

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church

### Sermon Summary #50

#### The Obscenity of the Cross

Mark 15:16-32

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The love of the Lord Jesus Christ for his bride, the church, is nowhere more vividly seen than in the horrors of the cross he willingly endured on her behalf. Many, however, know virtually nothing of the cross and its significance as the consummate expression of God's love. We sing about the cross, we wear it dangling from our neck or wrist, we emblazon it across the top of our church letterhead, but I wonder how much we really understand what it means to say that Jesus was impaled on one.

There is no escaping the fact that nearly 2,000 years of pious Christian tradition and religious art have largely domesticated the cross. The cross of Jesus has been sanitized and stripped of its original meaning. It has been washed, waxed, painted, and decked with jewels. It has been cast in gold, silver, bronze, and even platinum. We've done just about everything one can do to make it presentable to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Just look around and you'll see virtually everyone, regardless of their spiritual beliefs, wearing a cross. Everyone from Madonna to Oprah proudly displays the cross either as a tattoo or a diamond studded necklace. Some even use it as a political symbol.

The result is that no matter what people think they know about crucifixion as a means of capital punishment, the cross simply does not mean the same for us today that it did for those who witnessed Jesus being nailed to one.

I remember years ago when the state of Oklahoma executed its first death-row inmate since the Supreme Court lifted its ban on capital punishment. Debate was intense and focused primarily on the most "humane" way to inflict death. Every effort was made to minimize this man's pain and to diminish any humiliating or embarrassing factors. The electric chair was thus replaced with death by lethal injection.

It hasn't always been this way. In the ancient world crucifixion was employed precisely *because* it was unparalleled in its capacity to inflict pain and lingering agony, precisely *because* it was humiliating and embarrassing.

It comes as quite a surprise to many people when they discover that the four gospels say virtually nothing about the crucifixion of Jesus. In all four accounts of his death, we read simply that "they crucified him" (Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18).

The reason is that people in the first century were all too painfully familiar with the details of crucifixion. It wasn't necessary for the gospel writers to be any more precise than they were.

Each day when I leave the church to go home I pass a variety of stores, restaurants, golf courses, and a few gas stations. Nothing exceptional. Nothing offensive. People in Jesus' day would close down shop, head for home, and often pass by a row of crucified victims, left for days on their respective crosses. They knew all they wanted to know about such horrors.

What exactly did they see? They saw crosses in various shapes, some in the form of X, T, and often t.

The *height* of the cross was also important. Usually the victim's feet would be no more than one to two feet above the ground. This was so that wild beasts and scavenger dogs common in the city might feed on the corpse. One ancient author wrote:

“Punished with limbs outstretched, they see the stake as their fate; they are fastened and nailed to it in the most bitter torment, evil food for bird of prey and grim pickings for dogs” (*Pseudo-Manetho*, as quoted by Martin Hengel in *Crucifixion* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], p. 9).

Jesus may well have been made an exception to this rule (cf. Mt. 27:42,48). If so, it wasn't out of mercy, but in order to increase his humiliation by exposing his shame more readily to passersby.

In 1968 in a Palestinian cemetery a bulldozer accidentally unearthed the skeletal remains of a man who had been crucified. According to one description, “the feet were joined almost parallel, both transfixed by the same nail at the heels, with the legs adjacent; the knees were doubled, the right one overlapping the left; the trunk was contorted; the upper limbs were stretched out, each stabbed by a nail in the forearm” (N. Haas, “Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from GIV’at HA-Mivtar,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970):58).

The man’s right tibia, the larger of the two bones in the lower leg, had been brutally fractured into large, sharp slivers. Although he was crucified through the forearms, it is possible to do so through the palm, contrary to what some have said. If the nail enters the palm through the thenar furrow it breaks no bones and is capable of supporting several hundred pounds.

Often a small peg or block of wood, called a *sedecula*, was fixed about midway up the vertical beam, providing a seat of sorts. Its purpose was to prevent premature collapse. In other words, it was designed to prolong the agony of the victim.

Debate still rages on the precise cause of Jesus’ death.

Some argue that he died from asphyxiation. A victim of crucifixion was forced to pull with his arms and push himself up the vertical beam as much as possible in order to keep his chest cavity open for breathing. The pain of this constant ordeal is almost unimaginable.

Death by crucifixion could actually go on for days. But in the case of Jesus, the scourging that he had endured, together with the beatings to which he was subjected no doubt caused a massive loss of blood. Add to this the onset of shock, and it is no surprise he died within hours. If death took too long the executioners would take a club and break the leg bones to prevent the victim from pushing himself up the vertical beam.

It is hard to imagine a more hideous form of capital punishment. If ever there were a true deterrent to crime, it was crucifixion. For example:

- Appian reported that following the defeat of *Spartacus*, the victor Crassus had 6,000 prisoners crucified on the Via Appia between Capua and Rome (*Bella Civilia*, I.120). Before their final battle, Spartacus himself had a Roman prisoner crucified to warn his men of their fate should they be defeated.
- It is strangely ironic that Julius Caesar was hailed as being merciful to his enemies when he ordered their throats cut prior to their being crucified in order to spare them the indescribable suffering of prolonged agony on the cross.
- Josephus described the fate of the Jews taken captive in 70 a.d. when Jerusalem was destroyed. The soldiers, "out of the rage and hatred they bore the prisoners, nailed those they caught, in different postures, to the crosses, by way of jest, and their number was so great that there was not enough room for the crosses and not enough crosses for the bodies" (cited in Hengel, 25-26). Josephus indicates that the Roman general Titus hoped that this would hasten surrender of those still in the besieged city.

Here's where most Christians stop, if they get this far at all. I realize it isn't pleasant to consider. But if all you know of the cross is the physical pain it inflicted, you have yet to understand the depths of Christ's love. Let me explain.

### *The Foolishness of the Cross*

In 1 Corinthians Paul describes the message of the cross as "foolishness" to unbelieving Gentiles and a "stumbling block" to Christ-rejecting Jews (1:18,23). Does Paul mean the cross is intellectually incoherent, like saying  $2 + 2 = 5$ ? Is he suggesting that the cross is religiously illogical, like saying salvation is both by grace and works?

When he says the notion of Christ crucified was "foolishness" or "folly" does he use that word in the way we do today to refer to acts of stupidity? Was it "foolish" in the same that taking drugs is foolish? No. Was it "foolish" in the same way that driving 100 mph in a school zone when young children are present is foolish? No. Was it "foolish" in the same way that people are who still contend that the world is flat? No. Was it "foolish" in the same way that Fred Phelps and his followers are when they protest at a soldier's funeral with signs too vulgar to repeat? No.

What, then, does Paul mean? How is he using this word? The message of forgiveness through the cross of Christ is foolishness because of what the cross meant to the ancient world. **It was the embodiment and emblematic symbol of the worst of human obscenities.**

Someone was once asked to define "obscene". He replied: "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it!" I agree. When confronted with something obscene we are repulsed. We experience an intuitive feeling or reaction of revulsion. Our sense of personal dignity is offended, decency is besmirched, and we feel emotional anguish. Something need not be sexual to be obscene. Anything that is abhorrent, repulsive, or disgusting qualifies.

An obscenity, whether seen or spoken, violates our sense of aesthetic and social propriety.

I think Paul is saying that the cross of Jesus Christ was obscene! It was far more than an instrument of capital punishment. It was a symbol of personal reproach, public indecency, and social indignity. If all they wanted to do was kill Jesus, they could have stoned him (like Stephen) or decapitated him (like James).

Crucifixion, on the other hand, was specially designed to do more than kill a man. Its purpose was to humiliate him as well. **Crucifixion not only broke a man's body; it crushed his spirit. Crucifixion not only destroyed a person physically; it defamed him socially. As difficult as this may be for you and me to understand, worse than the suffering of the cross was its shame.**

The shame associated with crucifixion was so intense that *it was expressly forbidden that a Roman citizen be executed in that manner*. A Roman citizen could commit a capital offense, one worthy of death. But no Roman citizen was ever subjected to crucifixion. It was considered too shameful and repugnant, regardless of the gravity of his crime. Cicero wrote:

"Even if we are threatened with death, we may die free men. But the executioner, the veiling of the head, and the very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but the liability to them, the expectation, nay the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man" (*Defence of Rabirius*, 5,16).

Specific steps were taken to ensure this effect. Crucifixion was always public. We argue today over whether or not executions should be televised. In the ancient world there was no debate. The most visibly prominent place was selected: at a crossroads, in the theatre, on a hill (like Calvary). Why? To intensify the victim's personal humiliation.

People were always crucified naked, although Jewish sensitivities demanded they be provided a loin cloth. John Calvin describes the significance of this:

“The Evangelists portray the Son of God as stripped of His clothes that we may know the wealth gained for us by this nakedness, for it shall dress us in God’s sight. God willed His Son to be stripped that we should appear freely, with the angels, in the garments of his righteousness and fullness of all good things, whereas formerly, foul disgrace, in torn clothes, kept us away from the approach to the heavens” (John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke*, Vol. III, Translated by A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 194).

**The first Adam, originally created in the righteousness of God, did by his sin strip us naked. The last Adam, suffering the shame of nakedness, did by his obedience clothe us in the righteousness of God!**

What the ancient world thought of crucifixion is seen in the way it received treatment in their literature.

Historians once mistakenly assumed that the scarcity of references to crucifixion in cultured literary sources was proof that it was rarely employed. But recently it has been determined that the more refined literary artists omitted reference to crucifixion, not because it was unknown, but because they did not want to disgrace or defile their work by mentioning such a vile and obscene practice.

In Greek romances and the theatre, crucifixion of the hero/heroine was routine, but in every instance he/she was delivered from the cross and set free. In other words, heroes could not on any account be allowed to suffer such a shameful death. This was one reason why the notion of a *crucified savior* was "foolishness" to the Greeks.

Crucifixion was referred to as *crudelissimum taeterrimumque supplicium*, or "that most cruel and disgusting penalty." Pliny the Younger (112) called Christianity a "perverse and extravagant superstition" because it preached Christ crucified (*Epistulae*, 10.96.4-8; quoted by Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, p. 2). Tacitus called it a "pernicious superstition." Christians were accused of being overcome by a "sick delusion" for daring to suggest that God had been nailed to a cross!

This may well be the reason why Paul, before his conversion, vigorously opposed the church, "breathing out murderous threats" against the believers (Acts 9:1). Paul was "ravaging" the church (Acts 8:3; a word that literally refers to a wild beast tearing at its prey, ripping flesh from bone); he "persecuted" the church "to the death" (Acts 22:4); he was "furiously enraged" at the church (Acts 26:11); and "tried to destroy it" (Gal. 1:13). Why?

His initial opposition to the gospel wasn't due primarily to the claim that Jesus was God in the flesh or because the church was a threat to ancient religious customs or because the life of Jesus failed to conform with messianic expectations. The principal stumbling block was that Jesus had been *crucified*! A "crucified Messiah" was a contradiction in terms. One may have a Messiah, or one may have a crucifixion, but one cannot have a crucified Messiah. The Messiah is the embodiment of power, splendor, and triumph. Crucifixion is the embodiment of weakness, degradation, and defeat.

To be crucified was to fall under the curse of Deuteronomy 21:23 ("anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse"; cf. Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; 1 Peter 2:24; Gal. 3:13). A person executed by some other means or who may have fallen in battle would be hung on a tree as a sign of God's ultimate curse. Obviously one does not crucify someone who is already dead in order to kill them! One crucifies a dead victim in order to humiliate them and to defile their name and reputation in society.

Thus what Paul (or Saul, actually) was hearing proclaimed by Christians was that *he who was to enjoy God's richest blessing instead endured God's most reprehensible curse. How could these Jews honor as God and Savior one whom God himself had openly and obviously cursed? Worse than a contradiction in terms, a crucified Messiah was an outrageous blasphemy!* Yet, note how the early church highlighted this very fact! See Acts 2:23; 4:9-12; 5:29-31.

Thus the offense of the cross does not come from the fact that it is theologically incoherent or intellectually illogical or legally impermissible. *The offense of the cross came from the fact that the cross, itself a visible symbol and physical embodiment of moral shame and aesthetic repugnance, was the instrument of death for him who claimed to be Messiah and Savior.* To suggest that the “Lord of glory” was nailed to the cross of shame was the height of folly.

This explains why Paul himself, after his conversion, was so horribly and viciously denounced and persecuted for preaching “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2; cf. Gal. 6:14). Paul makes the point clearer still in the famous Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. He refers to Jesus,

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (vv.6-8)

Don’t miss the connection Paul draws between the Son taking on the form of a slave/servant and dying on a cross. **Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, for the riff-raff of society, the dregs and refuse of the world.** We must never forget that the death Jesus died was the vilest indignity to which the most reprehensible social pariah could be sentenced.

Thus, “*even* death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8) is the last bitter consequence of taking the very nature of a slave/servant and stands in the most abrupt and shocking contrast imaginable with “being in the very nature God” (v. 6).

Jesus Christ suffered not only for our sins but for the *shame* of our sins as well. Such was the depth of our depravity and the magnitude of his love.

Let us never forget who this is that suffers such brutally shameful treatment from the hands of men like you and me. Let us never forget the intrinsic excellency of his person and the brightness of God's glory which he embodied. Jesus is the express image of the invisible God, sovereign over all, the eternal Word by whom all things were created and through whom all things are continually sustained. He is the heir of all things, the prince and king of all princes and kings. He is pre-existent glory, worshipped and adored by cherubim and seraphim. "Yet here He sits, treated worse than a felon, made the center of a comedy before He became the victim of a tragedy" (Spurgeon).

"The soldiers also spit upon that face,  
Which angels did desire to have the grace,  
And prophets once to see, but found no place,  
Was ever grief like Thine?"

"They bow their knees to Me, and cry, Hail king;  
Whatever scoffs and scornfulness can bring,  
I am the floor, the sink, where they'd fling,  
Was ever grief like Mine?"

But we must never forget that "at the very time when they were thus mocking Him, He was still the Lord of all, and could have summoned twelve legions of angels to His rescue. There was majesty in His misery . . . . [and] had he willed it, one glance of those eyes would have withered up the Roman cohorts; one word from those silent lips would have shaken Pilate's palace from roof to foundation" (Spurgeon). But he said nothing. He did nothing. Why? Because of his love for you and me!

"Who defeats my fiercest foes?  
Who consoles my saddest woes?"

Who revives my fainting heart,  
Healing all its hidden smart?  
Jesus, crowned with thorns."

We must be careful that we do not commit a similar offense against him by hypocritical professions of love and loyalty. When we "pretend" to be his disciples and loudly proclaim our allegiance, yet care for him no more than did the soldiers. Says Spurgeon,

"Oh, if your hearts are not right within you, you have only crowned him with thorns; if you have not given him your very soul, you have in awful mockery thrust a sceptre of reed into his hand. Your very religion mocks him. Your lying professions mock him. . . . You insult him on your knees! How can you say you love him, when your hearts are not with him? If you have never believed in him, and repented of sin, and yielded obedience to his command, if you do not own him in your daily life to be both Lord and King, I charge you [to] lay down the profession which is so dishonouring to him. If he be God, serve him; if he be King, obey him; if he be neither, then do not profess to be Christians. Be honest and bring no crown if you do not accept him as King."

What shall be our response? I suggest that we weave him yet another crown with our praises, our love, our devotion, and our hearts.

Conclusion: