

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Example of the Cross

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 80-132

It is my desire, this morning, to prepare your heart for the time at the Lord's table. This is a time of remembrance. Most frequently as we come to the Lord's table, as we often do, we look back to the death of Jesus Christ and we focus on its redemptive sense. We look at it, and properly so, as the act of substitutionary atonement for which our sins are forgiven. We look at the irreproducible part of Calvary, that which was once for all never to be repeated, and fittingly. We look at the one offering that perfected forever them that are sanctified. We look at the one sacrifice that did what all the offerings of bulls and goats throughout all of history in the nation Israel could never do. We look at that which can never be done again. And we celebrate the redemptive work of Christ.

But this morning I want us to look at the cross from a different perspective, not from the viewpoint of what was done that can never be done again, not the redemptive, not the single solitary unique act of Christ in satisfying the justice of God for the sins of those who believe, but I want us to look at the cross for the value of its example, in the sense that it gives us in the very character and expression of Christ patterns which we are to follow. There are things about the death of Christ that are to be reproduced in our lives. Obviously we cannot pay for the sins of all humanity. We cannot by our death satisfy the justice of God for others. We cannot offer a perfect sacrifice. We can't and we don't need to, it's been done. But there are some elements of the death of Christ which we must follow and reproduce.

Peter had that in mind when he said this, "Christ suffered for you," 1 Peter 2:21, "Christ suffered for you leaving you an example to follow in His steps." Now in what sense is the death of Jesus Christ an example that we are to follow? We can't die for the sins of the world. We can't satisfy the justice of God. We can't offer a perfect sacrifice. We can't do anything that's once for all. In what sense then did Christ suffer leaving us an example that we're to follow?

Well I think the answer is absolutely wonderful, convicting, challenging, encouraging and apt preparation for us as we come to this table. When Jesus was dying on the cross Scripture records that He uttered seven different sayings. We call them the seven last words of Christ. Each of them has been studied from many, many viewpoint, rehearsed and repeated and proclaimed and taught and preached, written about. But I don't know that I've ever approached them in this particular way, and I think it's such an important way.

In the seven sayings of Christ we have seven principles which we are to follow. Seven sayings of Christ that give to us an example that we are to follow. To put it another way, in His dying we learn how to live.

Let's take the first one. According to Luke chapter 23 and verse 34 Jesus first said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." In that moment He was forgiving those who crucified Him. Here is an example we can follow. The principle is this, He died forgiving those who sinned against Him. Man had done its worst deed ever. The one by whom the world was made had come into the world but the world knew Him not. The Lord of glory had tabernacled among men but He was not wanted. The eyes which sin had blinded could see in Him no beauty that He should be desired. At His birth there was no room for Him at the inn which foreshadowed the treatment He would receive all through His life. Shortly after His birth Herod tried to kill Him and this intimated the hostility that His person evoked and forecast really the cross and the climax of man's hatred. Again and again his enemies attempted His destruction and now their vile deeds have reached success. The Son of God has yielded Himself up into their hands. A mock trial has taken place and though the judge has found no fault in Him, they have nonetheless yielded to the harangue and the clamor of an insistent crowd who keeps screaming, "Crucify Him."

The fell deed has been done. And no ordinary death could satisfy His implacable foes, a death of intense suffering, a death of ignominy, a death of shame, public humiliation and embarrassment was decided upon. A cross had been secured and the Savior had been nailed to it and there He was hanging silent. Presently His lips move. Is He crying for pity? No. Is He about to curse His crucifiers? No. Is He pronouncing malediction upon those who had judicated in His behalf? No.

What is He doing? He's asking God to forgive them. "Forgive them, Father, they don't know what they're doing." Our Lord understood the sinfulness and blindness and depravity of the human heart. He knew they were ignorant of the identify of their victim. The sin was enormous. They were killing the Son of God. They didn't know they were killing the Prince of life. They didn't know they were killing the Creator of all, the Messiah, the Lord Christ, the Savior of the world. And it shows how blind people are and how the carnal mind is at frightening odds with God.

Man needs nothing more than forgiveness. There is no greater need than forgiveness because it is forgiveness that keeps him separated from God forever. It is unforgiven sin that sentences men to hell and to the judgment of God. Forgiveness is man's greatest need and there was Jesus dying on the cross and praying for the forgiveness of God to be given to the ones who executed Him.

That is a marvelous example for us to follow, isn't it? It matters not how people treat us, it matters not how we may be abused. It matters not how we may be misjudged, misrepresented, falsely accused. It matters not how our affections and our love may be returned with hatred and animosity. All that matters is that we have a heart of forgiveness.

Stephen understood that, didn't he?, in Acts chapter 7 as he was being crushed under the bloody stones of his executioners who were snuffing out his life by dropping huge boulders on his head. He responded by saying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," following the pattern that he had seen in Jesus at the cross and he asked God to forgive them.

This is lesson number one on how to live, forgive. Not a popular virtue in our culture, is it? A culture filled with vengeance. We're to live with a forgiving heart to those who wronged us even if they wronged in heinous ways. No one has ever been wronged to the degree that Jesus Christ was wronged. And He forgave and He's our pattern. Christ died forgiving the very ones who cruelly and without cause murdered Him. What an example that is to follow. Less severe treatment, for sure, has been laid on us and we are...we are so unworthy anyway. Can we find it in our hearts to forgive a lesser deed to a lesser person? Christ set the example.

The second thing that Jesus said on the cross is recorded in Luke 23 verse 43. He looked to a thief that was crucified beside him and He said, "Today you shall be with Me in paradise. I say this to you truly, it's a fact." Here's a second principle, a second example. He died bringing the truth of eternal life to a damned soul. Jesus no matter where He was, even at this moment, never lost the sense of His mission. Life never became so unbearable that He lost the sense of what He was to do. He had come to seek and to save that which was lost, according to Luke 19:10, and there was a lost man just a few feet away and though He could well have been preoccupied with His own suffering and His own agony, it was His concern to bring the truth of eternal life to a damned soul. And during the most incredible pain He never lost the sense of His mission.

And how dramatically God had set the scene for Him to bring in that lost sinner to paradise. It was no accident. It was no accident that the Lord of glory was crucified between two thieves. It was no accident who they were either. There are no accidents in a world governed by God, much less could there have been any accident on that day of all days in the middle of that event of all events, the day in the event that lies at the center of human history. No, God was presiding sovereignly over everything. From all eternity He decreed the death of Jesus Christ in all of its attendant circumstance, and in fact who it would that would be hanging right next to Him. Nothing was left to chance, nothing was left to caprice, or the whim of men. All that God had decreed had come to pass exactly as He had ordained it. God had placed a thief beside the Lord Jesus who was chosen from before the foundation of the world to be a part of the Kingdom. And Jesus was so sensitive to that man's spiritual response.

In Luke 23, one of the criminals of the two was hurling abuse at Jesus, according to verse 39. "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us." A mocking jeer, really. But He answered and rebuked him saying, "Do you not even fear God since you're under the same sentence of condemnation and we indeed justly for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing

wrong. And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingdom."

That dying thief had a pretty substantial theology. He understood the sinlessness of Christ. He said He's done nothing wrong. He understood the sovereignty of Christ. He said, "When You come in Your Kingdom," he knew He was a King. He understood the Saviorhood of Christ, he said, "Remember me." He was asking to be delivered from the consequence of sin and death.

I think he even believed in the resurrection power of Christ. How else could he say, "Remember me when You come in Your Kingdom." Nobody is going to have a Kingdom who dies and stays dead. He testified much about who Christ was.

It's an amazing thing that has happened in this man's heart. Instead of attributing the salvation of lost sinners to the matchless grace of God, such as was obviously working in that thief's heart, many professing Christians seek to account for it by human influence. And they imagine that for someone to enter into the Kingdom, all the circumstances have to be exactly right. And you've got to create some kind of an ethos, some kind of an environment to make it all sort of go down, you know? But in the case of this thief, everything would have said...This is not God's Son, this is not the Savior, this is not the Messiah. I mean, everything on the outside looked like it was not convincing. Christ seemed to be in a position where He had lost all power to save either Himself or others. This thief had marched, by the way, along with the Savior through the streets of Jerusalem and seen Him collapse under the weight of the cross and have it given to someone else to carry. It's very probably that since he followed an occupation as a thief and a robber, this may have been the first time he ever set eyes on Jesus, so how it is that he could become so quickly convinced when all he saw was weakness, disgrace, humiliation, embarrassment, shame? In fact, Jesus' friends had forsaken Him so he couldn't even find a group of people who could give testimony to His virtue. Public opinion was unanimously against Him and that was being led by the religious leaders who were supposed to be in the know when it came to God.

His very crucifixion was regarded utterly inconsistent with anybody's view of a messiahship. His lowly condition was a stumbling block to everybody. The circumstances of His death only intensified that. Frankly there was nothing in Him that was beautiful, as Isaiah said, nothing made Him desirable.

And by the way, nobody in the crowd stood up and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." All they did was spit on Him and yank the hair out of His beard, jam a crown of thorns on His head, pound nails through His hands and feet, stick Him up in the sky. How...how could a thief come to the conclusion that this was the Savior who could deliver him from sin and death and bring him into the kingdom of God? And the answer is, it was a miracle, like every conversion. It is not the result of all the circumstances, it is the result of divine intervention and supernatural operation and a miracle of grace. And it could happen. And here is the illustration in the most unlikely and not conducive circumstances. The thief in the midst of all of this apprehended the reality

that this was the Savior, the living God in human flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he placed his life time and eternity into His care.

I don't know what that does for you, but it gives me great hope about my taking the opportunity to share Jesus Christ in what may be the most unlikely circumstances. And by the way, the conversion of this thief took place before the darkness, before the earthquake, before the rocks split, before the graves opened, before the people were resurrected, before the veil in the temple split from the top to the bottom, none of that had happened. And you might have assumed that that would be the stuff that would really push him over the edge, right? That hadn't happened yet.

In other words, in the most unfavorable and unconvincing circumstances imaginable, he was saved. And Jesus Christ was faithful to gather up that miracle of grace into His arms and promise him the Kingdom that very day. He never ever lost sight of His mission, ever.

Two malefactors were crucified together, equally near to Christ. Both of them saw and heard all that transpired during those fateful six hours and both were notoriously wicked, both suffering acutely and justly. But dying, both needing forgiveness. One of them died in his sins, died as he had lived, hard and impenitent. And the other repented of his wickedness, believed in Jesus Christ, called on Him for mercy and that day went to heaven. And Jesus was ready to receive him. He is an example for us.

No matter what may be going on in our lives, no matter what pain we may be bearing. No matter how difficult the circumstances of life may be. Our mission is ever and always to put our arms around some repentant sinner near by and bring him to the Kingdom. What an example.

The third words of Jesus that I remind you of are given in John's gospel chapter 19 verses 26 and 27. And Jesus looks down from the cross and He sees Mary on the one hand and John, His beloved disciple, and He says, "Woman...to His mother...behold your son," has her look at John and He says to John, "Behold your mother." What is this? This is Jesus giving John the beloved Apostle the care of His mother. No doubt Joseph was dead. She not having a husband would be a widow and be alone, and now her son was dying.

You say, "Well didn't she have other children?" Yes she did, but they did not believe, it tells us in John chapter 7, yet, until later. She needed to be in the care of someone who loved Jesus and believed in Him, someone who was a fellow believer as well as one who would love and care for and meet her needs. And so here we find another principle to follow, He died expressing selfless love. He died forgiving. He died embracing a sinner. He died loving someone else.

Standing at the foot of the cross that day was a special little group. They weren't looking from a distance. They weren't mixed and mingled into the morbid crowd. They just were all huddled together, it says in John 19:25, together at the foot of the cross. There was Mary, now realizing with

full force the words of Simeon many years before that it would be a sword that would go through her heart with this Son. She had all the love a mother could hold for an absolutely sinless Son. She hurt. She had pain. She was baffled, paralyzed, and yet bound by love to the cross. She stands there without strength, no hysteria, no wailing, no fainting, suffering in unbroken silence. The crowds are mocking. The soldiers are gambling for His clothes, clothes she might have made. Her Son is bleeding and dying. With her is her sister, perhaps Salome the mother of James and John, then there's Mary the wife of Cleopas, Mary Magdalene, and one man, one disciple, John. And He commits His mother to the care of John. And there is a marvelous example in the death of Christ, an example of selfless love. He is dying but it is not His own pain that burdens His heart, it's the pain of His mother. Occupied as He is with the weight of the world's sin, with the most stupendous agony ever conceived or known by any person, a sin engulfs the sinless One under a burden that no creature could ever come close to bearing, feeling the wrath of Almighty God, more pain than you can ever imagine, and yet who is He thinking of? His mother.

That's how we're to live. No matter how difficult life is, no matter how trying, no matter how deep the pain, we're always to be concerned with others. The magnificence of selfless love was never better demonstrated, neither was the magnificence of commitment to the evangelistic mission, and neither was the heart of forgiveness. Its most magnanimous and magnificent illustration is at the cross.

Fourthly, in Matthew 27:46 the writer records that Jesus also said, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" And here's another exemplary principle. He died understanding the seriousness of sin. In His dying He tells us how to live, we live forgiving, we live evangelizing, we live loving, and we live understanding the seriousness of sin. He knew what sin did, it separates from God, it alienates. It severs intimacy

Paul felt it, "O wretched man that I am." David felt it, "Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation." Sin can do what nothing else can do, it can separate the Son from the Father. It can separate, it can break the intimacy, it can violate the fellowship. He understood the seriousness of sin. He who enjoyed uninterrupted communion, perfect communion within the trinity is now forsaken. He could feel it coming as He was in the garden, "Let this cup pass from Me," I think was much more a prayer that if there was any way He could be relieved He would want to be relieved, not so much of the physical pain, but of the anticipated sin-bearing and separation.

Those are words of unequalled pathos, by the way. They mark the climax of His suffering. The soldiers had cruelly mocked Him. They had arrayed Him with a crown of thorns. They had scourged Him. They had struck Him in the face with their fists, pounding on Him. They went so far as to spit all over His face. They plucked the hair from His beard. They fouled His garments. They made Him naked. They put Him to open shame. He suffered through it all in absolute silence. Then they dragged Him through the city, as you well know, took Him to the hill, nailed Him to a cross, dropped the cross in a hole in a socket, it must have ripped and torn His flesh as it hit bottom. He endured it all

and never said a word.

He never talks about His pain. Never says a word about it. Never says, "I'm...I'm hurting." But this pain He does talk about. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" That's a cry that ought to melt the hardest heart. He felt separation. He felt the curse of God, Galatians 3 talks about. He was experiencing how much God hates sin, the violent punishment of sin, it came at three P.M. in the afternoon, after six hours of hanging on the cross. And this He screamed out loudly. He died feeling the seriousness of sin. And that's how we're to live. We're to live with a sensitivity to sin, feeling and understanding and comprehending its seriousness because it will separate us from God's blessing and God's peace and joy and power.

Fifthly on the cross, He said something very human. John 19:28, He said, "I'm thirsty." Here's another principle we can follow, He died experiencing human suffering. He died experiencing human suffering. This is evidence of His real humanity, He was thirsty. The New Testament tells us occasionally about those things in His life and it reminds us there were times when He was weary, and hungry, and sleepy, and sad, and happy, and even grieved and groaning in His spirit. Times when He was disappointed. And by the way, they tried to give Him a drug earlier, people just didn't get crucified without some drug to mitigate the unbelievable pain. He refused it. But now He's thirsty. That's so human...that's so human.

It's an ordinary thirst. Just like you and I would have. Sitting out under the sun for six hours, naked, dehydrated, in the agony of death, His mouth parched, His throat dry. The crowd alone must have kicked up an incredible amount of dust which would settle all over Him. Here is the Lord God Christ experiencing life at its most basic level. I'm thirsty. It's just a window to see that He was so sympathetic to the simple needs of human life. We're to live like He died, sensitive to the humanity around us. We live forgiving, we live evangelizing, we live loving, we live sensitively to sin, and we live sympathetic to the suffering around us. This has been a wonderful time for us to live that way, hasn't it? To show our love to those who have suffered.

The sixth statement that I bring your attention to is in John 19 verse 30. Jesus said, "It is finished...It is finished." Here's another thing we can follow. Here's another exemplary part of His dying. The principle is this, He died but only after completing the work God gave Him to do. He died but only after completing the work God gave Him to do. He didn't say I'm finished, He said it is finished. This is not a cry of defeat, "I'm finished," this is a cry of triumph, "It is finished. I completed the work You gave Me to do. My life work is over."

He came to do the Father's will and He did it. A lot of people run in the marathon of life, some finish, some just quit. There's a difference in quitting and finishing, isn't there? I don't know about you but I don't want to...I don't want to just leave, I want to finish. I want to know so well what God has called me to do and do it that some day I can say I'm ready to die cause I'm done.

What has God given you to do? What Kingdom enterprise have you poured your life into so that when you come to the end you don't just leave, you finish? He came to take away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. He did it. It was done. He came to bear our sins, condemn sin in the flesh, defeat Satan. He did it.

I want to come to the end of my life, I hope you do, like Paul and say, "I finished my course, get me out of here, I'm ready." What are you pouring your life into? Is it just going to be said "He lived and he died, she lived and she died?" Or is it going to be said "She lived and she finished...He finished?" What work, what giftedness, what calling has God given you?

And the last thing, in Luke 23:46 Jesus said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit." He died entrusting Himself to God. That's how we're to live. He died entrusting Himself to God. The cup of wrath was drained. The storm of divine fury was over. Darkness was passed. Fellowship with the Father was waiting after death. This is an act of trust. I'm going to give My life now cause I'll trust You that You'll give it back to Me." That's what He was saying.

He believed that God would raise Him from the dead. His trust was in God. I'll give My life, I will bear sin as I have borne it. I will take the full weight of sin. You can crush Me under Your wrath, I yield up My life in the confidence that You'll give it back to Me. He trusted God with His life. What an example to us.

He died trusting God in the darkest moment. That's how we're to live. We trust God when disease hits. We trust God when an earthquake hits. We trust God in everything. We trust God when we face death. Stephen, same situation, his life being crushed says, Acts 7:59, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He didn't fear dying because he believed in resurrection. He trusted Christ to bring him out of death.

We have that hope, don't we? There's much to be seen in the death of Jesus Christ from a redemptive perspective. There's much to be seen in the death of Christ that is irreproducible, that is absolutely unique, that is solitary. But there are also things in the death of Jesus Christ that become examples for us and all of our lives are to be lived according to the pattern they set. We are to live forgiving no matter what is done against us. We are to live evangelizing, embracing every person around us, never losing sight of our mission, but bringing as many into the Kingdom we can no matter how difficult and no matter how contrary circumstances might appear. We are to live loving selflessly and not preoccupied with our own things but the things of others, no matter how tough it is. We are to live sensitive to the damage that sin can do. We are to live sympathetically knowing that everybody around us feels the pain of just being human. We are to live so that when it comes to the end we'll finish and not just end. And we are to live trusting God for everything.

Christ suffered for you, says Peter, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.

Father, we come to You now in a moment of prayer, we have just been taken back to Calvary and briefly with just a few words we've lived again the tremendous reality of the death of Christ, the death in which He paid the price for sin for all who believe and granted eternal life by His triumph. We thank You for His death and His resurrection and for the solitary achievement of redemption that He accomplished.

But, Lord, we thank You too that in His death is an example for us to follow. Help us, Father, as we look back at the cross to see what we're to be who name the name of Christ.

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