he discovered Batman. I have never witnessed such an obsession in my life! I will never forget the way he would scuttle around the house, saying “I ‘Batam’. I ‘Batam’.” Day and night, weekdays, weekends, holidays, all the time for more than ten years, he was completely absorbed. I can’t even count the number of Batman costumes he wore out, or the ocean of batman figures spread through every crevice of the house. Who knows how many times we watched the animated series, or the movies? When my youngest child was born at home, five or ten minutes after the birth we invited the boys in to meet their new brother. After a few minutes of hushed and reverent silence, Jonathan looked up at me and said, “Dad?” I responded (knowing it was coming), “Yes, Jonathan?” “Does he like Batman?” I said, “I’m sure he’ll learn!” Jonathan was not satisfied with being a mere boy; he wanted to be something more. He wanted to be accepted as a hero. He wanted to be Batman! What he did not want to acknowledge is that he was precious and beautiful and richly important to me whatever he decided to wear, despite his weakness and faults. He is my child whom I dearly love.

## Jesus Fulfills the Law — For Me

In the last post, we looked at how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets because the central principles, practices and prognostications of the Old Testament were fulfilled by Jesus. In this post, we are going to look at the idea of fulfillment in more personal and present terms. I may not fulfill the Law, but in Christ the law is fulfilled for me.

How does this work? At first blush this sounds like a lot of theological hooie. I’ve heard people say that justification means that God looks at me “just-as-if-I’d” always obeyed — somehow because of Jesus’ obedience, when God looks at me He sees only Jesus’ obedience. That sounds very holy and theologically wonderful until you reflect on it a bit. It leaves this lurking suspicion that God may love Jesus, but He rejects the real me. While I am in actuality a sinner, He only accepts me because I wear a fake Jesus mask. It implies that my acceptance in Christ is all a lie. He has rejected the real me, the sinning me. In this sense I am not only presenting a fake persona to other people around me in order to be accepted, I am instructed to



present a fake persona to God in order to be accepted. In the end this is a substitution, but it is a bloodless and crossless substitution.

## True Acceptance Requires Justification

The message of the cross of Christ shows forth a much stronger grace. It sees our sin. I do not come wearing a fake Jesus mask. It is most liberating that while God may *deal with me* just as if I'd never sinned, he does not see a fake me. He sees and loves the weak and sinful me ([Romans 5:8](#)). My sins have not simply been forgotten or overlooked, and He does not simply pretend that they never happened. In Christ I have been definitively and authoritatively forgiven. In Christ I can face the fact that the obedience and righteousness of Jesus is a condemning example. In Christ I can acknowledge how grandly and consistently I have fallen short of glory ([Romans 3:23](#)). The cross acknowledges that I have truly sinned, and that God has seen it all the way to its root; there is no pretense whatsoever. He has loved me knowing the depth and persistence and richness and evil of my sin. The justice for my sins has actually been executed, and a strong vengeance and wrath has been exhaustively delivered upon my choice to obey my selfish and harmful lusts. I don't have to *act like* I am OK or *pretend like* I am righteous. Justice has truly been executed against our most secret and feared past deeds. I *am* OK and I have been definitively declared righteous and all my sin has been clearly seen.

So for each of us, the fact is, we are not righteous. The righteousness of God stands as a condemnation, not as a comfort. You may have given your body to feed the poor, but if you did it to prove your worth instead of doing it from love, you are a selfish clanging cymbal. We think we can change if we want, but we really cannot. Even our best righteousness is filthy rags ([Isaiah 64:6](#)). We are very bad at fulfilling the law. We have to be willing to face the fact that if the law is going to be fulfilled for us, if justice is to be upheld, it is not a matter of future obedience. There is going to have to be a penalty for the law to be fulfilled. We are tempted to think that the fulfillment of the law involves obedience from now on; we are often foolish enough to think that from here on we will be sufficiently successful at our righteousness that it will surely make up for our past mistakes. We want to promise that we have "repented". If you have murdered someone, simply refraining from murder for the rest of your life does not bring back the life of the one you killed. Similarly, even if you were completely successful at your repentance, you cannot possibly make up for your past. Also, what you think is 100% successful reform and what is actually 100% successful reform are two separate things. You won't be able to do it, and if you did it wouldn't be enough. You do not need reform, you need redemption.

## Penal Substitution — The Worst Case Scenario

There is a certain vein of thought that says that the “penal substitution” theory of the cross of Christ is an archaic and medieval notion. The thought is that it is unkind and some kind of nonsense to say that when we err, we ought to expect some kind of punishment. It may be important to demonstrate punishment as deterrence to future sin, but even this would seem to some to be archaic nonsense. Such people would have to say that we don’t require punishment, we require reform. It may seem kinder and gentler, but this leads inevitably to the false gospel of salvation by personal transformation. In this sense, the only thing the cross of Christ could represent would be an example of endurance despite injustice. However, we don’t really think that future reform is enough, no one does. When there is no penalty, there is no clarity of conscience. Where there is no penalty, no consequence, the hearts of men are given over fully to do evil ([Ecclesiastes 8:11](#)). Where there is no penalty, there is no justice, because the suffering of the one unjustly harmed is marginalized. In our day-to-day affairs, we deeply understand this. If our boss lets the slacker get away with their laziness, we seethe. If the parent lets their child get away with their petulance, we later discuss their bad parenting at length. If someone in our house makes a mess and leaves it, we are outraged that we have to clean up after them again. When the bad guy gets what is coming to them in the movie, we rejoice. We don’t want to see them getting a chance to reform! We want consequences, we want justice, we want perfection, all the time. If the gospel does not speak to these daily situations, it speaks to nothing at all.

Faith says that the blood of Jesus satisfies justice for every little thing we do wrong, all the time. Faith says that I always feel inadequate because I really am inadequate, but that I am saved through His cross from all of these judgements that daily accuse me. My thoughts are no longer bound up in the fear that I am inadequate and sinful and unworthy, but instead my thought is constantly that I am worthy of God’s death. The cross declares that the law, which speaks so powerfully to my conscience, has been fulfilled — not because I obeyed it, but because Jesus has more than sufficiently borne its penalty. The cross says that even if I take the dumbest and most medieval and most cruel notion of justice possible, even then I am OK, because it is all satisfied. It embraces penal substitution because the fear of raw and dumb penalty is the worst case scenario for us, and the cross takes this fear out of the way. That way, even if you are only partly reformed or you relapse, you are still justified, because it is not your reform which saves you. It is Christ who saves you. Vive le penal substitution!

Paul gives us this very powerful phrase in [Romans 3:26](#), that God is “just and the justifier” of the one who has faith in Jesus. He does not simply pretend that we always obeyed. That would not be just, because we in fact did not always obey. He is just. The Father would be wrong to look at our sin, and say that Jesus’ public death on the cross was not sufficient penalty. The cross of Christ says that the penalty which the law

demands for our sin has been more than carried out; He would be unjust to hold me accountable for my sins when I claim faith in Christ. The cross of Christ declares that law has been fulfilled on my behalf — it is indeed *finished*. I do not need to wear a fake Jesus mask for God to accept me; I am accepted and justified in Christ as myself.

# Chapter 9 - The Cross of Christ Declares

## Fulfillment of the Worst Case Theory of Justice

I want to spend some time focusing on something that was hinted at in the last chapter. We talk quite a bit about justice and punishment and atonement in Christian circles, and through a recent dialog I was led to think about the purposes of punishment in the context of justice and how these apply to the different theories of atonement.

### Theories of Atonement

I was very surprised to discover that some people have different views of atonement than the rather clear idea from scripture that Jesus Christ died in our place in order to justify us (e.g. [Romans 5:8-9](#)). Some of these ideas are:

#### Christus Victor

Through the incarnation or the resurrection, or possibly His righteous life, He was victorious over evil, and so we are made one with the Father through His righteousness.

#### Incarnational Atonement

The incarnation itself invites us into relationship with the Father.

#### Moral Exemplar

The moral power of Jesus' life is enough to inspire us to repent of our sins and achieve atonement through our behavior.

#### Solidarity

Jesus achieves atonement with us proving that He always stands with the marginalized and sinful.

#### Healing Servant

Sin is disease and Jesus is the great Physician, so atonement means healing us of our disease.

### **Penal Substitution**

The death of Jesus on the cross satisfies the demands of justice for sins committed.

### **Last Scapegoat**

Jesus represents the release that society needs from increasing violence.

### **Ransom Captive**

Jesus died to pay a ransom price to the devil.

I'm going to paint with a very broad brush here, since this is not really a book meant to catalog theories of atonement. These are all very interesting and possibly useful ideas as far as things that the cross is speaking, but I do not think they are not instances of atonement. I think it is wonderful to think that Jesus was victorious over evil and so we might share in that victory. However, all of these are either works salvation or some twisted form of penal substitution. "Incarnational Atonement" says that the incarnation itself invites us into relationship with the Father. What does "relationship" mean? If I am sinful, even embarrassingly so, does the "relationship" end? If it does not, does God not carry on blessing evil and sinful people with a "relationship"?

The New Testament authors are quite unanimous that the death of Jesus on the cross was extremely central to His purposes, and that it has to do with saving us from our sins. I think that some of these other things that are called "atonement" are wonderful notions, but they are not *justification* messages. Our central problem is that we are sinners, and the central solution offered to us biblically is Christ and Him crucified.

Here is a way to think about this: did it work? Does the moral power of Jesus' life really inspire us to repent of our sins and achieve atonement through our behavior? Apparently it never even worked that way for Paul the Apostle. And this is not what Paul outlines in Romans 1-8 - clearly Jesus life and death are meant to be propitiatory and not merely an example. Did the crucifixion really release society from increasing violence? This is laughable. So if this is what God was trying to do through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, He failed spectacularly.

Here is another way to think about this: what value is the theory to you on your deathbed? On my deathbed, I don't need a more powerful exemplar, that bird has flown. I don't need a societal scapegoat. I am leaving society permanently. I don't need to be healed of the disease of sin, my future is over with. I need for my conscience to be cleansed, so I can face God with assurance. I need a savior who justifies me, because it is my truest sins which will haunt me as I face eternity. I don't need to be "invited" into a better way to live; I need a very thorough and a very convincing forgiveness. This is what the gospel offers in Christ: penal substitution. Penal substitution asks nothing of us but to know and to believe the love which God has for us in Christ's propitiatory death.

There is only one of these theories of atonement which richly satisfy the good demands of justice and which also absolve the guilty without continuing to press future guilt. There is only one of these theories of atonement which have the power to offer eternal life: penal substitution. The others either require a history of conformance or make a mockery of God's sovereignty and justice.

## **Justice and the purposes of punishment**

A man named Glenn Cassidy gives us the following possible purposes of punishment for crimes:

### **Incapacitation**

A felon in prison cannot commit crimes while imprisoned. An executed felon cannot commit a crime ever again.

### **Deterrence**

The threat of punishment deters people from engaging in illegal acts.

### **Restitution**

The felon is required to take some action to at least partially return the victim to the status quo ante.

### **Retribution**

The felon harmed society; therefore society (or the direct victims) is entitled to inflict harm in return.

### **Rehabilitation**

The punishment changes the felon in order to make him a better citizen afterwards. (The punishment can include mandatory vocational training, counseling, drug treatment, etc.)

(from <http://home.page.ch/pub/rfm@vtx.ch/punishment.html>)

The incapacitation theory could not be God's operative theory because Christ was perfect and He was not taken out through execution so that He could stop doing evil.

The deterrence theory is not God's operative theory either, because it is a message of complete forgiveness. This is actually the scandal of the gospel: it is such a complete offer of acceptance that it raises the question of moral license. In other words, it is because the gospel reduces our part to mere belief ([Romans 3:24,25](#)) that the [Romans 6:1](#) question is raised: shall we sin all the more? Thus, the gospel actually eviscerates and eliminates the deterrence theory of justice as applied to the cross.

The restitution theory obviously could not be applied to Jesus Christ. He never did anything wrong which required restitution. There is no way that the cross represented this form of justice. The same goes for the rehabilitation theory.

The retribution theory of justice is the worst-case scenario for all of these purposes for punishment. What it really means is that there is some mysterious level of harm that must be paid to the perpetrator of evil, whether they have been rehabilitated, and no longer need to be incapacitated, and whether or not anyone would be deterred ever. It is the theory of justice and punishment we would most fear, because it is the harshest and most unforgiving, and it is the theory of justice that the gospel addresses.

## **The Gospel is Powerful Because it Addresses the Worst Case**

The atonement we most need is the atonement that assumes we can do nothing to reform ourselves or ingratiate ourselves in some successful effort. It assumes, not that we are powerful and able to change, but that we are lost and hopeless, that we can do nothing to atone. It assumes, not that we can make up for our sins, but that our guilt is built up hanging over head like an eternal black cloud. It even assumes something worse: that it will not go away and that it must be answered for. It even assumes that there is nothing we can now do to assuage our own heart's sense of justice. It assumes that we need to be saved, not reformed. We need to be carried helpless out of the burning building, not to be told that we need to rescue ourselves. We also need to know that when our situation is that of a burning building, that it is most hopeless, we have a rescue that is stronger still. When we feel that we are beyond forms of justice that depend on reform, that even if we were to successfully maintain our reform retribution is still angry and active in our conscience and

that were we to be found out we would be hated, the gospel is more powerful still. The gospel assumes the worst case scenario for our theories of atonement and justice, and addresses those. Every attempt to make our ideas of atonement and justice more kind and modern more palatable steals the power of the true gospel. The cross of Christ saves us to the uttermost because it assumes not only the worst about us, but it addresses our worst fears about God. We secretly fear He is wrathful and violent and vengeful - and the gospel says yes! Whether or not He is that way, regardless of our power to appease such a God, the declaration of the cross is that we are safe. The cross thus assumes that we have no power to change at all and assumes the harshest and worst form of justice we can imagine. In Christ, through the power of His death for our sins, we are saved completely and forever.



# Chapter 10 - The Cross of Christ Declares that God Understands My Suffering

The cross of Christ addresses our worst problem as humans — not the evil done to us, but the evil we choose to do. The evil we choose produces the greatest possible harm to us, because it does not superficially harm us, but anchors our being in guilt and shame and darkness. When we sin, we hide in shame, because it is evil we had control over and chose anyway. We can take much comfort that the cross of Christ so richly and definitively addresses our guilt. However, we might be led to believe that the cross of Christ only speaks to our sin and is useless to address the evil that comes to us which we did not choose. Nothing could be further from the truth!

In the midst of our very real lives, in our frustrations and disappointments and broken dreams and suffering and trauma, it is tempting to think that God in His heaven is so perfect and holy and removed from it all that He doesn't understand what we are going through. How could we pray to a God who is only a Spirit, who has always been perfect and has never experienced the kinds of suffering and temptation and failure that we have experienced? The Cross of Christ declares that God has indeed come into the world as flesh and blood, and that He is able to sympathize with our problems, because He has lived through similar hardships.

*17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.*

[Hebrews 2:17-18 \(NASB\)](#)

The Cross of Christ declares that God understands human suffering, because He has suffered in a similar way. He has been made like His brethren (that's us) in *all things*. Perhaps you or someone you know has said that it is difficult to approach God as a Father, because their father was cold, cruel, distant, or neglectful. When Jesus was on the cross, in His darkest hour and His time of greatest need, He cried out for His Father's help, and there was silence:

*45 Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why*

*have You forsaken Me?” 47 And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.” 48 Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. 49 But the rest of them said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.” 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.*

[Matthew 27:45-50 \(NASB\)](#)

Perhaps you have cried out for help in some way, and there was no help at all. Maybe you have felt that the whole world misunderstands you and offers you a false comfort. You are right! The half-hearted self-serving comfort they offered was sour wine on a sponge when you were dying. I may not know how you feel directly, but Jesus understands, and sympathizes. He has learned through His sufferings a very great compassion for you ([Hebrews 5:8](#)). The entire world rejected Jesus to the point of killing Him; at the point of His death He was isolated and abandoned. No cavalry appeared on the horizon at the last minute to rescue Him. No last minute miracle came along and saved Him from this awful fate. He actually was tortured and stripped naked and nailed to a cross and raised up publicly outside the city.

In the prime of His life, at the height of His influence and ministry, He was cut down. Perhaps you have felt like you were all dressed up and ready, full of hope and life and optimism, and your dreams were cut off before they could come to fruition. Someone close to you died young, in the prime of life when their promise was great. God knows the tragedy of this. God understands this terrible grief.

Perhaps you have felt that you were betrayed by your family or close friends or your church. In your time of greatest need, someone important did not come to your aid, but kept apart and aloof from you. Perhaps they left you dangling on your own and even accused you falsely to further their own interests. I know I have seen that kind of thing happen in the workplace a number of times, and it is a comfort to know that Jesus has a great deal of compassion for that kind of thing, because He has lived through it in a dramatic way.

Perhaps in your field of expertise, you are very good at what you do. However, for some strange reason, politics or just fate, you are not honored. You remain on the periphery of the elite movers and shakers in your field, and they seem possibly even a bit hostile to you. The major contributions you could make are marginalized and rejected, or others take your work and your ideas and put them forward as their own while you remain in obscurity. Jesus was *the Messiah*, and the religious elite only wanted to discredit Him, and in the end they conspired together to actually kill Him. You think He doesn't understand how you feel, and have compassion?

*6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, 7 casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.*

[1 Peter 5:6-7 \(NASB\)](#)

With others, their suffering can become a badge of honor by which they can boast and best your suffering. They want to impress others with the fact that they are better because they have suffered more. With Jesus it is never so. His suffering serves to make Him all the more compassionate. In fact, He wears His suffering on into His resurrected body ([John 20:27](#)), and by His scars we recognize Him. He stands on the very throne of God as a lamb who was slain because He will forever be the compassionate savior who understands what we have been through. It is in fact through our sufferings that we have fellowship with Him ([Philippians 3:10](#)), because by His sufferings we know He has compassion on our plight and through our suffering we understand the depth of His sacrifice and love for us. No other faith gives such a great comfort and compassion in the face of the evil within us and that afflicts us!

# Chapter 11 - The Cross of Christ Declares the Gravity of Sin

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There is an age-old popular notion that proponents of grace are light on morals. I like to point to this fine quote from Kevin DeYoung:

*Sure, it would be great to be a better person, and you do hope to avoid the really big sins. But you figure, since we're saved by grace, holiness is not required of you, and frankly, your life seems fine without it.*

*Kevin DeYoung, There's a Hole in Our Holiness*

Please don't get me wrong - Kevin DeYoung is a true believer and he is pointing out an error that I would strike down, perhaps in a different manner. I am not targeting Mr. DeYoung, I am targeting this idea that radical grace demotivates us from pursuing holiness. People want to strike down the "hyper-grace" or "radical grace" teaching by setting up a straw man like this to shoot down. Actually, the advocates of the power of the gospel and the incredible grace that it offers have a very high standard of law and a very clear idea of the terror of our sinfulness. The grace that comes through the gospel of Christ and Him crucified is not simply a vapid dismissal of all responsibility and consequence. Bloodless crossless "grace" is a damaging idolatry, and ends up being no grace at all. Because love requires justice for the beloved, and we transgress justice every little time our sin rules our decisions, there must be wrath expressed against our sin or else God blesses and approves our evil.

There was a very great price paid for our redemption. Jesus did not receive a reprimand from the Father to redeem us. He did not get a spanking. He did not not receive lashings and then get released. He did not do community service in our place as our ransom. He did not even receive a quick painless death like a beheading or lethal injection for our redemption. He was publicly nailed naked and bleeding to a wooden pole to be mocked and scorned. He was left there, rejected outside the city, in tortuous pain, to die of starvation and exposure. He suffered the indignation of being the promised Messiah and the very Son of

God, and being harshly rejected to the point of downright murder. This is a very harsh death. Jesus sweat blood in His prayers to avoid it. This is what He did in our place.

There are two things to understand from this. First, our sin has a tremendous weight, and an overwhelming gravity. We may think our sin is some small manageable thing that isn't really hurting anyone — not really. Everyone looks! Everyone covets a little. Everyone gets a little upset with someone here and there. Everyone is a little greedy here and there, or a little selfish. Everyone lets their tongue loose once in a while. We're only human, right? The "only human" argument doesn't really fly with God Almighty. Nothing but perfect love will do. He means it. That is why there is talk of hell — which to us seems just a bit harsh, does it not? If you're a little angry with someone, you receive the sentence of eternal torment? Isn't that going too far Jesus? That is also why there had to be the horrible sacrifice of the only begotten Son of God. It declares the terror and the power and the gravity of God's wrath against sin in a way we can grasp. He means business, He really does. He must. No one wants to live in a universe where God can't be counted on to ultimately uphold justice. We just don't want to acknowledge the fact that we are part of the threat against justice that God has to uphold His good cause against. So no one will get away with any sin, ever, no matter how slight. There are no secrets. There will be no excuses. When you are tempted, remember the cross. This is how God feels about what you are considering.

Second, our justification is *just* ([Romans 3:26](#)). It isn't simply nice, and it isn't simply a gift. It is just. If I sin in some way, and believe that it breaks God's acceptance and eternal love for me, it means that I believe that the horrible death of Jesus the perfect Son of God was not enough to satisfy justice. It means that I disagree with the Father, that what Jesus has done was enough. It offends the honor and affection which the Father has for the Son. The unbeliever basically tells the Father, "I don't care what Jesus did for me, and you're wrong. I should bear the weight of justice, not Jesus. I'm not all that bad." You are telling the Father, Jesus' death was unnecessary and probably of no consequence when it really counts.

Do you want to stand before the throne of God and tell Him that's what you think?

When you have sinned, remember the degree to which your sin has been atoned. Justice has been served in full. God counts Jesus' blood as most highly adequate justice for your transgression. You really dare not believe otherwise. Your false piety and groveling guilt cannot make atonement for you. Only the blood of Jesus can carry this great weight of wrath.

The cross of Christ declares that our sin has gravity. It is sobering in the weight of its badness. We may think it is not so bad, but the cross declares that it is much worse than we think. We may think that God is a great absent-minded grandfather in the sky, who is forgetful about our little foibles, but this is far from true. He is

the ancient of days, the creator of all things, all-knowing and all-powerful. He acts decisively on His own schedule for His purposes. He has the power and the wisdom to create universes, and your little arrogance stands squarely against Him. If you do not fear Him, rest assured that you will. You will say from the bottom of your heart, with the prophet Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" If you are in Christ, you have been rescued from a very just and a very certain weight of tremendous wrath and justice.

There is a fantastically buoyant upside to all of this. We are justified so completely, and Jesus' blood is so powerfully salvific, that we can count on *eternal* life. We have escaped a terrible weight of judgment. We have not been saved from a mosquito bite in order to eat a potato chip. We have been saved from the weight of the righteous justice of the universe to an eternal joy. We cannot and we need not and we should not bear the weight of our own guilt. We don't have the resources to do this successfully. In Christ the world is turned upside down. Now, our own evil can't condemn us because it is truly already judged, and the new gravity in our life is our eternal splendor. We stand just, defended by the fierce power of God. The evil that happens *to us* is our gravity of glory now:

*16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an **eternal weight of glory** far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

# Chapter 12 - The Cross of Christ Declares the Power of Obedience

## Follow Your Dreams!

I confess that I have always had a weak spot for those “follow your dreams” kinds of posts and books. I love brainstorming what awesome things I could do, and I love thinking of ways to fulfill my destiny and live up to my potential and make a difference. I want to be courageous and creative and lead a successful enterprise. I want to “Think Different” – what a great slogan! I daydream sometimes about letting my hair go crazy like Einstein just so I will seem more eccentric and out there. I think usually my hair just looks weird, but maybe Apple will put my picture up there some day anyway. I’m an American, a rugged individualist. I have the beating heart of an (unsuccessful) entrepreneur. Right now I am sitting on at least three ideas that I know would be wild successes if I pursued them. My great grandfather was a cattle and oil baron in central Texas, and my mother is always saying that he never worked for another man a single day in his life. This was the great value of the man, the almost mythic power of his life.

## Jesus the Follower

Jesus was not really one of these people. I hate to break it to ... myself, but Jesus was all about being subordinate. He was about following someone else’s agenda. He was all about obedience. The gospels are full of these kinds of verses:

*5:19 Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.*

*5:30 “I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.*

*7:16 So Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. 17 If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself.*

*8:28 So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. 29 And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him."*

[John 5:19,30](#), [7:16-17](#), [8:28-29](#) (NASB)

## Entering Rest

I have to confess, I have always hated obedience. I hate the idea of commandment. If we're honest, most of us do. We don't like someone telling us what to do. Grace is supposed to be all about acceptance and love and forgiveness, and there doesn't seem to be much place for the ugly idea of commandment and obedience in such a world. However, I was taking a shower the other day (most of my greatest revelations come to me when I'm taking a shower for some reason), and I realized something. Obedience is all about entering your rest ([Hebrews 4:3](#)). Obedience relieves me of the distress of being smart enough to create my own vision, developing my own resources, forging my own message, and in general inventing my own successful life. If I am inventing my own successful life, then whenever I am challenged, I have to make sure I have a strong enough plan to answer every objection. However, if I am simply being obedient to another, none of these things are my problem. The plan belongs to another, and they are the one who must answer these objections. I am entrusting my fulfillment and success to someone else, and it is their job to make sure all of these things come together. If I have entrusted my welfare in obedient submission to some wild-eyed fool of a dreamer (for instance, myself), then there remains the very real fear that everything is going to fail. It turns out that everyone I have ever worked for has ended up being a sinner in some way, and it is difficult to submit to their very imperfect leadership. In fact, I myself have turned out to be a bad leader of myself. So where do we turn?

It is a truism to say that we turn to Christ. We don't turn to Christ. We keep turning to ourselves and screwing things up over and over and over. We do this because we are used to being our own god, our own master. We love ourselves most; we worship ourselves and we don't want to sacrifice our own agenda and desire to obey another. In our secret mind, God is less than us because we are real and present and God is ethereal and invisible and sometimes He doesn't answer prayer the way we want. Amazingly, even in this



Jesus was perfect. In refusing to submit to bad leadership ([Luke 4:1-13](#)), He didn't turn to Himself. He turned to His Father. He served. He trusted. He obeyed.

## Obedience is Death. Thank God!

Obedience involves a death. Obedience says that what someone else wants is all-important, and that what I want must take a back seat. Obedience relinquishes control. Obedience thinks the same ([1 Corinthians 2:16](#)). Obedience sacrifices personal agenda and vision for the agenda and vision of another. This would be horrible and terrifying if it weren't that the vision and agenda that are gained by such sacrifice are much greater than I could have ever conceived or imagined! We are talking about dying to our meager selfish short-sighted ill-advised and improbable agenda to be invited into the world of the agenda of God Almighty, the Creator of the universe! He has vision that lasts into eternity, and He has resources such that He can create vast universes with a word.

The cross of Christ declares this truth with direct and emphatic power. Jesus quite literally trusted the Father enough to obey His agenda in relinquishing heaven and equality with God to the point of death ([Philippians 2:5-8](#)), and was rewarded by being resurrected to equality with God with the saved church, His bride, in tow. When we surrender our own selves and our own ridiculous self-justification projects to God, we are given through His blood the open door to enter into the rest of the simplicity and beauty and meaningfulness and even romance of obedience to Him.

*39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."*

[Matthew 26:39 \(NASB\)](#)

# Chapter 13 - The Cross of Christ Declares the Ultimate Standard of Law

*You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin...*

[Hebrews 12:4](#)

The cross of Christ speaks so richly to us! Often we rightly look and see love and salvation there, and it certainly is present. If mercy and justice have kissed ([Psalms 85:10](#)), they have certainly kissed at the cross. Mercy is to be found there, but justice is to be found there as well. The cross of Christ is the ultimate expression of the law.

What do I mean? The writer of Hebrews shows us that if we think we have arrived at some acceptable level of righteous living, there is always a higher standard to attain to when we look to the cross. When we look to Jesus as an example to follow, the cross is the standard. Have we resisted self-love and idolatry and covetousness to the point of death? Have we loved God and our neighbors so much that we would die for them? Do we count our very own lives as sacred idols? Are we willing to “hear God” if His word is that we must shed blood and die in obedience? Don’t we find that crazy? Do we have such a strong faith that we see the joy set before us in the face of death? Is our joy that we would sacrifice everything to obtain the welfare of our enemies? OUCH! Would we forgive our own murderers right as they are in the act of murdering us? Do our enemies and detractors and betrayers find love and forgiveness beaming down at them from us? Can you even think of a mythical being, much less a real human, who comes close to being that good? And you think you can do this? I am skeptical, to say the least. As he goes on to explain in the rest of the passage, the cross of Christ shows us that there is always room for improvement for everyone no matter how “mature” they believe themselves to be ([1 John 3:2](#)). We always have need of the loving discipline of God. Even Jesus Himself learned obedience through the process of experience ([Hebrews 5:8](#)).

When he says, “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin,” who is he talking to? Is there some group of people who have progressed beyond the need to hear this? Of course not! He is talking to everyone. Everyone is in need of the gospel, every day. No one at any point has attained to the level of the perfection of obedience that Jesus has attained to. No one is worthy to open those scrolls ([Revelation 5:2](#)) except the Lamb who was slain. I have talked many times to people who wonder why we have so much emphasis on guilt and sin and mercy and grace and forgiveness — they just

don't feel they are so bad. They think that actually they are pretty good. Forgiveness and redemption just isn't their primary need! They take care of their responsibilities, work hard, watch out for their children's welfare, and even serve sacrificially at their church. The question is, are you such a person that you would obey God even if He asked you to die? Would you shed blood to avoid sin? If you think you have reached an acceptable level of moral success and have no need of redemption, your standard is too low. What is the right standard? The right standard is the cross of Christ.

The cross says something very profound here. It says that the law kills. You don't have to understand why it is so, to observe that for Jesus, and thus for us, the law demands death. He fulfilled the law because He died; short of obedience to death, Jesus would not have fulfilled the law. Death is the law's satisfaction. The law goes against our desires, against our joy. Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him ([Hebrews 12:2](#)), but the cross was not the joy. The cross was to be endured. The cross was undesirable; it was set against His desire. The power of the law is that it asks us to sacrifice and to die and to do the thing which is counter to our comfort and joy. If there is to be joy, we must look beyond the killing sting of the law to the resurrection. As we have died with Christ, we have been resurrected with Him ([Romans 6:4](#)). Under the new covenant in His blood, virtue and desire are united, but under the old covenant the standard of righteousness carries only the sting of death ([Hebrews 8:10,11,12,13](#)).

I think this is the right context from which to understand Jesus' command to us take up our cross daily and follow Him. This is the daily standard: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus ([Matthew 16:24](#)). Abandon your own self-appointed anemic standard of excellence and embrace His standard. His standard is the cross. If we wake up some day and think, "I have confessed everything, I have purified myself ([1 John 1:8-9, 3:3](#))" we can rest assured that the cross is still the rich standard to which we must attain. This is the day I am my own best idol in a fresh and living way; this is the day I haven't resisted sin to the point of shedding blood. This is the day I look to Jesus as the author and perfecter of my faith, because this is the day that I am yet imperfect in which I need His new mercies. This is day when I have so much to confess, so much to be cleansed of, so much need for purification. Today the cross tells me, I need forgiveness again, today, now. The cross says that I need a savior, and the cross says that I have a savior! Every day and every hour I need to go where justice and mercy kiss. The cross expresses the standard which tells me that I need mercy, and the cross tells me that God has shown forth mercy in His very blood.

## Chapter 14 - The Cross of Christ Declares that Jesus is Worthy

5 Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, 4 and **I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy** to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw **a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain**, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying,

**"Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God**  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,  
10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth."

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice,

**"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,**  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!"

13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

**"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"**

14 And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

### [Revelation 5:1-14 \(ESV\)](#)

What an incredible scene! Why was the apostle weeping? I think we need to capture the weight of this moment. Whatever is in this scroll is very important to the unfolding of eternity, and only a being of proven worthiness would be capable of opening it. Only the most worthy beings in the created universe were allowed as witnesses to this event in the first place. All of them have focused their entire attention and desire upon this scroll and its need to be opened.

*No one* is found worthy anywhere to open it. No one in heaven is worthy! Not the four living creatures, not the angels or archangels, not the 24 elders, not the cherubim, not the seraphim, not the saints — *no one*. Surely the four living creatures who surround the throne of God who never cease to say “holy holy holy!” are worthy! Alas, they are not. Surely the twenty-four elders who fall down before the throne of God and worship Him forever and ever are worthy! Not one of them. No one on earth, of all the billions of people, is found worthy. Not one. Jim Elliot, Amy Carmichael, George Muller, Hudson Taylor, Mother Theresa, Peter the Apostle, Paul the Apostle, John the Apostle — all were found wanting. In all of history, none are worthy. No one is righteous enough, or clever enough, or smart enough, or shrewd enough, or rich enough, or strong enough, or famous enough. No one is fit enough or good-looking enough or has good enough singing skills to open the scrolls. No one has invented any technology which is capable of this task. No one has strong enough intercessory prayer power or spiritual gifting or wisdom. All of these kinds of power and ability ridiculously fail to equip anyone to open the scrolls, because the question is not ability. The question is worthiness. What does it mean to be worthy?

I want to pause for a second here and ask a simple question. How hard could it be to open a scroll? It is a *scroll*. The question isn't about insufficient force, it is about insufficient morals. If you think about it, a lamb standing as if slain is not exactly a symbol of superior force or even intelligence. Why didn't anyone think to ask, “Why are we so hung up on *worthiness*? If this is so important, just OPEN IT. Who cares who opens it?” You know what is strange? Not one being said this. Not even the devil, or the most vile hedonistic sinful human, piped up and said “Worthiness be damned! Let *me* open it for you!” The entire universe was in unanimous agreement here: the showstopper question was worthiness. It was the judgment of the perfection of the law that held that scroll closed, because the question in every mind was worthiness. Not one being ever created in the history of the universe was willing or able to step up and say that the judgment of the law wasn't binding. The law had stopped heaven altogether, and judgment had won. No one else had fulfilled the law. The sealed scroll judged all of us as unworthy.

I want to notice that He was not deemed worthy because He was resurrected. He was resurrected because He was worthy. He was worthy because He was slain. He shed His blood in resisting sin. He shed His blood to remain true. He shed His blood to maintain His integrity. He shed His blood to forgive. He died to prove His love and His obedience. He fulfilled the law, all the way to the death. No one else died the way Jesus died — that is what this is saying. If they had, then perhaps they would be found worthy to open this scroll. Jesus alone is worthy, because He died in order to ransom. He alone obeyed the Father's will all the way to the death. He alone died for pure love.

The cross of Christ declares that He is worthy. He stands forever a lamb as if slain, and He is worthy to receive blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever. The rest of us worship Him, for He is worthy. He has proven it. There is quite literally nothing He wouldn't do for the love of us. He *is* love.

In the same way, I am not worthy to open the scroll of my brother's heart, or of my wife's heart. I did not die for them. I did not love them the way He loves them. I die to fixing myself, and I die to fixing others by holding a standard of worthiness over their heads. He is worthy because He was slain to ransom them. If we confess, He will forgive *us*; we are all equally unworthy. It cannot be my agenda to demand worthiness from myself or from anyone else. We can only stand weeping and hoping that One worthy to fix us opens the door to eternity for us. I can only share the bread broken for me with them, and drink the cup with them, and proclaim His death together with them. Apart from His death, we remain unopened, isolated, and judged, condemned by our communal standards of worthiness. No one else meets our standards, which God has forged in us. Every other creature stands judged, but there is only One who bears up under judgement. Together we can worship Him, for He and He alone is worthy.

# Chapter 15 - The Cross of Christ Declares the Sacrificial Gift of God

*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

[Romans 6:23](#)

*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

[1 John 4:10](#)

## The Nature of a Gift

When you want to show someone a very great love and affection, you give them a very costly gift. This is why wedding rings have gold and diamonds instead of plastic and aluminum. This is why David refused to make an offering to God with free oxen ([2 Samuel 24:24](#)). We try to hide it when we give gifts at Christmas that were gifts to us the Christmas before – because it means it cost us nothing.

When you want to show someone love, you also want to give a gift that reflects an understanding of who they are and what they really like. In a famous episode of the Simpsons, Homer gave Marge a bowling ball fit perfectly for his own fingers and engraved with his name. Ha ha! This is *not* the kind of costly and appropriate gift I am talking about. The best gifts are truly selfless, truly costly, and truly reflect an understanding of what the recipient of the gift wants and needs. This selflessness is incomplete if the gift is merely costly. It shows that the gift is born of intimacy if it reflects the receiver's wants and needs rather than the giver's wants and needs.

The very best gifts are also a surprise! There is a tension in this idea of a surprising gift, because it is difficult to find a gift which is both what the receiver wants *and* what surprises them. It is only possible if there is a deep reflective affectionate understanding of who the receiver is so that the giver can predict both what they would be surprised at *and* what they would really like.

So the Father loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. This is a gift which fits all the criteria for being a wonderful gift: it is costly, appropriate, and surprising.

## The Costliness of the Gift

The costliness of the gift of our redemption may seem obvious. However, it is not enough to say that the costliness is that Jesus died. Two robbers died on either side of Him, on crosses no less, but no one thinks of their deaths as costly gifts to us. There is something entirely unique about Jesus' death. When Peter gave his first sermon at Pentecost, the people were cut to the heart:

*36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." 37 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

[Acts 2:36-38](#)

Why were they cut to the heart? They hadn't just mistakenly sentenced just any random person to death. That alone would have been a very piercing guilt. They had crucified the actual Messiah – the One predicted by Jewish law, practice, and prophecy for millennia. They had crucified the One whom the Old Testament scriptures declared to be even more than a messiah: He was *Lord*. They realized they had crucified the One man in all of history who was both Messiah and God in the flesh. This was His great great value and it was their very great guilt.

If my son died because he was a drug dealer and a murderer, and had been killed in the midst of his evil, I would grieve very very greatly. But truly, if he was a great artist or doctor or writer or father/husband and was killed for no reason, I would mourn all the more — not just because of his innocence but because of the great worth of his life. And O the great great worth of the life of Jesus Christ! He was much better than the greatest doctor or statesman or philosopher or theologian! All wise, seeking the good of others, completely dedicated to truly doing God's will, He was constantly going out of His way to do miracles for the good of others. He did not break the bruised reeds, and the forgotten riff-raff and the despised sinners gathered to Him like moths to a flame. This is the One whom the Father gave — the One who always listened to Him and obeyed His will. He sent His only begotten Son, perfect in all His ways, the one and only Messiah, the



fulfillment of thousands of years of Jewish prophecy, and gave Him. He was utterly wonderful and utterly unique and He was killed as if it were nothing.

I have trouble believing that my life is worth His life. I am lazy, unbelieving, selfish, mean, self-indulgent, lustful, and generally sinful. Yet this is the gift I have been given! I am undone!

Of course, the cross of Christ declares a very costly gift. Jesus didn't just give up His dreams of being a bohemian poet or musician so he could be a farmer to support His family. I suppose that would be a very great sacrifice. He didn't just give up his excellent and well-paying job to become a pastor. He sacrificed His very life. These words "sent" ([1 John 4:10](#)) and "gave" ([John 3:16](#)) are gentle ways of saying something very incredible. He gave up everything to the point of being crucified, for the love us.

*5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

#### [Philippians 2:5-8](#)

Here is the stunning thing about all of this: He *wanted* to do this for us! The Father was pleased to crush Him and put Him to grief, to render Him as a guilt offering ([Isaiah 53:10](#)). That is strange but for one thing: as a very great show of love for us, God Himself showed forth a very great and sacrificial gift. The greatness of the sacrifice is part of our assurance that we are very greatly loved.

# Chapter 16 - The Cross of Christ Declares the Appropriate Gift of God

In the last post we considered the threefold nature of a good gift: it is sacrificial, it is appropriate to the receiver, and it is surprising. We looked at the sacrificial nature of the cross of Christ, and how that makes it a powerful gift to us. In this post we will look at the appropriateness of the gift.

When I say appropriateness, I don't mean that a good gift is merely inoffensive. I mean that it truly reflects an understanding of the receiver's wants and needs and personhood. I think a lot of people lack passion in their faith because they have not realized how powerfully the gospel of Christ and Him crucified fulfills this part of the nature of a gift. When Jesus died for us, He gave us a gift that fulfilled our deepest and most urgent needs and desires. How so?

I am always saying that our greatest injury isn't the evil that has been done to us, it is the evil we have chosen. If evil is done to me, I may be terribly harmed, and that is really bad. This is no attempt to downplay the wounds and scars we have from the evils we have suffered in life at all. We can be assured that God has tremendous compassion for our plight. However, when we choose evil, we become guilty and ashamed. We hide and lie. A karmic dynamic of belief enters, where we feel that we deserve the harm that we suffer because of our sin. When we sin, we wear the weight of it in our soul; our conscience afflicts us in our secret mind everywhere we are. When we tell people stories about the evil we have suffered, it curries sympathy and compassion. When we confess our guilt and shame, it brings judgment and revulsion and rejection. Suffering from evil done to us threatens our comfort and success and longevity, but suffering because of our sin threatens our acceptability, our ability to have relationship, and our very personhood. It is the difference between being a good person who was wronged, and being a bad person who was wronged. Everyone cheers when a bad person is wronged, because they are getting what should have been coming to them; and this is our great fear as sinners. We can believe that God will love us and comfort us when we have suffered evil at the hands of others or of fate, because in doing so he is upholding justice and displaying compassion and love. We have the feeling that even though we have been right, God is right to have sympathy and kindness towards us. However, it is hard to believe that God will love us and comfort us when we are the source of evil, because if He does it will be against justice and against compassion for those we have harmed. We may articulate other beliefs, but in our conscience we know that if God blesses us He blesses evil, and we know it must never happen. Mercy and grace are our greatest need, and the most difficult to truly believe.

The cross of Christ declares that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly ([Romans 5:8](#)). While He was being murdered He loved and prayed for the forgiveness of His murderers, and this is just an example of His heart and attitude across the board. While we sin against Him, He reaches beyond our uncleanness and beyond our shame and fear and touches us with healing mercy. In fact, in Christ you can stop worrying about whether your problems are your fault or someone else's fault, because the truth is it is probably a mix of both. He has already died for you, your faults have been absolved. He is just going to comfort you and help you and heal you regardless of your responsibility in your mess. However, a great deal of Christian thought seems utterly determined to make the cross out to be about more than simple forgiveness. Such teaching says the gospel must produce sanctification, or it must show us how to live sacrificially and incarnationally, or it must produce submissive obedience. It cannot really be about simple mercy and forgiveness, because that would be "easy-believism" or "hyper-grace" or whatever pejorative moniker the spirit of antichrist has dreamt up for the simple gospel this week. Why can't we rest in the simplicity that the cross offers true and lasting mercy? Mercy is not simple, and there is nothing at all unimportant about the power of the forgiveness we have received in Christ. At the cross Jesus became just and the justifier; He has rolled away the stone of our reproach and shame and opened the door again to genuine intimacy for us with Himself and with others. The removal of our reproach is *the big deal*; other things grow from that soil, but make no mistake that the simple gospel of pure mercy is the good soil. The cross of Christ declares that we are greatly loved, not by merit, but by gift. Any other emphasis or message is not the message which the cross of Christ declares, but is some other message ([John 10:1](#)).

Which is all to say, God has big fluffy wonderful unending unkillable eternal love for you. He died for you and He rose from the dead for you. He is crazy about you and He has the power to back that up. You have been caught up into something much bigger and more wonderful than you know. He who is alone worthy in all of the universe has you in His heart and would rather die than live without you. And that is exactly what is playing out — He did die and He will live with you! Our worst problem is this: we think that if our secrets were known, we would be judged and rejected. The gift of God is this: when our secrets are known, God establishes perfect love for us. This is the appropriateness of the gift which the cross of Christ declares.

# Chapter 17 - The Cross of Christ Declares the Surprising Gift of God

*It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,*

*But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.*

[Proverbs 25:2](#)

## Surprise!

As I write this, today is my wife's birthday, and I have been concealing a very big secret. Her sister flew in from North Carolina all the way to Bellingham WA just for her birthday! I also planned a surprise birthday party, but I know that she is way too smart for me to keep the entire thing secret. So although I wanted it to be a surprise, I used the party as a decoy surprise to draw all of her suspicions, so that her sister's arrival would be completely shocking. It worked! When we drove up to the spot where we agreed to pick her sister up, she was not expecting anything to happen, and when her sister suddenly showed up, she screamed, waved her hands in funny little circles, and started crying when she ran out to hug her neck! What a joy!

In a previous post we considered the threefold nature of a good gift: it is sacrificial, it is appropriate to the receiver, and it is surprising. We looked at the sacrificial nature of the cross of Christ, the appropriateness of the cross of Christ to our need and desire, and how that makes it a powerful gift to us. Now we look at how the cross is a surprise.

The idea of surprise is steeped in grace. If a gift is truly a surprise to someone, it means they didn't plan it or ask for it or even remotely expect it. Yet, unbeknownst even to them, it is something which truly befits them and which they would have badly wanted if they could have thought of it. Since it is a surprise, it is something which is all done on the initiative of the giver. The receiver not only didn't earn it, they didn't even think to ask for it. It is tremendous blessing that comes at you out of the blue, out of love and a desire to bless. Once Paul has outlined a torrent of amazing things about our identity in Christ in the first three chapters of Ephesians, he ends the section with this:

*20 Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen*

[Ephesians 3:20-21 \(NASB\)](#)

## The Cross as a Surprise Gift

I think it is fair to say that while the Jewish nation at the time of Jesus was on the alert for the coming of the Messiah, they were not expecting what they got. Even the wisest and best of them were expecting a figurehead and a political leader of some kind. They were not expecting God Himself to come in the flesh; in fact whenever you see the subject broached in His dialogs with the religious leaders, they enter directly into a murderous rage. I certainly doubt anyone could have conceived that God would come in the flesh and personally die for our sins. Sometimes as Christians we become numb to how shocking these things are. The exact nature of the coming of Christ was kept secret for millennia:

*10 As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, 11 seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.*

[1 Peter 1:10-12](#)

As a pastor, I categorize people into two groups: those who are astonished at the gospel, and those who are not. It isn't that astonishment is a requirement, but it is a sign that the surprise of the gospel has been revealed to a person. Inevitably, if someone is not somehow exhibiting a degree of shock at the scandal of grace, then when you dialog with them you begin to realize that for them their progressive improvement is the real gold. There is no surprise because there is no gift for them - the Christian life is still a matter of merit and work. It has not occurred to them that the angels are shocked, but they are not, and that perhaps the angels are right.

I think it is safe to say that the nature and power of our redemption ended up being much more far-reaching and amazing than we would have thought. Many of the reasons people balk at grace is that they want to soften the shocking degree of forgiveness and blessing. The degree of love and the cost of it all seems too good to be true. It really does seem foolish and offensive to human nature to say that if you simply believe it and receive it, you have eternal life and you are forgiven everything forever. I think a lot of people would be very surprised to find out that this is what we are saying! I am convinced that a great number of people would be inclined to say, "This is what you meant by all of this preaching? Why didn't you come out and say so? This is absolutely tremendous! Thank God I know that! I never knew what it felt like to be released from the burden of my very conscience! Thank you!" It is shocking to say that we are so beloved of God that He would become flesh and die for us. We can also know that the surprises aren't over; there are many glories to follow! Expect God to surprise you over and over and over for the rest of eternity!

# Chapter 18 - The Cross of Christ Declares that Virtue Does Not Secure Blessing

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

[Romans 6:3-4](#)

I recently watched a movie by Slavoj Žižek entitled “The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology.” Before you think I have gone off the rails and become a “Christian atheist” and that I think he has the right thinking concerning these things, let me assure you I don’t. However, there is a very profound point he touches on that I want to pick up and examine. Let’s read what he had to say in the film about Martin Scorsese’s film “The Last Temptation of Christ”:

*... I think one can read the Christian gesture in a much more radical way. This is what the sequence of crucifixion in Scorsese’s film shows us. What dies on the cross is precisely this guarantee of the big Other. The message of Christianity is here radically atheist. It’s the death of Christ is not any kind of redemption or commercial affair in the sense of Christ suffers to pay for our sins. Pay to whom? For what? And so on. It’s simply the disintegration of the God which guarantees the meaning of our lives. And that’s the meaning of the famous phrase Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani. “Father, why have you forsaken me?” Just before Christ’s death we get what in psychoanalytic terms we call subjective destitution, stepping out totally of the domain of symbolic identification, canceling or suspending the entire field of symbolic authority, the entire field of the big Other. Of course, we cannot know what God wants from us because there is no God. ... This is why I claim that the only way to really be an atheist is to go through Christianity. Christianity is much more atheist than the usual atheism, which can claim there is no God and so on. But nonetheless it retains a certain trust into the big Other. This big Other can be called natural necessity or evolution or whatever. We humans are nonetheless reduced to a position within a harmonious whole of evolution, whatever. But the difficult thing to accept is, again that there is no big Other, no point of reference which guarantees meaning.*

To take the meaning of the crucifixion this way is of course to completely disbelieve in the justificatory power of the cross, the resurrection, the miracles of Jesus, and the existence of God the Father, and ultimately to deny the divinity of Christ. Zizek is not even close to being faithful to the true person of Christ as presented in scripture. However, I am not citing this in order to dispute it. His idea here is so crazy and difficult to grasp that I don't think there is much threat that many people will be influenced by it at all. After I watched this, I began to reflect on what he was saying, and I think there is an important element of truth here. The cross tells us that there truly is no immediate connection between virtue and blessing. The God who is a slot machine, the God in whom most people believe, into which you put in coins of virtuous behaviors and receive blessing, is a non-existent idol. Here is the most virtuous man who ever lived and who ever could live, in fact here is a man who is morally perfect. His moral perfection does not lead him to a place of blessing but to the cross. We may want to dispute this in light of the resurrection, but even He, in light of the resurrection which He already had foretold, sweated blood and pleaded in prayer to be spared the unjustified agony of the cross. What we see is that moralistic perfection itself cannot manipulate the favor and protection of God. The Father does not act on this basis.

In general we interpret the idea that we have "died with Christ" and that we have been "raised with Christ" to mean that we have left a place of loose and unsuccessful moral responsibility and have entered a place of greater moral responsibility, and that we have come by one means or another to better adhere to this greater moral framework. Yet, Job's story and the cross of Christ declare that no great virtue can ensure blessing with God. Psalms and Proverbs remind us that many times the wicked prosper and the righteous struggle. This was why the "Lord Lord didn't I" people in the sermon on the Mount were turned away. They equated virtue with earning the bestowal of favor - they want a crossless and bloodless self-fashioned redemption. The cross of Christ severs this tie completely. It says, when you do right, you will be rejected and crucified. It says, while you are yet a sinner, you will be forgiven and blessed. It says, if you want to be my disciple, you must bear the cross. The Father God will not necessarily step in and help you in the way and at the time that you think He must. We learn the secret of contentment at the point when it becomes evident that our virtue has not secured our blessing ([Philippians 4:12-13](#)).

What dies at the cross is this idolatrous notion of a God who can be controlled through our moral success. We have so many idols. Our highest, most dignified, most cherished and sophisticated pictures of deity are shown as graven images at the cross. All we can do in our religion without the cross of Christ is name God in vain. The cross shows us that these notions are really God in our own image. I think that to truly die with Christ, we must be able to say from our heart, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" We must functionally become atheists in the sense that we lay down our most cherished notions of who we think God is and what we think He is supposed to do for us. Then the God who is real can by His own initiative raise us



from the dead, so to speak, and express favor and love to us because of pure one-way love without the slightest reference to the quality of our virtue. Virtue and blessing have been forever rent asunder by the cross. Truly, the poor in spirit are the inheritors of the kingdom. True virtue is only born once it is a product of this one-way love and is shown through the cross to be no longer a requirement but a gift.

# Chapter 19 - The Cross of Christ Declares that We are Flesh Eating Blood Drinking Cannibals

If I came up to you and said, “you can’t be with me unless you eat my flesh,” you would rightly assume that I had utterly lost all contact with reality. Even people with the most shocking face tattoos and piercings and perverse crazy lifestyles don’t go around offering their own flesh and blood for consumption. Can you imagine? “Here – (holds out arm) – take a bite!” What?!

Yet Jesus says this very thing! He was so cutting edge. Even as a metaphor, it is not really so savory, is it?

*51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”*

*52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” 59 Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.*

*60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this?”*

[John 6:51-61](#)

We try to make the point in sermons that the Jews would have been horrified at such words. In all truth, everyone who has ever lived from any culture would be horrified at such words. Even cannibalistic cultures don’t have their leaders going around saying “eat my flesh and drink my blood.” Even for them there is a shock value and a horror – which is why it is a powerful act for them. In nature, it is very uncommon for

species to eat their own. Tigers somehow know not to hunt and eat other tigers. But this idea is the very centerpiece of the Christian faith. The main thing we have been told to do by Jesus is to eat the bread and drink the cup which signify the new covenant in His blood. The bread and the wine are merely signifiers of something more real: we partake of Him.

Here's a bonus question: how does this passage make Jesus a "great moral teacher"?

Notice that Jesus starts off a little softer with this message. He says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." You could kind of say that He was telling off the posers – that in effect He was saying, "You guys only want free food! You should be seeking spiritual stuff!" It sounds like a nice metaphor, if a little strange. However, when the Jews take issue with this, He doesn't say, "Oh – listen! It was just a metaphor! It means you should think of God as your sustenance. Let me help you understand." Instead of helping them He sharpens the scandal. He intensifies the horror of what He is saying, and He goes on and on hammering the point home. In fact it seems He drives away everyone except for the twelve! So much for His successful and growing ministry! He certainly cleared the chaff.

This is one of the strangest aspects of the Christian message, made even stranger by the fact that it is considered so central and important. He came to die? He came to shed His blood on our behalf? He came so we could be washed in His blood? Who uses blood to wash up? GROSS! We celebrate this together in a beautiful and reverent ceremony? This is supposed to be comforting and holy and peaceful? *Zen koan!!!* These things all end up sounding so strange if you take them at face value. People who are not believers or who are very new believers must find such words very alien and bizarre. They are right, they are bizarre, and I think they are meant to be alienating. Jesus used the whole picture *in order to alienate*.

So, let's run with the idea that cannibalism is the single most immoral human act. It is murder PLUS eating human flesh. This is the idea that scandalized Jesus' hearers. Christianity takes it to the extreme. Cannibalistic cultures typically eat their enemies or their grandmothers who died naturally. Jesus is asking us to eat Him – the Messiah and the central leader and in fact God in the flesh. There is no cannibalistic tribe where they make it a necessity to eat their healthy leaders. Why did God choose this?

Here's why: it is entirely and truly the end of approaching God on a moralistic basis.

If someone asks, "how do you approach God?" And you answer, "by repentance and good behavior and upstanding morals and secret personal integrity," then no one is going to be scandalized or outraged by that. Everyone will crowd around and clap. Your church will grow. People love that stuff, it requires no supernatural unction and it makes perfect human sense. We all want a sensible God for an idol, that's why we create idols. The real God is just too weird for us. Of course, no one will really do many of those sensibly

moral things, but they will pretend to, and they will applaud your harsh moral stance. But if you answer, “we approach God as flesh-eating blood-drinking cannibals,” no one is going to love that statement. It couldn’t be more scandalous – it is amazingly and offensively scandalous. Even the few disciples who didn’t walk away were scandalized. Don’t water that down. Jesus didn’t. He emphasized it. We deeply want a clean inoffensive bloodless grace but Jesus didn’t give that to us.

Imagine this completely fictitious dialog between Jesus and the devil at the throne of judgment:

*Devil: How can you accept this person? He was a sex addict, a family destroyer, an alcoholic, a liar, a cheat, and a thief. And an idolater!*

*Accused Guy: Hey, wait a minute! I got better. I was ... sort of ... sanctified...*

*Jesus: (Ignores guy’s useless defense) That’s all true. But it’s worse than that! Because he has faith in me, he is a flesh-eating blood-drinking cannibal. Top that!*

*Accused Guy: I was? Wait a minute! I don’t remember doing that!*

*Devil: < (Ignores guy as well) silence class=“feverish thinking” >*

*Jesus: Since his murderous man-flesh eating has been made the very cornerstone of his faith, and he is even forgiven of this horrible thing, do you have any other accusations?*

*Devil: < silence class=“sullen angry” >*

*Jesus: (to the accused) Enter into your rest! I knew you! You obeyed and were a true disciple!*

*Guy: (Awash with incredible relief) I was?! You’re kidding! I was horrible, really. Thank You!!! (Jumps for joy and enters paradise)*

*Devil: (storms off, furious at God’s lack of justice)*

One of the beautiful things which the cross of Christ declares is this: we are deeply and incredibly evil. In simply coming to Christ, we acknowledge that we are so deeply evil that it can’t be topped. Nothing we could

do for the rest of eternity could be worse than murdering and eating our own savior. The gospel is so frank about this that we can't even look at it squarely without squirming. It's like looking straight at the sun. This is how forgiven we really are. The net effect of this is that it kills any possible notion that we approach God on the basis of our moral success. If you say, "look – I conquered my sexual addiction, Lord!" Or, "I conquered my alcoholism!" Or, "I ministered to the poor!" He will say, "did you eat my flesh and drink my blood?" He'll press that. It doesn't take self-justifying deeds, it takes *faith*. And if you are approaching moralistically you'll say, "What?! No! I'm a good person, not a cannibal! Why would I do that? Give me a clean bloodless grace! Give me pretend grace and pretend justice. I don't want a redemption which requires this horrid violence and stark immorality." This is exactly what people do when they want a "grace" that is defined by moralistic success, and shy away from all this awkward cross and blood-washing flesh-eating business. But God has made cannibalism the doorway. You either acknowledge the truth of that and go in, or you run away screaming. If you enter, you are entering a world where you are included not because of your goodness, but because of your faith and trust. If you enter, your only choice is to lay your moral pretense down and enter by pure gift. As Kierkegaard has shown us, this is the faith of Abraham – trust, not moral stamina. Then you can start to do things from love and a pure heart ([1 Timothy 1:5](#)), instead of doing them from threat. Your old-covenant approach to God, the moral-manipulative approach, is dead. All your schemes of significance and success are dead. The threat of the law is dead, because if the law says anything, it certainly says don't be a cannibal. Yet here is God saying, if you want to enter, the essential element is this: be a *cannibal*. You're a true follower if you eat His flesh and drink His blood.

You, at your secret root, are a murdering cannibal. You use people for your own desires and spit them out once they are used up and useless. God offers Himself to you in this, your worst sinful place, and says, I am bigger than your worst secret. Take and eat, I insist. Eat me up in a gluttonous orgy of evil desire and unabashed selfishness. Take advantage of my greasy grace. I am bigger even than that. I will overcome your worst hidden sinfulness and overwhelm you with resurrection love and power. I will use your evil for good!

Are you not astonished?

## Be Astonished!

*6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 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. 9 Much*

*more than, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*

[Romans 5:6-9](#)

## **Chapter 20 - The Cross of Christ Declares God's Answer to the Problem of Evil**

I was recently in a discussion with a group (cloud? pride? flock?) of atheists, and very predictably it came down to a discussion of the problem of evil. How can there be a God if there is cancer and death and natural disaster and insanity and murder? It was interesting this time because a friend of mine was there, who has faced terminal cancer twice and has lived to tell the tale. His story is that his cancer, inexplicably, brought him closer to God. The atheists were all squirming around waiting for him to shut up about his tale of faith in the face of evil, and as soon as he did finish, they jumped in to explain that he was not experiencing God's presence in those times, he was experiencing a personal dissociative identity disorder. Of course! How could he have missed this?

### **Everyone Believes Something**

The fact is, the atheists were making a priori metaphysical assumptions that forced such an interpretation of his experience. Since I already believe in God, I hear his story and say "Of course!" There is a God, and it is astonishing but entirely likely that God would grant comfort and a palpable sense of peace in the face of certain death. He can do anything, so why not this? My metaphysical assumptions allow for this. The atheists' metaphysical construct does not allow for this, so they are forced to root around for some other explanation. The arrogance of the atheist construct is this: it pretends to have no metaphysical construct, and so assumes an exceptionally accurate interpretation of things belongs to them. They assume that their viewpoint is not based upon a metaphysical construct, but rather upon science. This is of course ridiculous. Atheists do not have a monopoly on science; science is the study of natural empirical phenomena. Just

because theists assume there is more to existence than its physicality doesn't mean they deny the truth and study of the material world.

## What does atheism offer the suffering?

However, all of this set me to thinking. What answer does atheism offer to suffering people? Are they willing to say, "your pain and fear and loss are all a part of the adaptive survivalism of the circle of life?" What kind of hope does atheism answer? Is their final answer to a child dying of cancer, "you're just an insignificant speck on a dust mote on the edge of an insignificant galaxy? Your life wouldn't have mattered anyway. Your suffering proves there is no God." That seems to be the argument, although they would certainly recoil from the brutality of saying such things to a suffering and dying person. However, the very strength of the atheist argument – there is evil so there must be no God – is its own achilles heel. It is utterly bankrupt to offer comfort or hope in the face of suffering and evil. It carries no emotional truth, and yet here we are, by one means or another, emotional beings requiring emotionally satisfying answers. Atheism can offer no guarantee of justice or comfort or hope – only the stark reality that our lives are ultimately meaningless and determined by genetics and environment and the cold march of unreasoning unfeeling adaptive survivalism over time.

## Christian Legalism is Worse

Christless and graceless Christian-flavored legalism is worse by far than the atheist position. Instead of offering the hope that your life will merely cease, it says that God's answer to evil is the fear of a terrible judgment by an impartial just and holy God, who will dispassionately and certainly toss you into a fire of unending torment if you don't measure up to His standards. And who measures up? Who faces death with the certainty that their life has measured up to the holy gaze of a just and perfect and all-powerful judge? What a terrible belief!

Don't be confused here. Anyone who teaches a gospel-like message, and even mentions the cross and belief in Christ, but mixes in a necessity of conformance to some behavioral standard as the condition to acceptance, has tossed the cross of Christ into the garbage can and has offered a belief that is far worse than atheism. How so?

I work with databases. There is a type of data entry which is called "null". It means, there is absolutely nothing in that field. If you combine another field with a null field, the result is always null.  $7 + \text{null} = \text{null}$ .

“Apples” combined with null results in null. Anything that touches null results in null. Works righteousness is the null of spirituality. If you combine any level of grace with some form of works justification, the grace is thrown out and the works become the true condition of entry.

As the writer of Hebrews says, if one clings to such a faith,

*26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

[Hebrews 10:26-31](#)

The point of the passage is that if we go on sinning by clinging to the law instead of believing in the power of Christ’s blood which cries out for mercy instead of justice, all we have left is a terrifying expectation of vengeance.

## The Cross of Christ Declares God’s Answer to Evil

So what is the true Christian answer to the problem of evil? The rest of this chapter is a fluff piece. This is the good part!

There is nothing worse that has happened in the universe than the death of Jesus Christ. The perfect Son of God, the long-promised one-and-only Messiah, the greatest teacher and rabbi and obeyer of God that ever lived, was rejected by humanity and killed. Any president or king is a blip on the radar compared to the Messiah. It is a tragedy when an important leader dies, especially if he or she was murdered. But this is the Messiah. This is the guy who could heal all diseases. This is the guy who possessed all knowledge. This is God in the flesh. Humanity, represented by the most religiously pious and successful culture on earth, crucified Him. Humanity failed and God failed to get through to them. It was the greatest and most tragic evil



that ever happened. We dress this up with sentimental icons and paintings and hymns (like one of my least favorite – “the Old Rugged Cross”). But it was not sentimental. It was monstrously and horrendously evil. It was a huge victory for selfish political gain and injustice.

But this is the message of the cross: God took the worst evil and made it into the greatest good. He took the cross of Christ and made it into the salvation of mankind. He made the greatest example of humanity's collective moral failure into the great great redemption of all believing people. He did this without whitewashing the degree of evil that happened at the cross. He did it without ignoring the suffering of Jesus, without saying that somehow murder and suffering and injustice are OK. He turned the murder and suffering and injustice into resurrection and joy and justification.

And this is the ultimate statement of how God operates. We may not see it yet, but this is our great hope. Our suffering will end up having this same twist. It will end up as a comfort to many. It will end up glorious. It will end up as a redemptive story somehow. Our suffering matters in Christ. It is our dignity and our beautiful gravitas because of our faith. Paul sums this up perfectly:

*16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

[2 Corinthians 4:16-18](#)

# Chapter 21 - The Cross of Christ Declares The Real Gospel

*15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.*

[1 Timothy 1:15-16](#)

*2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*

[1 Corinthians 2:2](#)

There has been a lot of talk for as long as I can remember about the “real” gospel. I went to a “Full Gospel Businessmen’s” meeting once. By “Full Gospel” they mean they emphasize certain sensational manifestations of supernatural gifts. The stupid old “plain” half-gospel is about believing that Jesus died for your sins, but the “full gospel” includes casting out demons and speaking in tongues.

Or there is the idea among the advocates of Lordship Salvation of “real faith” – those with “real” faith will love Christ and will long to obey Him. The “real” Christian will have a serious commitment to the Lordship of Christ or will have a transformed life or will have some other sign of moral change that is a necessary sign of authenticity. If you don’t have it, mere belief isn’t enough, because if you really believed you would pretty much completely stop sinning forever.

Or we have the idea of the “incarnational” gospel:

*The gospels tell us that Christ Jesus was a “friend of sinners,” ([Matthew 11.19](#)). He associated with tax collectors, prostitutes, the diseased, and the down and outers of society. The religious leaders despised him for it and called him a glutton and a winebibber, because he attended the parties of the sinners, ([Luke 7.33-35](#)). Socializing with these kinds of people ruined Christ’s testimony before the religious*

*leaders of His day. The missional church is also often misunderstood and maligned as it attempts to reach out to people in the same manner of our Lord.*

*At the heart of being incarnational is simply loving people like Jesus loved people; loving people enough to go to them. The missional church understands that Christians are to follow the example of Jesus.*

So the “real” gospel means, loving outcasts the way Jesus did. The real gospel means Jesus’ example is far more important than Jesus’ offer of salvation. If you’re not doing incarnational mission, it isn’t the real gospel. The real gospel means being a friend of outcasts and sinners (which I guess implies that *we’re* not outcasts, but our mission is to condescend to reach out to these other wretches!)

So, we’re to understand that the “authentic” gospel – the gospel according to *Jesus* as opposed to all of this anti-Jesus “salvation” stuff – means real lasting moral transformation. It must be qualified with words like “real” and “authentic” and “genuine” because the regular old vanilla Bb stupid gospel that just saves sinners because they believe in Jesus is too easy ([John 3:16-17](#)). Regular grace won’t do – it has to be “costly” grace. Which of course means it has to cost *us*. We have to add our works and efforts and sacrifice to the gospel somehow, or it isn’t really the gospel. Only the elite obedient people will really be saved. The regular vanilla “Jesus saves us” gospel is only a half gospel, but these people have come to an enlightened new message – you have to do hard stuff to get approved by God.

*Let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.*

*-Jesus Christ*

If you notice, the “real” or “full” or “incarnational” or whatever gospel is a bloodless, crossless, graceless gospel. It is not a God-initiated gospel that loves and saves sinners. It is a “gospel” which presses human responsibility onto us as a necessary ingredient for “truly” being saved. These “Jesus plus” gospels tell us that God isn’t interested in regular old sinful people who merely believe. They tell us that God is only interested in the committed, the sacrificial, the costly, the incarnational “believers.” Yet what is it they “believe?” And how is this inviting to the outcast wretches they are extending the strong arm of ministry towards? They believe in human deeds and efforts as the ultimate justifying sign. They emphasize deeds and works, and assign a backseat if any seat to the Cross of Christ. Or they redefine the Cross of Christ as being an example, but not really a salvation. Thus their teachings are no different than any human system of

religion or ethics. Atheists believe we should behave ethically and kindly. Everyone believes that. These “gospels” do not represent a message of a God-initiated salvation, but of human-invented behavioral excellence.

The simple message of the Cross of Christ – Christ Jesus crucified for sinners – is the true message of Christianity. Only the Cross of Christ declares the true depth of the horror of our sin. Only the cross declares the serious and terrible wrath of God at our injustice. Only the Cross of Christ declares a lavish and just forgiveness. Only the Cross of Christ declares a real compassion. Only the Cross of Christ declares that God embraces those He ought not to embrace. Only the Cross of Christ declares a genuine and unconditional and enduring love. The Cross of Christ declares that while we were yet sinners, Christ deemed us worthy of His death ([Romans 5:8](#)). Only the Cross of Christ can wipe our consciences clean:

*13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

#### [Hebrews 9:13-14](#)

These other so-called “real” gospels relegate the importance of our salvation through Christ’s blood to a one-time past event that must be supplemented with obedience and effort and transformation. They say, now you are saved, so welcome to hell! Get to work! Stop all that sin! Prove it! Show it! Be authentically “saved” or God will kick you right out. Don’t ‘judge’ or God will judge you! Have “assurance” without being assured! God loves you but He is also a schizophrenic monster who hates you and is waiting for you to screw up or not be “full” or “incarnational” enough so He can throw you out.

But you have to think that maybe Jesus would disagree with them about the importance of His death on the cross. He says, remember my death often with the wine and the bread. You don’t even have to know how to read to get the message here – you just have to know how to eat and drink. This is because it is a central and extremely important message for *all people*. Jesus says, proclaim the New Covenant in My blood until I return. Keep it front and center. Make it important. Determine to know nothing else. Paul the Apostle seems to agree with Jesus’ gospel of forgiveness through His blood. That seems like a big clue. So I say, enough of this. To hell with these other gospels. I mean that quite literally. To hell with them, where they belong, with the accuser of the brethren who is never satisfied with God’s works. These preachers of another gospel are

united against God's purposes and the devil is their father – who all think the blood of Jesus is not enough justice for us.

# Chapter 22 - The Cross of Christ Defines the True Message of the Church

*15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.*

[1 Timothy 1:15-16](#)

*2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*

[1 Corinthians 2:2](#)

So, in the last chapter we discussed how much and how easily we create a false gospel by defining a “real” or “authentic” gospel which functionally adds works to our justification. Today we’ll look at this from another angle.

## The Church as a Moral Pillar

We often hear that the church is supposed to make a moral stand, and to be a pillar of traditional standards to the community. There are people who passionately push for consistent messages against abortion from the pulpit. I have been pushed from both sides to make a clear stand for or against gay acceptance. They want this to be the defining mark of the church: are we ‘inclusive’ or do we stand for ‘traditional family values’?

## What is Essential to Salvation?

Here is the question I always ask. Is a correct stance on these controversial issues essential to a person’s salvation? Must a person be either for or against ‘LGBT’ acceptance to be a true Christian? Must a person have a proper pro-life stance to be a Christian? Does anyone come to Christ because they have a perfect

grasp of God's moral ideals? Doesn't God have mercy on us despite our flawed moral understanding? Must a person believe that all of the Old Testament is the inspired Word of God, including all the genocidal parts, to be a true Christian? Must a person believe in young-earth creationism to be a true Christian? If so, then these things are essential to our eternal salvation. This is the plumb line for our public stance on things: is it essential to belief in the gospel?

## The Church's True Message

However, if these things are NOT essential to a person's salvation, then why should we present them as being of such critical importance? Are we more interested in presenting a saving message of Christ crucified and resurrected, or are we more interested in presenting a strong moral stance on certain cultural issues? If we take our stand on 'traditional family values' issues such as abortion and one-man-one-woman marriage, then we set these things up as barriers to the gospel for unbelievers. People come to believe that the church's true message is 'traditional family values' instead of the actual gospel of Christ and Him crucified. In many cases the message *is* traditional family values instead of Christ and Him crucified. Outsiders are then led to think that the church's version of moral excellence consists of a select set of self-serving politically motivated issues that happen to exonerate themselves while excluding others. This is obviously happening, and their assessment in some cases is actually very close to the truth.

The true message of the church is *not* traditional family values. Sexual purity and sanctity of life are important moral points, but they are not the central message of the church. The true message of the church is Christ and Him crucified. The notion of "traditional family values" is much too tepid and loose an expression of the law. The standard of behavior that the Cross of Christ teaches isn't just family values, but obedience to God to the point of death. If we make our stand on traditional family values, it is too broad – there are some people that seem to be acceptable under that umbrella, making the blood of Christ unnecessary. It says that if your sin happens to be more easily covered up and in line with traditional family values, you are allowed at the communion table, but if your sin is outside those traditional lines then you are not. The true law says that no one belongs at the communion table, and that no matter who you are, grace must be lavish and shocking and scandalous. There isn't one person anywhere who isn't a desperately evil and guilty sinner in need of salvation. That's why they call it "salvation"!

## Who stands for Christ and Him Crucified?

The logical problem is that people want the church to draw the lines of acceptance on their terms. They want you to say, same-sex attraction is lawful, or same-sex attraction is not lawful, and they want to define you by that stance. They are not interested in the message of the cross of Christ, because that is not the message they see as important. No one except the church is going to stand up and say that the cross of Christ is important. It's not an obvious message. Ironically, although these two camps appear to be diametrically opposed, from the standpoint of the gospel, they are two sides of the same lost coin. This whole argument is a speculation and lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God. Neither of these are the message of the church, and they are not even really the message of the law. The real standard of the law is obedience to the point of shedding blood. This is the message of the Old Testament law, and this is the message of the cross. It doesn't matter what you are attracted to, whether men, women, animals, or fruit, it is idolatry somehow unless it is only the true and living God. The purpose of the law is to press you to despair of your efforts and your self-justification, and to turn to Christ alone for justification. If your stance on the law turns people away from Christ instead of towards Him, obviously you have a defective idea about what the law is all about and what the gospel really is.

## Practical Sense Churchianity

One might think that these things may be true, but that we can't have abortionists and homosexuals running around in the church as if it is OK. This is true. We can't have any of these people running around in the church:

*9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.*

If you are covetous or you angrily criticize people, or have come by your wealth at the expense of justice, you will be excluded just like the fornicators and homosexuals and drunkards. Jesus says that if you are even angry with your brother – which is an internal feeling – you are guilty of the fires of hell. Do you think he was lying? Do you think God incarnate was soft on sin? So does this mean I'm saying that homosexuality and fornication and adultery and stealing and coveting and swindling and reviling are OK? Of course not! Nothing is OK! "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." ([Matthew 5:48](#))

How do you reconcile this with the fact that He was a friend of sinners? Sexual sinners ([John 8:2-11](#)). Swindling sinners ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). Covetous sinners. Angry sinners. Idolatrous sinners. People who should



not inherit the kingdom of God. How did Jesus work this out? How can you take a strong moral stand and still be a friend of sinners? How can the church maintain this perfect stance on the strict full law and still be a refuge of mercy for the sinful and lost?

## Let This Question Scour You

I want to let that question hang on you for a moment. Stop all your incessant pretense that you have a correct answer for this and admit that it is weird. Can you, can your fellowship, take a strong stance on the exacting moral code of the law, all of it, and also take a strong stance for welcoming sinners and offering a true and enduring mercy? Can you take a strong stance on the law and still not judge? Can you say “if you are angry with your brother for a moment, you are going to hell” and still claim to serve a merciful loving God? What does that even look like? Do you really know how to do that, or are you just pretending you know how to do that? You have to let that question scour you and admit that you really have no idea what you are doing. Admit that when you show mercy and compassion you feel guilty that you are just letting people get away with things. Your stance on the law is soft and your mercy is tepid. You are utterly worthless in the kingdom. Really, you truly are. You barely believe anything. You are just pretending at your theology and you have not worked out how to do any of this at all. You may quote councils and catechisms and even Bible verses but you are an enemy of justice and an enemy of grace. The ways of Jesus are a complete and utter mystery to you. You must face these things and indeed one way or the other you will face these things.

## The Answer at the Foot of the Cross

The answer to these things lies at the foot of the Cross. The fulfillment of the law and the ultimate stronghold of justice was expressed with extreme wrath and passion at the cross. The impulse in you that says, “no, this isn’t enough” — stems directly from unbelief. Let this sink into you: it was God’s good pleasure to let the fullness of wrath fall on Him:

*Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him;*

*He has put Him to grief.*

[Isaiah 53:10](#)

This is because it pleases God to express wrath against evil. You understand that! You want people to *pay* for what they've done. You love it. If we're honest we'll admit that we hate forgiveness and rightly so – our way of achieving it is all a sham. You feel the rightness of holding sinners strongly accountable. No one should get away with the things they've done. They should *not* be in the **Church!** You want to soften this, you want to make things nice, because you don't want to look mean and crazy. And what's worse, you think all this mess of confusion is godliness. It is actually you in the state of being lost trying to pretend you are OK.

But, there has been wrath expressed. At the cross of Christ. The fierce anger and hot righteous holy indignation of God has been poured out in full. It is finished; justice has been completed. And your belief in this has justified you. It has sanctified you. It has transformed you. It has cleansed you ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#)). No longer are you slinking around pretending to be good while you are guilty guilty guilty. You're not guilty any more. You haven't simply "repented." You have *believed*. Belief isn't less than repentance — it is the very meat and substance of repentance. Justice has been served and your evil has been avenged. Avenged!

## The Cross is Our Moral Stance and Our Merciful Welcome

And so the wrath of God and the love of God is at once expressed at the cross. More than simply sweeping our guilt under a rug, our shame and sin has been lavishly and harshly judged. We have been *justified* and this is the greatest most wonderful thing in the world! It is a strong moral stance! It is true mercy! It is true forgiveness! It is lasting and lavish grace! Look what He has done for us! The Cross of Christ is the church's one message. It is our strong moral stance, and our compassionate merciful help for guilty sinners. There is no moral stance apart from the cross, and there is no mercy and no love apart from the cross.

The Cross of Christ is indeed the true message of the church.

*4 Surely He has borne our griefs*

*And carried our sorrows;*

*Yet we esteemed Him stricken,*

*Smitten by God, and afflicted.*

*5 But He was wounded for our transgressions,*

*He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,  
And by His stripes we are healed.*

*6 All we like sheep have gone astray;  
We have turned, every one, to his own way;  
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

*7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He opened not His mouth;  
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,  
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
So He opened not His mouth.*

*8 He was taken from prison and from judgment,  
And who will declare His generation?  
For He was cut off from the land of the living;  
For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.*

*9 And they made His grave with the wicked—  
But with the rich at His death,  
Because He had done no violence,  
Nor was any deceit in His mouth.*

*10 Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him;  
He has put Him to grief.  
When You make His soul an offering for sin,  
He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days,  
And the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.*

*11 He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied.  
By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many,  
For He shall bear their iniquities.*

*12 Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great,  
And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,  
Because He poured out His soul unto death,  
And He was numbered with the transgressors,  
And He bore the sin of many,  
And made intercession for the transgressors.*

[Isaiah 53:4-12](#)