

COMMUNITY OF THE CROSS (CONTINUED)

ROMANS 12

BY PASTOR JIM LINCOLN ON JUNE 8, 2008

For the last several weeks we have been thinking together about what it means for us to be a people of the cross. Among other things in this vein Paul said, that he wanted *to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings*. I've been in a lot of prayer meetings and can't remember hearing a prayer request where anyone asked God to include us in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. By the way, our prayers reveal what we value the most. And today prayers for relief from suffering or prayers for the sick can dominate our prayer lists. Many weekly prayer meetings easily become a weekly health report.

Now, don't get me wrong. Prayers for the sick are good things.

And, when I'm the one who is sick, put me at the top of your list. However, I think we can lose our balance here. I have some questions. Would the focus of our lives change if we simply prayed the way Jesus taught us to? Would we be healthier if our health wasn't our main focus in prayer? If we make ourselves the gravitational center of our prayers instead of hallowing God's name, seeking His Kingdom and seeking His will, will it not distort our whole view of life, putting ourselves at the place God ought to be? I wouldn't do this, but I've wondered, what if you made it a rule of prayer that you couldn't ask for things until you have asked that God's name be hallowed, that His kingdom come and that His will be done? Would acknowledging these things change the things we ask for?

Paul said, "I want to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings". He was a disciple identified with the Cross. Are we? We learned a few weeks ago that true Christians accept the offensiveness or reproach of the cross; we boast in it and that to truly be free we must even crucify ourselves to the world if we are to be free from the passion of its idolatry. Here's a prayer I think the Lord would like to hear from us, "Lord, would you crucify us to the world and the world to us and set us free to worship you and you alone." However, the more worshippers are treated as consumers, that message may not market very well. Before he ever went to the cross, Jesus crucified himself to that which we are hard wired to value, the relief of suffering. And he did it so that we could live at peace with God. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And long before that he set his face toward Jerusalem to do just that.

We've been asking ourselves what it means to be a people of the cross. And the truth is, it's counterintuitive to and challenges all our natural instincts. Rom. 12 gives us lots of help and there is more here to be applied than I will mention this morning. But, I want to pick out three out of the larger threads given here that reveal how we can be people of the cross.

1. Abhor evil and cling to what is good and in doing so, get a new definition of love (9).
2. Let humility reign in your heart (16).
3. Practice Forgiveness or overcome evil with good (17-21.)

These are ways Jesus lived and died a crucified life. When we pick these up by faith, they are evidences of what it means to be people of the cross.

ABHOR EVIL

OK. First, learn to love by learning to become horrified by evil. (9) *"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil and cling to what is good."* Too often I acknowledge that sin is wrong but I don't really abhor it. In fact I have even regretted the temporary joy I might have gained from it. Do I really abhor sin? Or do I make peace with it too easily?

Maybe you've heard the phrase that we should *"hate the sin and love the sinner."* I've never been completely satisfied by that because I don't know how to separate who we are from what we do. It seems so convenient to say after wounding someone terribly, "Oh you shouldn't be angry with me. Just be angry with what I did." The phrase can be abused. But in another way it's useful. Vs. 9 is perhaps the closest thing we have in the Bible that says, to hate the sin and love the sinner. Paul could have easily said, "Abhor the person who sins." Instead, he says to abhor the sin. The context is about believers getting along and bearing a witness to the reconciling love of God in the gospel.

"Abhor:" It's not a word we use much any more. To abhor means to loath or to be horrified. It's anger but it's an anger of disgust, indignation and repugnance. "Hate sin." (NIV) is good, but it doesn't quite get the idea of horror intended.

JESUS WAS VERY ANGRY

In this respect we're told that Jesus was an angry person. In Mark 3:5, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath with a withered hand. But when he did the religious leaders

were embittered because He broke their interpretation of the law. Mark says Jesus *looked on them with anger* because of the hardness of their hearts. The word translated “anger” means *an intense sustained anger*. When He approached the tomb of Lazarus it literally reads *that he was “snorting with anger”*. And of course when he cleansed the temple, he wove together strands of leather and made a whip and drove the moneychangers out of the temple. Trust me, Jesus wasn’t being nice, gentle and passive. He was angry. When Nehemiah learned that the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after the exile, didn’t teach their children Hebrew making it impossible for them to read the Scriptures, he beat some of them and pulled their hair out. He wasn’t a preacher. So, I can’t follow his example. But he was rightly angry. Jesus’ brother James said to *be angry but don’t sin*. Why? Why was Jesus angry? Why are we called to be angry?

Well, Jesus was angry because He is good. E. F. Gifford was reflecting on his love for his own son. He said, “The more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the drunkard, the liar the traitor.” Mary Becky Pippert said, “Anger isn’t the opposite of love, hate is. And the final form of hate is indifference not anger.” Love and anger against evil not only may go together they are inseparable.

The reason Jesus was often angry is because he’s so good. The holy response to sin is righteous indignation. He’s righteous. And God’s wrath and anger is just that, it’s always righteous indignation. The problem with our anger is that when we get angry, we unravel and get out of control. That vein in your neck starts to bulge, your brain seizes up, and you start to lose a piece of your mind that you couldn’t afford to lose. Now, this hasn’t happened to me of course. But I’ve witnessed it in others. Beloved, God is never out of control. God doesn’t lose control. But he is angry.

If you are loving and good you get angry at that which destroys what you love and what is good. The less you love your son, the less upset you get when you see your son lie. I failed a loved one recently when I didn’t get angry about a sin. I slithered around it. I made peace with it. I used the old rationalization, “Everyone does it. It’s done every day.” But I knew in my heart it was wrong. I failed to abhor evil.

But God gets angry. C.S. Lewis wrote,

“This (anger) is the way God is. In an awful and surprising truth we are the objects of His love. You ask for a loving God? Well, you’ve got it. But not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes us all well, on our own way. Not the cold benevolence or philanthropy of a kind magistrate but the consuming fire itself. The love that made the world is persistent as the artist’s love for her work, as venerable and protective as a mother’s love for her child and inexorable as exacting a love between the sexes. If you love you hate evil.”

Did you see that in v. 9, “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor evil and cling to what is good.” Love must have the quality of abhorrence if it’s to be true love. It is more

than hate. The word communicates a sense of horror and sense of terror about sin and evil.

At the cross Jesus abhorred evil and destroyed its tyrannical power over us. I hope to look at this next Sunday from Col 3:14. To be a community of the cross is to abhor evil and then to cling or fasten ourselves to what is good. Hold good close to your heart. But, without that sense of horror or loathing of sin we will make deals with sin way too easily. We need God's grace for this don't we?

PRACTICE HUMILITY

Now, this leads us to a second way to be a people of the cross. And that is to practice humility. It's a great check on the abuses of self-righteousness and self-centeredness. You see, we can abhor evil and cling to the good with an attitude of self-righteousness. The moment you start to hate evil, you look around and see many that love it and even benefit by it. You can get pretty self-righteous.

That was the attitude of the Pharisee over the tax collector at prayer. He abhorred evil, told God that he abhorred evil, and then patted himself on the back for doing so. He was like the guy who got a gold pin for being the most humble and then the church took it away from him because he wore it the next Sunday. The Pharisee at prayer abhorred evil except the evil of pride, vanity, self-righteousness, contempt, and his sense of superiority over those who weren't like him. Paul knows the temptation that stands so close to the decision to be horrified by evil. So he says, "Don't be conceited...give preference to one another in honor." (10) "Don't be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Don't be wise in your own eyes." (16).

The exhortations of verse ten and following hinge on the practice of humility. They all require that we take self-gratification out of the gravitational pull of life and honor loving God and others in that place. Humility is not low self-esteem or the absence of self-appreciation. It's taking that which you would by nature do to serve yourself, love yourself, satisfy yourself, protect yourself, build yourself up and direct that same energy and direct it to the love of the Lord and others.

Humility has to do with being devoted to one another in brotherly love (10). It's not lagging behind in diligence being fervent in spirit, serving the Lord (11). It's rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, giving to the needy, practicing hospitality, blessing those who persecute you, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. None of this can happen until your private concerns are dethroned. That's humility. That's love. Love happens when

the satisfaction, wellbeing, and security of another becomes more important to you than your own.

Listen to how Paul describes humility and how to be people of the cross in Philippians 2.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. (now listen how...)

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not {merely} look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Phil.2:2-8 NASB

Paul's explaining what it means to take up your cross and follow Christ. We do so by practicing a humility that regards the welfare of others more so than our own. Not that you neglect yourself entirely. But how did Jesus do it? He didn't regard the self-serving prerogatives of divinity something he had to grasp or exercise. He laid aside the prerogatives of honor, glory, ease, prosperity and comfort to become the servant of the Lord and to serve us in love.

Abelard argued that the atonement has a moral intention as well as an objective end in satisfying the justice of God. He was right. The cross is an example for us about how to live as well as the righteous sacrifice for our sins. No, we aren't called to die on the cross to forgive the sins of others. But we are called to practice the humility that moves us to serve, pray, sacrifice; honor all men (even those we soundly disagree with). "To love the sinner and hate the sin." is implied. To do this we need the grace to both abhor sin and to humble ourselves before each other. A community of the cross is a community of givers, servers, workers, that pursue the joy, hope, wellbeing, love of others and love of God above our own private ambitions. In this world, you get a thousand and more messages every day that tell you just the opposite. Abhor evil, cling to what is good, and practice humility.

PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

And that leads to the third exhortation or way we can be people of the cross. Practice forgiveness and overcome evil with good (14). "Bless those who persecute you; bless and not curse." 17 ff: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone." Or 19, "never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." "If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty give him a drink for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (20)

Who are your enemies? I suppose they would be those who would be out to harm or hurt you, dishonor you, marginalize you, mock you and your values, mock your Lord, mock your church, or those who would cause harm to your family and friends.

First, practice forgiveness with those who have harmed us. He says in v.14 "Bless those who persecute you and not curse. Never payback evil for evil." Being people of the cross means to forgive others when offended. We have been learning that forgiveness is a payment thing. When offended, you can exact the debt from the person. You can make them pay or you can let God do it. To refuse to exact the payment or to pay back evil for evil is to forgive. We can do as he says here, leave room for God's vengeance or God's dealings. We can say, "God, you know what that person deserves, I don't. You take care of that because you will do it far better than I can, anyway." We can also say, "*Lord, you have radically forgiven me. So, Lord, I pass over any effort to exact payment, through gossip, carping, withdrawing, running them down or harming that person.*"

That doesn't mean you take a stupid pill and grant an untrustworthy person your trust. Forgiveness is given (It's grace!), but *trust is earned*. Forgiveness means to crucify yourself to nurturing that offence. It means, "*I'm not going to let the seeds of that offence grow in my soul. I'm not going to let their offence take charge of me.*" And forgiveness like this is almost always granted before it is felt. But you grant it. And when you forgive you can bless that person and you don't have to curse that person. Curse here doesn't mean profanity. It means to cut down and to destroy. David did this well with Saul,

After Saul attempted to kill David, David was hiding in a cave (1Sam 24). Saul entered the cave. But instead of payback, David cut a piece off of Saul's robe. Then Saul left. Just after Saul left, David cried out to Saul, "*My Lord, my king.*" David then bowed low to the ground and prostrated himself. "Look", he said "*You're my father. Here's the piece of your robe I cut off while you were asleep. There is no evil between us...not from my side. I'm just a flea with respect to you. I mean you no harm.*" They made up and David swore not to harm Saul's descendents. But it says at the end of the chapter that Saul went home and David *went to his stronghold*. David forgave him. But he didn't trust Saul. Saul was untrustworthy.

Paul says, “Be at peace with all men as far as it depends on you. “ And that qualification is important. You might not be able to bring peace between you and another. They may not be able or ready. But don’t let it be you that doesn’t forgive.

God also says to over come evil by doing good. Jesus didn’t just pronounce the catalog of our sins against him that earned his righteous indignation. He didn’t just wave a wand and say, “I forgive.” He left heaven and moved in our direction with words and acts of love, warning and grace. Paul says in v.20, “*If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty give him a drink, for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.*” Think about whoever your enemy is and ask, “Is this how I go about dealing with him?” I can default to making the best argument I can why my enemy is wrong and why I am right. There’s some wisdom in that. Clarity is critical in ethical and moral debates. But, here’s how the text challenges us. It calls us to move beyond pronouncing judgments, even judgments that are righteous. Do we go beyond defending righteousness to actually serving our enemies with good by asking, “Where are they hungry? Where are they thirsty? Have I moved an inch to attempt to serve them?” Or am I content to build my argument, defend my argument and challenge any who disagree?

The word says that if you feed and give water to your enemy you will heap burning coals on his head. One thing is certain about that imagery. When you get burning coals poured on your head, you feel a sense of alarm. It’s the last thing they expect. To be treated with such grace by an enemy is so counter-intuitive to how enemies go about dealing with each other that it will be absolutely alarming. It’ll either communicate an alarm to repent or an alarm that judgment is near. The response can go either way. One is effective for salvation and the other for judgment.

This will be challenging for a culture immersed in self-gratification. But I can hear this call to overcome evil with good...not merely with good arguments, but with good. Let’s ask ourselves, how are we doing good, feeding the hunger of our enemy? How are we giving drink to him?

Isn’t that what Jesus did on the cross for us? He overcame wickedness and evil by the good sacrifice of his good life on our behalf. That goodness heaps burning coals on our heads. It creates a sense of alarm. It’s the announcement of the eternal realities of heaven and hell. By God’s grace some will be alarmed enough to repent and believe others will shut the alarm off and go back to sleep. Remember Pippert’s comment, “Anger isn’t the opposite of love, hate is and the deepest form of hate is indifference.” And some will react to the message of the cross with abject indifference.

God’s call on us is to be a people of the cross. The cross shows us that God hates evil; he abhors it. Do we? Have we made peace with sin? The cross reveals that he will break sin’s tyranny over us. But he breaks it through humility not through the

exercise of raw power. He humbled himself and took the role of a servant, he lost face, honor, reputation, success. He crucified himself to the world and it to him.

I have three grafted lilacs in my front yard. But, to graft a new branch onto a tree you have to gash or cut a deep wound in that tree. The deeper the wound, the better the graft. The more deeply it's wounded the deeper in the branch goes. Beloved, it's at that point and only at the point, where the branch goes in and lives. Jesus said, *"Take up your cross and follow me.* It's the paradigm of our lives before the world and each other. He humbled himself and made himself nothing but a gashing wound so that we could be grafted in, folded into the fellowship of the Father Son and Holy Spirit. And grafted into God's smile forever.

Jesus says, "Look and see, I was wounded so that you could come in and be grafted into the tree of life. Now go and follow me. Abhor evil, practice a humility that moves you to serve others and not yourself, and practice forgiveness."

HOW?

Verse one says, *"I urge you therefore brethren by the mercies of God present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your reasonable worship."* How can we find the grace to be like this? We find it on the basis of His mercy, His forgiveness, His generosity, the promises of His care and provision, On the basis of his love poured out upon us who believe, on the foundation of irrevocable, imperishable, mercies to do more for us than we could ever ask or imagine and to never stop doing us good. We can do it on the foundation of the mercies of His unending presence to be with us, to shepherd us, lead us, protect us, defend us and redeem us, and, on the foundation of his mercy, to never leave us or forsake us. On the basis of such mercies, we can be people of the cross. Because of His endless mercies, we can abhor evil, practice humility to serve others and we can overcome evil with good. So, receive his mercies, live his mercies, glory in his mercies, hope in his eternal mercies, feast on them, prize them, treasure them, revel in them, exult in them. Be so full and satisfied in His tender and infinite mercies that you join the Christ of the cross and out of a heart full of faith and love, may we prove to be a people of the cross once again.