

The Necessity of the Cross

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Every religion has necessary ingredients to it. With Islam comes praying to Allah five times a day and making pilgrimages, and having women cover their faces. When you think of Mormonism you might think of abstinence from alcohol and caffeine. Jehovah's Witnesses have a strong outreach program, you will see them going out two at a time or even doing a two-year mission program.

What do people think is the necessary ingredient to Christianity? Some might say going to church on Sunday. Others might think of avoiding cursing or lewd behavior. The necessary ingredient of Christianity is the cross – not as a piece of jewelry or a religious symbol. It is the cross on which Jesus Christ suffered and died. Without Christ and His cross, there is no Christianity.

A cross was used by the Romans for suffering. It meant suffering by Christ, and Christians have a cross as they suffer for Christ. It is part and parcel of Christianity. We need to be aware as Christians what the cross is all about, and how it is necessary not only for the Christ, but also for us as Christians. It is a good thing in both instances. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to receive His message this morning.

1. For the Christ

When Jesus walked this earth, He caused quite a stir. Wherever He went people followed Him in droves wanting to hear what He had to say and hoping to be involved in or least observe one of His miracles. Even with all this stir He was somewhat of an unknown commodity. This is evident when the disciples told Jesus who the crowds thought that He was: *John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.* They associated Him with a prophet, but very few went to the next step of identifying Him as *the Christ of God.*

The Christ is another way of saying, "the Messiah," the one promised by God to be the Ruler of His Kingdom. While Jesus is a name, the Christ is the office. What got in the way was the paradox of His humble appearance, and the fact that He was in the form of a servant. What also got in the way of this idea was the cross of Christ, that is to say, His suffering. But this is an integral part of His office. Jesus said, *The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised on the third day.* He did not say that the suffering would be optional, or that it might be a good thing. He said, *must.* The cross was necessary for Jesus to accomplish His work.

This did not jibe with people's idea of who a Savior should be. Jesus hushed the disciples in talking about Him being the Christ because people were not ready to hear it. They did not know from what they needed to be saved. They wanted a Savior like the one who fed the 5000 and could be a Bread King for them. He could make them prosperous and rich and they wouldn't have to lift a finger. They thought that they needed to be saved from poverty and hunger. Others thought that their biggest need was to have a sovereign nation and to be free. Even Jesus' disciples did not understand until later on the necessity of the cross and how Jesus' suffering would fulfill their biggest need.

Even today there are different ideas about the greatest danger. You could take a poll in America about what we need help with the most and you'd get such answers as inflation, gas prices, crime, terrorism, the environment, or health care. So also, people look for messiahs that will fulfill those roles for them. People may look to themselves for the answer. Maybe the government or corporations. Others will get outraged about various causes and will ignore the biggest problem which is the sin that resides in them. Any concern other than hell is really quite superficial. That is the biggest danger facing every single person on this planet, and we need a Messiah who can save us from that fate.

Here is where we need our focus to be on the true Christ. Jesus identifies Himself as the One promised by God to take away our sin. He, Himself, tells us of the importance and necessity of the cross. As He pleaded with His Father at Gethsemane it was clear that there was no other way to bring about salvation than through the suffering that He would undergo on the cross. Even within Christianity you will find the devil trying to take the focus off the cross.

Jesus is a unique Savior for a unique religion. There is no other religion where the God makes a sacrifice for His people. It is always, always, the other way around. No other religion emphasizes true love as does Christianity. At the cross the love of God and the justice of God intersected. It was necessary for the Christ to suffer so if sinners were to be bought back from the slavery of sin. It pains us to think of the Christ suffering so, because we know that we put Him on the cross with our sin, but the cross also brings relief in knowing that our sin was left there. The cross was a most necessary part of the Christ's work.

2. For the Christian

As followers of Christ, we find that the cross defines our work as well. You cannot be a follower of Christ with a different focus than He had. We will be centered on what He accomplished for our sake.

At the same time our Savior defines the necessity of each Christian carrying his or her own cross. *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.* To take up your cross is to suffer for the sake of Jesus. That is the narrow definition. Sometimes we may use the term more broadly and talk about different problems in our life as, "My cross to bear." There are problems that all people have, and problems that we have only because we are Christians.

In following Jesus, you will find that you will suffer solely because you belong to Him. That is a cross. If you find yourself verbally assaulted and vilified because you identify sin for what it is, or you refuse to participate in some action that would bring to shame to Jesus and pay some price for it, that is a cross that you carry. If we go to that narrow definition and you can't think of a cross that you are carrying, then you better examine how prominent your faith is in your life. You cannot separate the cross the Christian.

Along with carrying the cross, Jesus speaks of the necessity of denying yourself. This goes contrary to our self-preservation instinct but is part and parcel of being a Christian. By nature, we don't want to expose ourselves to hardship or even limiting ourselves from pleasure. If you say to somebody, "How would like to be a millionaire?" no doubt the answer would be, "I'd love to!" Yet when the direction is then to work hard and spend less than you make, it doesn't look so attractive. Denying or even delaying pleasure for yourself is difficult to do.

Yet this is a necessary ingredient to taking up the cross and being a Christian. Your Savior does not want you to indulge yourself to the point of losing your soul. He doesn't want you to be so concerned about clinging to comfort that you let go of Him. If your chief concern is satisfying yourself, you will not be living for Christ. Jesus died to give us a new life which involves living for Him. This doesn't mean that we can't have any enjoyment in this life, but you can only have one Master. Our Lord wants us to see the big picture and not be afraid to lack if it means that we can better serve Him. He wants our energy and devotion spent in glorifying Him. That means making sacrifices for our God, using our time, talent, and treasure for His Kingdom first and using the leftovers for ourselves, not the other way around. He wants us to deny ourselves and serve others, using our station in life as an opportunity to be a servant.

These things will separate you from the world, just as Jesus was different from those around Him. You will be viewed as being different because you will be swimming against the tide. Our world is about taking care of yourself first, indulging yourself, avoiding suffering and ridicule and taking the easy road. This is not the way of Christ. *If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.* The Lord wants us to look long-term when it comes to our discipleship. If you find yourself separated from the pack now because of your faith, you can figure that you'll also be separated from the unbelieving world on Judgment Day.

Is it difficult to carry a cross? No doubt. Is it worth it to take up your cross and follow Christ? Absolutely. Carry it gladly knowing the necessity of it. Carry it with honor, knowing that Jesus took up one far greater to make you His disciple and God's very own child. The cross is necessary, but it is a blessed necessity. Amen.