

**“The Gospel Of The Crucifixion
1 Corinthians 1:17-24**

September 1, 2019

SI: This is a sermon series on the Gospel. We started out by asking:
What is the Gospel?

We saw that in the big picture, the Gospel is everything in the Bible,
it’s the whole grand story of God redeeming this fallen world.

But more specifically, the Gospel is the proclamation of salvation through Christ.

Then we asked two more questions?:

Why do we need the Gospel?

What does it mean to believe the Gospel?

Last Sunday we asked another question: What is the content of the Gospel?

If it’s good news, what exactly is that news?

There are many important and true teachings in the Bible that we have to know that
give us a context for understanding the Gospel.

But those statements about judgment aren’t, strictly speaking, the good news.

The content of the good news is the incarnation,

the crucifixion,

and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

INTRO: A number of years ago I was in Dallas at the General Assembly of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America.

My hotel was a few blocks from Dealey Plaza, where President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. So one evening during the supper break, I walked over to see it. Even though that happened before I was born, it resonated with me because my parents had mentioned it so many times while I was growing up—where they were when Kennedy was shot.

The events of 9/11 certainly have a larger grip on the present generation than Kennedy's assassination, but everyone would still agree that it was a watershed moment for our country.

If there ever could be said to have been an age of innocence in American history, it ended in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963.

As much of a watershed as that event was, it pales in comparison to another death. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago is still exercising its influence on human history and the life of every person.

Even those who are not followers of Christ cannot escape the presence of the cross. The cross marks the graves of countless thousands.

Who can forget the cross that was raised at the ruins of Twin Towers?

The cross has been reproduced in gold and silver jewelry and worn by many.

The cross is emblazoned on the flags of many nations.

Churches are built in the shape of the cross—as this sanctuary is.

Poets and hymn writers and artists have used their skill to depict the cross.

And deeper than these physical manifestations, for 2000 years the cross has given hope and meaning to the lives of vast multitudes of people.

A few weeks ago we had some AIRBNB guests from Minnesota who were on their way to Gulf Shores. They were very different from us in their political views, but we had something in common at a deeper level—the cross of Jesus Christ. No event has had a greater impact on human history and no event so connects this life with the world to come as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In this passage Paul uses the phrase “preaching the Gospel” interchangeably with the phrases “the message of the cross” and “preaching Christ crucified.”

So for Paul, the content of the gospel is the cross.

And one of the major points he makes is how people respond to the crucifixion.

He says in verse 22 preaching Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews

and foolishness to Gentiles and in verse 18 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. Let's use those two verses as an outline for this passage.

If you're taking notes you can write down the two points like this.

1. The cross in the first century Roman world
2. The cross in the eternal plan of God

MP#1 So let's consider first, the cross in the first century Roman world

Jesus Christ was not born at a random time and place in history.

God sent his Son into the world at a very particular time.

He was born in Judea when that country was ruled over by the Roman Empire.

One of the unique things about that particular time was the use of crucifixion. The Romans didn't invent crucifixion, but under Roman law and polity it became part of their penal system.

The Roman Empire was made up of a great many subjugated nations like Judea.

In addition, 30-40% of the population were slaves.

The Romans used crucifixion as an instrument of terror to keep those people in line.

Anyone who rebelled against Rome was crucified, common criminals were also crucified. Crucifixions were public events and the horror of them was not only the gruesome physical pain, but the degradation and humiliation.

Isaiah 53 prophecies the suffering of Christ and there is a line that says:

“Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised . . .”

Crucifixion as a form of death fulfilled that prophecy.

The Mediterranean world was a shame and honor culture, so being shamed and degraded was a fate worse than death.

Crucifixion combined physical torture with psychological and social humiliation through nakedness and mockery.

It was intended to dehumanize the victim to such a degree that even people who might have sympathized with him, like his fellow countrymen or his fellow slaves, would recoil when they saw him.

Crucifixion was considered to be so horrible, that Roman citizens convicted of capital crimes could not be crucified.

They had to be executed in a more swift and dignified way.

Historians have noted that educated, upper class Romans understood crucifixion was a necessary tool to keep themselves in power, but it was so barbaric that it was bad manners to talk about it in society.

That was the Roman view, how did the Jews view crucifixion?

The Jews were conflicted about crucifixion. Here's what I mean.

Many of Jews suffered crucifixion at the hands of the Romans.

The country of Judea never completely accepted Roman occupation.

There was always resistance, so lots of Jews were crucified.

Their fellow Jews saw them as patriots dying for the nation.

But because Judaism had become a legalistic religion, there was always the thought

in the Jewish mind that if a person died such a horrible, humiliating death, then that was probably God's judgment for some sin in his life. There was this verse in the Old Testament that said anyone who was hung on a tree was cursed and they applied that to crucifixion. That's why Jesus' enemies wanted him crucified rather than killed some other way. Because in the Jewish mind, crucifixion would be proof of rejection by God. And that would definitely rule out Jesus as the Messiah.

Do you see how crazy it must have sounded to first century Jews and Gentiles when Christians spoke of worshipping a crucified Messiah? Or when they regarded the cross itself as a symbol of their life and hope?

We have something similar to crucifixion in American history and culture. It's not a perfect analogy but I'm talking about lynching. Lynching was used as an instrument of terror to keep black people in line. It was a dehumanizing act. There was a carnival atmosphere and mutilation of the body was encouraged. Educated, upper class white people thought it was shameful so it wasn't a topic for conversation in polite society.

As I said, the analogy isn't perfect, because unlike first century Jews, black Americans didn't have a conflicted view of lynching. They didn't view it as God's judgment against victims. But comparing the two does give us a better understanding of how evil it was for the Jewish crowd to urge the Romans to crucify Jesus. Imagine a crowd of black people in the 1930s shouting for the white authorities to lynch a fellow black man. Lynch him! Why? What crime has he committed? Lynch him! Lynch him! His blood be us and on our children.

Or imagine making little hangman's noose pendants out of gold or silver and wearing them on a necklace as jewelry. Think how crude and obscene it would be for a white person to wear that and how ignorant and self-hating it would be for a black person to wear it. If this example is making you uneasy, then you're getting just a tiny feel for how crucifixion was viewed in the Roman world of the first century. The idea that a person would worship a crucified man and claim this man was God in the flesh and the Messiah of Israel was absurd and offensive.

There is some ancient graffiti that archaeologists discovered in Rome in a dormitory for imperial pages. Imperial pages were upper class young men who were

training for civil service. Equivalent of getting an internship in Washington DC
The graffiti discovered in their dorm was drawn around the year 200.
It's a crucified man, but instead of having a man's head, he has a donkey head.
Standing next to the cross is another man with his hand raised.
Written underneath it says: Alexamenos worships his God.

One of these pages named Alexamenos was a Christian, his fellow pages knew he
was a Christian, and they were mocking him for his ridiculous religion.
What kind of god would be crucified? A god with a donkey's head.
You would have to be a fool to worship that kind of god.
A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

I think this historical exercise is helpful for us to be reminded of what a uniquely
painful and shameful death Christ died. It's easy to miss that being separated
by time and culture.
It makes us realize that the important question is not: Why did Jesus have to die?
But, why did he have to die that death?
Why did he have to be crucified?

The answer to that question presents itself when you consider . . .

MP#2 The cross in the eternal plan of God

There was a common thread between the Jewish and the Gentile rejections of the Christian message about the cross of Jesus.

Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles thought their sin deserved the wrath of God.

Judaism of Jesus' day had abandoned the teaching of the Old Testament about sin and sacrifice and God's grace and had replaced it with a moral system for getting to heaven.

In fact, the rabbis argued about how righteous a person had to be to get into heaven.

Some said almost 100%, others said anything over 51%, others something less. But you do your part and God's mercy will tip the scales.

The religion of the Greeks and Romans was very different from the Jews, but in one respect it was very much the same.

It had no fear of sin or the judgment of God. It was actually a religion that mostly had to do with acquiring happiness in this life and didn't give much attention to the world to come.

Paul says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

They are perishing because they don't know they are perishing.

They don't have any conception of their need for salvation.

Paul said this about himself in Romans 7.

His said Christ never made sense to him until he realized he was a sinner, deserving of God's judgment, and in desperate need of forgiveness.

Most people think sin is a little problem. It's something to be managed.

You do the best you can, God overlooks some of the bad things you've done, and that's it. It all works out.

Virtually everybody thinks that deep down they're a good person and that their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds.

They may have done some bad things, but those aren't deserving of God's wrath.

They don't deserve to die and go to hell.

But God makes it perfectly clear in his Word that sin is an immense problem.

It's a horrendous problem that we don't have the power to solve but it must be solved if we are going to find peace with God and escape his judgment.

The cross was such a terrible, revolting, painful, humiliating death because that's what sin deserves. God can't just overlook sin.

Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?

Punishment can't be just waved away. Someone has to pay. That's justice.

But punishment can be suffered by another in our place. That is love.
And the two together—justice and love—is the meaning of the cross.

Theologians have coined a phrase to about Christ's death, that phrase is penal substitutionary atonement.

Penal has to do with punishment, particularly God's just punishment for sin, which Christ suffered on the cross.

Substitutionary refers to someone standing in the place of another person, offering himself on behalf of others, which Jesus did for us on the cross

Atonement means justice has been satisfied so people can be reconciled to God, and that's what Jesus Christ does for through the cross.

The penal substitutionary atonement has always been challenged.

People ask questions like:

Why couldn't God just forgive?

Why was this punishment required?

How could it be right for the death of an innocent person to count as the punishment for guilty people? That wouldn't be right in human courts, why is it ok for God?

All of those are good questions, but Jesus makes it clear this is why he died.

He said the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

He said: I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

He said: No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

And when you understand all this and believe it—

that you deserve the wrath of God for your sins—

but that God in love sent his Son to die the death you should have died—

and that Jesus willingly laid down his life, then the cross becomes lovely to you.

How does Paul put it?

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

A number of years ago there was a PBS series on the major world religions.

It took the approach that religion is a projection of basic human needs and wishes. All people have basic human longings and all people have religious imagination.

So people express and project these longings through all the various rituals, practices, and beliefs of the world religions.

Being PBS, you would expect it to argue that all religions are basically the same, and it did. But when it came to Christianity, they blinked.

“Christianity is the only major religion to have as its central focus the suffering and degradation of its God. The crucifixion is so familiar to us . . . that it is hard to realize how unusual it is as an image of God.”

What the writers of this series were admitting is that they couldn't see how the central focus of Christianity could have arisen out of religious imagination.

Nobody would imagine that their spiritual condition is so bad that there is absolutely nothing they can do to save themselves, and that they deserve eternal suffering and degradation for their sins.

And nobody would then imagine the suffering and degradation of their God as the way to salvation and fulfillment and happiness.

Because all the other world religions present some kind of belief, ritual, or morality as a system of self-salvation. And whatever gods or forces there are respond positively and this results in the desired outcome.

But the cross is not a system of self-salvation.

It announces God's justice for sin and that mankind is doomed in its sin. And at the same time it announces that God became a man and suffered the pain and degradation I deserve, so that I can be reconciled to God.

As pointed out at the beginning, the cross 2000 years later looms over human life. As a religious symbol, there's not another one that even comes close to provoking such strong reactions.

But of course it's not the cross as a symbol we're talking about.

It's the message of the cross, the good news, Christ crucified for you.

I've participated recently in the funerals of three believers, which is both a great privilege and a cause for sober reflection.

Some of you here are old, many of you are young.

But your last day in this world will come to you sooner than you think.

And all you have worked for in this world and so much of what you counted important will fall away from your sight.

You will feel the whole world giving way under you.

And if you are like many, as everything slips away, you will grasp at anything: your bed sheets, your wife's hand, your son's arm, the air you breathe.

What will you hold to in that final moment? What will be there for you to grasp?

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling.