

The Crucifixion: The Scandal of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,
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Anonymous Fans

Every so often, a professional sports team's competitive fortunes fall to the point in which even the most ardent fans and supporters feel such shame and embarrassment, that they will wear a paper sack of shame to the games. I remember specifically seeing Cleveland Browns fans wearing paper sacks to the stadium. It was an acknowledgement of how bad things were going for the team. The fans were also saying, "I am ashamed to root for the Browns."

We all have moments like that. There will be times when something we had once proudly supported or associated with has become somewhat embarrassing. We may even be moved to declare being ashamed by our association with it. As a lifelong Denver Broncos fan, I have had several brown-bag moments.

I have even heard Christians claim to be ashamed of their association with Christianity from time to time. Christians and churches are certainly not above acting the fool. And on more than once occasion, I have heard apologies. The Crusades are a difficult topic of conversation. I have heard many express shame in how the Church behaved. Even in the late 20th century, several mainline denominations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, acknowledge shame concerning views surrounding slavery and racism. There was a public apology made on behalf of the entire SBC concerning that.

However, the most scandalous aspect of faith, the most irreligious symbol associated with the church, is not something to be ashamed of. Paul himself said it clearly: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew and also to the Greek." (Rom 1:16)

That is an interesting statement. "I am not ashamed of the gospel." It is a remarkable statement. Nowhere did Buddha or Confucius or Muhammed say, "I am not ashamed" of any central or core tenant of their respective religion.

It you condense down the most important component of any major religion, you will not find perhaps the most influential follower of said religion make a qualifying statement about that most important component like you hear the Apostle Paul claim about the crucifixion.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Why would Paul feel compelled to make such a statement to the believers at the church in Rome? It is hard for us to comprehend almost two thousand years later just how scandalous the message of the cross was to - well, everyone. I invite you to read with me in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 as we consider the scandal of the cross together.

Skandalon

To more clearly understand what Paul is saying, let’s begin with the term *skandalon* (“stumbling block,” “pitfall”) that Paul uses, such as in the phrase “*the skandalon* of the cross.” (Gal 5:11) We get our word scandal from that term, and it fits. But many Christians have been almost conditioned to believe that the scandal was simply the fact of Jesus’s death. However, Paul clarifies for us that it is the *mode* of his death in the crucifixion that is truly offensive.¹ The manner of Jesus’s death has marked the character of the faith for all time. Jesus himself made it the core of our belief himself when he said that anyone who would be His disciple would “take up his cross and follow me.” (Matt. 16:24)

We’ve done a pretty good job over the centuries of scrubbing up the cross. We’ve housebroken it, domesticated it. But we must understand that to the first century, in that Greek-influenced, Roman-elite culture, the cross was obscene. To truly understand the scandalous nature of the cross, we need to understand the abandonment, the dereliction, and the profound sense of alienation that the crucified Son of God experienced on the cross.

As a teenager, when someone would read me the account of the last night of Jesus’s life in the Garden of Gethsemane, I was always so bewildered and gob smacked with all emotional the pain was for the Lord. However, the scandal of the cross has changed that for me. When a believer does have a better understanding of the obscenity of the cross, it makes the agony in Gethsemane the only comprehensible aspect of the entire passion narrative.

¹ Many scholars believe that Paul’s distinctive signature is found in the addition he appears to have made to the early Christian confession in Philippians 2:8: “He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, *even death on a cross.*”

They Didn't Kill Jesus in a Corner

Crucifixion was for the dregs of society, the lowest of the low for non-citizens of the empire. It was always practiced publicly, always in highly trafficked areas to help dissuade people from being so terrible. It was for slaves and terribly criminals. That makes Paul's comment to King Agrippa and Festus that the crucifixion "was not done in a corner." (Acts 26:26). Jesus was executed by the best people – representatives of both the highest religious and governmental authorities. He was publicly, deliberately put to death by people who had no fear of being punished for it by any earthly authority.

Over the centuries, when the image of a cross is used, there is no argument that it is a religious image. However, at the most fundamental level, in that first century, the cross was in no way "religious." It is the most irreligious object ever to find its way into the heart of faith. J. Christiaan Beker refers to it as "this most nonreligious and horrendous feature of the Gospel."²

The crucifixion marks out the essential distinction between Christianity and "religion." It was a stumbling block to the religious – the Jews – because of the scandalous and embarrassing and obscene nature. It meant that Jesus, the rabbi, the self-proclaimed Messiah was really a horrible, no-good heretic who was killed in the most embarrassing manner. And for the non-religious, the Greek or Gentile, it was foolish because of the prominence such a thing would take in a faith system. "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, and so moving, that it is hard to realize how unusual it is as an image of God."³

For the religious, the Jews, the cross was identification with the lowest, worst scum of the earth. For the irreligious Gentiles, the crucifixion was wrenchingly unsuitable as an object of faith. And yet, Paul declares he is not ashamed of the gospel, even with the crucifixion at its very center because it is the power of God for the salvation of anyone who believes.

Not Quite the Right Question

Churches sometimes teach lessons or sermons based on the question, "Why did Jesus have to die?" That isn't really the right question. A better one is, "Why was Jesus crucified?" We don't emphasize just the

² J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 207.

³ A quote from the 1981 PBS television series *The Christians*.

death, but on the manner of the death. This was a slave's death. Jesus died the death of a nobody. "He was despised and rejected by men...he was like someone people turned away from; he was despised, and we didn't value him." (Isa. 53:3) Crucifixion was utilized almost exclusively for the worst of society, the lowest and least.

Through the crucifixion, the Son of God entered into solidarity with the lowest and least of all of his creation: the nameless and the forgotten, what Paul calls "the scum of the earth, like everyone's garbage." (1 Cor 4:13) There is nothing remotely "religious" about this. In this context, we see with interest this Old Testament spring forward: "If anyone is found guilty of an offense deserving the death penalty and is executed, and you have his body on a tree, you are not to leave his corpse on the tree overnight but are to bury him that day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse."

You can see how that phrase, "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse" would stick with a former Pharisee named Saul. No other method of doing away with a person – impaling, hanging, beheading – was ever specifically identified in its religious context as being godforsaken – cursed by God. Crucifixion wasn't just a painful way to die, it was a godforsaken way to die. Don't take my word on it: "*Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani.*" "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?"

"From the very beginning, the Christian faith was distinguished from every other religious surrounding it by its worship of the crucified Christ. In Israelite understanding, someone executed this way was rejected by his people, cursed amongst the people of God by the God of the law, and further excluded from the covenant of life."⁴

To the Gentile intelligentsia of that Hellenistic world, the crucifixion was an embarrassment, the most degrading kind of punishment. For Roman humanists, the "religion of the cross" was unrespectable and perverse. It was offensive to good manners to even talk about it. We need to understand the full ghastliness of crucifixion. It meant shame, embarrassment, and horror. And Jesus, in obedience to God the Father, chose to be crucified.

It makes Isaiah 50:5-6 land with deeper impact. "The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I did not turn back.

⁴ Jurgen Moltman, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 33.

I gave my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who tore out my beard. I did not hide my face from scorn and spitting.” When Jesus Christ chose to take on the sin of the world upon himself, it means, quite specifically, that he suffered the shame and the humiliation that we humans have been heaping on one another for and yet he above all others did nothing to deserve.

The crucifixion has been a difficult aspect of faith for people to accept since it occurred. Paul draws us into the heart of the difficulty that we also share with Christians in the first century. Remember, the church that Paul writes to in Corinth resembles several churches in America today. The parking lot is always full, new services always being added, incredible experiences abound, testimonies shared about lives being changed, no limit to the enthusiasm in the church at Corinth. And yet Paul sees danger ahead for the first and third millennium churches. Because the Corinthians’ life is oriented to the wrong center.

Paul is defending his preaching of the crucifixion. He is arguing against two factors: the rampaging religiosity of the Corinthian Christians and the urbane sophistication of their surrounding city. “Jews demand signs. Greeks seek wisdom.” We could interpret that to read “religious people demand signs and secular people seek wisdom.” The crucifixion is scandalous to religious people in general because it is offensively irreligious. For Christians who aggressively self-promote their spirituality, the cross strips away all the razzle dazzle and places all the importance on Jesus Christ and Him crucified – not some building, not some wonderful preacher, not some great program, not some cozy small group.

Paul is clear. If you are a Christian, your power, your life, your everything comes from the crucifixion because there, in that godforsaken moment, Jesus became sin so that you and I might become His righteousness.
(2 Cor 5:21)

Jesus didn’t become sins – all of the things we do that miss the mark of God’s perfection. He became sin – he took into himself the power of death, hell, separation from God – he became that. Jesus became sin, the thing that holds us helplessly captive and enslaved.

When we read that He became sin, we understand that to mean He was humiliated, degraded, placed lower than low, despised like scum and garbage, so that you and I could instead become holy, righteous, set apart, saved, redeemed, restored, justified, sanctified, and one day glorified. That is what his sacrifice and humiliation makes possible.

I don't know how you view your story, but you need to understand that there is NO triumphant version of your story without HIS sacrifice and suffering at the heart of it.

God, in the person of his sinless Son, put himself voluntarily and deliberately into the condition of the greatest accursedness. And He did it on our behalf and in our place. That is the mind-boggling paradox at the heart of the Christian faith.

Jesus Christ took on the role of the lowest of the low, dying a death that would, to both religious and secular people alike, seem to be obscene and scandalous. He chose a path that would be considered shameful. For religious and secular alike, people might even hide their heads in shame at such a horrifying and embarrassing ending. But not Paul. He was not ashamed by the cross because the godforsaken nature of it is what saves us.

Jesus died the death of those excluded by society? Praise God. Jesus died the death of those foreign to the covenant and promise? Praise God. Jesus died the death of those without hope? Praise God. Jesus died the death of those without God? Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Because that was the death we were supposed to die.

By making himself to be sin, Jesus came to us even when we were as far away from God as possible. Paul said "at that time, you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, foreigners to the covenant of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Eph 2:12-13)

Don't every take for granted the scandal of the cross. Don't let it get to sanitized and don't domesticate its power away. It was the crucifixion that has the power to save everyone who believes.

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

How many crosses do you have in your house?

Can you think of a time in which you were embarrassed to support a team or a person? How did that feel?

How is the message of the cross different from popular secular thinking?

How is the message of the cross different from popular religious thinking?

Paul is insistent on the “word of the cross” being preached. Many churches seem to preach a self-congratulatory message based on the achievements and attainments of the church rather than on the cross of Christ. How would the cross being consistently preached/reflected upon change your life? Your home? Your church?

Have you sanitized the cross in your own life? How might a person do that, diminish the power of the cross?

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Easter Egg Hunt Outreach for Families of Special Needs Children POSTPONED. April 1st at 10:30AM. Sign up to volunteer today! All ages are encouraged to help! Come serve alongside your children and teenagers.

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!

Silver Wings Update: Silver Wings Ministry was going to see "Hello Dolly" on Wednesday July 19th but that showing is sold out. However, they were able to secure 20 seats for the performance on Friday July 21st at 2:30PM. The cost is \$38 for seniors. Interested? Contact Cindy Everhart for more information.

Silver Wings Picnic and Egg Hunt: April 19th, 12PM Bring a brown bag lunch!

1st Quarter Reports Due April 10th: The business meeting is scheduled for Monday April 24th at 6PM. Reports for the book of reports are due by April 10th.

The Constitution and Bylaws Committee has proposed a new constitution and bylaws to replace the current edition being utilized by the church. The church family is invited to read, prayerfully reflect on changes recommended, and vote on at the next business meeting. There will be a Church Town Hall style meeting with Pastor Craig and representatives of the Constitution and Bylaws committee on Sunday April 16th at 4PM at the church if you have any questions about changes being proposed. If you have a smartphone, you can find the new constitution there. Or grab a paper copy if necessary.