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Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

TEN **The Cross in Practice**

Has the cross of Jesus Christ captured your heart? Once we understand the significance of Jesus' death, our lives can never be the same. The cross enables us for the first time to see things clearly. It reinterprets every situation, colors every view, and rights every wrong perspective. By it we interpret history and predict the future. By it we see every person in a new light. By it our motivations are brought into focus and our hearts are laid bare. The cross opens the eyes of our understanding.

In this final chapter, I want to share five specific ways that the cross alters our former perceptions. To what degree has the cross captured our hearts? Let us examine our lives as we survey the following five indicators.

1. If the cross has truly captured our hearts, we live for a new purpose.

In fact, Jesus and His cross become the only things worth living for. If God became a man, suffered, and died to offer forgiveness to people who are otherwise destined to spend eternity suffering in hell, then those who believe it must live to spread its message.

The saddest thing is not that people refuse to believe in Jesus, but rather that some people have never yet been given an opportunity to make a choice. What could possibly be more important than making certain everyone hears "the word of the cross," the gospel of Jesus Christ? Nothing.

Those who have been captured by the cross live for one purpose. They may not be pastors or evangelists. They may be flight attendants, construction workers, homemakers, or business executives. Whatever their occupation they are missionaries to their world and seek opportunities to witness of God's saving grace through Christ.

As we meditate upon the message and revelation of that cross, our supreme prayer request is that the world hears the gospel. Our aspiration is to be used of God as He sees fit and take the gospel to those who have not yet heard it. We live for Christ's cause.

Today many Christians are caught up in other worthy causes, but none compares to the worthiness of spreading the gospel. Lately, it seems that political involvement is being presented as the Christian's most sacred duty. But is it? The good that results from political action is immensely inferior to that of preaching the gospel. If all Christians

would be as devoted to spreading the gospel as some are in their political involvement, there would be much less need for political activism.

The best way to improve society is by means of the gospel. People who are born again don't abort their babies; they don't patronize pornographic theaters; they don't abuse their children; they don't sell drugs.

Imagine for a moment a person sitting in a crowded football stadium. Somehow, he learns there is a bomb buried in the middle of the football field that is capable of destroying the stadium and is going to be detonated in thirty minutes.

He thinks to himself, "I must tell these people to evacuate the stadium." So he dashes from his seat in search of the broadcasting booth to announce the peril of the situation and instruct the spectators to evacuate.

In his search, he accidentally ends up in a public restroom and sees profanity scribbled all over the walls. "Oh!" he says to himself, "I would hate for some child to come in here and see this." So he diligently begins to scrub down the walls of the restroom for the next thirty minutes to remove the profanity.

No one would argue that the man was involved in a worthy cause as he worked to clean up the restroom. But while he worked with zeal, a stadium full of people was blasted into eternity.

This exemplifies the activities of many Christians today. They are doing good things, but while they work, people are slipping into an eternal hell as the seconds tick off.

To make matters worse, the world often perceives Christians as people who are trying to make the world conform to their morality. The media presents us as religious fanatics whose sole message is one of political conservatism. Unbelievers reject what they *think* is our message, never hearing the message we are supposed to convey to them.

Why are Christians against abortion, gambling, alcohol, and pornography? Because they have been born again and given a new nature. When they became children of God, their perspective of everything changed. If we want others to see things as we do, then let us use the same means that changed our perspectives. Let us proclaim the gospel! The gospel is the solution to society's ills.

Am I saying that Christians shouldn't be involved in the political process? No. In a representative form of government, Christians have an obligation to be involved. May our political involvement, however, never supersede our gospel involvement. Let us work to change unsaved people's hearts, and then their minds will be changed also.

2. When the cross captures our hearts, our perception of the world changes.

The apostle Paul wrote:

But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, *through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world* (Gal. 6:14, emphasis added).

When Paul understood what happened on the cross, he became a different man—a man of another world. All his former ambitions died. His love of this life and his selfish pursuits died. He viewed the world as something that needed to be redeemed—a world that would one day perish, a world of which he was no longer a part.

Material things become unimportant to those whose eyes are fixed upon the cross. Next to it, diamonds lose their sparkle and gold's luster fades. Knowing that the things of this world are destined to burn one day, the one who has been captured by the cross invests in things eternal. He would rather win someone to Christ than own a Rolls Royce. If owning a certain object might possibly hinder someone from coming to Christ, he never buys it.

He knows that more possessions cannot bring true joy and fulfillment. By supporting missionaries, by sharing with those less fortunate, by printing gospel tracts and so on, the

believer sees his money as simply a tool for bringing the gospel to more people. If he desires to make a lot of money, it is not to buy bigger and better toys. It is because he wants to invest more in the kingdom of God. He loves to give. He obeys his Lord, who commanded His followers to not lay up treasures on earth, but in heaven.

Many have speculated as to why the early Christians in Jerusalem so generously sold homes, lands, and possessions to lay the proceeds at the apostles' feet. Some have theorized that they were specifically led by the Holy Spirit to do so because He knew their city would be destroyed by the Roman Legions. That, however, is unlikely since they were selling their possessions more than thirty-five years before the Roman siege.

The answer is simply that the early Christians had been captured by the cross. Material things no longer held their hearts. Christ did. They valued their possessions only as a means to show their love for the brethren and win people to Christ.

The one who has been captured by the cross sees himself, not as a citizen of this earth, but as a citizen of heaven where his Savior dwells. The believer is only a sojourner here, and his treasure is being laid up in heaven. Everything of this world is viewed as only temporal and, therefore, of no real value. All personal accomplishments before his salvation are regarded as worthless.

The believer finds it hard to imagine Jesus, looking down from His throne on Judgment Day and saying to the retired executive: "Way to go! I'm impressed! You worked hard at your job and got to the top! You were able to buy anything you wanted!" As for that day, the one who values the cross knows his heavenly reward depends on what he has done to advance God's kingdom on earth.

3. When the cross captures our hearts, our perspective of the people of this world changes.

We no longer categorize people as rich, poor, black, white, American, or Russian. It no longer makes a difference to us. People are either saved or unsaved; they are either sinners or saints. When our hearts are captured by the cross, the question that comes to our mind when we first meet someone is, "I wonder if he's saved?"

Because of the cross, we know God loves everyone immensely, regardless of his or her sinfulness. We also know that a way has been provided for them to escape the wrath of God. Now we see people through the eyes of the One who died for them.

Paul wrote it this way:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. *Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh* (2 Cor. 5:14-16a, emphasis added).

Now we recognize people *spiritually*, either as born again or as dead in their trespasses and sins. Now the love of Christ, which He demonstrated so marvelously on the cross, controls us.

We must love our enemies. How can we hate those whom God loves? We who have been shown so much mercy are obligated to show mercy to everyone.

When we are reviled, we do not revile in return, but pity and pray for our persecutors. We know if they don't repent, they'll suffer even more in hell for having reviled us. God loves those who harm us and wants them to accept their pardon. He loved them so much He died for them.

We know it was not the nails that held Jesus to the cross, but His love for humanity.

4. When the cross captures our hearts, our perception of the people of God's kingdom changes.

Before I was saved, I used to make fun of "Jesus freaks." Who would have believed that one day I would be one! If I could find any of the "Jesus freaks" I used to mock, I'd hug them as my brothers and sisters.

Our fellow believers are our brothers and sisters, members of God's family. We would rather spend time with them than with many of our own natural relatives (if they are still unsaved). We love our brothers and sisters in Christ and are careful to avoid doing anything that could cause them to stumble. The apostle Paul wrote:

For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him *for whom Christ died* (Rom. 14:15, emphasis added).

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother *for whose sake Christ died*. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:11-13, emphasis added).

Jesus said,

"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13).

We are commanded to love our brothers, following the example Jesus set before us when He laid down His life for us. Who are we to decide whether to love one of God's own children? John wrote in his first epistle that it is impossible to hate God's children and love God at the same time (see 1 John 4:20).

All the fighting and bickering in the body of Christ indicates that our hearts have not been captured by the cross. Our pet doctrines often divide us because we're all following a few teachers whom we think are infallible. The cross puts an end to all that.

The Corinthian Christians were being divided by their varying preferences of certain teachers, and Paul addressed their carnality by bringing them back to the cross:

Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos" and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? *Paul was not crucified for you, was he?* Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:12-13, emphasis added).

When we are captivated by the one who was crucified for us, we cannot be enamored by any favorite teachers. Wouldn't it be wonderful to open one of our modern Christian magazines and see, instead of endless promotions of personalities, praise for the one who died for us! Sometimes I wonder if it's "ministry-anity" instead of Christianity that we espouse.

When the cross has captured our hearts, denominational walls crumble. Now that we love all those for whom Christ died, we can no longer restrict our fellowship to our own exclusive church or group. We may not always agree on certain doctrines, but all of us can join hands around the cross.

To the Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Charismatics who have been captured by the cross, our labels elicit more shame than pride, indicting us for our division and lack of love. We would prefer to be known only as Christians.

5. When the cross captures our hearts, our perspective of ourselves changes.

First, the cross brings an end to pride.

As we see Jesus hanging there, suffering for our sins, we begin to realize how debased we are. How foolish we were to think that we could save ourselves or merit our salvation by our good works. Our sin condemned Him. Our selfishness nailed Him to that cross, and the awfulness of our sin is revealed there.

Once we've accepted our pardon and received His righteousness, we realize that everything we are and will be is because of Him. Since our gifts and talents originate from His grace, they should only glorify Him. All boasting ceases. The apostle Paul wrote, "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:14a).

The cross is our only boast, for without it we have nothing and are nothing.

Second, the cross ends hatred and bitterness.

How can we, once we realize the price that was paid so we could be forgiven, harbor bitterness against those who have wronged us? In the light of the cross, bitterness is exposed as self-righteousness. By harboring grudges, we are in effect saying, "You have wronged someone who has never wronged another. You are guilty of something of which I'm not."

You'll recall Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant who was forgiven an astronomical debt by his master but who was unwilling to forgive his fellow servant a small amount by comparison. The message of this parable is obvious: The servant had no right to be merciless when he himself had experienced so much mercy. The Bible says his master was "moved with anger" and "handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him" (Matt. 18:34).

Jesus then promised: "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

Paul wrote that we are obligated to forgive because we have been forgiven through Christ's cross:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Eph. 4:31-32).

Third, the cross ends selfishness.

One cannot understand and believe what happened on the cross and continue to live purely for one's selfish pursuits. There is no way a person could rightfully react to the cross by saying, "Yes, I believe that the Son of God died for me. Now I'm going to live for what I can get."

The supreme example of love, demonstrated by Jesus' agony while He was suspended between heaven and earth, moves us to lay down our lives for those for whom He died. The author of our salvation was selflessness personified. From the cross He calls us to deny ourselves, and He inspires us by His great example. Paul wrote:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself....Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who....humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:3-8).

And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma (Eph. 5:2).

To what degree has the cross captured our hearts? The answer is revealed by the love we spread.

Carrying Our Cross

It has often been debated as to what Jesus meant when He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

Some say that God gives each of us some burden to carry. I've met people who claim their sickness is their cross; others say their job or their spouse is their cross.

The cross of which Jesus spoke, however, is something we voluntarily take up, not something God, or the devil, or circumstances force upon us. In order to take up our cross, Jesus said we must deny ourselves. Our cross is something we must carry daily if we are to follow Jesus.

Some have pointed out that Jesus was speaking here not of *His* cross but *our* cross, thereby concluding they must be two different crosses. The New Testament, however, teaches that Christ's cross *is* our cross. We have been crucified with Him. When one learns that Christ's cross is his cross, he has heard the gospel. When we take up our cross daily, it is Christ's cross that we carry.

Jesus, of course, knew that His cross should be the center of all true theology, the hub of all heavenly revelation, the heart of the message that God wants conveyed to all humanity. He knew it should be the standard by which everything is measured, the key to all of God's blessings, and the banner that marks the true church. He knew the gospel would be known as "the word of the cross."

Jesus must have meant that His cross, our cross, should dominate our daily lives. Through it we should view every person, situation, circumstance, and opportunity. By it we should judge ourselves and show others mercy. It represents the message we are called to proclaim and the life we are called to live. True disciples have had their hearts captured by the cross. Has your heart been captured?