

John 1:14-18

Nov. 21, 2021

Colossians 1:13-20

2 Tim. 1:8-12

Grace to Serve Our King

Some forty years after Christianity had become the dominant religion in the Roman Empire, Flavius Claudius Julianus (331 – 26 June 363) became emperor. Known to history as “Julian the Apostate” he wanted to restore pagan worship in the empire. He had a short life of thirty-two years.

As emperor he had his mind set on conquering the Persian empire. So, he marched with his troops as they invaded Persia in 362 A.D. The emperor had a young aide who was a Christian. One day, Julian asked his aide, “What do you suppose your friend Jesus is doing today?” The aide answered, “Sir, since Jesus is a carpenter, it may be that even today he is taking time off from building mansions for the faithful to build a coffin for you.”

Before the day ended, the emperor was fatally wounded by Persian soldiers. An apocryphal report tells that his dying words were *νενίκηκάς με, Γαλιλαίε* – “You have conquered Galilean!”¹

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar. We call it Christ the King Sunday, a very recent addition to the Church’s observances. Christ the King Sunday began in Europe’s churches in 1925 when fascist governments were storming into Spain, Italy, and Germany. It was the church’s effort to rebuke pagan glorification of state. Three generations later we saw communist, totalitarian systems crumble in Europe, and in many cases the face of Christ inspired their downfall!

In our day, as we face the powers of big tech, big media, big pharma, big government, big corporations, perhaps it is well that we are reminded of to whom the Christian owes allegiance. The church confesses that ***... in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him, Col. 1:16.*** He rules over all earthly rulers, all ideologies and “isms” ... and rules over our own egos. Is He Ruler of your life? Or are you ruled by the passions and desires of the culture? Last week I spoke about our Lord’s commands ***... If you love me, you will keep my commandments,*** Jesus said. Remember, our Lord never demands, coerces, or manipulates us into keeping His commandments – unlike most rulers of this world. He will not take your life ***... He will take you in a better life direction.*** That better direction is found in obeying His commands.

A Stumbling Block

Beginning with the 1st disciples, Christians received God’s grace to follow and obey Christ the Lord. Despite skeptical or hostile receptions, despite persecution and even threat of death, they proclaimed salvation and new life in and through Jesus Christ. The Apostle John stated how ***... From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace, John 1:16.*** Christians of Syria and Iraq – some of whom are among us here in Bakersfield - know what this means. ***In many places around this globe today Christians witness to the truth despite opposition.*** As with St. Paul they can say: ***...do not be***

ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace, 2 Tim. 1:8-9. Yet there remains a stumbling block for many would be Christians ... it is the Cross.

Boasting in the Cross

St. Paul said, *God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, Galatians 6:14a.* A cross is a strange thing to boast about. Most people boast about their family, their background, their education, their career, their salary, the size of their house, the important people they know, the great deeds they have done, and of course their children and their grandchildren. But who boasts about a cross? In the first century the cross was an instrument of torture, a means not simply of death but of ghastly suffering.² So, what in the world was Paul thinking when he wrote that he boasts in the cross? Early Christians were mocked, in satirical cartoons and writings, for their belief that Jesus' death on the cross could mean anything but foolishness. How ironic that a symbol of suffering and shame is the singular and precious symbol to Christians.³

The Cross represents the faith of believers and unites us even when we can't agree on much of anything else. We are the people of the Cross, called by the One who died on the Cross to follow the way of the Cross. The Cross spells the end to human attempts to gain God's favor; reminding the world that there is no way to God through good works, or religion, or self-effort. No wonder the world has a hard time with the Cross. There have always been objections to the cross of Christ.⁴ I think it instructive that we consider some of them this morning:

The Intellectual Objection

When Paul came to Athens and preached the gospel, to the brilliant thinkers of that great city it made no sense, so they dismissed him as a babbler of nonsense (Acts 17:18).⁵ Nevertheless, Paul said, *We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 1 Corinthians 1:23.* Who could ever believe a thing like that? How could you worship a God who died on a cross? Who would trust a God who died on a cross? How could such a person possibly be a king?⁶

This isn't, of course, all that we believe about Jesus, but that is how some people hear it. It is tempting to water down the cross and to talk in generalities of God's love for the world. The intellectual objection says the cross is foolishness. The Bible says: *For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe, 1 Cor. 1:21.*

The Religious Objection

It is recorded in John 14:6 that Jesus said, *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* A lot of Christians are uncomfortable with that. I can almost hear the objections: "That's way too exclusive. Who are we to claim that our religion is the only way?"

So, what do we do with Acts 4:12? **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.** “No other name.” Talk about exclusive. The ancient Greeks and Romans would have no problem if Jesus was just another god in their pantheon. If Paul had said, “You can have Jesus and keep Zeus too,” no problem.

Why was Paul stoned? Why were early Christians seen as a threat to Rome? They would not go along with a watered-down version of their faith.... Neither should we. Why preach Jesus if there is some other way of salvation? Why sacrifice to take the gospel to the lost if they aren’t really lost?

Christians aren’t the only ones who claim exclusive truth. We need to be aware of that. People want an easygoing mix (syncretism) of religions. It doesn’t work. It just ends up in functional atheism.

The religious objection says the Cross is intolerant. But we Christians cannot surrender either the finality or the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. There is simply nobody else like Him.

The Personal Objection

Most people want to control of their own destiny. They’re okay with the love of God in general, a warm fuzzy sense that allows them to feel good without examining themselves. But then we encounter this verse in the Bible: **There is no one righteous, not even one, Romans 3:10.** Or this:, **The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, Jeremiah 17:9.** Then there’s this: **All our righteous acts are like a polluted garment, Isaiah 64:6.** We must ask ourselves: “Does this apply to me?”

Every religion says, “Do this and live.” **Only Christianity preaches “It has been done for you.”** The whole gospel comes down to just three little words: It is finished. Christ has finished all that is necessary for our salvation on the Cross.

The problem with a religion based on doing all the right things to be accounted good is that you can never be sure you’ve done enough. And how do you know that you won’t blow it all tomorrow by one stupid sin? **The personal objection says the cross does not build our self-esteem.** Nevertheless, we preach salvation by grace because the gospel is truly the Good News the world needs to hear.

The Moral Objection

First century Rome and Greece were hotbeds of immorality and idolatry. Licentious behavior was condoned, even celebrated, and all the personal and family dysfunction that came with it was considered the norm. (Is that what’s happening in America?) Christians preached the Good News that Jesus Christ could change your life from the inside out. It was, in the deepest sense, a promise of liberation from the sins of the flesh, unlike any other religion. Paul notes how early Christians were transformed: **They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true, God, 1 Thess. 1:9.** When Christ comes in, the idols must leave and take their false morality with them.

That message was as unwelcome then as it is now. If you want Jesus plus your sinful ways.... You don’t really want Jesus until you are willing to agree with God about your sin. Coming to Christ means submitting to his “extreme makeover” of your life. That frightens some people.

The moral objection says the cross is too demanding. But if you are willing for the Master Carpenter to take over your life, when He is finished, you will be a masterpiece of grace for all to see.

The Political Objection

Here's an interesting fact about the Romans: in conquered territories they generally left the local religion alone, as long as the people would make an offering saying, "Caesar is Lord." The term they used for Lord was the same Greek word translated "Lord" in the New Testament. As you might expect, Christians had a problem with that. They were willing to be good citizens but they could not violate their conscience by declaring, "Caesar is Lord." In Matthew 16 records Peter's confession of faith that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Here's what well-known Methodist evangelist and missionary E. Stanley Jones said of this "... it was no mere chance that the confession was made there. For at Caesarea Philippi was a white grotto where an image of Caesar was worshipped as God. Is the power back of universe a Caesar-like power – force? Or is the power back of the universe a Christlike power – suffering love?"⁷ That is the question we must ask ourselves. It reveals the great chasm dividing terrestrial and temporal power from heavenly and eternal power.

As a general rule Christians ought to be good citizens: support laws and leaders, pray for them. But we can never give ultimate allegiance to any earthly ruler or government. It's no mystery why systems and governments that demand ultimate allegiance to party or state so often persecute Christians. We pledge our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. Any lesser allegiance is just that—lesser.

The political objection says the cross is subversive. But we know that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We owe our ultimate allegiance to Him alone.

We Are Witnesses

So where do we go from here? Let us soberly realize that objections to the cross have always been with us and are with us today. So, here's a couple of thoughts to take hold of:

1. **Hold fast to the cross because it is the only way of salvation.** He paid the price for our sins. This doesn't mean all our troubles will go away. It could mean more troubles. But our troubles or sacrifices for Jesus' sake have power and purpose in God's plans. **In Him we can move from uncertainty about their own lives and future, to certain trust in God.** It's not a matter of going from failure to success, but from failure to faithfulness.

2. **Do not expect to be popular with the world.** The word used in the New Testament for witness or testimony is μαρτυρια. From it we get the English word "martyr" which originally meant someone who testified to Christ as Savior and Lord, and later those who died for the faith. Let us pray to God that we may live in peace, but even if the world doesn't like the cross, we must be ready to live for Christ or to die for Him if necessary.

Each one of us regularly preaches a sermon by our words and our lifestyle. That's how we show who is king in our lives. This includes how we manage our time, our

money, and our relationships with neighbors, coworkers, and family. They're all watching us.

A witness is trusted when consistent. On our good days and our bad days, we represent Christ and speak and act as one of His disciples. We cannot be “sunshine Christians” only, claiming Him when it is easy. Let us not dishonor His name and our brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe who suffer for His name. Do not fear the call of discipleship, for by His grace we are sustained. Place your whole trust in the King who went to the Cross for you.

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace, John 1:16.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_\(emperor\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_(emperor)).

² Few people today would boast of an electric chair, but even that comparison is not quite right because an electric chair is designed to kill within a few seconds. The ancient Romans had devised an instrument of execution to show their ruthlessness against all enemies. Of all the various ways the Romans had of killing people, crucifixion was the worst because it took so long. The whole point of crucifying a man was to expose him publicly, to nail him up in agony, and to do it in such a way that he might live 24 hours or even 48 hours and in rare cases even 72 hours in unimaginable suffering, being forced to raise himself up by placing his weight on the nails in his hands and his feet, every breath a gasp of searing pain. It was torture in its purest form. There are stories of hundreds of people being crucified at one time, of roads where you could see crosses for miles in either direction, where you could hear the multiplied screams of the dying and the wailing of family members who could do nothing to ease the pain. If ever there was a cruel and unusual form of punishment, this was it!

³ We have beautified an object of terror, covered it with gold and silver. That thought would have been unimaginable 2000 years ago.

⁴ see *The Essential John Stott*, “Part One: Approaching the Cross,” p.19-79.

⁵ The Greek word – σπερμολογος - literally means “seed-picker.” It’s like calling someone “country bumpkin” or “airhead.”

⁶ Those sentiments persist in the 21st-century. Many people in the West think it is absurd to believe that a dying Jew on a Roman cross could save anyone. Jews see it as shameful and unnecessary. Muslims see it as a sign of weakness.

⁷ E. Stanley Jones, *Victory Through Surrender*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1966), 57.