

## **The Cross of Christ: It was my sin**

Last week we began a series on the cross of Christ and we looked at two aspects of the cross that help us to understand its meaning: the broken heart of God - the ache that He felt because of human rebellion against Him - and the purpose of the cross which is to take wretched sinners and to make us into His treasures, His precious daughters and sons.

We touched a little bit on why the world rejects the notion of “wretched sinners”. It’s not that they don’t believe that there are such persons in existence somewhere, but that they believe in themselves more than in God, in their sense of justice than in His, in their morality, or lack of it, instead of His commandments.

Cliff Knechtle was an evangelist who focused on speaking at university campuses and debating people about issues surrounding Christian faith. After several conversations with one interested student, he asked the young man if he was ready to receive Christ. The student said, no, that he had an active sex life and that Jesus would want to change that and so wasn’t ready to give his life to Jesus. I suspect that there are many people who would put themselves in exactly that category. They are people who have an admiration for Jesus, what He did and what He taught, but they are not ready to give up their lifestyle in order to follow Him.

Note: what the world calls “lifestyle”, the Bible very often calls “sin”.

But would this student, or the many people like him, agree with the Bible that their choice constitutes sin, that there is something wrong with their choices that makes them an enemy of God? I don’t know about the student that Cliffe Knechtle talked to, but in my experience there are many people who either don’t think their choices are wrong, or who are unwilling to examine them in the light of Scripture. But, if you were to say that we’ve all made bad choices, they would agree with you. So, on the one hand they are defensive of the things they do in life generally, but are also willing to admit that they have let-downs; they may lose their temper or say something mean, or drive drunk or something else that they know isn’t right. So they admit that they’re not perfect, but would also argue that they’re not a bad person -- no matter what they’ve been doing with their lives. The implication is that that should be good enough.

The problem with that kind of self-assessment is that it’s not based on anything other than what people in general think. It’s based on what the other kids at school are saying or what the characters on a favorite TV show are saying or maybe it’s just based on years of rationalizing the mistakes each of us make, the lack of good judgment we exhibit, the loss of self-control we experience under certain stresses. Once we’ve gotten used to excusing our failures, it seems a bit extreme to label them as sins and to see ourselves as somehow guilty.

The other problem with this self-assessment thing is that it’s usually done without reference to God. In other words, although the standards may come from the Bible,

people who fail to live up to those standards might feel badly for a while, but when they consider that the person who was hurt by their actions probably deserved it, or that, really, the consequences from their actions were pretty minor, their guilty feelings lighten up and they carry on as before.

Let's take an example and see what might happen if we follow the world's lead. Bill tells Andrew that he won't be able to give him a ride on Friday night because he's already promised a bunch of people and he doesn't have any more room in his car. The truth is that he doesn't really like Andrew and doesn't want to spend the whole trip listening to Andrew talk about himself. He ends up taking just one person with him and Andrew gets a ride with someone else. They arrive about the same time and Andrew sees Bill and his friend getting out of the car. "I thought you had a full car?" "Well, a bunch of guys cancelled out at the last minute -- and I mean the *last* minute." Two lies -- "no room" and "a bunch of guys cancelled" -- and they came out real easy. Bill thought he sounded pretty cool and natural and that Andrew would never suspect. Andrew was not willing to press the issue and ask, "Which guys cancelled", which could be followed up on to find out if Bill was telling the truth, so that was the end of it.

Now, if Bill ever thought about it, he would probably tell himself that he is under no obligation to take Andrew anywhere. This is his car and his evening and he can do with it whatever he wants. Andrew neither deserves a ride nor does he deserve an explanation. And, after all, no harm was done -- Andrew got his ride and Bill got what he wanted.

So, let's take a closer look. Why didn't Bill tell the truth in the first place? Because it's harder to challenge people than to avoid them. . . and maybe Bill was trying to hide his selfishness or his dislike of Andrew. Why did Bill care what Andrew thought if he disliked him so much? Maybe he was just trying to avoid the awkwardness of the conversation that would follow, maybe he didn't want word to get around that he had treated Andrew this way, maybe he kinda liked Andrew's sister -- there are lots of options here.

Would most people hearing this story judge Bill for not telling the truth? What do you think? Is it true that no one got hurt? We don't know for sure, but we can suspect that Andrew is not that dumb. He remembered the excuse that Bill had given and was unlikely to be impressed by this second excuse. He probably felt a little different about Bill.

Who else gets hurt in this story? Bill's friend, who was with him in the car and who knew the whole story, who knew that there hadn't been a bunch of last-minute cancellations. He may not have felt hurt, but he was being given another example of me-first, 'who cares about the other guy' actions that had the potential to be hurtful.

But we're missing the big one in the story -- God was hurt. God loves both Bill and Andrew. He knows that neither of them are perfect, that they can be difficult to be with, but He loves them and wants them to learn to love others with that same kind of

compassionate care. He wants Bill to get over himself and become a kind and caring person. He wants Andrew to experience acceptance, to be included within a circle of caring friends. And from God's perspective, maybe the worst sin of the bunch is Bill's lack of love. Maybe that's the thing that God wants to see corrected first.

Do you see what a difference it makes to the discussion when we include God in the picture? What we once defined as a personal failure or disappointing ourselves, is now defined as sin or disappointing God. The reason our society doesn't talk about sin anymore is that they have deliberately shut God out of the discussion of moral ethics, of what's right and wrong, of how to determine good and evil. With God out, everything changes. With God in the equation, in the discussion, the reference point is shifted and the discussion now has to do with God's purposes for our lives, His absolutes and our guilt before Him. It can't be any other way.

Let's take this a little farther. Sin, in both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, is based on a word that means to "miss the mark". The mark is God's standard, what He expects from the people He made in His image. It is perfection. To miss the mark means that we fail to meet God's requirements and therefore are found undeserving of His glory. This is not like horseshoes where you can miss the mark and still be close enough to get a point. Missing God's mark leaves us outside of His future blessings. It's more like missing the boat -- it doesn't matter if you or anyone else thinks you were close, you still missed the ship's sailing time which means you're not on it, not going where that ship is going, not going to arrive at the destination that you had hoped to reach. What this tells us about sin is that it is much more than breaking some rules. It is much more than failing to accomplish what you are supposed to get done in this life. It is looking at this wonderful gift of life that God has given us and saying that we haven't pleased Him with how we've used His gift.

Even in the church, a person will look at this word "sin" and their mind immediately turns to something they did that was wrong -- they cheated on an exam, they twisted the truth to make themselves look good, they repeated some-thing they had promised to keep secret. If Bill was a church goer, he might have thought of his two lies to Andrew. But the bigger picture is that sin is missing the mark and so Bill's sin was more than the lies; it was his hard heart towards Andrew, his willingness to hurt someone's feelings in order to please himself and his willingness to share that callous attitude with his friend, providing a negative influence in that person's life as well.

When a Christian says that he or she sins every day, they are just admitting that they fall short, that they fail to fulfill God's vision and purpose for their lives, not just on a rare occasion or two, but repeatedly. You may not break one of the ten commandments every day -- in fact, I hope you don't -- but you and I continually miss the mark. Every failure to live out of love and concern for others means we miss the mark, we fall short of the glory of God, we sin.

“Well, then,” someone might be saying by now, “What’s the use in trying to be good or to do good or to make a positive difference in the lives of people I interact with? If it’s all going to end up in such miserable failure, then how do I find the motivation to keep trying?”

Once again, the answer is in the cross of Christ. All of the struggles and failures are descriptive of life without the cross, of a life that is not yielded to Christ and has not been humbled by confession of one’s sin. Let’s turn to our Scripture passage for today in 1 John 1:

*This is the message He has given us to announce to you: God is light and there is no darkness in Him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth. But if we are living in the light of God’s presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from every sin. If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that His word has no place in our hearts.*

Let’s look at this in the form of a diagram. On the left we will put the things that belong in the category “if we say we have no sin” and on the right side “if we confess our sins”. Left column: “living in spiritual darkness”, “not living in the truth”, “fooling ourselves”, “refusing to accept the truth”, “calling God a liar”, “showing that His word has no place in our hearts”. Right column: “have fellowship with each other”, “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from every sin”, “He is faithful and just to forgive us”, “He will cleanse us from every wrong”.

There is a clear difference between the two positions, but the difference is not that in one case you don’t sin and in the other you do. The difference is that in one case you are in humble agreement with God that you have fallen short of His standards and in the other there is a proud resistance to this, an unwillingness to even admit that we are sinners.

Look again at that left side: “If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth.” The truth is that we do sin and that is born out by the verses that come before and after, verses that invite us to confess our sins to Jesus and receive His forgiveness and His gift of making us clean again.

The world we live in provides the perfect backdrop for this passage. The world says, “I’m not a sinner because I’m as good as the next guy, I don’t kill people, I’m not in trouble with the law and I help people find their lost pets.” The world says, “I’m not a sinner because sinners are bad people and I’m one of the good guys . . . wouldn’t harm a fly.” The world says, “I’m not a sinner because I don’t accept that there is a God who created the world and who has a right to tell me what is right and wrong for me. I’ll be the judge of that and, according to me, I’m doing just fine.”

And here the apostle John says to these representatives of our modern world, "You're calling God a liar and showing that His word has no place in your hearts." He's basically saying that there are two kinds of people, those who admit they are sinners in need of a Savior and those who refuse to admit it and keep themselves away from God and His word of truth.

Let's bring these two groups to the cross and ask them what they see there. The sinner says, "I deserve that fate and I am eternally grateful to my Savior for dying in my place and taking the punishment that I deserved." The modern skeptic says, "Well, that's a really sad thing that such a wonderful person, such a great teacher who was so kind to others had to suffer such a horrible death. But it has nothing to do with me. It's not relevant to my life. It doesn't change anything about what I think or what I choose to do with my life."

Last week we looked at the first verse of the song, "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" by Stuart Townend. This week, I want us to focus in on the second verse:

*Behold the man upon the cross  
My sin upon His shoulders  
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice  
Call out among the scoffers  
It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished  
His dying breath has brought me life  
I know that it is finished.*

This is the response that the apostle John was looking for when he wrote that first letter. This verse owns up to the responsibility that each human on the planet has in relation to God and in relation to the cross.

1. My sin is upon His shoulders - He is carrying the burden that my rebellion against God, my failure to live out His covenant with mankind, should have brought on my own shoulders
2. I hear my mocking voice - I know that I am not above any person or group of persons. I am not better than the Jews who mocked Jesus at His death and I am not less likely than they to falsely accuse or to mock Him. I am what I am, born in sin, weak and unworthy, subject to temptation and failing often to stand against it.
3. It was my sin that held Him there - only the death of Jesus would pay the penalty for me because what I deserved, what I have earned with my life, is eternal separation from the Father, an empty existence beyond the reach and beyond the experience of God's love. In being willing to pay the penalty for my sin, Jesus took on the cross, embraced it as the road towards His reward and died so that I could be His eternal treasure.
4. His dying breath has brought me life; I know that it is finished -- all that I needed, all that was beyond my ability to produce to honor God appropriately, Jesus has done for me on the cross. His sacrifice has brought me life and His work, all that I needed, is now finished, complete.

The cross demands humility. That's why it is such a stumbling block to those who think themselves as good, for those who think themselves to be wise, those who think they are at least better than the average person -- pride that keeps them from embracing the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The opposite of pride is that spirit of humble confession that says, "My sin upon His shoulders", "It was my sin that held Him there" and "I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers." It's me. I'm responsible and there is nothing I can or should do to try and duck out of that responsibility. But Jesus has come to pay the price for my sin, to give His life for me and now Jesus offers me forgiveness, cleansing and a new life. It doesn't take away my responsibility for my actions, but it does give me hope, the promise of forgiveness and a new life lived in gratitude to the one who saved me.

The proud heart can't receive that kind of love, undeserved and beyond our ability to repay. The humble heart knows that it *must* receive that love and bends the knee to honor the One who gave His life so I could live.