

THE CROSS

... how appealing and smart is it?
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
February 21, 2010

Last Sunday we noted that we have been given our “spiritual driver’s license” – our official document from God that indicates that we have been ...

SANCTIFIED

- an **official change has taken place so that we are no longer who we once were. Jesus Christ has forever made us different. We are never just “ordinary” again.**

”... CALLED TO BE HOLY”

... moving past being a card-carrying Christ-follower, to living out visible holiness.

Holiness does not come naturally to us. It is difficult, hard ... in reality it is so humungous that it is impossible for us.

Yet ...

- **God asks big things of us, but He also comes loaded with unlimited resources (GRACE)**

- **Our pronounced and obvious inconsistency is more than matched by God’s dogged persistence (FAITHFULNESS)**

That is good stuff ... but think for just a second – We get great benefits but have done nothing for them?

We get a fantastic deal and with no contribution?

Where else in all of the world can you be given such a bonanza and not have to pay anything for it?

... even in lotteries you have to pay a few bucks to buy a ticket.

This cannot be real.

So we get this “spiritual driver’s license” telling us that we are God’s and that we are “in” for eternity, BUT WE FIND THAT PEOPLE AROUND US are telling us to get off our high horse and quit preaching Jesus. They can live their lives just fine without Him.

We show them our “God credentials” and what He has done for us and they say, “Oh, that’s nice, but I don’t believe that. God may help you, but not me.”

It is not just our North American society that struggles with God-matters. The entire world struggles with God and the way He operates.

The BIG PROBLEM remains – how do we get ordinary people to be good and not do evil?

What separates us is the solution.

If we look at the fine print on our “spiritual driver’s license” we will read that the solution **requires that we look not through our own eyes, but through Christ’s eyes.**

The BIG SOLUTION does not require US doing something else or something better.

The BIG SOLUTION has already been given ... we just need to accept it.

The big solution ... is found in what Jesus accomplished on a non-descript cross just outside the city limit’s of the middle eastern town called Jerusalem some 2000 years ago.

... and people all around us say, "Yea, right. Get real. Jesus may have been one great person, but being THE SOLUTION for the world ... not a chance!"

It doesn't make sense.

No one person has that much pull.

It is not logical.

How could it be? ... I mean, be reasonable!

Good questions ... let's not duck them. Good tough questions deserved thoughtful answers.

To **TAKE LIFE BACK ... INTELLIGENTLY** ... is going to require clear thinking in an emotionally charged environment.

So why do we still "cling to the old rugged cross"?

Why, for crying out loud, does God's Church have to incessantly talk about Jesus' death on the Cross?

We know that society is not at all impressed with what God did in Jesus ... that response we should expect from society.

What bothered this writer was that this was also the response of God's Church.

The people of God were subtly drifting from the Cross ... and that should never happen if we realize what the Cross conveys.

... an old friend from bible school. don't know if you remember him. he came to stay at our house once ...brief background: he's always been into the "deeper, philosophical" aspect of things. him

and his wife are....

I went to church for Ash Wednesday, and its the first time I've been to church in a long time. A long long time. I haven't really gone lately because - to be perfectly honest - I don't really know why I would go. I find it extremely hard to believe in anything at this particular juncture in my life, and the notion of having faith in something seems virtually inconceivable because its so counter-intuitive right now.

I've always been a Christian, I was raised Christian, went to Christian college, studied Christian theology, and lived my life generally according to Christian values (whatever "Christian values" happen to be). I've always believed in Christianity, in Jesus Christ, and that the meaning of life was very directly and simply defined by Christianity as it related to Jesus Christ on the Cross. Now however, the whole things seems a little too murky - a little too opaque all the way through - and I find myself not really believing - not with the conviction I once did - in the Christian message.

It's not that I decidedly do not believe in Christianity, its more that I don't really believe in believing at all. Being Christian isn't the problem, its just Being in general. I can't really believe in anything anymore; I just can't see how anything could possibly ever mean anything at all. Nothing makes or has any sense whatsoever, and I don't know how it happened. It's not even that I doubt, or that I'm a skeptic - the idea of doubting seems like a naive to me: as if it is doubt has any meaning to direct itself toward...

I keep thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness, in the introduction, when he talks about how its impossible to believe in anything ever again like we did before the 2nd world war, after the whole social structure of meaning has failed so totally.

So anyway, this year I was thinking about what I should give up for lent (for anyone reading this that is not familiar with the Church calender and the practices that go along with it, lent is the 40 day period prior to Easter in which its customary for you to give up something your used to having to), and after thinking for awhile and almost deciding it was just a pointless exercise, I decided to give up not believing in anything, and I also decided to give up not telling anyone about how I don't really believe in anything anymore.

My plan is then, that I'll blog everyday of Lent, because I'm not really sure how else to start believing in things. So everyday I'm going to explore a different facet of my non-belief, and where it may have come, and see how I feel by Easter.

Hopefully I'll have myself sorted.

Is the “cross of Christ” so old that it is no longer effective?

Key Thought:

The God of the Bible is discounted because His calculations do not make good sense to the average person on the street; ... but we, His Church, should know better.

We jump into the letter as it is unfolding.

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The Cross

- **God's most brilliant and powerful act?**
- **God's miscue or miscalculation, a clear indication that God had lost, and not won?**

1. The effectiveness and value of the cross is determined not by taking a poll, but by God's decree 1:17-21

We can look at what is out there through our own eyes ... or God's.

Just because a person says something, it does not mean that what has been said is true.

Just because our kids think that we are merciless, cruel and harsh, does not mean that we as parents are that. It may be that we have just stepped on their selfishness ... and their selfishness has yet to come to grips with parental wisdom and love.

With kids we understand their immature thinking. But when it comes to adults, we somehow change the rules of engagement.

In order to not hurt people's feelings we come up with a brilliant statement like:

One opinion is just as good as another.

... not true!

Some opinions are plain ridiculous and dumb.

God is not into taking a poll and letting the majority opinion run the show.

God runs things by decree, by laying out the principles ... whether we like them or not. God lives in reality and this is how things actually work.

It was God who thought up of the strategy of having His Son, Jesus Christ, die on the cross for our sin. He decided that ... for reasons that we hope to see shortly.

God's plan, His actions – the cross - can be seen as

- (It is) ... ridiculous if you reject God (both His analysis and actions) - 18

If we think that ...

- we are okay just the way we are
- we not in any trouble or danger
- we live for hopefully 80, 90 or a 100 years ... good. That's it - there is no life after death so there is nothing else for which we need to prepare.
- there is no great God out there to whom we need to answer
- no one is perfect so let's not get too upset with our failures

The Cross is absolutely a waste of one great and good life, if we are not in any trouble.

... the message of the cross is foolishness ... to those who are perishing (they either do not know it, do not accept it, or don't care)

Maybe the BIG PROBLEM is not sin ... Maybe we could get more done and be far more effective if we focused on a new cause.

Would it not be a tad-bit refreshing if God's people, instead of being so locked into the Cross of Christ, would get a new image, a new rallying point ...

... **humanitarianism** - and we could be Jesus' hands to the poor?

... **social justice** – and tackle the big corporations or corrupt governments

... **standing for economic equality** – and distribute the world's wealth more fairly

... **a peace movement** – providing counseling and therapy from life's little and big stresses

... **promoters of education** – if people see the picture they will want the solution. They are smart enough to make the right choices.

Is the Cross an absolute necessity?

Can someone die to save another person?

Is it possible to transfer one's accomplishments to the benefit of others?

Our approach to problems is more like this:
(Complete the following statements)

- If you are part of the problem, then you need to be a part of the solution.
- Don't expect something for nothing
- You've got it in you.
- Don't just sit there, do something!
- If you've broken it, then fix it.
- Get your act together.

This is how we think. It is normal. That's the way we work every day. If we make a mess, then we need to fix it.

God, though did things differently.

On the other side of this emotionally charged issue is this:

... to us who are being saved it (the cross) is the power of God.

- (The cross) Gives eternal life when embraced - 18

If ...

- we not okay
- we are in trouble or danger
- after we live these lives and there IS MORE life after death
- we find out that there is a great God out there to whom we need to answer
- we realize that we don't meet up to God's perfection ... and therefore we have a very serious problem

... and we see Jesus as God's SAVIOR for our BIG PROBLEM – sin; then the Cross is the greatest solution.

Then that which happened at the cross works; it is extremely practical and down to earth.

It may not be flattering, but it is effective.

It clearly shows that God can do what we were unable to do – get us straightened out and “saved”.

This is definitely a different way to handle our BIGGEST PROBLEM.

What happened at the cross is this ...

- God takes on the world's elite and outwits them - 19-20

¹⁹For it is written:

**"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."**

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

The best people, the elite, the ones with the best brains, with the greatest expertise, ... God ignored.

That is what He did at the cross.

- It is startling to think that the world's best did not make room for God, but God made room for the world - 21

²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, ... God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

The deep thinkers, the scholastically recognized, even the religious contingent ... missed it.

They did not find God for the same reason a thief cannot find a policeman.

... they were not looking for Him. They did not want Him.

Those who accepted what God did, experienced God's work that instantly saved them and keeps them from today on and into eternity.

We've been talking in generalities. Let's get specific. Here is ...

2. Why people can look at the same event (Christ's death on the cross), yet come to such different conclusions

²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The religious camp (Jews):

These are the Bible thumpers ... the people who are familiar with the God of the Book. These are no religious rookies. These people have been close to God. Their conclusion ...

Jesus did not deliver.

... Why would we commit ourselves to a failure?

The Jewish people were God's people. If anyone knew God, it was them. They had hundreds of years of live experience with Him.

These were insiders.

But they got it all wrong at the cross.

How could that be?

Here is how this group – the religious – would explain their rejection of Jesus:

Proof is measurable. You can see it. You can handle it. You cannot trick your mind into accepting what has not worked – that is self-deception.

²²Jews demand miraculous

The clincher: Show us! ... give us the evidence ... proof is what we want.

The religious people wanted hard core proof; irrefutable evidence.

Put Jesus onto the stage.

Is Jesus really GOD ... THE SAVIOR OF ALL OF HUMANITY.

Conclusion (for the religious contingent):

DEFINTELY NOT.

Why:

Throughout history God had worked on behalf of His people. He had come through for them time and time again, on a number of occasions, in miraculous fashion.

God had sent special representatives to get them through tight times – prophets, leaders, kings, priests.

He made a promise that they have never forgotten. Somewhere in the future God promised to send them a LEADER par excellence ... ONE SPECIALLY SELECTED BY GOD HIMSELF - in Jewish words this one is called the MESSIAH.

For centuries the people waited for God to deliver on His word.

This MESSIAH would give them peace from their enemies, a homeland ... a country in which to live, security, and prosperity.

The One who could pull this off would obviously have God's backing. He would be the true-blue leader.

So Jesus steps onto the scene and announced that He was God's Special Sent One – the Messiah.

The establishment checks Him out ... and rejects Him for the following reasons:.

1. He thinks He is God, but He is there before their eyes, a mere human being.

God is not a human being.

2. He does not validate His Messiahship at their demand (Matthew 12:38, Mark 8:11)

Jesus did miracles, but on His own time schedule, not theirs.

When they asked for proof, He never produced.

The clincher ...

3. He does not succeed ... clearly proven in the manner of His death

Messiah, to any thinking person means power, glory, freedom, prosperity, winning.

But if when Jesus died, He was the Messiah, then messiahship had just been redefined to mean weakness, disgrace, insignificance, subjection, shameful loss.

Further ...

He didn't just lose. He lost bad ... in a big way, in an embarrassing way.

He was powerless to resist arrest. He was a limp rag ... clearly no leader to speak of, definitely not one who stood up to the Romans, the big, bad bullies on the world scene.

Jesus died on a cross, stretched out between heaven and earth, not at all in control of His destiny.

... and God had told the Jewish people this:

Deuteronomy 21:22-23

²² If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, ²³ you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

If you see someone hung out to dry, ... left to shamefully die on a tree ... mark that person ... They are cursed by God ... and they have gotten what they had coming to them.

Those that get strung out on a tree are to provide a sobering lesson to everyone observing: You do not listen to God ... this is what happens to you.

Criminals, violators of God's law, die for their wrongs ... they die shamefully, exposed to a watching crowd that learns ... God is not mocked.

So ... on the basis of the Bible – God’s Word – Jesus could not be the Messiah.

Jesus, strung out on a cross, was a person who was cursed by God – God Himself said so.

These people had God figured out. They knew how God worked ... and this wasn’t the way.

A dead leader makes a very poor savior.

You cannot call a loser a winner ... and be serious.

Those that God Himself has labeled as cursed ... cannot have God’s approval on them.

God shows His approval of a person by blessing them with good things (health, prosperity, family, friends, success), not with loss, trouble, unjust treatment and a humiliating death.

You don’t kill your leader, your best person. You protect them at all costs.

Had Jesus been “the Son of God”, God would most definitely have protected Him.

But Jesus’ embarrassing death on a cross proved that not even God was supporting Him.

He was a fake. Not the real Messiah.

Honestly, this Bible stuff doesn’t make sense to us.

It only makes sense if we see it, not through our eyes, but God’s.

Newsweek religion editor Kenneth L. Woodward writes:

Clearly, the cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other Jesus.

In Judaism there is no precedent for a Messiah who dies, much less as a criminal as Jesus did.

In Islam, the story of Jesus’ death is rejected as an affront to Allah himself.

Hindus can accept only a Jesus who passes into peaceful *samadhi*, a yogi who escapes the degradation of death.

The figure of the crucified Christ, says Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, "is a very painful image to me. It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus."

There is, in short, no room in other religions for a Christ who experiences the full burden of mortal existence—and hence there is no reason to believe in him as the divine Son whom the Father resurrects from the dead.

That the image of a benign Jesus has universal appeal should come as no surprise. That most of the world cannot accept the Jesus of the cross should not surprise, either. Thus the idea that Jesus can serve as a bridge uniting the world's religions is inviting but may be ultimately impossible.

Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Other Jesus," Newsweek (3-27-00), p.50

- The non-religious (Greeks):

God does not act this way.

It is inconceivable that Jesus, if He was God, would do this.

This is out of character of God.

If this were to happen it would be classified as divine insanity.

Think for a moment - If **WE** were "God" and were running the show, here is how we would act.

If we were God ...

- 1. We would stay away from people and remain in our own heaven. We would not mingle with corrupt humanity.**
- 2. If we allowed for people, everyone of them would do what we desired.**
- 3. And people who hassled us, we would just get rid of them.**
- 4. At no time would we give up what was ours to pay for their mistakes or foolish behavior.**

If they created a mess, let them fix it.

- 5. Under no circumstances would we give up being God, become like one of them, and "save" them at our peril.**

God is almighty; He does not step into weakness or give up His life.

Would God in His right mind would give up perfection for a people who consistently blow it? ... get serious.

So to those who think, who use their intellect, who are reasonable – Jesus could not be the BIG SOLUTION to our problem.

Absolutely not.

Think for a moment about what is being said.

Would God, the Great One, be this condescending, this compassionate, this caring, this kind, to people who were wrecking His creation?

Would God, the Great One, allow His Son to be crucified for people who rejected Him?

To people, the non-religious, this would never happen. It is inconceivable.

It makes sense only if we would see matters not through our eyes, but God's.

In March of 1956 (when I was about 6), a tall, pale, white man stumbled into my home village of Dibagat in the northern jungles of the Philippine island of Luzon. The man didn't speak our language, so our elders asked him the best they knew how, "Why are you here?"

"I've come to learn your language," he said. "I'd like to write it down and then give you God's Word in your language."

"Who is your God?" the elders asked.

"He's the God of Heaven and earth," the man answered. "He's the Creator of the universe. He created you, too."

"Is he powerful?" the elders probed. "More powerful than the spirits that have controlled our lives from the beginning of time? Is he more powerful than our ancestors, the head-hunters?"

"Yes, he's more powerful."

Hopeful, we started teaching this man, Dick Roe, our language. Maybe his God could free us from the spirits.

When I was about 13, Dick had to return to the United States to raise support for his ministry. But before he went back, he

translated the Gospel of Mark and gave me a copy. While he was gone, I started reading the Bible for the first time, beginning with the Easter story and continuing through chapter 16. Sitting on top of a rock, I read the Gospel of Mark in my heart language. It felt like I was actually there, seeing the characters.

But the further I read, the more distressed I felt. A mob of people came to get Jesus out of the Garden of Gethsemane. What did he do wrong? I read as fast as I could. They accused him of all kinds of false things. They mocked him, spat on him, beat him, and took him before Pilate. Then the scourge and the crown of thorns. It was excruciating to read that they forced him to carry a wooden cross and then nailed him to it.

Deep in my heart, a hatred of God swelled. I shook my fist and shouted:

"I hate you, God, for being so powerless! Why should I believe in a powerless God like you?"

With all my strength I threw the Gospel of Mark down to the rocks and started walking home. I couldn't understand why God wouldn't protect his own Son. Our headhunters defended us to the death. Because of them, no one could touch us. I wanted a god like that—someone who would protect me from the spirits that demanded we sacrifice our cows, chickens, pigs, and dogs.

This God didn't even save his own Son.

Suddenly, God reached down into my heart. "Nard, don't you understand?" I heard him say. "That's how much I love you. I gave my Son on your behalf." For the first time, I understood grace. I understood how much God loved me.

"God, if you love me that much," I prayed, "I want to give you my life, my heart. It's all yours." I went back and picked up my Gospel, brushed it off, and sat back on that rock to see what happened next.

It was an incredible moment as I read that Jesus rose from the grave on the third day. Nobody in all of Dibagat, nobody from among the Isnag people, had ever risen from the grave. The resurrection story changed my life.

Nard Pugyao, "Penetrating Power," Decision (July-August 2006), p. 18; ©2006 Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, used by permission, all rights reserved

- Believers:

It is a God-work (saves) and makes God-sense

Believers do not need to park their brains to believe in Jesus' death as payment for their sin.

The cross is not an intellectual embarrassment.

A crucified Savior was the twist in God's work that opened the door for God to reach down to us ... and if He hadn't – we would never have had the opportunity to be saved ... never.

What we could not do on our own, God did for us.

Jesus – God - bent so low, He did the unthinkable.

- He stepped down from heaven into our world
- He became like us – but without any faults.

He bent even lower.

- He didn't come as one great intellectual, occupy a throne in a palace, throw money around to display His wealth.
- He was rather ordinary, human.

He bent even lower.

- Though like us, He became a servant ... God a servant?

Instead of everyone serving Him, He served us.

.... and then, incredibly, ... He went even lower.

- Jesus died, intentionally, purposefully ... for us.

It was uncalled for.

He did it for us out of the goodness of His heart

He took all our dirty laundry, our sin, our twisted character, our damaged lives ... and through the Cross dealt with it all – fully, completely, perfectly.

²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

This is God at His best. Here we see the absolute intellectual superiority of God and His incredible strength.

Since Jesus went so low, there is no one beneath His saving ability.

Does it make sense?

Who wins by losing?

Who lives by dying?

Who becomes first by being last?

Who receives the most by giving all they have?

Who gets to the top by living at the bottom?

Who conquers by surrender?

God does.

He's turned life right-side up.

It only makes sense if we see it, not through our eyes, but God's.

That is why the next words we read say ...

²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

- God's insignificant acts are more noteworthy than humanity's greatest accomplishments

MOVE TO THE LORD'S TABLE.

Seeing things God's way

This morning we gather at the Lord's Table.

A table with one food item and one drink item.

It is a table – a place for us to gather and eat.

It is a table that remembers the cross – the act that did it all for us,

It is a table to which we come humbly, seriously, and joyfully.

These two items tell us ...that while ...

Key Thought:

The God of the Bible is discounted because His calculations do not make good sense to the average person on the street; ... but we, His Church, should know better.

This was no dumb act, no mistake where God got in above His head and couldn't pull it off.

This was God taking care of every last detail so that when He saved us, no one could accuse Him of ...

- rigging matters

- not being completely truthful

- taking short-cuts

1. The Cross is so central to everything that happens for us that if we do not understand His work, things start to fray.

That is why the Church of God in Corinth was being torn apart.

They didn't understand how important Jesus' death was and how far it reached into their daily lives.

Believe it or not, our squabbles with our spouse or friend or boss, indicate that we are not appreciating what Jesus completed at the cross.

Jesus' death affects everything we do. It is of such significance for us as Christ-followers.

I used to struggle with [overconfident intelligentsia] while living in Boston. I would leave the town of Lexington, where my family and I lived, and I would drive past the towers of Harvard University. Another mile down the road, on the left, sits the campus of MIT, and to the right, the campus of Boston University. Straight ahead were the towering headquarters of many great multinational corporations.

There were moments when I was tempted to be intimidated by these unmitigated, unadulterated symbols of power. Here were great world leaders being trained in the business school at Harvard. Over at MIT, signals bounced off Mars every 30 seconds. In those towers, decisions were being made that created and destroyed the economies all over the world. And who was I? What was our congregation with this Christian gospel trying to preach?

That's what was happening in the Corinthian church. They were intimidated by all the talk of so-called intelligent people who said the Cross is silliness. Paul tells us not to buy it. It has never been true, and it's not true today. God is going to show the wisdom of men and women to be rank foolishness. For the wise, the Cross must be in its central place.

Gordon MacDonald, "The Centerpiece of the Gospel," Preaching Today, Tape No. 137.

In a few minutes we are going to leave this place ... but don't forget about THE CROSS.

Most everyone else will not even think of it.

But we are different.

Remember, we have our “official spiritual document” indicating that we are different – holy.

What makes us like that is fully powered by the cross.

2. God does things so differently and the cross shows us just how different God wants us to be.

We can only be different as we let the truth of Christ’s cross be expressed through our mind, speech, hands, feet, how we handle our money, ... everything.

The cross explains “differentness” but not “distance”.

This cross is a live example of what it is like to follow Christ in relationships that are not perfect, in a work environment that is raunchy.

The cross ... here is where holiness is made understandable and attainable through Jesus Christ.

3. Again God stretches us beyond comprehension. How will we ever learn this? ... and that is what comes next in 1 Corinthians 2.

What is so hard to get, God teaches us, in His way, by His Holy Spirit, ... what we anticipate we will examine next Sunday, Lord willing.

4. The cross really is God’s wisdom and power. This is why Jesus is central to everything God does.

Get the order right.

- as our Savior from sin

There is no other way to handle humanity’s biggest problem.

- as our example for living

- as our hope for eternity

That is what we show as we participate at this “table”.

We are saying, “Jesus ... it all starts with Him ... works all the way ... it all ends with Him”.

We get to see God because Jesus died for us.

Here, at this “table” we express to Him our thanks for His incredible work.