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# THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

As a boy growing up in Baltimore, I had a regular Saturday regimen. First, I would finish the home responsibilities that my mom had assigned me. Then, when all of my chores were done—usually by noon—I would head down to the diamond.

The “diamond” was a large field located just a few minutes from my house where the guys gathered every Saturday to play football.

I could never get enough of football. It was my passion. Even though I played in school during the week as a halfback, and even if there was a Friday night game the evening before, you could still locate me every single Saturday at the diamond.

On one occasion, we had all gathered down at the

diamond for our Saturday afternoon game. Typically, we would play from noon until dark. As always, we had chosen sides, and then it was time for the game to commence. However, when we started to line up across from each other, everyone began to look around for the football. Unfortunately, on this particular Saturday, no one had brought a football.

While we had taken the time to go to the diamond, and while we had been proactive to choose up teams in order to begin the battle, everything came to an abrupt end simply because the football was missing in action. We were not able to do what we had gathered to do because the main thing was missing.

Isn't it amazing how something so small can carry so much weight? The people were there. The field was there. The plan was there. The spectators were there. The teams were there. Yet, because the main thing wasn't there, nothing else mattered.

We couldn't play football without the football.

You see, in the game of football—the football determines everything. First downs are measured by where the ball is placed. Touchdowns are measured by whether the ball crosses the plane. Out-of-bounds is tied to an individual's control of the ball and its relationship to the feet of the person holding it. Fumbles are determined by who grabs the ball. Field goals are measured by whether the ball goes through the uprights. All in all, men fight over it, rejoice over it, and strive to possess it.

In so many words, if a football is missing then there is

no football game. Without the football, everything else that goes on in a stadium—or on a field such as the diamond where I once played—is a waste of time.

Suffice it to say, in a football game, the football is the main thing.

Friend, I want to share something incredibly important with you: in Christianity, the cross is the main thing.

What Jesus satisfied and gained at the cross is the main thing. Without it, there is no power, no freedom, no forgiveness, no authority, no strength, no victory—nothing at all. The cross is the main thing.

**IF WE LEAVE OUT THE CROSS,  
WE ARE ONLY LEFT WITH THE  
EMPTY SHELL CALLED RELIGION.**

Every year around Easter time, people will typically focus on the cross. We remember that Christ's death paid the penalty for our sins. We meditate on how the reality of the cross enables those who believe and trust in Jesus to spend eternity in heaven. However, once Easter passes, we frequently go back to doing our own thing and trying to live our lives without the cross of Christ as the central focus.

This makes about as much sense as if the NFL decided to supply a football for the Super Bowl only and not use any footballs for the other weeks of the season leading up to it. Without a football every week, having one at the Super Bowl isn't going to do anyone much good.

See, it isn't enough to gather together at the right place each Sunday: the church. It isn't enough to gather together with the right people in our lives: fellow believers. It isn't enough that there is a program and a plan, or that there are books, seminars, worship time on Sundays, and personal devotional time throughout the week. All of that is good, and all of that is critical. But all of that means nothing without the centrality of the main thing: the cross. If we leave out the cross, we are only left with the empty shell called religion.

We are left with an empty set of rules, laws, requirements, judgments, and all else to try and legislate spirituality without the power, intimacy, grace, and ability to live spiritually victorious lives. As a result, believer after believer finds themselves in perpetual defeat: never measuring up, never fully overcoming their struggles, never rising above their circumstances.

Sadly, many believers fail to fulfill their destiny and achieve the complete manifestation of their own significance simply because they are operating without the power and deliverance of the cross. They are trying to live the Christian life without the main thing, which makes as much sense as trying to play a football game without a football.

Oftentimes we will wear a cross around our necks. We also hang pictures, banners, and replicas of it around our homes and churches. Some even tattoo it on body parts or dangle it from their ears. Yet, in doing these things, we run the risk of denying the cross its true meaning and power. We have run the risk of belittling its authentic strength. We have turned it into an emblem, good luck charm, or decoration rather than leverage the authority and ability that the cross grants.

Essentially, we have made the cross nothing more than a replica to induce guilt rather than what it is—the single greatest affirmation and demonstration of pure love.

The problem in our personal lives, homes, churches, and communities today is not a problem of a lack of knowledge. It is not a problem of a lack of skills. It is not even entirely a problem of a lack of motivation. Many believers today want to live in victory yet continually live defeated lives.

The problem that we face in our modern, contemporary Christian culture is that we have forgotten the purpose, the preeminence, and the power of the cross. We view it as an icon reflecting something that happened thousands of years ago but has little relevance to us today.

Far too many Christians regard the cross as an historical event that will take them to heaven one day rather than as a current event wielding everything they need to bring heaven to bear on earth.

## PAUL WRITES ABOUT THE CROSS

In writing to his audience at Galatia, Paul urged them over and over again, in one form or another, to remember Christ and the cross. As Paul concluded his letter to the Galatians, he did what we will often do today through the use of italics, underlining, bolding the font, or other forms of highlighting. He emphasized his point by writing largely. In essence, Paul was saying, "I don't want you to miss this part. Everything that I've said up until now has been important, but this part is the zinger. This part is what I don't want you to ever forget. Pay attention here. Read closely. Know that this is coming directly from me."

Paul wrote in "large letters" with his own hand (Galatians 6:11) in order to tell his audience that he was the one writing, and that the truth he was telling them came from one source. He wrote in verse 14, "But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul had been saved for some time. Yet he was still saying, "I'm only going to brag on the cross." He did not let the historical reality of the cross get lost in his mind, thoughts, function, teaching, or calling. Paul's only point of reference for his life was the cross of Christ. He wrote earlier in his letter to the Galatians a verse that we will look at more closely in the final chapter. It contains a message that ought to serve as the central point of our Christian lives,

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)

To Paul, the cross wasn't a decoration or an icon. The cross was the centrality of his very existence. The cross was the air of his every breath, the beat of his heart, and the very substance of his significance. It was the power to overcome his weaknesses. It was his identity and it was his hope.

#### RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP

The reason why Paul spent so much effort focusing on the cross in his letter to the church at Galatia was because they had become confused about what true spirituality and power meant. They had begun to look to the flesh—something easy for many of us to do—instead of to the power of Christ. Paul gives us insight into their mindset when he writes,

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1–3)



The church members at Galatia were no longer looking to the power provided them through Christ's death on the cross and the sending of the Holy Spirit; rather, they were looking to themselves. They were looking to live their lives according to what they could do instead of what Christ already did. Paul was keenly aware of how this mindset had crept into the hearts of the Galatians. He reveals this to us a few chapters later when he writes,

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. (Galatians 6:11–12)

Paul makes a profound statement in this verse. If you will capture and understand it fully, it can set you on a whole new direction for your Christian life. There was something getting in the way of the Christians in Galatia and hindering them from experiencing the fullness of Jesus Christ. The thing that was keeping them from living out the blessings of the Christian experience was religion.

Religion had gotten in the way of the cross.

In that day, circumcision was the external symbol of religious commitment and involvement. In fact, there was a specific group of people who would follow Paul around wherever he went. Whenever he started a church, they would try and interfere with the belief structure of the

church. This group of people was known as the "Judaizers."

The term "Judaizers" comes from the original Greek verb *ioudaizō*, which means "live according to Jewish customs." The Judaizers were a group of people who were still attached to the religious rules of the Old Testament. Because of this, they would try and get the new Christians to conform to external religious observances, which were symbolized by the chief one known as circumcision. The Judaizers were trying to subvert the message of the cross. They had religion. They just didn't have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

However sincere it may be, whenever religious activity trumps relationship, the power of Jesus Christ is no longer experienced in the believer's life. One of the greatest dangers in our churches today is for religion to replace an intimate relationship with the Savior. By religion, I am referencing the external adherence to exercises, codes, or standards practiced in the name of God—yet apart from God.

For example, if you go to church because it is the religious, or spiritual, thing to do rather than because you are motivated to spend time worshiping God, learning about Him, and experiencing Him, then that is called religion. Religion is anything you do for God that does not stem from a heart connected to God.

One of the assignments that I had to do at seminary involved writing a research paper. I remember this particular paper because when I turned it in I was very proud of the work I had put into it. I had done my due diligence.

I had controlled the material and analyzed all of the possible idiosyncratic elements of the vicissitudes in the arguments. I felt great about my paper.

However, when I got the paper back from my professor, there was a big, fat, red zero at the top, along with a smaller note at the bottom. In a hurried hand, my professor had scrawled, "Tony, great work. Great preparation. Wrong assignment."

It wasn't that I hadn't done great work; it was that I had done my great work on the wrong assignment. I had researched the wrong topic. As a result, I didn't get credit for what I had done.

Christianity is no different. It's not that there aren't a lot of people doing a lot of excellent things. It's not that a lot of these same people attend church, help the hurting, or say all the correct spiritual platitudes. It's just that they've missed the cross. They've missed Jesus Christ. And then they wonder why they aren't getting any credit. They wonder why they aren't experiencing any victory, power, hope, and authority.

Friend, external observances—the rules of religion—can actually get in the way of a relationship. Oftentimes these religious rules are called "legalism." What legalism does is measure your spirituality by your activity. Within legalism, you must always do more, be better, go further, pray longer, and strive harder. The list goes on and on. One of the problems with legalism is that you never know when you get to the end of the list because there is always something else to add to it.

Paul wrote stern words to those contemplating following the Judaizers' path of religion in chapter five of Galatians. He said, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. . . You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:1, 2, 4).

**GOD DOESN'T WANT YOU  
SERVING HIM ONLY BECAUSE  
YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO;  
HE WANTS YOU SERVING HIM  
BECAUSE YOU LOVE HIM.**

Paul uses the terms "severed from Christ" and "fallen from grace" to indicate that Jesus Christ is no longer of any benefit to you on earth. His strength, intimacy, power, and all that He has to offer have been removed from you if you are counting on yourself to be religious. The profundity of this truth is serious. What he is saying is that religious activity can actually keep Christians from experiencing the Lord. Church activity can actually keep

you from Christ. Self-righteousness can keep you from true righteousness.

For example, a married woman checking off a list of things to do in her home because she is under pressure, seeking approval, or is threatened by her husband, reflects a far different relationship than a married woman who does the same list because she is motivated by love. The activity may be the same; in fact, it could be identical. But the motivation changes both the results and rewards of the activity.

One of the ways many pastors misuse and abuse their position is through preaching religion. They seek to have the pulpit control the pew through religious guilt. Such pastors turn to the Bible to make the congregation feel guilty, insisting members give more or by simply telling them they're not doing enough. But that is religion. That is legalism. That is also spiritual death.

God doesn't want you serving Him only because you are supposed to; He wants you serving Him because you love Him. He wants your morality, prayer life, dedication for Him, and all else be predicated on your relationship with Him rather than on religious duty. Instead of being defined by what you do, He wants you to be defined by who you know—Jesus Christ.

## TWO CRUCIFIXIONS

Paul says there are two crucifixions that must occur on the cross in order to live a victorious Christian life:

Jesus' and your own. He emphasizes this point in the latter part of Galatians 6:14 as he writes of himself, "But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

To identify with Jesus Christ is to identify with the cross. In other words, on the cross, Paul was crucified to all things that belong to this world. Being "crucified" with Jesus created a resultant disconnect from this world's order and subsequent attachment and alignment with Him. Paul asserts that a relationship with Christ supersedes everything this world has to offer.

The word "world" in the Greek is Kosmos. It simply refers to an organized world system or arrangement designed to promote a specific emphasis or philosophy. For example, we often talk about the "world of sports," or the "world of finance," or the "world of politics." These phrases are not referencing a location or a place. They are referencing an organized system inclusive of certain definitions, regulations, and philosophical worldviews.

When Paul states that he has been crucified with Christ, he is saying that he is no longer alive to this world's system that wants to leave God out. He refused to embrace a worldliness mentality. He was crucified to the strategies and rules that are set up to try and make humanity acceptable to God, independently of God.

I don't know if you've ever noticed, but the world does not mind religion. The world not only tolerates religion but frequently will even embrace it. Religions dominate

much of humanity's systems all across the globe. However, what the world will not tolerate is the cross of Jesus Christ. As soon as you introduce Jesus into the equation, you have become too specific. Staying with references to God is okay because that can be generic and vague. But once you bring Jesus to bear on a life or a worldview, His involvement becomes too narrow for many people.

In fact, the cross is often tolerated even more so than the image of Christ on the cross. In these cases, it is merely being viewed as a religious symbol rather than as an instrument of relational sacrifice. Nonetheless, the key to the cross is not the two beams of wood, one vertical and one horizontal. The key to the cross is the One who hung on it as a sinless sacrifice.

### CARRYING YOUR CROSS

Friend, the more religious you become the further from Christ you go. The cross is not about religion. It is an expression of an undying love and the payment for all of mankind's sin—past, present, and future—including yours.

Consider the harbor of a wheel. If something happens to it, the spokes become disconnected. Similarly, if you fail to make the cross the central focus of your life—your identity in Christ—you run the risk of experiencing extreme disconnection in the various areas of what you do.

Don't allow the world system that leaves God out to define you. Don't be duped into believing that you can

make it by dipping in and out of both. Have you ever gone swimming in an ocean or perhaps a very deep lake? If you attempted to swim several hundred feet down in the depths of the water, you wouldn't survive simply because your body was not made for that environment. Without the proper equipment, you wouldn't last more than a few minutes.

**WE HAVE SOME MESSED-UP IDEAS  
ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO CARRY,  
OR BEAR, OUR CROSSES.**

Friend, the cross is your equipment in this world. It is your GPS. It is your identity. It is your oxygen. It is your point of reference. It is your life. Why is it that so many believers are struggling to live victorious lives in the world? It is because they are leaving the cross at the benediction. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). He didn't say that you are to pick up your cross and then set it back down. He said you are to carry your cross.

Denying oneself is a form of dying to self. It is an ongoing declaration, as Paul pointed out in his letter to the Corinthians. He said, "I affirm, brethren, by the boasting



in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, *I die daily*" (1 Corinthians 15:31, emphasis mine). The cross represents the moment-by-moment connection to and identification with Jesus Christ and the purpose of His life, death, burial, and resurrection. It is acknowledgment of complete and total dependency on Christ and His sufficiency, along with recognition of personal sin.

Jesus wants to be more important to you than your own comforts. Similar to Matthew, Luke also recorded Jesus' words when he wrote in chapter 14 and verse 27: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." You must carry your cross, not Jesus' cross. He took care of His own. If you desire to follow Jesus, you need to carry your cross.

We have some messed-up ideas about what it means to carry, or bear, our crosses. A nagging physical problem, trouble with in-laws, or noisy neighbors—none of those things constitutes bearing a cross. So what does it mean to carry your cross?

Crucifixion was invented in ancient Rome. When Roman officials wanted to put a condemned criminal on public display to humiliate him, they paraded him down the street carrying the crossbeam of his cross. Carrying one's cross to the place of execution was a demonstration that the individual was guilty of the crime he was condemned for.

To carry your cross means to bear the reproach of Jesus Christ. It is to be so identified with Him that when they accuse you of being a Christian, you are found guilty.

When someone accuses you of being His disciple, you say, "You got me." In other words, to carry your own cross is to admit publicly that you are guilty of the cause of being committed to Christ, guilty of placing Him first.

What does this mean in practical terms? A young girl bears her cross when she tells her boyfriend, "I can't sleep with you because I am a Christian." It's when a businessman says, "I can't do that unethical thing. Because I am Christ's disciple, I am living by a different agenda." Carrying your cross is dying to yourself and what you want; it means putting Jesus first. It isn't comfortable to carry a cross—it takes dedication.

Religion and religious titles mean nothing. When placed against the backdrop of the cross, external paraphernalia and religious duties count for nothing. What matters is your identification with Jesus Christ and the newness of life that He brings when He lives within you. Paul tells us as he continues his letter to the Galatians, "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15). Similarly, he writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

For you as a believer, victory in your daily life—decisions, emotions, finances, and in all things—completely hinges on your attachment to Jesus Christ and what He did at the cross on your behalf. It rests on His work, not on your own. It is tied to the new creation inside you, not to the flesh.

Paul concludes his letter to the believers in Galatia with this final thought. Reflecting on the fruit of living a life connected to the cross, he writes, "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

So then, if we are connected to Him, why does God often feel so far away? It is because we are not operating by this rule. Paul says that if you walk according to the rule of the cross—that is, to align your frame of thinking, moving, and operating with the centrality of the cross—then you will experience the benefits of God. Those benefits include both peace and mercy.

On the other hand, when you are merely satisfied with religion or religious activity—or even when you have placed your trust in your religious duties to earn favor with God—you have been severed from Christ and have fallen from grace.

Falling from grace is a fairly drastic occurrence. Grace is the provision of all that you need in order to live a life of abundance and peace. To best understand what it means to be "severed from Christ" or to be "fallen from grace," I need to compare the situation to electricity. Electricity is the flow of power that makes things work in your home. Virtually everything in your house operates because of electricity. Your appliances, lights, heat, air conditioning, computers, television, and many other things work because they are receiving electricity.

If you are severed from electricity, the flow of power stops. It's not that you no longer have your possessions,

nor is it that you didn't purchase them. You still own your electrical devices and appliances. But you can have something that you have paid for and not enjoy it simply because the flow of electricity is no longer there to empower it.

To be severed from Christ, or to fall from grace, means that the flow of what God wants to do in you and through you is no longer operating. You have essentially been unplugged, or disconnected, from the power of Jesus—even though you still have all of the paraphernalia of religion. Therefore, your hope is gone, your peace is gone, your courage is gone, your faith is gone, and your authority is gone.

On the other hand, those who function by the rule of the cross will experience a peace that passes understanding. The Spirit of God will permeate all that you do so much so that you begin to think differently, act differently, live differently, love differently, and even recognize yourself in a different light. You are empowered because the flow of the Spirit comes to every believer by way of the accomplishment of the cross. God will be at work in you, with you, through you, to you, and for you.

In summary, without electricity, a lot of what you own in your home would be unusable. Without a football, every game consisting of two teams with eleven men gathered on fields all over our nation would be unplayable. Electricity is essential to empowering that which was made to run on it. A football is essential to the game that was designed around it. The cross, my friend,

is essential to both empowering and enabling you to live an abundant, victorious life, defined by both peace and mercy.

Never let religion get in the way of your relationship with Jesus Christ. Rather, take the cross from around your neck and carry it in your heart instead. You have been crucified with Christ—and as a result—you are a new creation.