

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series that will carry us through the Lenten season up until Easter Sunday, March 31st. I've entitled this series "The cross: why the death of Jesus matters." Over these coming weeks, I will be doing my best to explain what the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross is for us and for the world. For those of you who have called yourself a Christian for a long time, I would encourage you to take to heart the words of David Prior in his commentary on 1 Corinthians: "We never move on from the cross, only into a more profound understanding of the cross."

It is verified history that this Jesus, this Jewish carpenter turned rabbi turned enemy of the state, was murdered around the age of 33 by being crucified, nailed to a cross. Crucifixion was the Romans' way of not just killing criminals but torturing and humiliating them in the worst possible way, as they slowly suffocated to death, hanging naked or covered by the simplest of cloths, for all to see, with nails driven through the wrists and feet. And even though Jesus was no criminal – he was a good teacher, a miracle worker, thought by many to be the eternal Son of God – he was betrayed by his own disciple, slandered by the religious leaders of his own religion, and handed over to the state to be executed.

But was the death of Jesus just a tragic or unjust event? Or did it MEAN something? Was there a PURPOSE or SIGNIFICANCE to it? That is the question we will answer in this series.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us what he believes is the heart of the answer to this question:

1 Corinthians 15:1–10 - Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day **according to the Scriptures**, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to **one abnormally born**. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

There is a lot we could talk about in that passage, but to go back to the beginning of it, Paul wants to remind them of the gospel, the good news. He says that this gospel saves us, which we are going to have to look at more closely in order to understand what we are saved from. And then he tells us that Jesus Christ (Christ means Messiah) died for our sins according to the Scripture, and that he was buried but then rose again. This morning, we are going to seek to understand what Paul meant when he said that “Christ died for our sins.” Why does the cross matter? Why does the death of Jesus matter? Because on the cross, Jesus paid the debt created by our sins. Let’s try to understand what that means by answering three questions:

What is sin?

What are the consequences of sin?

How does Jesus’ death take care of our sin problem?

Firstly:

1) What is sin?

I don’t know how you react when you hear the word sin or sinner, but I know that plenty of people recoil at that word. They have seen that word used as a **weapon**, as people are labeled “sinners.” Or, they recoil at the **negativity** of the word, failing to see how focusing on people’s faults or flaws can be a good thing. If that is you, then bear with me and consider why this term is so important.

Remember that the Bible was primarily written in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). And in those language, there are many different words for sin, with many different nuances, kind of like the Eskimos have so many different words for snow. Here are the three main meanings:

1) Transgression, rebellion against God

Biblical Hebrew and Greek words that convey this perspective include Pasha (revolt or refusal to submit to a rightful authority), Ma’al (breach of trust), Parabasis (transgression of a boundary), Parakoe (disobedience to a voice).

This is when God tells you what you should not do, but you do it anyways. God tells Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil, and yet they eat of it anyways. This is when you know stealing is wrong but you choose to steal anyways. You know you should not lie, but you lie anyways.

2) Missing the mark/falling short of the standard

Biblical Hebrew and Greek words that convey this perspective include Chatha (to miss the mark or deviate from the norm, inaccuracy), Agnoema (ignorance of what one ought to have known), Hettema (the diminishing of what should have been fully rendered), Hamartia (to miss the mark; an offense in relation to God with the emphasis on guilt).

Romans 3:23 - *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

Sometimes sin isn't outright rebellion but just falling short of the standard. God says to love Him with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves, but despite our best efforts, we fall short. Most if not all of us know the feeling of not living up to what we expect of ourselves.

3) Iniquity/crookedness

Biblical Hebrew and Greek words that convey this perspective include Avah, Aval (bent or crooked, lack of integrity, iniquity), Hamartia (the defective internal dimension of a person).

More than doing wrong or not doing what we should, there is something wrong with us, something twisted within us that prevents us from achieving our ideal. Ever since that first rebellion in the garden, every human has become curved in towards themselves, self-centered and full of pride, fear, and a tendency to think of themselves as the center of the universe.

Jeremiah 17:9 - *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*

Romans 7:18 - *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.*

So what is wrong with the world? Yes, there are bad systems. Yes, there is racism. Yes, there are corrupt politics or bad leaders. But these are just symptoms of the deeper problem, manifestations of the true cancer of this world. The real problem is sin, which has corrupted every human heart and every facet of our world. **A**

rebellion against God, a falling short of His holy standard, and a brokenness, twistedness, self-centeredness inside of each of us.

2) What are the consequences of sin?

Sin causes alienation, a broken relationship, in four directions.

- Alienation from ourselves

Brokenness inside, shame and guilt.

Jeremiah 17:9 - The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Our desires are not pure. We do not desire God or what will give us life. The popular phrase “Born this way” is no justification for how we live, for we are all born into sin, broken on the inside. And even though we might want to do what is good, we repeatedly fail to live up to even our own standards, let alone God’s standards.

- Alienation from nature

Instead of harmony with nature, there is brokenness in creation and in our relationship to it. The world is off kilter. Tornadoes and hurricanes and drought. The world is groaning.

Romans 8:22-23 - We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

- Alienation with each other

Sin causes alienation between people, a brokenness in relationships.

James 4:1-2 - What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight

It is easy to see the evidence of sin out there. Son of Hamas. Larry Nassar. Some things are clearly horrific and evil. But sin is not just out there, unfortunately. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, *“The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart.”* And may I suggest to you that the problem is much, much worse than you think.

There is a great book of Puritan prayers called *The Valley of Vision*. Listen to a portion of a prayer from this book:

“Searcher of hearts,
It is a good day to me when thou givest me
A glimpse of myself;
Sin is my greatest evil,
But thou art my greatest good;
I have cause to loathe myself,
And not to seek self-honour,
For no one desires to commend his own dunghill

**My country, family, church
fare worse because of my sins”**

That last line is haunting. Read it carefully. He is not saying “My country, family, church fare worse because of me” like George Bailey in “It’s a Wonderful Life” saying “Everyone would be better off if I had never been born.” This is not some cry for pity and sympathy, as if we are looking for people to tell us that we’re a good person. No, this is an honest admission that our sin has terrible consequences, not just for us but for those around us.

I began serving this church as pastor in 2006 at the age of 30. I did such a stellar job that after only a couple of years, we made the decision to hire an outside mediator to come in because I had made such a mess of things as the pastor with regards to the leadership. My sins – particularly my struggle to deal well with conflict and my poor communication – threatened to destroy this church and my family. People left the church wounded because of my poor leadership. And while we made it through that time by the grace of God, that last line still holds true: **my country, family, church fare worse because of my sins**. You all have no idea how many times my wife has had to pick herself up off the mat and out of her sacrificial love for God, for me and for this church, continue to serve, never looking for recognition or honor. **Sometimes I look back at my journal from that time so I won’t forget**. My country, family, church fare worse because of my sins.

I regularly do marriage counseling, and one of the most important goals in marriage counseling is to encourage spouses to resist the urge to get defensive or to argue back, but to truly listen when their spouse tells them how something they have done has hurt them. As uncomfortable as it might make you, as much as it might hurt, **do not look away. Do not rationalize, do not minimize, do not try to justify yourself, do not blame-shift or explain it away, but listen humbly until you understand the depth of how your sin has affected the one you love. Why?** So that everyone might know that everything is your fault? So that you might feel terrible about yourself? No. So that there might be true repentance and reconciliation and peace.

I think of youth rallies I went to as a youth pastor and how they talked about sin – “has anyone lied? Then you have sinned!” So nonchalant. Turns salvation into a “get out of hell free” card.

Do not minimize the impact of your sin. **Sin has consequences, not just for ourselves but for others, and often for generations. Think about King David**, who made a terrible decision to sleep with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his mighty fighting men, and then to try to cover it up by having her husband killed. In the process, he loses God’s favor and undoubtedly some of his own integrity of leadership. Soon his family is falling apart: **rape, incest, murder, suicide, betrayal, insurrection, war, and exile**. Within two generations the kingdom of Israel is split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Do you think David would have gone back and made a different choice if he could have?

- Alienation with God

Our sin is what separates us from God.

2 Corinthians 4:4 - The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Romans 8:7-8 - the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸ Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

We are spiritually dead, without hope and without God. As terrible as the other three alienations are, this one has eternal consequences.

3) How does Jesus' death take care of our sin problem?

Go back to 1 Corinthians 15.

1 Corinthians 15:1–6 - Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Christ died for our sins. Listen to a few other passages:

Isaiah 53:4–6 - Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Romans 5:5–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Rachel Denhollander & Larry Nassar in 2017:

In our early hearings. you brought your Bible into the courtroom and you have spoken of praying for forgiveness. And so it is on that basis that I appeal to you. If you have read the Bible you carry, you know the definition of sacrificial love portrayed is of God himself loving so sacrificially that he gave up everything to pay a penalty for the sin he did not commit. By his grace, I, too, choose to love this way.

You spoke of praying for forgiveness. But Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance, which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror without mitigation, without excuse, without acting as if good deeds can erase what you have seen this courtroom today.

If the Bible you carry says it is better for a stone to be thrown around your neck and you throw into a lake than for you to make even one child stumble. And you have damaged hundreds.

The Bible you speak carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.

I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me – though I extend that to you as well.

You see, the focus on sin is not to leave you in despair. The way to life, to love, to joy, comes through facing our sin fully. I am asking you this morning to stare your sin in the face, in all of its depth and pain and heartache. Don't look away. Don't minimize it or rationalize it or blame shift or explain it away. **It may feel like death, but you have to go through death to find resurrection.**

Romans 7:24-25 - What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Look your sin full in the face this morning and do not look away. It was your anger, your greed, your lust that has harmed the ones you love. It was your abuse,

your affair, that damaged your spouse, that wounded your children. It was your abortion that caused the death of that unborn child. It is your cruel words and actions that hurt your siblings, your friends. It is your disobedience of God that has kept others from knowing Him more. Do not minimize it this morning. Do not rationalize it, blame-shift, or explain it away. Feel the full weight of what you have done, the evil you have inflicted on others, the abuse, the neglect, the betrayal, the hurt, until it breaks your heart. This is more than confession; this is a sober-minded, gut-wrenching comprehension of what your sin has done to yourself, to others, to Jesus. You are so wicked that nothing less than the death of the Son of God could save you. And you are so loved that He died willingly for you.

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

While I was a sinner, Christ died for me. He gave me His righteousness. There is now no condemnation.

Romans 8:1-2 - Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

There is forgiveness and healing for you:

1 John 1:8-9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Lastly, pray for those who do not believe.

If hell is real, and if those who reject God's offer of salvation through Christ are heading there, then we have great reason to mourn. As Leonard Ravenhill said, "About a million persons in the world die each week without Christ. Is this nothing to you?" Blessed are those who do not look away, who look this hard truth in the face, who meditate on it, who feel the weight of it, who are brought to tears over it.

Where else can you find complete forgiveness and grace and healing for all you have ever done wrong, for all the ways you have hurt others? Jesus died for your sins. He took the punishment you deserved. Blessed are those who mourn, who feel the full weight of their sin and bring it to Jesus. You will be comforted. You will experience grace. You will truly come to know the depth of how loved you

are, how every single sin has been paid for. You will see Jesus nailed to the cross, taking the punishment you deserve, and you will know that He died for YOU.

Let me close with another portion of a prayer from the Valley of Vision:

Grant me never to lose sight of
The exceeding sinfulness of sin
The exceeding righteousness of salvation,
The exceeding glory of Christ,
The exceeding beauty of holiness,
The exceeding wonder of grace.