

## The King on the Cross (Luke 23:26–49)<sup>1</sup>

I suspect that some of us here today are decorating ourselves with an item closely associated with death. That is, some of us, I assume, are wearing crosses. It might be on a necklace or as ear rings. Sometimes people wear a cross on a tee shirt. People get cross tattoos. No doubt at least a few of us here today are wearing crosses.

What does it mean when someone is wearing a cross as an item of decoration? Why would anyone wear a symbol of a device used for execution? I don't suppose you are wearing a cross because you think of it as a means of execution. Typically, when I see a person wearing a cross, I think that the person must be displaying some kind of commitment to Christ. The only reason we even think about the symbolism of a cross is that the cross is associated with Jesus. In fact, the cross is the most well-recognized symbol of Christianity.

The cross became a symbol of Christianity very early in the life of the church. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Christians were using the cross to identify themselves. The early Christian writer Tertullian, way back in 204 AD, described how it was already a tradition among Christians to trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads. The British Museum contains a piece of jasper gemstone into which has been carved a picture of Christ on the cross. It is likely the oldest picture of Jesus' crucifixion. Almost all Christian churches have a cross displayed on the steeple and in the front of the auditorium.<sup>2</sup>

For billions of people, the cross is important because it represents the primary purpose for Jesus' ministry. The cross speaks of Jesus' substitutionary, sacrificial death. The cross reminds us that Jesus died for our sins.

But the cross ought to remind us of other things as well. Today I'd like to consider several themes that the cross displays:

### I. The cross displays the depths of human sin.

Sometimes we use the word "depravity" to describe how deeply sinful humans are. Sin has penetrated every aspect of human nature. It's only because we are so thoroughly sinful that Jesus died on the cross.

What made the crucifixion of Jesus such a deeply sinful act?

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<sup>1</sup> This outline is largely based on the work of Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 107: The King on the Cross (Luke 23:26–49)," in *Luke*, Steven J. Cole Commentary Series (Dallas: Galaxie Software, 2017), Lk 23:26–49. Edited/modified.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_cross](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_cross)

- A. First, Jesus was innocent of sin. He never did anything worthy of any kind of punishment, let alone death by crucifixion. Jesus was the sinless, innocent, perfect son of God.

Hebrews 7:26 describes Jesus as *holy, harmless, undefiled, [and] separate from sinners*

You may remember that the Gospel accounts record perhaps five instances where Pilate states that Jesus is not guilty of any crime or not worthy of death. Herod says the same thing, as does the thief on the cross and the centurion at the foot of the cross. They all testify that Jesus was unworthy of death.

No greater injustice has ever happened than the suffering of the innocent son of God. Human sin is on stark display in the death of Jesus.

- B. Second, Jesus had repeatedly proven himself to be what he claimed to be—the Messiah, the Son of God, the savior of the world.

He went about doing good, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. His miracles were indisputable, yet the Jewish leaders rejected him. They were hard-hearted and stiff-necked in their rejection of and hostility toward Jesus. We see the hardness of the human heart when the Jewish religious leaders paid no attention to the miraculous signs Jesus did during his ministry or to the signs that accompanied his death.

- C. Third, crucifixion, as a form of execution, was exceedingly cruel and brutal.

Crucifixion was a slow, excruciating, humiliating way to die. The Romans reserved crucifixion for the worst criminals and rebels because it was a terrible form of execution. That humans could do this to one another shows the utter depravity of the human heart.

- D. Fourth, the fact that the Jews chose Barabbas instead of Jesus is another indicator of human depravity.

1. Pilate wanted to release Jesus, but the Jews insisted that he be executed.
2. When given the choice, the mob chose a murderer over their Messiah. That is a clear proof/demonstration of human depravity.

- E. And finally, human depravity is seen in the taunting and scorn of those viewing Jesus on the cross.

We know that some of the people viewing Jesus' crucifixion were truly heartbroken over the spectacle. They cried out loudly in wailing and lamentation. But others responded by making fun of Jesus as he hung on the cross.

1. The religious leaders are the most guilty, since they had seen Christ's miracles and heard His teaching. They knew that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. But they knowingly and willfully rejected Him and even taunted Him as He died (23:35).
2. Both thieves crucified next to Jesus mocked at first, although one of them eventually came to repentance and expressed his trust in Jesus (23:39–43; compare Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32).
3. The Roman soldiers also were guilty of mocking Him (23:36–37), but it was more out of ignorance and stupidity. They probably treated everyone they crucified with the same kind of brutality and contempt.

**Quote:** Never has the human race stooped so low as when they crucified the Lord of glory and mocked Him while He was hanging on the cross. To make sport of torturing such a one, and then to jeer as He hung on the cross with His life slowly ebbing out of Him, was the most heinous crime imaginable!<sup>3</sup>

**App:** The death of Christ is a stark reminder of how sinful the human heart is. Jeremiah tells us that "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (17:9). The Bible describes sinners as lost, blind, spiritually dead, and separated from God.

The spectacle of the cross should overwhelm us with the awfulness of human sin! That's the problem that Jesus solved when he died on the cross. Human sin is so deep that God took a radical step to solve the sin problem once and for all. He sent his only son into the world to save us from sin by dying on the cross.

And the first step toward salvation is admitting your sin, confessing it, and repenting of it. Without admitting your sin and repenting of it, there is no salvation.

## II. **The cross displays God's dreadful judgment against sin.**

We see several indications of God's judgment while Jesus was on the cross.

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<sup>3</sup> Steven J. Cole

- A. Jesus was bearing the judgment of our sins as he died.
  - 1. As Jesus hung on the cross, he was subjected to the full fury of God's wrath against sin. He endured the judgment of God as he was made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21).
  - 2. Jesus bore God's judgment so we wouldn't have to. If you accept Jesus' payment for sin on your behalf, then you escape the judgment of God against your sin. Cf. Rom 8:1.
- B. Three hours of darkness displayed God's judgment.
  - 1. The brightest part of the day is usually from noon until 3 pm. The fact that darkness descended over the land during this time should have caused people to recognize that something very unusual was happening. The sun was darkened in a response to the judgment of God being poured out on Christ. Creation itself responded to God's judgment against sin.
  - 2. Darkness is often symbolic of sin and judgment. The Bible says, "Men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). The darkness of the human heart was never as dark as when they crucified the Son of God. The darkness of that day testified to the judgment of God being poured out on Jesus.
- C. The veil of the temple being ripped in two displays God's judgment.
  - 1. For about 1500 years before the time of Jesus, the Jewish sacrificial system had been in place. Sinners would come to the priest with an animal sacrifice, the priest would slaughter the animal and shed its blood. The life of the animal would be considered an adequate payment for the sinner.
  - 2. In the tabernacle and in the temple, a thick veil separated the holy place from the holy of holies. Only once a year, the chief priest would enter the holy of holies to sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant, thus making atonement for the nation.

3. That system of worship and sacrifice had been in place for many generations. But when Jesus died, the veil was torn in two, from top to bottom, signifying that the Levitical sacrificial system had come to an end. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world had been sacrificed. There would be no more sacrifice for sin. Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law and put an end to it.
  4. The torn veil shows not only the end of the OT sacrificial system, but also God's judgment against his sinful people. They had rejected the Messiah, and now God had put an end to their system of worship.
- D. The cross should remind us of the coming judgment.

One of the main themes in the Bible is that we should take steps to avoid the coming judgment. You may recall Jesus' stern words—"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Judgment will fall on you if you don't repent.

The Bible foretells two main judgments to come.

1. God will judge *believers* at the Judgment Seat of Christ. This will not be a judgment to determine who gets into heaven, but a judgment to see if we have earned any rewards in heaven. Those who have served the Lord will earn eternal rewards—described as gold, silver and precious stones. Those who have not served the Lord will see their works go up in flames like wood, hay, and stubble. But everyone appearing at the JSOX will be saved—some "so as by fire."
2. God will judge *unbelievers* at the Great White Throne judgment. At that time, the records will be opened, and everyone will be judged for his works, whether good or bad. Everyone appearing at the GWT judgment will suffer the judgment of God for his sins. Everyone standing at the GWT will receive the fair and just punishment that his sins deserve. There will be no forgiveness at that judgment, only condemnation.

Jesus spoke about what it would be like for those suffering under God's judgment. In addition to describing hell as a place of outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, He called it a place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). He pictured the rich man crying out, "I am in torment in this flame" (Luke 16:24). There is very good reason to avoid the judgment of God, and the only way to do that is to repent and turn to Christ in faith.

**Trans:** When we see the cross, it should remind us of the judgment of God. It should remind us that Christ provided a means of escaping God's judgment.

### III. **The cross displays God's amazing love toward sinners.**

As Charles Wesley put it in his great hymn, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me!" That is the explanation for why Jesus did what He did. John tells us that "God so loved the world... (Jn 3:16). Thank God that Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath because of His unfathomable love!

- A. God's amazing love is displayed by Jesus' willingness to die on the cross. Jesus said that he was motivated by love.

*John 15:13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

*Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

*1John 3:16 By this we know love, because [Jesus] laid down His life for us.*

What made Jesus willingly, voluntarily lay down his life? He did it out of obedience to God's will, and he did it out of love.

- B. God's amazing love is displayed in Christ's forgiveness of his enemies/executioners. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (23:34). Jesus had previously taught, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (6:27–28). Jesus himself extends mercy toward his abusers.

**App:** Christ's prayer for those who so badly mistreated Him should give hope to the worst of sinners. Jesus is more than willing to offer forgiveness to those who approach him humbly and repently. He doesn't offer forgiveness based on your deserving it, but simply because of His great love and mercy. It cost Him dearly, but it is free to you if you will receive it.

- C. God's love is displayed in Jesus' acceptance of the repentant thief on the cross.
1. We know that, at the beginning, both criminals railed against Jesus. But at some point, one of them repented and turned to Christ in faith.
  2. Jesus assured the repentant criminal that "today you will be with me in paradise." He assured the man, and us, that sincere repentance and simple faith in Jesus are enough to save even the most depraved sinner.

- D. How do you respond to this love?

*1John 4:19 We love Him because He first loved us.*

The proper response to God's love for us is that we accept that love; we accept Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We believe that Jesus laid down his life for us because of his great love.

*Ephesians 2:4–5 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),*

The proper response to God's rich mercy and great love is to be born again. By faith, turn from your sins and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Love him because he first loved you.

**Trans:** The cross is a symbol of God's love for us. Every time we see a representation of the cross, we should remember God's love, mercy, and grace.

We know the cross is not the end of the story. Jesus truly endured the wrath of God against sin and he died. We naturally want to go on immediately to what happened next.

As we've been reminded today, the cross displays the awfulness of human sin, God's dreadful judgment against sin, and His amazing love for sinners.

Paul mentions the “offense of the cross” (Gal 5:11). Crucifixion was a brutal, disgraceful, and horrific means of execution. It’s a method of torture and death. If it were not for the victory that Jesus achieved over death, no one would willingly associate himself with the cross.

Do you associate yourself with the cross of Christ? I’m not asking if you wear the cross as an item of decoration. I mean, have you denied yourself, taken up your cross, and followed Jesus? It’s only by embracing the cross of Christ that we can be saved. We must acknowledge our own sin, respond to the love of God, and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. That is the one and only means of salvation.

For Christians, the cross means commitment to Christ and death to self. Unfortunately, many people who wear crosses have no commitment to Christ and have not put self to death. For such people, the cross is an empty symbol. They have not embraced or adopted the true meaning of the cross. They don’t know the awfulness of human sin, God’s dreadful judgment against sin, or His amazing love for sinners.

It’s only those who have accepted Jesus’ payment on their behalf who know the true meaning of the cross. We celebrate the cross because we value what happened there.

If you are a Christian, every time you see a cross it should remind you of Jesus’ sacrifice, God’s love, and your obligation to take up the cross and follow Jesus.