

Sermon File # 1297

Title: *The Centrality of the Cross*

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The Centrality of the Cross

Introduction:

Today and through Pentecost Sunday (May 23rd) we will take a break from our study of Ephesians in order to look at the Passion and Resurrection passages from the Gospel of John. In John's Gospel, we note that throughout his public ministry, Jesus was on trial constantly by his enemies, the religious leaders of the Jews. After Jesus had raised Lazarus from the grave, the reports of this miracle were drawing many to faith in Jesus, and so the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (John 12:9-11). Upon his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the message about Jesus spread, and many were coming to meet him (John 12:18). The Pharisees became increasingly alarmed by Jesus' popularity, and noted how "The whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:19).

Open your Bibles to John 12:20-36, as we look at what was perhaps Jesus' final public message before arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In verse 20, which is the beginning of our text for today, some Greeks (a term for Gentiles from the Greek speaking world) came to Jesus' disciples asking for an audience with him. They were representative of this truth, that the whole world was indeed coming to him,

that is, people from all the world's nations, languages, tribes and people groups (Revelation 7:9).

In this reply in our text, Jesus in essence tells us the purpose of his incarnation. Particularly in verse 27 Jesus says the reason he came into the world was to suffer and die on the Cross.

Follow as I read **John 12:20-37**.

Biblical scholar Merrill Tenney (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 9) says that our text underscores the fact that the whole of Jesus' life on earth was in dedication to his purpose stated in our text, particularly verse 27: "...it was for this reason (i.e., to glorify the Father through the cross) I came to this hour."

John stated in his Prologue (1:1-18) that the eternal Son and the Word of God came into the world to reveal the glory of God, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). John's Gospel makes increasingly clear that the glory of God would be seen most clearly and powerfully in the cross of Jesus. Ironically, it would be the most shameful thing imaginable—the suffering and death of the Son of God on a cruel and savage cross—that the glory/weight/significance of God would be most clearly seen.

Jesus states very clearly the centrality of the cross, both for his life and mission and for our lives today. The cross is central, not just in Christian symbolism and architecture, but in our lives and in our witness, in our message and in our mission.

When I first came into this worship center nearly 7 years ago, I noticed the absence of any Christian symbolism in either art or architecture. Since then we have added the cross on the wall and this pulpit tapestry. Perhaps this shows our rather radical reformation perspective that since the 16th Century has reacted against symbolism in the fear that all symbols pose the temptation for idolatry. Indeed, the church of the Middle Ages had become corruptly idolatrous and superstitious, not so much because of the art in the churches, but because of the vacuity of the preached word that lent itself to the worship of images and idols that adorned the church buildings.

Martin Luther did not want to tear the art and symbols out of the churches. His desire was to reform the church through the faithful reading, preaching and teaching of the Word, which had been long neglected. When the Word is central, there is an appropriate place for Christian art that enhances our worship, just as does good music that focuses on the word of God. So, bring on the art and the symbols that aid us in our worship of the living God and the Christ of the cross and empty tomb!

Our commitment at IBC is to the centrality of the cross. But the centrality of the cross is not guaranteed by placing crosses in the worship center and/or around on necks. The cross is to be central in our thoughts, lives, witness and proclamation. Note how the cross was central in the thoughts of Jesus and in the purposes of God for his Son. The cross is to be central for our lives and mission as well. As we think this morning from our text, we note first of all that the centrality of the cross is seen in...

The dread of the Cross

Jesus has just replied to the inquiry of the Greeks who wanted to have an audience with him that the hour was coming when he would glorify himself in a way that would be difficult for them to understand. It would not be through a triumphant overthrow of political powers that existed at the time, but through his death. And his death would become a pattern for the death and even the lifestyle of his followers. In that kind of living and dying defined by a cross, he would draw these Greeks as well as all sorts of people to himself.

But Jesus, as he thought about his death on the cross, began to be greatly confused and distressed in his spirit. As we have seen so clearly in John's Gospel, the God/Man Jesus had both a human and a divine nature. Even though he retained the fullness of his deity in his incarnation (Colossians 2:19), he nevertheless in his humanity remained subject to temptation and human feelings (Hebrews 4:15). He was literally thrown into confusion in his mind and spirit the text says. These feelings of dread and confusion are expressed in the Synoptic Gospels when Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest (Luke 22:39-46 gives perhaps the most graphic account of Jesus' anguish in the Garden). Jesus Christ is in deepest dread of the cross because of...

- *The nature of his suffering*

Jesus was greatly troubled over the coming suffering of the cross, not because of the physical suffering, which in itself was horrible, but because of the spiritual anguish, which was unspeakable. As Paul said, he who knew no sin would become sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus knew he would in his crucifixion receive the curse of God and the punishment of a Holy God who must punish sin (Galatians 3:13).

Michael Horton masterfully expresses the dread Jesus must have felt toward the cross and the nature of the suffering he would endure for us:

"The reason Jesus shuddered at the thought of the crucifixion had less to do with the physical torture involved (although it undoubtedly included this) than with the far greater fear of becoming everything he hated most in his deepest being.

“He who was the Truth would become the world’s most inveterate liar. He who was too pure to look upon a woman to lust would become history’s most promiscuous adulterer. The only man who ever loved with pure selflessness would become the most despised villain in God’s universe. He would become a racist, a murderer, a gossip, slanderer, thief, and tyrant. He would become all of this not in Himself, but as the sin-bearing substitute for us.

“At last, the moment came: God turned his face of wrath toward his bleeding, dying, Son, and made him drink that cup of rejection to the last drop...See here the price of your redemption: God must hate his own sinless Son, the joy of his eternal heart, so that he may love you justly. The Father must become the enemy of the Son....”

“In that moment, with the sin of the world crushing His soul, Jesus looked for the Father, with whom he had enjoyed eternal intimacy and indescribable love, and found no one there to comfort him. Forsaken by the world because of its sin, and forsaken by his Father because he had become sin for us, Jesus cried out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ so that we would never have to speak those dreadful words” (Horton, page 101, *We Believe: Recovering the Essentials of the Apostles’ Creed*)

The dread of the cross for Jesus was not only the nature of his suffering, but also...

- *The necessity of his suffering*

As in the Garden of Gethsemane, here Jesus in his human nature dreads the suffering of the cross, and struggles against the necessity or possible averting of the cross (Mark 14:32-36; Luke 22:40-46; Matthew 26:36-46). This anguish caused him to sweat what were like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22: 44). Yet he surrendered to the will of the Father, knowing the cross was a necessity for our salvation.

As Jesus was being crucified, the crowd mocked him, but their mockery was also a great message of truth. They said in derision, “He saved others...but he can’t save himself!”(Mark 15: 31). It was precisely because he saved us that he could not save himself. Had he abandoned the will of the Father, he could have called “twelve legions (72,000) of angels” to his rescue (Matthew 26:53). But he submitted himself to the cross.

The Atonement was prophesied from the beginning of the Old Testament (Genesis 3:15), and was symbolized through the Old Covenant sacrificial system. Only the suffering and death of the Son of God could remove the guilt of sinful mankind. As we noted last week, only the God/Man, the sinless Son of God, could be our sin-bearer. He who was without sin alone could suffer the punishment we deserve, and serve as our substitute in his being punished by the Father.

The Old and New Testaments speak of Jesus' death for us and our salvation through faith in him with judicial terms and imagery. In his Supreme Court over all other courts, Holy God pronounces everyone guilty of violating his Moral Law. Once Jesus declares us forgiven and our sins pardoned through his atoning death, that ruling cannot be reversed. Justification before holy God stands forever. God imputes legally and judicially the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The Bible says all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Either we must accept the sentence of God's judgment upon our sin and the consequences of eternal punishment in hell, or we can accept God's provision through Christ. Christ suffered the punishment we deserve, and when we accept his being our substitute, repenting of/turning from our sin, we are justified, i.e., made right with God. We receive his gracious forgiveness as though we had never sinned (1 John 1:9). Everyone faces the choice of either accepting God's provision to justify us, or standing before God the Judge and trying to defend ourselves by our "righteousness," which the Bible makes clear is woefully inadequate before Holy God.

Some of you perhaps have been privileged to see the famous passion play in Oberammergau, Bavaria/Germany. Legend says that villagers were spared from a plague in 1633, and in gratitude vowed to reenact the passion of Christ every ten years. In 1979 there was a dispute between Jews and Gentiles over the fact that the play incited anti-Semitic feelings such as occurred during the Nazi Third Reich. The same type of dispute took place six years ago with the release of the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. The fact is, we all are guilty of Jesus' suffering and death. Regardless of who led the trial and drove the nails in his hands and feet, it was our sin, yours and mine, that crucified him. In fact, as Isaiah says, it was the will of God to crush him and cause him to suffer (Isaiah 53:10). The cross was in the mind and heart of God before the creation of the world (1 Peter 1:19-20). Indeed, Paul says, we were chosen to be saved by the cross from before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

The cross, which was necessary for our peace with God and gift of eternal life, is central. It's not fashionable these days, even in some so-called evangelical churches, to talk about our sin and lostness, and the necessity of the cross. This "megashift" in thought is the movement away from talking about our sin, guilt, and need of redemption to talking about feeling good about ourselves, and letting the message of the church be therapeutic and soothing (see Horton, above).

Sin is dismissed as a Victorian notion, and many prefer to talk about having made some wrong or, better, some unfortunate choices. In rationalizing those wrong choices that nevertheless have consequences, usually in the lives of those who love us the most, we say, "After all, I'm only human." But we cannot blame our sin on our humanity. Jesus was a human, the most fully human being who ever lived on this earth, yet he never sinned. In fact, Adam and Eve were no less

human before they sinned in the Garden. They were the ideal human beings before their sin, which made them fallen and lesser human beings.

What a price Jesus paid for us. The cross is at the heart of our faith. Our text tells us about Jesus' dread of the cross, but also about...

The draw of the cross

Jesus, in referring to the voice from heaven, spoke of the judgment (crisis) on the world that his cross would bring (verse 31). The cross would necessitate a choice of believing in or rejecting Jesus as the Savior. Jesus said the cross would also spell the defeat of Satan as the prince of this world, who had held a death grip on the world. The suffering and death of Jesus would first break Satan's stranglehold on the world, then would draw us to the Savior. In verse 32 he speaks of this magnetic attraction of his cross and resurrection: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."

When Jesus spoke of being lifted up from the earth, he spoke of the cross being lifted up to draw people to conviction of sin. John, in Chapter three of his gospel, compares the lifting up of Jesus on the cross to Moses' lifting up the bronze serpent on a pole, that gave healing from the poisonous snakes in the wilderness (John 3:14; Numbers 21:8, 9).

Some great men leave a lasting influence and legacy, but in almost every case, every man's death diminishes his/her influence, particularly with the passing of time. But with Jesus Christ, his suffering and death was his greatest work, and because of the resurrection, the power of the cross continues to transform lives. Only of our Savior is it true that his death was the primary reason for his life.

Notice Jesus' words in verse 32 tell us His cross will draw people to himself, first of all...

- *By the power of the blood and the empty tomb*

In this text and throughout the witness of Scripture and history, we see that...

The cross is offensive, yet disturbingly attractive

The cross was the common mode of execution in the Roman world, and was disgraceful as well as a horrible form of death, reserved for the worst of criminals. Many of its victims went insane from the excruciating pain before finally expiring, which could be a long and horrible time. Those of you who saw the cinema, *The Passion of the Christ*, were graphically made aware of the horrible physical suffering Jesus endured,

For the cross of Jesus to become the focal point of the message of the church brought the response of offense from the world. It would be shameful, like the electric chair being the symbol of a movement in the world today. The cross was not a glamorous but rather was a shameful symbol. Yet the church has seen the cross of Christ as the heart of our message, reminding us of the love and sacrifice of our God and Savior, and the only means for our forgiveness and salvation. The cross' being the symbol of the Christian faith is evidence of its veracity, viability and vibrancy. If the message of the church proclaimed by the Apostles of the beginning church were a concocted story and the Christian movement designed to attract followers, why would they make they make the cross the center of its message?

Paul spoke of his determination to glory in the cross alone, and to preach the cross despite the offense it brought to the world of unbelief (Galatians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Even today the cross of Christ is despised by so-called Christian teachers and professors. One former (I'm glad to say "former", now is teaching in a non-evangelical seminary) evangelical theology professor, says to believe in the necessity of the cross is to endorse ultimate child abuse, saying that if God really intended his Son to die he would be a child abuser! Obviously for this theologian, the cross was a tragic outcome rather than the central purpose of Christ.

The cross is offensive to human pride that says that humankind does not need anybody's help, especially by a violent death. I believe it was atheist Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) who said the idea of the death of Jesus Christ being necessary for his salvation was repulsive. If there were such a thing as heaven, he hated to think he would have to get there riding on the back of anyone, Jesus included.

Ironically, though the cross is offensive to the world, and its presence would ruin many a liberal or therapeutic sermon, it is also attractive to those whom the Spirit of God is drawing to himself. It is in the cross that we are able to see God's glory most fully, that is, his very heart and nature of perfect holiness and love. The cross shows the holiness of God, in the necessity that some one, some perfect sacrifice/substitute, be punished for sin. The cross also reveals the perfect, undeserved love of God for sinners.

I am reminded of Jesus' love and mercy revealed to the thief who was being crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23). He was convicted of his sin, that his death was deserved. He also was convinced of Jesus' innocence, and called on him to remember him in his kingdom, believing him to be the Savior. He received the grace of God and Jesus' promise of salvation that very day, as an example of Jesus' love and power to save. This dying thief was drawn to the cross of Jesus, who did not deserve to die as did the thief.

Notice also, that in the draw of the cross...

The resurrection has power to lift up.

In verse 32 Jesus also, besides to his suffering and death on the cross, referred to his following resurrection, which was a “lifting up.” Literally the Greek prepositions in this 32nd verse mean “out of” the earth.

All of us, who are the children of God and are his saved ones, are saved by his drawing power. The Holy Spirit must draw us to Jesus, awakening our hearts to believe (John 6:44; 16:8). No one is ever converted because he lost an argument with a zealous soul-winner. No one is saved by human decision, John reminds us (John 1:13), because she/he decided on her/his own it would be a nice thing to be a Christian and go to heaven. We were spiritually dead until the Holy Spirit brought us to life (Ephesians 2:1). We had no desire for God, nor the capacity to turn to him and follow him as Lord.

Jesus says in our text that his cross draws by the power of his blood/death and resurrection, and also...

- *Upon the peoples of the world*

Jesus said, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (verse 32). By saying “all men,” Jesus was referring to all whom the Father would draw according to the Father’s good pleasure and will. What Jesus is saying is...

Not universalism

Contrary to what many think, this is not a statement of universalism, that all people will be saved. Only those drawn by the Father will be saved. I am concerned that the influence of multiculturalism and pluralism is having an impact even on the evangelical church, which is charged with taking the gospel to the lost of the world. Many, even in our evangelical churches, are beginning to take on the mindset of the world that all religions are equally valid avenues to reach God.

In our culture, it’s politically correct to be pluralistic, to say that it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere and we’re all going to the “same place. We’re all God’s children.” Indeed we all share a common humanity as God’s creation, and all humans bear the image of God, however defaced that image may be. But because of sin mankind is alienated from God. Only through faith in Jesus Christ can anyone, whatever the background or religious practice, become a child of God through the regenerating power of grace through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Once we have lost the centrality of the cross as the only way for a lost humanity to be reconciled to a holy God we have lost the heart of the gospel and are disregarding the claims of Christ himself.

If the cross isn't essential and central, Jesus' agony and ineffable suffering were for naught. At best he was facing death as a helpless victim whose best hope would be to elicit sympathy from his likewise defeated followers. Universalism is an insult to the Christ of the cross.

What Jesus is saying is not universalism...

But it is a statement of universality

Jesus is drawing to himself all whom the Father has given him from all ranks and strata of society, and eventually from all corners of the globe. The draw of the cross is on the peoples of the world...

without rank or status

One of the offenses of Jesus' ministry was his total acceptance of all categories of people. In fact, his moniker was he was the "Friend of Sinners," which, though intended by the supercilious and self-righteous Pharisees as an insult, was a great term describing his unconditional love for all people (Matthew 11:19).

He announced the coming of his kingdom by saying it was now through his ministry accessible to the poor, who now have the gospel preached to them (Luke 4:18). Jesus still seeks after the "nobodies" of this world, according to the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

When Nancy and I were on vacation in the beautiful city of Prague, we rode daily into and out of the city center on the subway. What I am about to report could have taken place in any city in the world, certainly including those in my home country. One evening in Prague our subway car was invaded by the most despicably group of young people you could imagine. Totally oblivious to other passengers, the couples among them shamelessly petted each other. Their bodies reeked of alcohol and smoke from drugs. Their tee shirts and tattoos displayed vulgarities, and one held onto the chain of a vicious-looking dog, that if he were to be unmuzzled, would be a dangerous weapon. At the time, my thoughts and feelings were of revulsion and disgust. But since then I have wondered what Jesus would have thought and even what he continues to think and feel toward these people at the very bottom of the social scale. If we believe what Scripture tells us, we have to believe Jesus' love and grace reaches down to these lowest outcasts and rebels.

The universality of Jesus is also...

without regard to nationality or background

I wonder what kinds of people Jesus would reach out to in our society today? No doubt he would draw to himself those who would feel least comfortable in

religious society. He would seek after the categories of people who are most overlooked by churches perhaps. And his followers would probably be representative of all races and social classes.

Just as is true throughout Scripture, Jesus promises that all peoples will be drawn to him, that the saved people of God will include individuals from among “every nation, tribe, people and language”(Revelation 7:9).

Notice that this last public discourse of Jesus was occasioned by the inquiry of some Greeks who asked Phillip for an audience with Jesus. Their coming to Jesus was perhaps a portending of the turning of the Gentiles to Jesus when the hearts of the Jews turned away from the gospel as it was preached later by Paul and the apostles.

How we are privileged to share the gospel with those around us, and through our prayers and support, with people around the world. We here in “The Capital of Europe” are privileged to share Christ with people gathered from around the world. I cannot imagine a more international, worldwide gathering place than Brussels, Belgium. In Belgium in recent years the most common name given to male babies has been “Mohammed.” We are in the midst of a mission field that is not only post-Christian but also being infiltrated by world religions.

In speaking of the centrality of the cross, Jesus spoke about the dread and the draw of the cross. But, finally, as we consider the centrality of the cross, we see also...

The demand of the Cross

In verse 31 Jesus spoke about the crisis/judgment he was bringing to the earth. He said Satan’s power and stranglehold upon the world would be broken with his coming crucifixion and resurrection. But also the cross would bring the judgment/crisis of decision upon the world. From now on, the world is divided on either side of the cross. Everyone is now faced with...

- *A choice*

Everyone faces the choice of the cross. Some first are drawn perhaps with a degree of curiosity or mild interest, like the Greeks who came seeking an interview with Jesus. But the Holy Spirit soon confronts the seeker with a choice, and this we call conviction that leads either to repentance and faith or to rejection and lostness. No one can remain neutral. The cross demands a choice.

We have friends who for years ministered to university students in Glasgow, Scotland. Karl and Marilyn are now serving in Ireland. In a newsletter article a few years ago Marilyn told the story of her friend, Carol. This young mother

shared with Marilyn that “for the past twenty years she has quite happily been gathering bits and pieces of various forms of spirituality, trying them on for size and then keeping them or discarding them according to how effective they were in making her feel better.”

She was satisfied with her approach,” says Marilyn. “Feng Shui, Buddhism, yoga meditation and many other pearls were in her collection. She sought not just any pearls, but fine ones that would truly feed her soul and satisfy her longing for spiritual wholeness. I met Carol,” says Marilyn, “in the midst of her journey about 4 years ago as we walked our sons home from nursery school. She had just come home from a week’s retreat at a Buddhist center and told me at length about how it had helped her. As fate (i.e., the sovereignty of God) would have it, Carol lived one block from us and this was to be the first of many conversations to follow about spiritual things as we walked to and from the school and began doing more and more things together socially. Carol is like many around us,” explains Marilyn, “post-modern in her thinking. Spiritually aware with no conviction of absolute truth. What’s right for me may not be right for you. Experience is everything. A few short months ago Carol gave the classic description of how she thinks one finds God: ‘God is like the trunk of the tree and the roots are the many ways there are to find Him. Everybody will eventually find him in their (sic) own way.’”

Marilyn continues, “The Lord began to use a series of events over the past couple of months to get Carol’s attention. She was less satisfied with her approach to spirituality.” Marilyn says, “She told me that she was starting to realize that something was wrong with this piecemeal method and that there was a missing link. She agreed to come to a series of talks and discussion groups set up to give unbelievers a chance to explore Christianity. Perfect timing,” says Marilyn, “for someone who has a collection of pearls that don’t seem worth so much anymore.

In her e-mail Marilyn reported with excitement, “Carol gave her life to Christ a couple of weeks ago!” Marilyn continued, “She (Carol) is showing signs of someone who is born anew—a hunger for the Word and keen awareness of its relevance to her life; a desire to communicate with God like she’s never had before; a sense of contentment like she’s not known for a long time.”

Carol came to see the necessity of a choice, either Jesus Christ or someone or something else, not a smattering of everything that makes one feel a bit better. This is a generation that is enamored with a plethora of choices, yet regarding the cross, many would rather not have to decide, but rather keep it in the background as a later option after other avenues are explored. But the cross calls for the crisis of a choice. Jesus says we must put our trust in him, the light, while we have that light (verse 36).

The cross demands a choice also...

- *With consequences*

The consequences of taking the way of the cross include those...

that are daily

Marilyn goes on to add that the new life for Carol is not all easy. She vividly says the new life is for Carol like wearing a new pair of shoes, not all that comfortable though preferable to the old life. Marilyn says these “new shoes” will take Carol to some difficult and challenging places. “The victory has been won for this new child of God but the battles are far from over.”

In verses 23 through 26, Jesus says that those of us who would follow him must also follow his example and take the way of the cross of self-denial. We don't know what following Jesus means for us until we begin to follow him. The story of the rich young man challenges me by causing me to wonder if I would have the grace to pay the full price of following Jesus. It certainly means we are to die to our self-serving and self-centeredness.

Recently I have come to a deeper understanding of or calling as believers to the cruciform life. As a pastor, I realize I am not fully equipped to preach and minister pastoral care unless I know something of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. I am also convinced that the way of the cross includes also a resurrection, even in this life. If we continue to trust, the Lord will, in his time, lift us up and enable us to experience his deliverance and vindication. The way of the cross is the way of death to self, and even to our most cherished dreams. It's the way of trust, however, that in his time God will restore us.

Almost daily, as I read e-mail and Internet news reports about the persecuted church, I am made aware once again of the price believers around the world are paying for taking the way of the cross. Persecution of believers is rampant in North Korea, China, Indonesia, Sudan, Vietnam, North and Central Nigeria, and throughout the Middle East. Literally, these believers must hate their lives in this world to keep it, as Jesus says in our text. This hatred is not the emotional disdain we associate with hatred, but is rather a disregard for one's mortal preservation in deference for obedience to Christ, whatever the cost.

When the cross is central to the way we live there are daily consequences. But also there are consequences...

that are eternal

In my correspondence with missionary friends I often cite this verse 26 in our text. I want to remind these people, many who are serving in difficult places, they are really just joining Jesus in his work. He is at work ahead of them and now

with them, and the Father will honor them for their service. He will compensate any sacrifice. And, as Jesus is saying in our text, our destiny as his followers is to join him in the glories of heaven.

And we need to pray for God's grace for the believers in the many parts of the world who are enduring persecution, that they will give a faithful witness to Christ, whatever price they might have to pay. Followers of Jesus today are facing the same choice with their lives as did those Hebrews 10 and 11 refers to, who lost their property and were tortured and some were martyred. These people know they have "better and lasting possessions" in heaven (Hebrews 10:34). They are willing to take the way of the cross because, just as with Jesus, their focus is on the glorious resurrection to follow (Hebrews 12:2).

As Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will *honor* the one who serves me" (verse 26).

And we in this place may not face overt political persecution, but there is a price in following Jesus. It's death to self-centeredness and the idolatrous focus on self, which is the heart of sin (DA Carson, *The Gospel According to John*). We are called to die to personal ambition and self-serving goals, and also to share the reproach of Jesus as we live for his glory and share his gospel and take on his agenda. The cost may be in terms of loss of job and career goals and forsaking personal pleasure and dreams that arise out of self-centered living and worldly thinking. We are called by Jesus to hate (disdain, disregard, deny) anything that keeps us from fully following and obeying Jesus.

Only in full surrender to Jesus as Lord do we find this eternal life he holds out to us (verse 25). Living the way of the cross leads to the discovery of eternal life, life that has meaning and purpose now (John 10:10) and promise for eternity to come. We are called to enter the narrative of Jesus' cross, what Paul referred to as "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). Jesus promised that the unbelieving world would hate and persecute us, but that he would be with us (John 15:18-16:4). Paul also said that "everyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). We are called and even privileged to participate in this ongoing narrative of Christ, reminding people of Christ, by our life of death to self and resurrection to his grace and power in us (Colossians 1:24).

Jesus' greatest glory was revealed in the Cross and he most glorified the Father, revealing his holy love, through the Cross. And we too bring the greatest glory to God, not through our successes and achievements, or even our healing of diseases and answers to prayers, but through our faithfully following Jesus through our sufferings.

And, the cost of following Jesus is worth it compared with the eternal consequences of rejecting Jesus Christ and his cross.

The cross is central to the life and mission of Jesus and to our life and reason for living. This is the reason I came, Jesus is saying in verse 27.

Conclusion:

You and I stand on one or the other side of the cross, either the side of acceptance and eternal life, or the side of rejection and unbelief and eternal condemnation in hell.

Remember, this was the last public discourse of Jesus before his arrest and crucifixion. Verse 36 is almost chilling in its effect. Jesus has warned them to take advantage of the Light of the truth of salvation while they have it, referring to himself as the Light and the Truth. Then, he left them and hid himself from them.

Today may be your last opportunity to come to the Christ of the cross.

And, as a people of God, so blessed with this house of worship, how we are constrained to make this a house of prayer, with the cross of Christ as central, and not just as a symbol. Jesus calls us to follow him in his way of the cross, and to serve him is to join him in making known the message of the cross. We also make known the cross and give the most glory to the Christ of the cross, not through our successes and answers to prayer, but in our faithful following Jesus in the way of the cross and suffering.

Daniel Vestal told the story of Karl Marx, who as a young boy, “went into a Christian church to a Bible study class and they failed to minister to him. I have read,” says Vestal, “that during the Russian Revolution in 1917 that the Russian Orthodox Church at that very hour was in a big dispute over the color of robes that the priests would wear in their vestment every day. There are many of you,” says Vestal to his congregation, “who have been disappointed and discouraged by Christians and people in general. But the real issue of the Christian faith,” he added, “is not what you think of churches or institutions, or even other people, but ‘What think ye of Christ?’ Some of you,” he concluded, “need to get your eyes off of other people and put your eyes on Jesus Christ. ‘We would like to see Jesus.’”

As God’s people, and as International Baptist Church, may we commit ourselves to the really important things. Let’s examine our attitude about and availability for service through the church in the light of the cross, which calls us to death to self and surrender to Christ. Let’s examine our lives and our relationships with one another in the light of the cross of Jesus. Let’s keep our hearts and minds on the cross of Jesus Christ and the fact that there will be people here, who like Karl Marx as a young man, need Jesus and the love and witness of his people. The cross of Jesus is central.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. As Jesus said in verse 27, the cross was the primary reason for his coming to earth. What does it mean for the cross to be central in the life of the Christian? What does it mean for the cross to be central to the life and mission of the church?
2. Death by crucifixion was a common mode of execution in the first century. What do you think was the primary reason for Jesus' dread of the cross (see also Luke 22:39-44)?
3. Who was responsible for Jesus' crucifixion? Share your answers and reasons.
4. Crucifixion was a horrible and disgraceful form of capital punishment, reserved only for the worst of criminals. Why, then, do you think the cross of Christ has had the attraction (which Jesus mentioned in verse 32) through all these centuries?
5. Do you agree with the statement, "All people on earth are God's children"? Who do you believe are the children of God? Perhaps reading 1 John 3:1-2 will help in your answer.
6. Jesus speaks about the cross as a pattern for his followers' lives as well, in verses 24-26. What do you believe is involved in a follower of Christ taking the way of the cross? Would you say your life is following in the way of the cross?
7. What are some of the consequences of taking the way of the cross? What are the consequences in this life? In the life to come?

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