

Living In View Of The Cross

Three weeks from today is Easter Sunday, the great day of celebration in the Christian faith. As I began to think and pray about the message for today, I couldn't help but wonder about what Jesus was doing and thinking four weeks before the Passover, knowing that it would mean his crucifixion. Of course, it wasn't just three weeks of knowing and anticipation. It was a lifetime of knowing that he had come into the world to die upon a cross.

The Gospel of John gives us some insight into the mind of Christ as he approached the final days of his life. Jesus said, **"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...Now my heart is troubled and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."** John 12:23, 27.

Jesus begins the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Along the way Jesus spoke to the disciples about what was ahead for him. Mark records, **"They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way...Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. 'We are going up to Jerusalem,' he said, 'and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.'" Mark 10:32-34**

Jesus tried to help them understand what was coming as they walked toward Jerusalem, but how could his disciples even begin to grasp the weight of what Jesus was telling them? He was going to die? Betrayed into the hands of the Jews and then executed by the Gentiles? How could this be? Hadn't he come to be the Messiah, to bring deliverance to the Jewish people? How could the cross figure into his mission, his reason and purpose for coming? The cross was a brutal means of execution for sinners, for law-breakers, for blasphemers, for the guilty – not for the innocent, the heroes, and certainly not for the Messiah. Yet we know that the cross was at the heart of why he came. Jesus lived his life in view of the cross. We too as believers and followers of Christ must live our lives with the cross always in view. Why? What does that mean for us? Let's start by looking at the importance of the cross.

The reason for the cross. Why did there have to be a cross anyway? Why did Jesus have to die upon a cross? The answer is found in both God and us. It is found in God's divine holiness and justice and his infinite love for his people, and it is found in our sinfulness and total depravity, our separation from God and our need for a Savior. It's the first step for us in living in view of the cross.

One of Job's comforters asked the question, "**How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less man, who is but a maggot – a son of man, who is only a worm!**" Job 25:4-6

It is the correct question to be asked. How can a sinful man become righteous enough, pure enough to stand before an absolutely holy God? It is the essence of the problem and it is at the heart of the reason for the cross. It's where we begin in living in view of the cross. To understand we have to accept the truth about ourselves and the truth about God. It may be hard for some, but the truth isn't always easy to accept.

We begin with the truth about ourselves. **We are sinners.** I know it is a word that is seldom used in our culture. We've tried to come up with new words, new language that softens our wickedness, that excuses or dismisses our rebellious human nature.

The New Testament has five different Greek words that are used to refer to sin. **1)Sin is missing the target, failing to reach the goal. 2)Sin is unrighteousness or iniquity. 3)Sin is evil and viciousness, referring to an inward corruption of our character. 4)Sin is trespassing or transgression, stepping beyond a known boundary. 5)Sin is breaking the law.**

By looking at the definitions, we have to admit we are sinners. All of us have sinned and come short of God's target and goal. We have all been guilty of sinful actions. We have all exhibited signs of corrupt and sinful character. We have all broken God's law. We have all broken our own moral and civil laws. We have all stepped beyond the known boundary and law of God. All of us are sinners. Paul tells us in Romans 3, "**There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God...there is no one who does good, not even one.**" Romans 3:10-12. That's us he's talking about.

We have all sinned but we have also kind of learned to skip right over that, haven't we? We seek to justify ourselves. "I'm a sinner, but I'm not as bad as some. I'm a sinner, but me and the man upstairs have an understanding. I'm a sinner, well, sure, but I haven't ever killed anyone or committed adultery." We fail to understand that every sin we commit is us refusing to submit to God's word and his commands. Every sin is us failing to love God with all of our heart and soul and strength which Jesus said was the first and greatest commandment. Every sin we commit is an expression of our willful rebellion against God and his authority.

Most of us have tried to find ways to dismiss the idea of sin. "It's not a sin, it's a crime so I don't have to deal with God about it, I just have to deal with the police and the courts. It's a sickness so I don't need forgiveness and cleansing, I just need treatment. It's not a sin, it's just the way I was raised, the environment I grew up in." We can try to pass it off but we have to face the truth about ourselves when we live in view of the cross. The bible says we have all sinned against God. We have to accept that truth. We have to accept our responsibility.

That's the second truth we have to acknowledge as we live in view of the cross. First, we are all sinners. Second, **We are all responsible for our choices and actions.** That's another thing we seem to be hiding from in our world and culture – accepting responsibility. Really? Are we responsible? Isn't it really our dna, our genetic makeup that is to blame? "I can't be held responsible for my actions, I was born this way. It's God's fault. Isn't it our chemistry that is to blame? We have a chemical or hormonal imbalance that caused us to yell and scream and shoot that guy that cut us off in traffic. I'm not responsible. It's my parents fault. That's the way I was raised. It is the schools fault. They didn't give me an education. It's the government's fault, they failed me." Keep going. The list can go on and on, but the biblical truth is, we are responsible for the decisions and choices we make. We are responsible for our actions.

Certainly there are some extenuating and limiting circumstances. Our dna and our environment certainly does have a conditioning effect upon us, but we aren't computers or robots that are programmed to respond without a free will. We aren't animals that only respond by instinct. We are created in the image of God and as such,

we are created with a free will, as free moral agents capable of making choices.

Nature and nurture are powerful things, but so is God's transforming grace. Our personality and traits, the effects of genetics and environment do not negate God's instruction to us to choose between life and death, between good and evil. The bible tells us that we will all give an account to God for our actions, our choices. Robots and computers and animals don't have to answer for their choices, people do. "But didn't the fall weaken our ability to choose wisely?" Yes, but his grace and the indwelling of his Holy Spirit empower and liberate us so we can make godly choices. We have to accept the fact that we are responsible for our actions. If we are living in view of the cross, we can't pass off our guilt. We must acknowledge that we are responsible for our sins.

The third thing in living in view of the cross: **We must admit our guilt.** If we are sinners, which we admit we are, and if we are responsible for our sinful choices and actions, which we've also admitted that we are, then we stand before God guilty as charged. We have sinned, we have done wrong, by our own choice and our own fault, and we must then bear the penalty for our sins.

This is the argument that Paul makes in the first chapters of his letter to the Romans. He could just as well have been writing to Americans. He writes first to the non-religious, the non-believing crowd. He says they have known of God and his power through creation and even knew of his holiness and his moral laws through their own conscience, but they have refused to live according to the knowledge they had. God has turned them over to the consequences and wages of their own immorality.

Then Paul writes to the religious folks, the Jews and Gentiles. He acknowledges that the Jews have the Scriptures and the Law and the Gentiles have a sense of eternity written in their hearts, but neither of them live up to the knowledge they possess. The Jews can even boast in being teachers of the Law yet they don't keep the very Law they teach to others.

Paul writes, "**What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.**" **Romans 3:9.** What's the point? The point is we are all sinners. We are all responsible for our own sin. We must admit the truth then that we are guilty, that we stand

condemned and rightfully so.

Living in view of the cross becomes a frightening, sobering thing when we are forced to admit that it is our cross that awaits us there on the hill. It is our cross that is in view. It is to be our place of execution. We are sinners. We are responsible for our sins. We are guilty by our own admission. We are liable in every sense and justice demands that we die for our sins. The bible declares the soul that sins must die (Ezekiel 18:20).

“But does God have to judge and punish evil? I thought God was love. I thought he was all about forgiveness. Why the cross? Why execution? Why punishment for sins?” John Stott, in his book *The Cross of Christ* states, “Indeed the essential background to the cross is not only the sin, responsibility and guilt of human beings but the just reaction of God to these things, in other words his holiness and wrath.”

God is holy and because he is holy he cannot and will not tolerate sin. The bible says **“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.” Habakkuk 1:13.** Isaiah tells us, **“...your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Isaiah 59:2.**

God is holy and cannot tolerate sin or look upon evil. Our sinfulness results in our being separated from a holy God. And closely related to his holiness is his wrath. Stott writes that **God’s wrath is essentially “his holy reaction to evil”**. God is always and forever angry at sin and the devastating effects it brings upon his creation. Sin is always then subject to God’s personal anger and wrath.

I know we don’t think of God being angry. “I thought the bible said we weren’t supposed to be angry.” The bible tells us not to sin in our anger. Understand, God’s anger and our anger are not the same. God’s anger at sin is a pure and uncontaminated anger. We have outbursts of anger and seek revenge, God’s anger is free from animosity and is a constant. God doesn’t get angry at you, but He is always and continuously angry at sin and at the same time he is always and continuously expressing his love to the sinner by calling him or her to repentance.

Understand what I’m trying to tell you. God’s wrath is the continual response of his holiness to sin and evil. Quoting John Stott again, he writes, “What is common to

the biblical concepts of the holiness and the wrath of God is the truth that they cannot coexist with sin. God's holiness exposes sin; his wrath opposes it. So sin cannot approach God and God cannot tolerate sin." His wrath is always aimed at sin and his holiness is always repulsed by sin.

Scripture uses several metaphors to illustrate the fact God cannot and will not tolerate sin. The first metaphor is height. God is referred to as "the Most High God." He is exalted above all nations, all gods, all authority, all the earth. He is high and lifted up. The earth is his footstool and heaven is his throne. He sits high and he looks low. He sees those who are humble and contrite in heart, but he is far from the sinner, separated by his sin.

There is also the idea of distance. His holiness requires him to keep his distance. God told Moses not to come any closer to the burning bush. Israel was not allowed to come up the mountain when God gave the law to Moses. God told Israel he would dwell among them, but they were not to come into the holy of holies. Only the high priest was allowed there, and that was only on the Day of Atonement and only with the blood of a sacrifice.

God is holy and his wrath is his reaction against sin. When he commands distance, it is because of the presence of sin. God cannot tolerate the presence of sin.

We also have the metaphor of light and fire. The bible tells us God is light and he dwells in unapproachable light. The bible also says our God is a consuming fire. Both fire and light keep people from getting too close. We can't endure the brilliance of the light of his holiness or the heat from the fire of his wrath as it burns up the sin within its reach.

Height, distance, light, fire, and the fifth metaphor in Scripture that suggests his holiness and wrath is somewhat unpleasant to think of. When the human body reacts against something that is putrid or poisoned it responds by vomiting. The Scripture speaks of God's response to sin and immorality in the same way. The bible tells of the practices of the Canaanites being so disgusting that the land vomited them out and God warned the Israelites that if they adopted those same practices the land would vomit them out as well.

It is one of the most dramatic warnings to the church in the book of Revelation.

Jesus says because the church is neither hot nor cold but lukewarm that he will vomit the church out of his mouth. The image is clear. God cannot tolerate sin. Our sins are so repulsive to him that he will vomit them out.

Do you see how serious our sin is? These five metaphors – height, distance, light, fire and vomiting all say that God cannot be in the presence of sin. Sin separates us from God. We live in a world however that refuses to consider the holiness of God and that rejects such metaphors without consideration. The world says, “God wouldn’t react wrathfully or violently to sin. He is love. He is gentle. He is accommodating of our weakness and sin. He is tolerant of our lack of control and our sinful choices.” But what has happened is we have lost an understanding of the majesty of our God. It never occurs to us that our sin, our tolerance of our own sinfulness and wickedness separates us from God. It never occurs to us that our sin will cause him to send us away. God said of some of the wicked prophets in Jeremiah’s day, **“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace’ they say, when there is no peace.”** **Jeremiah 6:14** We can’t live in view of the cross acting as though our sin doesn’t matter to God.

We must live our lives in view of the cross. We are sinners. We are responsible for our sin and our actions. We admit our guilt. We stand condemned before God. We see the cross before us and should recognize that apart from Christ and his mercy it is our own cross that awaits us. Our sin condemns us and separates us from God.

Stott writes, “We learn to appreciate the access to God which Christ has won for us only after we have first seen God’s inaccessibility to sinners. We can cry ‘Hallelujah’ with authenticity only after we have first cried ‘Woe is me, for I am lost.’”

We are sinners condemned to die. We stand before a God who hates sin and evil, who is angered by it and disgusted by it and as John Stott says, “refuses ever to come to terms with it.” Consequently, when God looked for a way to forgive and to cleanse and to save sinners, it was not through some kind of moral compromise. It was not by simply closing his eyes to the sin. No, it had to be a way that would fully express his holiness, his wrath against sin and his love for the sinner.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross. It was where I was supposed to die, suffering the wrath of a holy God because of my sins. But before I could be nailed

to that cross, God found a way, a way to show mercy without compromising his holiness, a way to satisfy the demand for justice, a way to atone for our sins by offering the only pure and completely holy sacrifice for sin. **“God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.” John 3:16-17**

Living in view of the cross with grace. No longer the place I dread as the site of my punishment, my execution, but now the place I reverence as the site of his sacrifice where he took my place, where he bore the penalty for my sins. The place of his death where I found everlasting life.

Can you see it? Can you see him as he hangs upon that cross, bearing the weight of your sins and my sins? Can you see him as the perfect, sinless Son of God becomes sin for you and for me so that we might be forgiven and made righteous in his sight?

If you can see the cross, you can be changed by the work of Christ on the cross. Admit you are a sinner, you are responsible for your sins, you are guilty as charged and you know the penalty for your sins. Acknowledge that God is holy, that his wrath is forever set against sin and there is only one way to escape that wrath and that is by believing in the one who turned aside God's wrath by taking away our sins, bearing them in his own body. Come to Christ in repentance and in faith, believing that he took your place upon the cross. Believe him, call upon him and make him the Savior and Lord of your life.

You don't have to die upon that cross. Jesus did that for you so by his grace you can live in view of his cross. The choice is yours.