

"The Message of the Cross"  
An Ideal Disciple, Part 7  
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The most popular religious symbol in the world is the cross. Whether it is rows of crosses in the cemetery, or a piece of jewelry hanging around your neck, it indicates some form of identity with Christianity. It is obviously related to the fact Jesus was executed on a Roman cross and that His death is a central part of the Christian faith.

So, what does the cross mean in our little picture of an ideal disciple? Well, we use the cross a little more specifically. In 1 Corinthians 1:18 the apostle Paul refers to "the message of the cross." By that he means the gospel, the great news that he was committed to proclaiming.

Now certainly Jesus' death on the cross is at the heart of the gospel. Yet, as we read the book of Acts and other parts of the New Testament, we see that message the apostles preached include, yes, Jesus' sacrificial death, but also His resurrection from the dead, and then the magnificent salvation that comes through His death and resurrection. That is the gospel, the message of the cross. Paul puts it this way as he speaks to King Agrippa in **Acts 26:23 that Christ would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way proclaim God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike.**

This message of the cross, this gospel, is really at the center of our lives as disciples of Jesus. An ideal disciple understands why that is, and how all of life should be impacted by this magnificent truth. This morning the goal is to help you become more that ideal disciple as we explore the role the message of the cross, the gospel, is to play in our lives. Let's pause and pray the Lord would help move toward that goal this morning.

Here are four truths we need to keep in mind:

**#1** The message of the cross, the gospel is what enables us to experience God's salvation and become a disciple of Jesus. Folks, as human beings we are all in trouble. Though we were created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, that is our purpose, we instead have been (2 Timothy 3) lovers of self rather than lovers of God. We have all missed the mark and have failed to live as God requires.

**Romans 3:10, 23 There are none righteous, no not one. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** Because of this we all deserve the wrath of a holy God. **Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death** (eternal death, hell) yet then adds these incredible words, **but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** How can that be? Can God simply overlook our sin and say, "Hey, it's okay, I know you are trying to be a good person." No, God cannot and will not do that. The penalty must be paid. The great news is Jesus paid that penalty for us on the cross. Paul puts it this way in **2 Corinthians 5:21 for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

This is what is called the great exchange. Jesus takes our sin upon Himself, absorbs the wrath of God in our place on the cross, and gives us instead His own righteousness that we now count as our own. Or as I sometimes say, my failing score has been erased and Jesus' perfect score has been written beside my name and is counted as my score. This is all because of Jesus' sinless life, and His death on the cross in our place. His resurrection from the dead confirms that God accepts Jesus' sacrifice as a payment in full for our sin. As a result, through faith, through trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, our sins are forgiven, we are adopted into God's family, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and we are promised eternal life. There are other benefits as well, but those are four of the most important.

Now, many of you are quite familiar with what I have just said. It is actually pretty complex theology, but this message of the cross, the gospel, is something you have heard (that has been proclaimed over and over again at Chisholm Baptist Church, not just in sermons, but in Bible studies, Sunday School classes, children's programs, and in almost everything we do here).

So, you may be very familiar with this gospel, maybe too familiar. Perhaps some of the "wonder" or "thrill" of the message of the cross has faded in your mind and heart. Friends, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this is what transferred you from the kingdom of darkness into

the kingdom of light. This is what has brought you from death to life. This is what has saved you.

The day you were born, the day you graduated from high school, the day you got married, the day your first child was born, the day you retired, the day your favorite football team won their fourth Super Bowl, these were all probably very important events in your life. But all of them together are not as significant as what happened when, by God's grace, you believed and embraced the message of the cross. Becoming a believer in and follower of Jesus, becoming His disciple was the most important, the most magnificent, the most thrilling thing that has happened to you. Do not forget that, *ever*.

For some of you, however, I suspect that message of the cross is still a bit confusing. To make it as simple as possible just remember two things. First, Jesus died on the cross for you. He died in your place for your sins. Second, to experience all of the benefits His death and resurrection brings, you need to place your faith, your trust in Him. You need to stop relying on your own abilities, on your own efforts, on your own goodness or righteousness, and instead rely on what Jesus has done for you.

As **Ephesians 2:8,9** says **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast.** Friends, if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ, if you are not sure whether you are, or if this all just doesn't make sense to you, please, please make sure to talk to me (or one of our other pastors).

#2 The message of the cross, the gospel, is what we are to share with those around us. In **2 Corinthians 5:20** Paul says, **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.** As a disciple of Jesus, that is what we are to be doing, imploring, urging people around us to be reconciled to God.

That happens when these folks hear the message of the cross and respond by trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. That is why telling people about Jesus, sharing the gospel, is so important. Remember, an ideal disciple is someone who is seeking to make other disciples. A huge part of

making disciples is telling people about what God has done for them through Jesus Christ.

Is it easy to do? No, not usually. Once in a while someone may come up to you and basically say, like the Philippian jailer, "What must I do to be saved?" Yet often people don't want to hear the message of the cross because it seems like an affront to their pride. Or maybe they fear that any conversation about Christianity is going to end up being a condemnation of their lifestyle. Or perhaps they are purposely avoiding conversation about their eternal destiny because the whole topic makes them uncomfortable. Yet, the fact people may not be eager to hear the gospel is not an excuse or even a reason to remain silent.

We have to develop the same attitude that the apostle Paul had, **Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

Did you catch that? It is through the gospel, the message of the cross that salvation and its blessings come to anyone and everyone who turns to Jesus Christ and puts their trust in Him. Why would you keep that news to yourself, even if others are not excited to hear it?

Let me mention some other things that are helpful for us to remember.

First, the Lord is probably not calling you to stand on the sidewalk and preach to other people as they walk by. For most of you, it will be pretty rare that He wants you to share the gospel with a total stranger. Some folks are called to do that, but not most of us. Your family members and friends are the people with whom you need to share the message of the cross. Is that always easy? Of course not. But your children, your siblings, your cousins, maybe your parents, need to know how they can trust Jesus and become His disciples.

Parents have the responsibility to teach the gospel to their young children. And your friends, people at work, at your school, your neighbors, they need to hear the message of the cross as well, because it is the power of God for salvation for them. So don't worry about talking about the gospel with people you don't know. Focus on the ones you do know, and with whom having a conversation is a normal thing.

Second, don't deceive yourself into thinking that being a good person who does kind and loving things is an adequate way to communicate the message of the cross to others. Now, you certainly should be a good person, who does kind and loving things. Being a bad person who does cruel, and selfish things better not be your goal.

The kind and loving things you do for others will help you be a disciple maker. These are part of how we let others know about what it means to trust and follow Jesus. As we reflect the love we have experienced through Christ, our love for others, to use an old phrase, "adorns the gospel" and makes it more attractive to others.

However, kind and loving deeds, by themselves, do not communicate the message of the cross. When people see you generously helping and serving others. They may think, "Ah, she must be a Christian. Maybe I should be a Christian too." Or your good deeds might make people think, "Wow, he is a nice person. Period." Or maybe they will think, "I wonder if she is a Mormon. I hear they are nice people."

Being an effective ambassador of Jesus and a good disciple maker means we are to do acts of love and we are to speak words of truth. It is "both/and," not "either/or." Pastor Mark pointed that out a few weeks ago.

He mentioned the quote attributed to Francis of Assisi. "Preach the gospel always, if necessary, use words." Mark pointed out that it is unlikely that Francis ever said that, and more importantly it is simply not good advice.

You cannot preach the gospel without words. Paul makes that clear in **Romans 10:14b** **And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?**

Third, always remember that our responsibility is to share the truth, the message of the cross. However, God is the one (2 Corinthians 4:4) who opens blind eyes and softens hard hearts. And an important part of our responsibility as disciple makers is to pray that will happen. Oh, we should seek to be clear and convincing when we speak, and should always be demonstrating courage and compassion, but we should not overestimate our role.

#3 As Jesus' disciples the message of the cross, the gospel must be central to our proclamation and conversations about the Bible and Christianity. In **1 Corinthians 2:2** Paul says **for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.** This means with the Corinthians, that was his focus when teaching or discussing things with them. He talked about the message of the cross and what it meant.

Now in **Acts 20:27** Paul tells the Ephesian elders **I did not hesitate to declare to you the whole counsel of God,** meaning he taught them all of God's Word, the whole Bible. So, which is it? Did he talk only about Jesus and the message of the cross, or did he talk about the many different topics the scripture addresses? Well, both. He talked about how all of the Bible is one story that culminates with Jesus the Messiah, in His death and resurrection and the salvation that brings. His focus was always on the message of the cross.

Friends, as Christians we are to live all of life for the glory of God. Paul says, **1 Corinthians 10:31 so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.** That is an important truth, but it can be distorted. For example, art, painting, sculpture, etc., can be used for the glory of God. Human creativity reflects that we are made in the image of our Creator. So, churches and individual Christians celebrate the gift of art, and it truly is a blessing. Yet, if this celebration is disconnected from the gospel, as it sometimes is, and replaces the message of the cross then it becomes very dangerous.

Other Christians realize that the Bible has much to say about family relationships and talk a lot about the Biblical perspective on marriage, raising children, masculinity, femineity, etc. those are wonderful things to talk about, but not independently of the gospel. Being reconciled to God is a prerequisite to reconciliation within the family.

In recent years many have focused on the Bible's political implications. On the left, there is a push for social justice and racial reconciliation. On the right the call is for "Christian nationalism" or applying Biblical law in our judicial system.

Again, nothing is wrong with these things, as long as they do not obscure or distort the gospel and

result in churches or individuals focusing on another message other than the message of the cross.

Folks, that is why our picture of the ideal disciple has the cross above, in a pre-eminent place. The gospel should be a disciple's highest priority. Of all the things that we might want to communicate to others, nothing matters more than the message of the cross. Whenever someone focuses on any teaching of the Bible or aspect of Christianity other than the gospel there is a problem. As Jesus' disciples we want to focus on the message of the cross. As disciple maskers, encourage others to do so as well.

#4 An ideal disciple applies the gospel, the message of the cross, to daily life. There are all sorts of ways that our lives can and should be impacted by what God has done for us through Jesus.

First, the message of the cross should mean freedom from guilt and shame. Friends, all of us have done things, said things, or thought things that we should not have. Sometimes the consequences of our actions or words can be painful. We might feel guilty, knowing we have fallen short of God's standards.

Or maybe we feel embarrassed and ashamed because others have found out that we are not as wonderful as we often pretend to be. Disciples of Jesus should not feel that way. **1 John 1:9** says, **"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** Or as the NLT translates **And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.** One of the implications of the message of the cross, is those forgiven by God do not need to feel guilt or shame.

Second, the message of the cross means those who have been forgiven through Jesus should be able to forgive others. **Ephesians 4:32** **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.** If you have received grace, it only makes sense that you show grace to others, meaning you treat them better than they deserve to be treated. That is a difference the message of the cross makes in our lives as disciples of Jesus.

There are many others. The promise of eternal life that the gospel gives us means we don't have to be afraid of death. It also means that you should focus not just on making your life more comfortable, but as Jesus says, (Matthew 6:19) we should be laying up treasures in heaven.

Yet, perhaps the most important and practical implication of the message of the cross, at least in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is that it gives us our identity. Because of what the Lord Jesus has accomplished, through faith, we are adopted into God's family as His children. **Galatians 4:4-7** **But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.**

Friends, those words should make you weep tears of joy. You are a son of God. That is who you are. If you call yourself a child of God, or gals if you consider yourself God's daughter, that is fine with me. Knowing that I am a son of God and (Romans 8:17) an heir with Jesus Christ is the most important thing I could ever possibly be.

How old I am, how much money I have, what my occupation is, whether or not I am married, how well my favorite football team is doing, are not nearly as important as the fact *I am a son of God*. What other people think of me, whether they adore or despise me, doesn't really matter, because *I am a son of God*. Because I don't have to focus on protecting and puffing up me, I am free, free to be a lover of God rather than a lover of self, free to love others as much as I love myself. In a world where so many struggle to find their identity, a sense of significance and belonging, the message of the cross is indeed magnificent news.

Folks, that is where we end today, the ideal disciple understands that the message of the cross, the gospel, is a magnificent truth. It is truth to be embraced, by trusting Jesus Christ. It is truth to be shared as we seek to make other disciples. And it is truth to be celebrated as we join the worship team in singing.