

Boasting in the Cross¹

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God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6:14).

Recently I came across a specialty store in fountain pens. I went there out of curiosity. The attendant showed me a pen for “just” \$300; no thanks I told him. We struck up a conversation. He said, “See the man with the medical clothes on. Obviously, he is an m.d. The pen he is purchasing is being bought for \$6,500.” I thought the attendant was kidding, but he was serious. I asked, “What does one do with a pen like that?” He said, “He has a room in his house dedicated to his fountain pen collection. Several times a year we sell a pen for around \$40,000.” I was—and am—astonished. One has a room in his house to boast in a fountain pen collection! I wondered later who would insure such a collection.

(I’m sure there is nothing wrong with such, and since then I’ve found two REC ministers who had a collection, but not to such a degree nor do they boast in it!)

I love to watch the Olympic Games, and watch athletes win gold metals, tennis players win Grand Slams, or bowlers win tournaments. The trophies they take home are their boasting power. And while there is certainly nothing wrong with being a professional athlete, we must realize how temporary that is:

¹ I use bold and underlining to help me preach; not the way I normally write.

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²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable (1 Cor. 9:25-25 ESV).

Surely everyone has something he boasts in. They boast because they are good at something and crave the recognition that comes from others. But this kind of boasting can be vain glory, being empty, for it does not last.

Some glory in their physical strength, and I have a friend I went to Bible college with who became a world class power lifter, setting the record for the squat lift at a little under 1,000 pounds, which held for about 20 years, though it has been finally broken. But this man glories in the Cross so he has his priorities right.

Others boast in their financial gain and put others down because of it.

The poor *man* uses entreaties, but the rich answers roughly (Pro. 18:23).

Still others boast of their power in politics.

It demonstrates how willfully blinded people are who throw away their souls for a little passing honor of this world simply because they can see it with their physical eyes.

But Paul says he boasted in the Cross, not the piece of wood but the atoning death of Christ, the Son of God. Paul did not glory in this because of its moral influence on his life, though there is a sense in which that is a secondary, derived meaning (1 Peter 2:21-24).

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Moreover, when Paul says the world was crucified to him, he meant that the Cross, though an instrument of death in his culture, had become the instrument of life for him. The Cross crucified the world to Paul, which meant put it to death, having no hold on him, but it also gave Paul life with God, for by means of it, Paul's sins were taken away, nailed to the Cross (Col. 2:13-14).

Think of how despised the cross was in Paul's day. Crucifixion was a slow and very painful death, often taking days to die as one hung on the cross. Romans citizens could not be crucified; all others could be. It was a despised death, and those who hung there were presumed to be deserving and guilty of some heinous crime. Yet Paul says he gloried in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! The Jews wanted a sign, a miracle, before they would believe, and the Greeks thought the whole thing of a dead Jew from a nation that they had conquered being sacrificed for our sins just about the dumbest thing they had ever heard. To this day, those are the two common responses to our view of the crucifixion: show me a miracle or it is dumb.

If anyone had things to boast about, it was the great Apostle to the Gentiles. He had studied the philosophies of the day from the Gentiles, had studied under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, and was the most brilliant theologian in the history of the church. Virtually everything we know about the Cross comes from Paul, especially if he wrote Hebrews. Here are other matters for which he could boast but refused:

³ For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, ⁴ though I also might have confi-

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dence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, *of the* tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. ⁷ But what things were gain to me, these **I have counted loss for Christ**. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:3-11).

The world today despises the symbol of the Cross. They do not mind us saying that Christ was a great preacher, for they generally love the Sermon on the Mount. They do not mind us saying that He was a good Man. They do not believe in His bodily resurrection but think we're off base on that one, even though we can demonstrate it historically. But when we exalt the Cross, when we say that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3), they hate that doctrine with an unholy passion and think we've taken leave of our senses.

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But here is the age old question: **How can God be both just and the justifier of sinners** (Romans 3:26)? We want God to be just toward others, just not toward us. We want Him to overlook our sins, but how can He and be just? Where is justice in society if we do not punish murder, rape, and other sins?

There is a great principle that the one who forgives is the one who pays. If you steal \$100 from me, and I forgive you, I just lost \$100. I paid. In a similar way, God forgives sinners, but He does not compromise His moral character. How can He forgive and not soil His own character? Only Christianity has the answer: the infinite justice required to be poured out on us sinful humans was assumed by God Himself in the person of Christ, who was God incarnate. He would forgive so He would pay. Christ was both God and man in one person. As a human, He could die and represent us. As God, He had infinite merit, and could satisfy God's justice. He was one person so that both God and man cooperated in the one act of salvation. The chasm between us and God is bridged in the One who is both God and man. Thus Christ died for our sins is the great wisdom of God. As God and man He took our penalty of death on the cross and through that event extends mercy to us. **The wisdom of God is this: Because of the cross, justice has been met, and because of the cross, mercy can now be extended without compromise.**

Consider the judge whose best friend had committed a misdemeanor that required a large fine. People were waiting to see if the judge would show partiality and acquit his friend, lessen the fine, or give him the maximum fine without partiality. He indeed imposed the maximum fine, but then he came

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down from the bench and paid the fine. This is exactly what God has done for us in the Cross!

Deep in the conscience of every man is the conviction that sin must be punished, and which of us would not want someone who murdered a family with five children to suffer the ultimate penalty? Should we expect God to do any less?

Thus some want miracles before they will believe, but miracles were done. Others want good reasons according to their standard before they will believe, and when given those reasons, they reject them. The Muslims say that Jesus was never crucified, which is so historically incompetent that one stands in awe of such willful ignorance. We have mountains of historical data both inside and outside the New Testament for the Lord's crucifixion (and resurrection). But then they deny the Jewish Holocaust also, saying it never happened. This is willful suppression of the truth. A religion that is that willfully blinded and subjective does not commend itself. But for us the Cross is the great symbol of the judgment of sin in the death of Christ and also the great symbol of the gift of life to us. We glory in it!

Consider a modern example of a nation dedicated to the Cross before Communism in Eastern Europe collapsed.

The government of Polish Prime Minister Jaruzelski had ordered crucifixes removed from classroom walls, just as they had been banned in factories, hospitals, and other public institutions. Catholic bishops attacked the ban that had stirred waves of anger and resentment all across Poland. Ultimately the government relented, insisting that the law remain on the books, but

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agreeing not to press for removal of the crucifixes, particularly in the schoolrooms.

But one zealous Communist school administrator in Garwolin decided that the law was the law. So one evening he had seven large crucifixes removed from lecture halls where they had hung since the school's founding in the twenties.

Days later, a group of parents entered the school and hung more crosses. The administrator promptly had these taken down as well.

The next day two-thirds of the school's six hundred students staged a sit-in. When heavily armed riot police arrived, the students were forced into the streets. Then they marched, crucifixes held high, to a nearby church where they were joined by twenty-five hundred other students from nearby schools for a morning of prayer in support of the protest. Soldiers surrounded the church. But the pictures from inside of students holding crosses high above their heads flashed around the world. So did the words of the priest who delivered the message to the weeping congregation that morning. "There is no Poland without a cross." (Chuck Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, pp. 202-3)

The Son of God came to pay a debt He didn't owe because we owed a debt we couldn't pay. Thus we read such statements in Paul as these:

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- The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18).
- He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).
- But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).
- Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Gal 3:13).

But people today do not want the Cross, but a reinterpretation of the Cross. They want a new Cross without blood, without sin. The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it (A.W. Tozer).

If our ministry is without the blood of Christ, it is without life. We dare not temper His message with ear pleasing words to pacify our culture. We hear that people are offended by such things as the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, sin, judgment, and the substitutionary death of Christ. Better people be offended than for God to be offended. People today want to remove these offenses of Christianity, but as I've said it is **precisely in the offenses where the power of the Gospel lies.**

Conclusion

To this day, the Jews reject a suffering Messiah.

To this day, the Gentiles think they are too smart for the Triune God.

To this day, Islam says the crucifixion never happened.

But the Cross of Christ is the great wisdom and power of God, and we embrace it with every fiber of our being. We sang a few minutes ago these words written by the great hymnist of the atonement, Isaac Watts (1707):

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

Then we shall sing one of my favorites as I grew up, written in 1771 by William Cowper, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins. . . ."

In life and in death, our only hope is the Cross, the whole Cross, and nothing but the Cross, so help us Judgment Day.

What do we consider of value? All our degrees will not merit one thing with God. **Away with those and give me the Cross!** All our worldly possessions will not help us get to heaven, for remember the rich fool who affirmed all his wealth and was self-satisfied, wanting to build bigger barns. **Away with that and give me the Cross!** What about those who have political power. One of the queens of England said she would, by the grace of God, make it to heaven on an "m," for Paul did not say "not any noble" would go to heaven but "not many noble." Away with political power, especially

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with those who think they will change society with more laws. That is the Galatian heresy, cleaning up ourselves by our own morality. **Away with that and give me the Cross that changes lives from the inside out!**

When Paul says in our verse that the world has been crucified to him, he means that it has lost its value to control him. He lives now for Christ, offering up his life to Christ to be a living sacrifice for Him in His service.

If Paul stated that he had determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), how much more should we!

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Gal 2:20).

If we live, we live for the Cross. If we die, our hope is in the Cross. **AMEN.**

PS: One of the greatest books I've ever read in my entire life is on our book table, by conservative Christian scholar in England, John Stott, and the book is *The Cross of Christ* for a few dollars. Also, there are shorter books on His death there that are free by Dabney and Packer.