

The Glory of the Cross

Sermon 2- The Cross and Reconciliation

Passages: Colossians 1:15-23
Matthew 27:45-54

In John 12, Jesus talked about His death on the cross as something of incredible beauty...a moment of *glory*. He said, "***The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself!***" Some might think that Jesus was referring to His ascension. But John makes it absolutely clear when he adds; "***He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die.***" In other words, Jesus knew that the cross would become the place of His glorification...when not only would **He** be glorified, but **His Father** would be glorified as well!

As a result, we, His followers, were always meant to *glory* in the cross! We were always meant to see the cross in a positive light. But, of course, that's easier said than done!

I said this last week and I'll say it again—Most of us were taught to look at the cross as the ultimate symbol of God's anger. We were told that our sins have made God angry, and since "***the wages of sin is death***", we all, therefore, deserve to be punished by God *with death*! Jesus, however, came to stand between us and God, to bear our punishment and to die in our place...to save us from God's wrath. ('EE' illustration- "*Book of Life*")

Charles Hodge, a theology professor at Princeton for fifty years and perhaps the most influential theologian in the United States during the 19th century, put it this way: "*God's justice, his moral excellence, demands the punishment of sin. Every sin of necessity subjects the sinner to the wrath of and curse of God. If sin be pardoned, it can be pardoned...only on the grounds of forensic penal satisfaction.*" Clearly, according to Hodge, Jesus was born to die.

But, there are huge problems with this model...particularly when you attempt to factor in the Biblical notion of **reconciliation**. You see, according to the Scriptures, ‘*reconciliation*’ with God is a big part of why Christ came to die for us. In fact, some theologians think it is the central metanarrative of the whole New Testament! But the word ‘reconciliation’ is always a *relational* concept, not a *legal* one. Even the Oxford dictionary defines it this way: “*To reconcile—to make friendly again after an estrangement; to settle a quarrel; to bring back together; to restore harmony; to make peace between parties.*”

This is exactly how the Bible speaks about the cross...in relational terms, not legal ones. It insists that the cross has the power to bring those who were once at enmity with God back to Him again. It is relational in nature, and because it is relational in nature, any legal model only serves to undermine it and make of mockery of reconciliation. Think about it: If God is *only* willing to accept us *after* someone’s blood has been shed, then justice is more important to God than mercy and law is more important to God than relationships. Surely, this is not the way of the God of the Bible!

Jesus once told a parable that we call *the Parable of the Prodigal Son*. The son is off in the ‘far country’, hungry and lonely. He suddenly realises that his life is a mess so he decides to go back to his father’s house, thinking that at least his father’s servants have enough to eat. Clearly, the son is looking for a legal solution to his problem- it’s so much easier and far less humiliating! And so, the son comes in saying, “*Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy of being your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.*” Now, if the Father were playing the game according to a penal/legal model, how would he respond? The father would simply agree, saying “*Yes, you’re right! Your sins need to be paid...so get out and work. You’re only a servant to me until you pay off your debt. Only then will we be able to talk about reconciliation... about becoming my son again.*”

This is what the legal model leaves you with; a God who is unable to accept us into His family until a price has been paid. Under this model, the cross is not a place of God’s glory—it’s a place of hard-hearted torture and revenge!

Thankfully, however, this is not what happens to the Prodigal Son. The Son doesn’t pay anything! Instead, the Father brings him a robe and a ring

(signs of sonship) and kills the fatted calf for him to celebrate his return to the family. This is the way the Bible speaks about reconciliation! It's about the restoration of relationships through the Father's grace and love!

For the fact is that God loves us. He loves the human race and all that He has made. Think about it-- According to the Scriptures, prior to the fall, there was a depth of relationships between God, humanity and creation that prompted God to look at His universe and declare, **“It is very good!”** Of course, we know that the Fall disrupted all those relationships, bringing enmity between all parties. And yet, our loving God and Creator was determined to see the world restored to its original harmony. In fact, he refused to let us destroy ourselves and the world He created for us. That's why God sent His Son into the world...and that's why Jesus died on the cross-- *to restore the world to its original relationships; to reconcile all things to Himself; to bring all things back into harmony and peace!*

Listen again to **Colossians 1:15-20**.

Col 1:15 *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

Col 1:16 *For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*

Col 1:17 *He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

Col 1:18 *And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

Col 1:19 *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,*

Col 1:20 *and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Now, I know this relational view of the cross is incredibly attractive. We are drawn to it! And yet, I'm sure that many of you are still unclear as to exactly what the cross did to bring about this reconciliation with God? How does the cross work?

There are two truths that Paul seems to be highlighting in this passage:

First, through the cross, we become aware that it is God who has made the effort “*to reconcile to Himself all things*”, not us. He is the One who took the initiative to overcome the blockages that we erected against him. As William Placher says, “*It is we who need to be reconciled to God, not the other way around. The barriers that need to be broken down were built from our side.*”

Now, everyone knows that, in a relational breakdown, the only way that true reconciliation between the two parties can happen is if there is a *renewal of understanding* between them. For example, if you hear something bad about me or feel that I’ve done something against you, you may erect a wall between us-- You may no avoid me by longer coming to church; you may refuse to speak to me or to look at me in the eyes. Whatever happens, *the only way that you will allow yourself to be reconciled back to me is when you gain a new understanding about me...* when you look beyond the original offence and see that my heart is true towards you. Only then will we begin to see me in a different light. Only then will you allow yourself to come toward me again, in reconciliation.

Reconciliation comes only through a renewed understanding and appreciation of the other person’s heart towards you.

And so, when our text in Colossians says that Jesus died on the cross *to reconcile all things to God*, the focus is not on God changing His mind about us. He’s never had to change His mind about us, for He’s always loved us. Rather, it’s our minds that need to be changed about God! We’re the ones that have erected the barriers. And so, we’re the ones who need a *new revelation* of God before we will drop those barriers and come to appreciate His heart towards us.

This is what the cross is all about! The cross is about revelation! It’s about giving us new information about God...information that we had either not known or refused to remember. In fact, that’s why Jesus is called *the mediator* between God and man. He brings us a new level of revelation of God’s love through His death on the cross! On the cross, He boldly

proclaims that we were totally mistaken about God. Although we had Him crucified...although we may have thought He was 'against us', the cross proves that He is 'for us'. Although we may have thought that He was angry with us and that we needed to hide from Him, the cross gives us a different message, telling us He loves us and will always forgive us.

Moreover, it is this new knowledge about God, made fully visible through the cross, that draws us back to God, leading us to repentance, helping us to drop our barriers. The cross leads us to reconciliation with God by changing our understanding of God! Jesus said, ***“If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father!”*** ***“I and the Father are one.”*** ***“No one knows the Father except the Son and all to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.”*** Now, if you apply these words to the cross, you will soon realise that, what you see on the cross is Jesus’ ultimate revelation of the Father—of His nature; of His character; of His endless willingness to love us! That’s why we need to look at the cross in order to understand God, for on the cross Jesus reveals the true nature of the Father!

For the past few weeks, I’ve been doing a prayer counselling workshop run by Elijah House Ministries. Last week’s training sessions was all about **how we tend to view God** through the lens of our own earthly father. You see, our view of God can be quite tainted because we tend to project onto God the failings of our earthly father. And so, for example...

If your own father was often angry and critical, it’s highly likely that you will likely see God as angry and critical. see God.

If your own father was unavailable or aloof, you will often see God in this same way; Someone who never attends to your needs.

If your father was unsafe or a threat to your wellbeing (if he often got drunk), that will surely affect how you see God. God may also be a bit scary.

If your own father didn’t pay you much attention unless you worked really hard and got top marks, you may also see God as Someone who needs to be impressed before He will reward you.

If your own father lacked generosity and grace, it’s possible that you see God in a similar fashion.

Now, of course, none of us has a *perfect* understanding of God. And because we all hold some false image of God, we can easily keep Him at arm's length in certain areas of life, unsure of what He might do. **That's why we all need to take a long, hard look at the cross...**some of us, longer than others... before the penny will finally drop and we will be willing to fully surrender to His love.

In the end, the thing to remember is that **the cross doesn't change God; it changes us!** Look at Colossians 1:21-22. Paul writes, *“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds as shown by your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death...”* Clearly, the death of Christ on the cross has the power to literally change our minds about God, and thus open our hearts to His love! It is this new knowledge that draws us back into a relationship with the Father. That's how the cross brings **reconciliation**; and that's why we can say that **the cross is glorious!**

But there's a **second** thing we need to take note of from today's passage in Colossians 1.

Col 1:19-20 *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*

Those two words, **“all things”**, are easily skipped over, but they are integral to the big picture of Paul's theology. You see, Paul's vision of *reconciliation* is far bigger than the human race. It's not simply about getting God and humankind back together again, but about getting the entire *the entire universe* back together... reconciled back to God and to His perfect purposes.

Back when God made the world, He declared it to be **“very good”**. That is, it perfectly reflected the harmony and peace found in the Triune God who had created it. The fall, of course, put an end to that harmony and peace. It introduced chaos and disorder into God's world as Adam and Eve, in their false understanding of God, tried to hide from God and run their lives without Him. Since Adam and Eve, as God's vice-regents on earth, were

given a divine authority to rule over *all things*, the breakdown in their relationship with God caused a breakdown in everything else. In other words, ‘*all things*’ in the universe that were under their rule were now in need of reconciliation.

You may have noticed that I chose the story of Jesus’ crucifixion (found Matthew 27) as our Gospel reading for today. Did you take note of how, at the moment of Jesus’ death, the entire creation reacted to it?

Mt 27:50-54 *And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!”*

The death of Christ caused the entire natural order to reel under its impact. (First darkness, then earthquakes!) But that’s not all. As the curtain of the Temple is torn in two, and as the whole universe is finally allowed to peer into the depths of God’s love for His creation, only then is the full impact of Christ’s death finally recognized. *Even the dead become aware that they are loved!* Amazingly, it is a Roman soldier who verbally expresses the amazement of it all—“*Surely, he was the Son of God!*”

In the end, what this little scene around the cross is telling us that the cross has effected nothing short of a **cosmic reconciliation**. The whole creation is shaken awake! The dead are shaken awake! Romans and Jews are shaken awake! For Christ’s death has shown us the unimaginable love of God.

But even that is not all! The Roman soldier’s presence at the cross also adds a new, horizontal dimension...that of human reconciliation... to the picture as well. It’s not just the vertical relationship with God that is restored, but as human beings stand together at the cross, they can no longer hate each other. In our mutual guilt for having crucified the Son of God, there is reconciliation between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. The love of God on the cross becomes our focus—it becomes a supernatural force that actually *promotes reconciliation throughout the whole universe*. The blood of Jesus (the ultimate display of the selflessness of God’s love)

woos the human race and draws the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve back to their common life in God. **Peace with God results in peace on the earth!**

Let me finish our reflections on ‘**the cross and reconciliation**’ by going back, once again, to the writings of the Apostle Paul. As I’ve just been saying, the cross was meant to reveal the true nature of God’s love for us. In this reconciling love, we, human beings, were meant to be able to put aside our differences and be reconciled to each other. Indeed, according to Paul, the church was meant to be a visual testimony of the power of the cross to bring reconciliation to the human race.

Sadly, however, far too many Christians have lost sight of this central truth. In **2 Corinthians 5**, Paul writes to a church in Corinth...a church that has been wracked by internal divisions. His point in writing is to get them to see that their *reconciliation to God through Christ* is meant to make a difference to the way they live with each other. And so he says to them:

2Co 5:19-20 **...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.**

Paul was clear about the cross—if we focus our attention there, then the old enmities that keep us apart will fade away! So, says Paul, *take a good long look at the cross-- allow it to change your mind about the people you are fighting with! Most importantly, don't let the church, and its testimony of the cross, be sullied by your internal divisions! Rather, be reconciled to God so that you can live as agents of reconciliation in this broken and divided world.*

Fortunately, for Paul, there were churches where reconciliation was being lived out. Listen to his words to the church in Ephesus...a church that was working through its racial differences by focusing on their common bond in Christ:

Eph 2:14-16 **For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus**

making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

This is what the cross is all about! It's about relationships, not legalities!
Through the cross, Jesus has mediated a new knowledge about God's and His love which has the power to change our view about Him and reconcile us back to Him in a vitally new relationship.

Through the cross, Jesus has mediated a new knowledge about God's love which has the power to change our views about each other and to reconcile us to one another in vitally new relationships as the Body of Christ.

Through the cross, Jesus has mediated a new knowledge about God's love which has the power to change our views about how we should be in a vital relationship with God's world.

I hope you can see that, in all this, **there's a lot of glory in the cross!**

Let's pray.