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One out of every 50 U.S. adults (2%) said that they would describe Easter as the most important holiday of their faith. 8% of surveyed Americans said the Easter holiday means nothing to them or that they do not celebrate the occasion. 46% of unchurched adults view the meaning of Easter to be religious, while just 25% connect the holiday to Jesus' return to life. Overall, 31% of active churchgoers said they would definitely invite someone to an Easter service this year.¹

"Good Friday is the one Christian "holiday" that the wider culture, even in America, has not taken up. It is the one holy day whose Christian significance cannot be bleached out to leave a commercially viable residue. Christmas can be for children and families, for shopping, for feasting. Easter can be bunnies and baby chicks, the newness of spring and a whole lot of chocolate. Even a couple of days marked out to honor saints in some Christian traditions—Valentine, Patrick—have been pretty much entirely taken over by a culture of romance and hedonism, sex and shopping. Not this day. There is nothing marketable about Good Friday. Suffering, sacrifice, injustice, betrayal—what's to celebrate? What's to shop for? Who could pig out on a day like that? The absolute impossibility of adapting Good Friday to consumer culture is most evident in the fact that even the greeting card industry, which seems capable of churning out more or less appropriate little notes for every conceivable religious event and life occasion, has nothing for today. Can you imagine it?

Every religion and every ideology has its own symbol. For the Buddhist it is the lotus flower. Judaism has the Star of David and Islam the crescent. In this century the communists were known for the hammer and the sickle and the Nazis for the swastika. In our day the democrats have the donkey and the republicans the elephant.

Given that background some people are surprised to learn that in the beginning Christianity had no recognized symbol. In the earliest days Christians recognized each other by declaring "Jesus is Lord." It took several generations for the cross to become the universal symbol of our faith. If you visit the catacombs of Rome, you will discover the crude drawings on the wall made by the earliest Christians in that city as they retreated underground during times of persecution. They drew pictures of Bible stories and they drew the fish, which stood as a secret anagram for the Greek word IΧTHUS—Jesus Christ, Son of God. But in the earliest days they didn't draw the cross. That would come later.

John Stott (*The Cross of Christ*, pp. 21-46) notes that the cross did not become the common symbol of Christianity until the second century when the custom of making the sign of the cross on the forehead arose. By the time of Emperor Constantine, the cross had become well-established as "the sign" of the Christian faith.

In some ways it is a strange symbol because crucifixion was so hated in the ancient world. It may have been the most brutal means of execution ever devised. Unlike modern methods of capital punishment that are designed to produce a quick death, crucifixion was meant to guarantee that the person on the cross would die a slow, agonizing death, sometimes hanging on the cross until his bloated body fell to the ground.

Over the centuries many unbelievers have sneered at Christianity for worshipping a man who died on a cross. The German philosopher Nietzsche called Christianity a religion for weaklings. He mocked the idea of a God who could be crucified. Some years ago Josh McDowell debated a well-known Muslim apologist in Africa. At one point the Muslim tried to ridicule the Christian faith by saying that Christians are riding on the back of a crucified man. Josh McDowell answered by saying, "You're right. We're riding on the back of a crucified man and he is going to take us all the way to heaven."

That little story illustrates a crucial difference in perspective. To the world the cross is a symbol of shame; to those who believe it is a symbol of salvation.

What does the cross mean to the world? Here are three answers to that question.

I. The World is Offended by the Cross.

“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1:23) The Jews “stumbled” at the cross because most of them were looking for a political leader who would deliver them from the heel of the Roman Empire. Jesus dealt with this misunderstanding many times in his ministry, which is why he repeatedly told people not to spread the news of his miracles. He didn’t want to start a political movement that would overthrow Rome. *He intended to start a spiritual revolution that would overthrow Satan’s power.* At one point a group of people came to him and attempted to make him king by acclamation. He sent them away because he had no time or use for such things. He knew that seeking political power would be a distraction to his mission.

The Jews simply could not imagine a crucified Messiah. It is difficult for us to understand what crucifixion meant to the Jews. We’ve sanitized the cross and domesticated it. We gold-plate it and wear it around our necks. We put it on earrings and on our stationery. We hang ornate crosses in our sanctuaries and on our steeples. We build churches in the shape of the cross. All of this would have been unthinkable in the first century. So terrible was a crucifixion that the word was not even spoken in polite company. If we want a modern counterpart, we should hang a picture of a gas chamber at Auschwitz in front of our sanctuary. Or put a noose there. Or an electric chair with a man dying in agony—his face covered, smoke coming from his head. The very thought sickens us. But that’s what the cross meant for Jesus. And that is why the Jews were scandalized by the cross. They could not conceive of a God who would allow his Son to die that way.

The Greeks were another matter. They didn’t practice crucifixion so they didn’t have the problems that the Jews did. They tended to look to philosophy as the answer to the deepest problems of life. The notion of man hanging on a cross to save the world was just utter nonsense to them.

The world has not changed its opinions in two thousand years. It still doesn’t understand the cross. The idea is either repugnant or laughable. Some people have called Christianity a “slaughterhouse religion.” In the 1960s one prominent Protestant denomination revised its hymnbook and took out nearly all the hymns referring to the blood of Christ. They removed “Power in the Blood,” “Are you Washed in the Blood?” and “There is a Fountain Filled With Blood” because they thought those words were unsuited to the sensibilities of modern men and women. As one of our familiar songs puts it, the cross is truly “despised by the world.”

II. The World is Judged by the Cross.

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (1:18). The cross strikes at the heart of human pride. It announces in blood-red letters that you cannot save yourself – only God can save you.

No doctrine is harder to accept than the doctrine of human inability. That doctrine teaches us that there is nothing we can contribute to our salvation. We are so lost in our sins that we have no idea how sinful we really are. When we look into our own souls and see ourselves, we see only the sin that lies on the surface, but God sees to the bottom – and what he sees is a foul pit of iniquity. We are so lost that unless God takes the initiative to save us we will never be saved at all.

Perhaps a graphic illustration will help. Isa 64:6 says that in the eyes of God our righteous acts are like “filthy rags” to him. Imagine taking your best dress or your best suit and dragging it through the mud. Then you put it on the floor where people can walk on it. Then you use it to mop up your dog’s vomit. Then you put on the suit and drive to the most expensive restaurant in Chicago. What will they say when you come to door? You will be immediately turned away. “But I have a reservation,” you cry out. It matters not. You are not dressed appropriately to enter this fine restaurant. “Get out,” the doorman says, “or I’ll call the police.” How do you think God feels when you stand before him dressed in the dirty rags of your own good deeds? What looks good to you is like a vomit-streaked dress in his eyes.

The cross stands as a silent sentinel proclaiming that you have to come God’s way – or you won’t come at all. Many people cling to the filthy rags of their own righteousness and then wonder why God won’t take

them in. *The cross stands in judgment over the sinful pride of the human race.* Just as Christ was stripped of his robe before he died, even so must we be stripped of ours.

When Christ died, he didn't die alone. Two thieves died with him. We often focus on the thief who cried out, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." We know that man was saved because Jesus told him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" ([Luke 23:43](#)). But don't forget there was another man hanging beside Jesus. He cursed and swore and blasphemed the Son of God. He died as he had lived, a wretched sinner, unforgiven.

One thief saved – that none would despair.

One thief lost – that none would presume.

The cross that saved the one doomed the other.

III. The World is Saved by the Cross.

Notice the last part of [1 Corinthians 1:18](#), "To us who are being saved it is the power of God." What men call foolishness God ordains as the instrument of salvation. What men mock, God raises up as the only means of salvation.

Nearly all of us know [John 3:16](#). Let's go back two verses and see what leads into that most famous of all the biblical promises. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" ([John 3:14](#)). The first part of that verse refers to a strange moment in Israel's history recorded in Numbers 21. There we learn that during the wilderness wanderings, the people began to murmur against God and Moses. "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" ([Numbers 21:5](#)). After 40 years in the desert, they were tired of the heat and the sand and the long marches from one place to another. Even the manna seemed disgusting to them. Finally, they had had enough. God heard their complaint and sent fiery snakes among the people. Many were bitten and many died. Panic swept across the tribes and they came to Moses and said, "We were stupid to complain after all that God has done for us. Please pray to the Lord that he would remove these poisonous snakes." When Moses prayed to the Lord, he was instructed to make a bronze snake and put it on a tall pole where the Israelites could see it. Then God said, "Anyone who has been bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." And that's what happened. Anyone who looked, lived. Those didn't, died.

What is the significance of the serpent? Recall that sin entered the human race through the serpent who deceived Eve ([Genesis 3:1-6](#)). Ordinarily lifting up a serpent on a pole would be repulsive to the Jews. *In this case it meant lifting up the symbol of the very thing that was killing them.* John used this vivid image to teach us what the death of Christ really means. God took the hated symbol of Roman oppression and turned it into the means of our salvation. Here is the next verse – the verse before the most famous verse in the Bible, "That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" ([John 3:15](#)).

When we read such a wonderful promise we may wonder if "everyone" really means "everyone." Last Monday night when I hosted Open Line on the Moody Broadcasting Network, a woman from Virginia called with a good question. She wanted to know how we can know who the "chosen" of God are. My answer was very simple. We can't. Only God knows who the chosen (or the elect) are. Our calling is to preach the gospel to every man and woman on the face of the earth. We are to invite them to trust Christ and be saved. We aren't supposed to worry too much about who is elect and who isn't. God can take care of that himself. Our job is to preach the gospel and trust God to use the gospel to draw many people to faith in Christ. When I preach, I never know how people will respond or who will respond. As I've told you before I'm in sales, not administration. But that's true of all of us. We do the preaching and God does the drawing. When we do our part, God always does his.

I told the woman in Virginia that many years ago I heard someone say it like this. Imagine the gates of heaven with a sign over it reading "Whosoever will may come." When you pass through those gates, you look back and the sign reads "Chosen from before the foundation of the world." I think there is good biblical balance in that illustration. We are not called to "reconcile" predestination and free will. Only God can do that. Let us preach the gospel with confidence knowing that anyone who trusts in the Christ who died on the cross and rose from the dead will be saved.

God has no other plan of salvation – and he doesn't need one. The same cross that offends the world and judges the world also saves the world.

“Wow! That's amazing!”

But there is a condition – “whoever believes in him.” Even the death of Christ cannot save you unless you believe in him. Let me go back to Open Line one more time. A week ago Monday I took a call from a young girl named Angela who asked how you can know you are saved. I quoted [1 John 5:13](#), which says that you can know with certainty that your sins are forgiven. I told Angela that salvation depends on trusting Jesus Christ. It's more than just believing facts about Jesus. Lots of people do that. Even the demons believe in Jesus ([James 2:19](#)), but they are not saved. To trust in Christ means to rely completely upon him. I told her that to trust in someone means to put your life completely in the hands of that person. Trust is what you do when you fly in a plane. You trust the pilot to get you back down on the ground safely. You trust a doctor when you take the medicine he prescribes. You trust a lawyer when you let him represent you in court. God says that when you trust Jesus Christ in that same way you are saved from your sins. It means to trust Jesus so completely that if he can't take you to heaven you aren't going to go there. All you have to do is trust Christ completely and you can be saved. When I asked Angela what she thought about that, she blurted out, “Wow! That's amazing.”

Yes it is. It's the most amazing truth I know.

“Lamb Over Me”

More than once I have illustrated God's plan of salvation this way. Hold up your left hand and let it represent you standing before God with your sins unforgiven. Now hold up your right hand and cover it with a cloth or a towel or a handkerchief. Let your right hand represent Jesus Christ and the cloth his perfect righteousness. As long as you (the left hand) stand before God with your sins uncovered, you cannot enter heaven. Now take both hands and clasp them together so that the cloth covers both hands. When God looks down from heaven, what does he see? He doesn't see your sins because they are covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Now you can enter heaven because God sees you as having the righteousness of his Son.

When I shared that illustration several years ago I received this letter in the mail a few days later:

Dear Dr. Pritchard,

Yesterday I was in the 2nd Sunday morning service when you used the white handkerchief to illustrate how we could be righteous in God's sight. I was reminded of the illustration which my mother had used. She used the Chinese character “righteous” to make the same point. (She was a missionary to the Chinese.)

The Chinese character “righteous” has two parts. The top part means “sheep” while the bottom part means “I” or “me.” So “righteous” in Chinese is literally “Sheep” over “Me.” When God looks down on me, He only sees the Lamb (Christ) and declares me righteous.

She enclosed several photocopied pages from a Cantonese-English dictionary that backed up what she said. What does it mean to be “righteous” in God's sight? When God looks at me by myself, all he sees is my sin. And what I call righteousness, he calls filthy rags. I have nothing in myself that will pass for righteousness in his eyes.

But when I place my trust in Jesus Christ – the great Lamb of God – then when God looks down from heaven, he sees “the Lamb over me” and declares me righteous in his eyes.

That is the basis of the radical change in the life of the believer. Not only does God see the “lamb over me,” but he also imparts to me the very life of the Lamb of God so that I now share in the life of Jesus Christ himself.

What is the result?

1. I am declared righteous before God.
2. I am changed from the inside out.

How do these great blessings come to me? By faith alone! *Not by anything I could ever do, but simply and only by faith in the crucified Lamb of God.*

All that I wanted but could never have, I find when I come to Jesus Christ. All that I wanted but could never achieve is provided for me by faith in the Son of God. What I lacked, he provided. What I wanted most, he supplied. What I needed, he freely gave.

In this message I have talked about what the cross means to the world. But I don't want to end on an abstract note. *What does the cross mean to you?* Is it just a religious symbol or a reminder of an ancient crucifixion? Is it something you wear around your neck? Or is the message of the cross stamped upon your heart?

The world is offended by the cross. If that is your situation, then I have nothing to say except that I pray God will change your heart. The world is judged by the cross. As long as you cling to the filthy rags of your own self-righteousness, the cross stands in judgment over you. The world is saved by the cross. This is our hope and this is our message to anyone who will listen.

In this life there are many roads a person may travel, but only one that leads to heaven. An old gospel song says, "I must needs go home by the way of the cross, there is no other way but this." Just keep walking in the blood-stained path of the crucified Savior and that road will take you safely home at last. Amen.

When former President George W. Bush was asked about regrets during his presidency, Bush answered that he regrets speaking in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner just weeks after the invasion of Iraq. Bush said, "To some it said, well, Bush thinks the war in Iraq is over, when I didn't think that. But nonetheless, it conveyed the wrong message." After suffering on the cross for six hours, Jesus finally shouted, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). "Finished" (tetelestai) – fulfilled, completed, accomplished. "It is finished!" did not send the wrong message. It was a shout of triumph. Christ's mission was accomplished!

Notes

¹ Barna Research 3/15/10: www.barna.org