

The Crucifixion: The Primacy of the Cross

1 Corinthians 13

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,

March 19, 2023

Where the Elite Meet to Eat

I have mentioned before that we were financially strapped when I was growing up. Oklahoma had been crushed during an oil bust and my parents divorced, putting us forever behind the financial eight-ball. The only time during my childhood when I felt like something was the occasional visit to the Oakwood Country Club to eat Sunday brunch after church. My grandpa who did have some means clung to that membership. While he wasn't always the most generous man, he did allow us to eat with him, at least until he retired when I was in grade school.

I would walk in after watching the valet park my mom's ratty big blue van and look at all the fancy pictures and couches that were leftover from a swanky 70's catalogue. Then I would borrow both a tie and a sport coat (Sundays required a dress code after all) and get myself situated. We would walk down to the dining room and pass these fantastic looking rooms loaded with these amazing round leather booths, mood lighting and live piano music. One Sunday, my curiosity got the best of me and I pushed through the door. It was the nicest place I had ever seen. It was so much nicer than the Wagon Wheel or Godfather's Pizza or Taco Bandito, our usual Sunday lunch destinations. My mouth dropped agape. Well, clearly my unfamiliarity with such luxury, as well as the stock clip-on tie I borrowed, gave me away. I was swooped up by the wait staff and was told I had to make my way to the main dining room. On my way out, I asked what that room was, and the snobbery was thick in the reply: "This is where the elite meet to eat."¹ I told my dad that and he would use it as the slogan for his sandwich shop that he ran.

There existed in that space a level for elite people, a place that the normal folk simply couldn't be in. It cost you money and status. This was privileged ground and not just for anyone. It was the first time that I realized that this world would hold things in reserve for elite people. There were rooms for the rich. Groups for the privileged. Places for the powerful. And philosophies to be shared only with the enlightened.

¹ I told my dad about that afterwards and he would lift that statement when he opened a sandwich shop called Fat'n'Skinnyies. "Where the elite meet to eat."

This has been prevalent since the first century, this idea that there is a happy and good life to be had. A life free from suffering and struggle that is set aside for the enlightened elite who might attain it. And it is only acquired through knowledge – knowing and believing in just the right things. And if you attain a required basic level of knowledge, you can then advance on to deeper levels of that knowledge. You can move from the regular dining room to the place where the elite meet to eat, think, and live.

In the first century, this focus on a spiritual knowledge set aside for a hierarchy of spiritual accomplishment along with avoiding any struggle or pain in this world was known as Gnosticism. It was and, in some form, remains today as the most significant alternative to the authentic Christianity. In Gnosticism, knowledge and a happy, struggle-free life for the elite few who can attain it is the main goal. And that still exists today. It stands in sharp contrast to what the writers of the New Testament made very clear in the placement of the cross at the very heart of the story.

The Cross

The cross is the climactic revelation that shapes everything that has come before it. The fact of the cross confirms that Jesus's sacrificial life led to his sacrificial death. The primacy of the cross proves the reality of the existence of Jesus Christ. The cross is placed front and center in the Scripture. The cross is placed front and center in Christian theology. It has been this way since the very beginning of the Christian faith. We see this in the letters Paul wrote the Corinthian church.

These were letters written within twenty to twenty-five years of the resurrection – and those letters clarify for both the church in first century Corinth as well as for the Church in 21st century America the unique meaning of the cross.

Gnosticism has been far and away the most popular and pervasive rival to Christianity.² *Gnosis* is the Greek for “knowledge.” Gnosticism is grounded in the belief that only the most privileged spiritual knowledge is the way of salvation. It is knowledge that cannot be shared with just anyone. It is a secret.

² “Modern-day Gnosticism is the natural religion of Americans, including American Christians...Feel-good religion and spiritual pills to elevate our consciousness and enhance our sense of comfort with our presumably ‘real’ selves – these are American specialties of long standing.” Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 117.

Consider all of the cults that hide away “more wisdom” or “deeper meaning” as a lure to get people deeper and deeper into that branch of Gnosticism.

Those deep privileges are not for everyone, mind you. To quote the Buddha himself on his own teaching: “This doctrine is profound, hard to comprehend, rare, excellent, beyond dialectic, subtle, *only to be understood by the wise.*” Do you see the difference? These distorted religions hold in secret deeper, meaningful wisdom. Take in contrast the method of Jesus.

He taught the Disciples privately and that message was then to be made known publicly to everyone. You are to take what you learn personally, privately and then share all of that with the whole, wide, waking world.

“Nothing is covered that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.” (Matt. 10:26-27) Gnostics are mystery-mongers, secret-hoarders. The message of the cross is to be preached to everyone and will appeal to the masses. But the gnostic teachings are only for the elite.

Paul contrasts the knowledge of Gnosticism with the love of Christ and the cross in 1 Corinthians. “Not all possess *gnosis.*” (1 Cor 8:7) Paul is working to correct this heretic snobbery. There is some idea that churches that boldly proclaim and preach the cross and Christ crucified are somehow not sharing enough knowledge or going deep enough – as if there is some mysterious level of knowledge but it is only accessible through special memberships. Paul writes that the cross is God’s subversive plan *to make foolish the wisdom of the world!* Further, Paul redefines *gnosis* or knowledge – especially after it seems one in the Corinthian church sent Paul a letter explaining how special and theologically elite, they were. They notified the Apostle that they “all possess *gnosis.*” Paul tells them that there are limits to knowledge. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.” (1 Cor 8:1-3)

Paul shifts the emphasis from *knowledge* to *agape* and he also reverses the direction of the knowing. It is *God* who has knowledge of *us*, through love. This is the thought that Paul brings together in the infamous 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians that we read at the beginning but will revisit some of it again.

If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all gnosis (knowledge), and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing...Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for gnosis (knowledge), it will come to an end. For we know in part (our gnosis is imperfect) and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end...For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love – but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:2, 8-10, 12-13)

A careful reading in context reveals that this is not a wedding text. It is a strongly worded anti-gnostic text. Paul is attacking the whole concept of privileged spiritual knowledge. He questions it on the grounds of the Day of the Lord. Paul uses double pairings of “now/then” to point to the second coming of Christ. When Jesus returns, human knowledge will be absorbed into the perfect knowledge of God. Paul says that God’s knowledge of us is proven, incarnate in the agape love of Jesus Christ.

The Apostles Paul and John work together in the New Testament to convince us that God loves us, and we are known, fully and completely by him, through the perfect love of Jesus. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..” (John 3:16) God loved everyone and Jesus came to redeem anyone.

In any religion or any church in which this Gnosticism is present, spiritual hierarchy is present. It may not always be obvious, but it is there, hidden behind some sort of door and there is some sort of gate-keeper there making sure you don’t get in unless you are elite. Again, it isn’t always easy to spot because so many of these gnostic programs promise well-being, personal enrichment, deep fulfillment, purpose, and access to divine truth. They often place special emphasis on those who feel marginalized. But eventually that hierarchy reveals itself.

You have to work through various levels of achievement and there are masters or teachers of any and all genders and beyond who lead their disciples through various stages of evolved consciousness. If your giftedness or skillset is more “worldly” – think service, helpers, administrators – you are made to feel inferior to those in leadership who pray easily in public, who lay hands on people,

or who exercise these flashy spiritual gifts. Actions taken in this world requiring kindness, serving, and humility were not valued because it only revealed that a person was living on a lower plane of existence. Which is why the idea of redemptive suffering in the world is foreign to them.

These places often recommend merciful acts out of abundance. But they place little value on suffering for the sake of the world. The idea of a cross, of a Savior dying for the redemption of a person's soul by forgiving their sins, it seems so dirty, earthy and unnecessary to these Gnostics. And virtually all human religion is gnostic, especially that eclectic religiosity of morally therapeutic deism that we see in America today. It emphasized specific individual spiritual experiences according to their own personal truths. There is a corresponding lack of interest in human struggle and suffering. They toss out undemanding rituals like prayer wheels, prayer necklaces, prayer idols and figures.

Even the Dalai Lama – who rates very high on the popularity scale with Americans – said, “We all desire happiness and wish to avoid suffering.”³ Redemptive suffering has long been a central teaching of true and genuine Christianity. We are not called to suffer just for suffering's sake. We are also called to do our best to alleviate suffering in the world. But the Christian faith must be anchored to the teaching and preaching of the cross. The cross means recognizing the reality of suffering both in the world and in our individual lives.

For the gnostic, Jesus is a son of God, but all of us, potentially or actually, are children of God. That is the core teaching concerning Jesus for so many. You can see how that teaching might be more appealing than the idea that we believe. Why suffer? Why go through troubles? We should be able to transcend all of that because aren't we like Jesus too? The Bible is clear on that point as well. While we are made in God's image, we are NOT made of God's substance. So many Christians have “drawn back” from this classical teaching about the cross and they no longer concern themselves with things like the worship or faith of the Church.

You don't have to look far to see people detach your impulses from any sort of established creedal belief system. In other words, you possess within yourself the power to redeem yourself. That is the distortion taught. It means you don't need a cross.

³ Gustav Niebuhr, “For the Discontented, A Message of Hope,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1999.

To those who believe this distortion, the crucifixion is unnecessary. Besides, spiritual enlightenment of the mind means you can avoid suffering. You don't need to worry about sin or those awful consequences that sin brings. And if you don't need to worry about sin, you don't need a savior.

That is why this entire passion narrative – the account of the cross – must be front and center in our lives, homes, teaching and preaching. The cross is the proof of God's love for us. And through that love, we can be fully known by God. It doesn't matter what you know if you don't have the love of Jesus proven through the cross at the very center of your being. Without love, you have nothing. Without love you gain nothing. Without love you are nothing. You can only sort of know things. But you can be fully known. You can have imperfect faith and imperfect knowledge. But one day, face to face with Jesus, you will be known fully, and you will then know fully. And that can only happen to us through the cross.

God the Son

While we see a concerted effort these last few centuries to dismiss the divinity of Jesus. "He was a good man, a good teacher who taught good moral philosophy, but he was not God." It is why creedal imperatives that teach Jesus was the only begotten Son of God must continue to inform our lives. However, our culture challenges His divinity often. That is becoming the most widely accepted teaching on Jesus. Many believe that he was a good man but he was not God.

However, in the first century, the opposite was the issue. People denied his humanity, his humanness.⁴ In the first century, with so many deities, redeemers and saviors to choose from, it was easier to claim that Jesus was another deity than to argue for his factual suffering humanity. In those first few centuries, the Church was forced to become militant against the idea that Jesus could be taken out of the world and sidelined as just another god.

If you have ever recited the Nicene or Apostle's Creed, you have recited one of the important pieces of factual proof that Jesus and the cross happened. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ His only begotten Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, he was crucified, died and was buried."⁵

⁴ It was a heresy called Docetism and was a principal enemy of orthodoxy for several centuries.

⁵ The first stanza of the Apostle's Creed. Rich Mullins recorded a song called *Creed* based in this. It is great.

Isn't it strange that some obscure provincial governor has been preserved forever at the heart of the most popular Christian confession in the history of the Church? Pilate is there because he affirms the shockingly specific, historical fact of God's incarnate appearance among us.

The cross must never be assumed. It has to always be both interpreted and applied in our lives. We have to re-place it at the center repeatedly and again. Paul is clear. Our knowledge, as elite and remarkable as it may be, won't be adequate and will leave us empty. But the crucifixion, the cross, is the standard of Christian life and authenticity. Everything in our lives is not measured by what we know, how good our life is or how elite we are. Our lives are measured by perfect love of the cross.

Have you given the cross its true significance in your life?

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

What are some people that you once believed were real and now know they are myths? (William Tell, Pythagoras, Mulan, Betty Crocker, Uncle Sam, Robin Hood, King Arthur)

What would you tell a person who views Jesus similarly? What proof do you have that Jesus was an actual person who walked the earth?

What does the cross mean to you?

How have you given the cross primacy in your life? How have you given it its significance in your own life?

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

WE NEED CANDY DONATIONS for the Easter Hunts we are having this year! Individually wrapped candies, please. Bring them to the church and drop them off in the buckets provided! We also need non-candy prizes for families who are careful to avoid specific dyes and ingredients that may be counter-productive to their children. We need either all natural fruit snacks or toys, bouncing balls, fidgets etc. If you need some ideas, call the office or Pastors Craig or Jason.

Easter Egg Hunt Outreach for Families of Special Needs Children. March 25th at 10:30AM. Sign up to volunteer today! All ages are encouraged to help! Come serve alongside your children and teenagers!

EASTER FLOWER ORDERS. Orders will be taken through Sunday March 19th. Order forms are available and can be turned into the office or prayer boxes. 6 1/2" flowers are \$10 each: Tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils are available.

VBS VOLUNTEER MEETING: MARCH 26th at 10AM in the Fellowship Hall. This will be a brief information meeting for all who are interested in serving during Vacation Bible School on June 19-23.

CHURCH SOFTBALL TEAM! Come out and enjoy a season of softball and fellowship as the FBC Martinsburg softball season is about to begin. This is a competitive softball league with church teams throughout our area. Practices will start April 1st and season games begin the week of April 17th. The season runs through summer and ends in August with a tournament between all teams in the league. Games occur during the week and are played at our Ridge Road field, IBC, and Johnstown in Hedgesville. Games begin at 6:15pm. Both new and experienced players are welcome to join the team, however you must be 18 years or older to play. There is a one-time signup fee of \$23 per player, which is used to cover umpire fees. Sign up at the welcome center if interested.

Maundy Thursday Service and Lunch: April 6th, 11AM. Sign up today to reserve your spot for lunch and the Maundy Thursday service.

Good Friday Worship: April 7th 7PM. Come worship in the shadow of the cross and participate in the Lord's Supper.

Easter Sunrise Service: April 9th, 6:30AM at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Be in your place as we worship during daybreak, in remembrance of the dawning of the good news of the Resurrection of our living Lord Jesus. Mt Zion is located on Short Rd.

Easter Worship Services, April 9th at 9AM and 11AM. Invite friends and come to worship the Risen King!

