

The Scandalous Offense of the Cross, Part 2

Luke 9:23

As we read earlier from Paul, "The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." It's *mória*. *Mória*, utterly moronic, foolish, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." What's the difference between us and them? They look at the cross and see abhorrent shame, and indignity and profanity, even. We look at the cross and see Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Martin Hengel cites Melito's homily on the Passion, where the crucifixion, one that's scorned by the world is pondered as a wonderful mystery by believers who follow him. Here's the quote. I have some exceptions with a little bit of the expression, here, but it is rhetorical and beautiful. But listen to this, "He who hung the earth in its place hangs there. He who fixed the heavens is fixed there. He who made all things fast is made fast upon the tree. The master has been insulted. God has been murdered. The King of Israel has been slain by an Israelitish hand. O, strange murder, strange crime! The Master

has been treated in an unseemly fashion, his body naked and not even deemed worthy of a covering that his nakedness might not be seen. Therefore, the lights of heaven turned away. The day darkened that it might hide him who was stripped upon the Cross.” End Quote. That’s a reference to criminals being stripped down completely, held out for public indignity and shame.

It’s interesting to note in Luke 9:23 that Jesus is not speaking only to his disciples at this point. He’s speaking to them, but he’s also speaking to others. He’s speaking to a whole crowd of people, many of them unbelievers. Amazing, isn’t it? This is the way Christ spoke to unbelievers. This is how he evangelized. He gave them the hard truth about discipleship. He didn’t soft pedal anything to them. Luke is very clear to show us this in verse 23. He’s not speaking not just to his disciples. He had been talking directly to his disciples and only to them in verses 18-22.

But then Luke says, “He said to all.” Mark tells us the same thing, Mark 8:34, “calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them,” plural, to his disciples and the gathered crowd. We’ve got to understand that between verse 22 and verse 23, some time had passed. We don’t know how long the

conversation lasted on any given point. We do know that Peter's rebuke of Jesus for this prediction of suffering happened in here. We see that in Matthew 16, clearly. There was, there was more conversation that happened. We don't know how long any of that lasted on any given point, or where they were along the journey, but it does seem that they've come toward Caesarea Philippi, where there would be more people gathering, hearing about the popularity of Jesus that had preceded him.

All three synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they record Jesus' prediction of suffering, as we've said, Peter's confession, the prediction of suffering, then after Jesus' predicts his suffering and delivers that stern warning to silence, commanding that they keep the, the matter secret, as a matter of operational security in all three Gospels, as I've said, though some time has passed, much has been discussed, the next thing we see Jesus doing, here, is evangelizing.

And he's calling, after he's said all that, he said, he's calling for total commitment, and the only promise he makes in the tract that he hands out, self-denial, cross-bearing. Only his close disciples know that he's the Christ. Only the Twelve know the prediction of his suffering. The crowds don't know.

They'll know, know soon enough, in about six months' time.
They'll know; they'll see for themselves.

But though the crowds don't know, Jesus still calls them to discipleship, and he tells them exactly what's involved. He doesn't sugar-coat it. He doesn't hold anything back. This is like the, the hard-to-swallow fine print you find on what would otherwise seem to be a very, very attractive contract for you. You start looking at the fine print. You say, whoa! This price I'm paying for this house, it comes with all these exceptions. Oh, there's a neighborhood association. Ugh! That's hard to swallow. Oh, they're going to tell me what color I can paint my house. Okay. You find all that in the fine print.

This, here, is the fine print made bold. This is the small print writ large. Jesus wants us to understand exactly what it is we are getting ourselves into when we profess to be his followers. You'll see it there, verse 23, when Jesus says, speaking to them all, a mixed group of people, believers and unbelievers alike, speaking to the elect like Peter and the non-elect like Judas Iscariot, Jesus says to them all, "If anyone would come after me." Stop there. "If anyone would come after me." This is when we start to answer the question that we're asking: Why would anyone want to follow the way of the cross?

Verse 23, there in verse 23, in the ESV, the translators actually left a word out of that sentence. When translating this from the Greek, the ESV translators have left out a very important word. I'm guessing they made the decision for the sake of a smooth, readable translation. You can get the point a little bit in that word, would. But they inadvertently left out an important word, and I think if that's all you had, that's missing an important point.

You know how the other translations render that part of the verse? The King James Version, "If any man will come after me..." The New American Standard, "If anyone wishes to come after me..." The New English Translation, "If anyone wants to become my follower." The New International Version, "Whoever wants to be my disciple." Any of those options I think are better than the ESV on this verse. Why is that? What is the ESV leaving out? It's the verb *thelo*.

Missing from the ESV translation is a very small word, but one that is dealing with one of the hardest forces on earth, the human will. Not everyone really wants to follow Jesus in discipleship in this way. And I think if we were clearer in our evangelism, many people would turn away and save us a lot of trouble because they would know what it requires. But for those

who draw near, who are willing after hearing the way of the cross, that's a different story. Not everybody desires to come after Christ, to become his follower. Obviously, we know that's true for self-protested atheists or pagans or those who are adherents of other false religions. We still evangelize them.

But what about those who say they'll follow Jesus; do we take everyone at their word? Didn't Jesus warn us in the Parable of the Sower and the Soils that many who initially profess a desire to follow Jesus, they don't actually keep on following? They fall away in times of testing. They're choked by the cares, and the riches, and pleasures of life. They fail to realize from the beginning, they fail to take account of what Jesus has told them plainly. They didn't understand the significance of what he said in verse 22, I will be rejected and killed, and then in verse 23, If you want to follow after me, so will you. And you must endure it, if you're going to be my disciple.

What makes the difference between those who turn away and those who stay? What makes the difference between those who reject and those who follow? What makes the difference in the will? What makes one person willing and another unwilling? The answer to that question helps us see why it's not our job, really, to win people over. Our job is to please Christ. If we

please Christ, we say what he says. It's his Word actually converting souls. It's the Holy Spirit at work in their hearts. We just need to tell people the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about what it really means to follow Jesus Christ.

Listen, one's will, your will, my will, it's property of nature, it's property of one's nature. You want to go after, seek after, desire, follow, you want what's in accord with your nature. Dogs, they like to play with little kids, chase sticks, and all the rest. Why? Because it's in their nature to do so. Cats, they like to remain aloof, feign affection, claw your furniture. Why? Because it's in their nature to do so. I like cats. I do. But just as dogs do what dogs do because they have a nature to do so, and cats do what cats do because they have nature to do so, sinners, too, sinners like sin. Why? Because it's in their nature to do.

Saints, on the other hand, saints hate sin. Saints love righteousness. Again, why is that? Because God has changed their nature. They repent of their sins and believe because it is in their nature to do so. God isn't coercing a will. He's changing a nature, and the will follows. They've been born again. They've been regenerated. They've been granted new life, and since will

is a property of nature, since they want, they want and desire and will what is in accord with their nature. Change the nature, change the will. Only God can do that. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come." That is manifest in a new will, with new desires, with a new set of wants, a new set of loves, a new set of hates.

That's the theology that undergirds this, and it comes right at the beginning. It's the theology of regeneration, followed by a theology, which we'll get to next time, a theology of sanctification. And in the middle of all this is the theology of conversion. Verse 23, that's a conditional statement, you'll notice, there. It's an, if-then statement. The protasis of the condition, the if statement, is this: If anyone wants, wishes, desires, wills, to come after me. So the willing, the wanting, the desiring, that is the condition that must be met, and it's met in regeneration, which leads to the theology of true conversion, which leads inexorably, intractably from the, to the immediate response of repentance and saving faith.

So if that happens, then what, then what follows? The theology of sanctification: He must deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me. That's Lordship salvation, which is a bad word in our day. There are whole churches that are built

on denying this principle of truth. This is demanding self-denial, cross-bearing and following and get this, it's continual; it lasts for a lifetime. Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come after me," and those verbs are present tense verbs, come after me. The wanting, wishing, desiring, that's *thelē*, the present tense form of *theló*. This refers to someone who wants to follow Jesus, has an abiding desire to do so, a continual longing.

I know, you look at yourself and say, you know sometimes, I just wake up, I'm having a bad day, I don't want to follow Christ. But is that the trajectory of your life? If you're a true Christian, you'll answer that emphatically No. Deep down in my heart, though I fail, though I stumble, though I sin, that is not what I want. That is what I hate." You find solace in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, The things that I do, the sin that I do, I don't want to do. Those are the things I hate. I hate those things. They're part of the sin nature in me. I want to tear it out and throw it away.

The things I love, righteousness, holiness, truth, those are the things I long for. That's what a Christian says. Someone who has a desire to follow Christ, it's an abiding desire, a continual longing. It's someone who knows who Jesus is, that

he's the very Christ of God. He seeks him. He wants him. He wants to follow after him, to follow him in discipleship no matter where that goes.

Another present tense verb, the infinitive, to come, "anyone who wants to come," present tense, to come. I love how Jesus says this. Literally, it's "If anyone is wanting or willing," and he puts the words "after me" up front. "If anyone is wanting after me to be coming..." The emphasis, here, is on the fact that when we come, we're already coming to a place where Jesus himself has already passed.

We're to follow him because he's gone on ahead of us. He's not asking us to do anything that he, himself, has not done. He's not calling us to go where he has not gone before. He's not calling us to go where he has not been. In fact, he's calling us to be where he is right now. He's saying, I've gone before you; I'm calling you to come after me. Now, did you hear that? I told you in the tract that Jesus gives, hands to people, all the crowd, self-denial, cross-bearing. You know what else is in there? This: there's a word of promise. There's the reward.

Following Jesus is not about your physical, temporal health, wealth, and prosperity. It's not about your best life now. It's not about male, female empowerment. In fact, Jesus

said that by following him, it virtually guarantees, Luke 6:22, people are going to hate you, and exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. But he says, "Blessed are you." Why? Why are we blessed for all that? Because the word of promise, the reward of following Jesus as Lord, you know what the reward is?

No matter what happens to you now, no matter what the diagnosis comes from the doctor, no matter how many of your relations turn from you, no matter how much inner turmoil it causes you from having to repent over and over and over and over for the same sins, no matter how much it requires of you to humble yourself before that other person, to confess your sins, to repent of your sins, no matter how difficult it is, you know what the reward is? It's Christ! It's Christ! Is he enough?

It's been one of those difficult sermons, I know. It's a hard word. I began with a warning, and I want to end with a very clear word. Some of you have been attending Grace Church for weeks, even months, or years, some of you for many years and you listen to a sermon like this, and then you leave and you go home, affect, unaffected and unchanged. I don't know what's going on in your mind and in your heart. I don't know how you can hear this and leave unaffected and go about your daily

business. And I'm so very concerned. On the one hand, I'm thankful you're here. I'm thankful you're listening to the truth.

On the other hand, I fear for your soul. Listening to Gospel preaching week after week and never following Christ in discipleship like this verse describes, it's deadly for you. You're heaping up truth that you're going to have to answer for on the day of judgment. You're receiving light and truth week after week, but there's no change in your life. You don't do anything about it. As they say, "The same sunlight that melts the wax hardens the clay." "It's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And I don't want any of that for any of you. So won't you bow the knee to Jesus Christ today? Stop! Stop sitting there!

There are others that we know, us believers, we know them: friends, coworkers, family members, like our children and our grandchildren, parents, for some of us it's parents and grandparents. And they profess to know Jesus Christ as Savior, but they live as if Luke 9:23 were not in the Bible, as if it's not true at all, as if this verse doesn't mean what it says. And again, I'm not talking about the world, about secular humanist or rank atheists or adherents to any other false religion.

I'm talking about professing Christians, But for many, they think it's okay to profess Christ and not attend a sound, faithful, Gospel preaching, and practicing church. If they attend any religious service, they prefer to attend a more light-hearted church, where you're not going to hear difficult things like this, one that's got a rockin' band, and lots of programs, and social projects. Look, everything that removes the offense of the cross to make their church attractive to unbelievers, everything that's not going to challenge them, not going to make them to feel too uncomfortable. Beloved, you've got family members attending churches like that. It's not okay. You should grieve, and mourn, and pray that God awakens them.

There are so many who profess Christ today, and you look at their lives, and you find very little evidence of true salvation. You take the fruits of the Spirit, growing, maturity, reproducing in their lives things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, instead of all that, you find the exact opposite of that. You find the decay of the flesh. In fact, you find anti-fruit.

Instead of love for God and others, there's indifference toward God, indifference, bitterness, anger, hatred,

unforgiveness toward other people. Instead of peace, there's continual conflict, contention, turmoil. Instead of patience, you find impatience, intolerance, a critical spirit. Instead of kindness, you find uncaring coldness, a total indifference, and a lack of compassion for other people. Instead of goodness, you find badness, hidden vices, private indulgences in evil. Instead of faithfulness, you find faithlessness, a lack of integrity, outright hypocrisy. Instead of gentleness, you find harshness, meanness, argumentative spirits, sharp tongues. Instead of self-control, you find self-centered, self-indulgence, ill-disciplined in mind and spirit, mind and emotion. I don't know about you, but I've met a lot of people who profess Christ, and they look like that, and look very little like Christ.

And you've got to wonder, I mean, listen, when the, when the world meets people who think and act and look like that, no wonder they distrust the church. No wonder they want to stay away from Christians. Paul said, Romans 2:24, "As it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Listen, beloved, there are a lot of wonderful, wonderful things going on at Grace Church, and I along with the elders, along with many of you, I am really, really excited to see what God's doing in our midst. People are knowing, loving God, they're worshiping him not just in word, but in deed, and in

truth. They're putting it on the line. People are confessing sin to one another. They're praying for one another. They're pursuing holiness in the fear of Christ. There's a love of the life of repentance as people are identifying sinful thoughts and attitudes.

They're seeing, hearing sinful words, seeing sinful behaviors, and they want to put them off and replace them, those internal and external sins with internal motives, external expressions of righteousness. People are loving one another in very practical ways, yes, taking care of physical needs, addressing concerns, challenges of life, lifting burdens. There are also some people who are studying, and training, and growing in Scripture so they can benefit others with sound, wise, biblical counsel.

But I also know that there are people here who don't know God, but they pretend to and that is what I'm talking about. That's what's grieving me. They attend here, but they don't draw near for mutual accountability. They spurn mutual submission of church membership. There are people who walk in stubborn pride. They remain aloof from other people, making all kinds of excuses for it. They still call each other brother and sister, but prefer privacy to transparency. They don't really want to know

others or have people know them. Instead, they love self. They refuse to give themselves to others. They remain at a distance.

Brothers and sisters, this should not be for any of us. Because Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me." You want to know what is absolutely exposing and transparent? Being crucified on a cross. As I said, Jesus, stripped down of clothing. What were the soldiers doing gambling for at the foot of the cross? His clothes. It doesn't get more transparent living than that. Beloved, that's what we need to be with each other. We say that we love Christ, follow Christ. Luke 9:23, that's where he's going. It's the end of self as the life of Christ shines in and through us to glorify God and bless others. You know what the reward is? The reward is not a better you. The reward is Christ. Is he enough?

let's pray. Our God and our Father, we pray that you would bless us by your Spirit, by your Word, that we would take the words of Jesus Christ seriously, sober-minded as we think about what he's calling us to do. This is about the end of us. It's about a daily death. As excruciating as being crucified on a cross was, a death that could last from six hours to four days,



Lord Jesus, you are calling us to a death that lasts the rest of our lifetime as we take up our cross daily.

We ask that you would be gracious to us and remind us of your glory and the joy that you had in your heart as you took up your cross, despising the shame, because now you have risen from the dead, and you've ascended into heaven, and you sit at the right hand of the throne of God, nevermore to endure shame. You still live through the afflictions of your people, as we, like the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:29, "bear the afflictions of Christ every single day." Those are your afflictions, not ours. They're merited because of our adherence to you, our walking with you. We know you feel it.

We thank you, Lord Jesus, that you've gone ahead of us, and we look to you, our eternal reward. We thank you that you have died so that we might be reconciled to God. Please help us as a church to grow to be more faithful as a people, after the, who follow after the command of Luke 9:23, following our Savior, putting our feet in his footprints, heading to Golgotha. We love you. We thank you for this morning and pray that you would use it to affect many souls. In Jesus' name, Amen.