



# Sermons

"CHANGED BY THE CROSS"

Sunday Morning, November 3, 1963  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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Scriptural Reference: II Corinthians 5:14-21

The cross of Christ stands at the center of the Christian religion. Here is the symbol most often associated with Christianity, and the event that must be understood if one is to believe aright. There is general agreement among Christians that the cross was an instrument of change. Something happened there that is of eternal significance. Conditions before and after Calvary were radically different. But what is the nature of that change? Precisely what took place when Jesus cried: "It is finished" (John 19:30) and offered up the ghost? This is a question of timeless concern, and I want us to ponder it this morning. We can never find a complete answer, for there is mystery here that no mortal can dispel. However, there is also truth of a most decisive and redemptive nature. Therefore, walk with me again "up Calvary's mountain," and let us consider the event of the cross.

Perhaps the best way to open up the matter is to ask this simple question: "Who was changed by the cross?" Was it God or was it man? As an instrument of change, in which direction did that action point?

Up until a few years ago, I would have answered the question with the first alternative. I grew up under the teaching that the cross was a sacrifice unto God that freed Him to forgive man. This interpretation was part of a compact system based on the idea of moral law. The basic principle was expressed in the words of Ezekiel: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). I was taught that this law governed all spiritual relationships. Whenever sin was committed, the penalty of death had to be exacted. But the problem was that God did not want men to die, even though they were sinful. In this case, a substitute had to be provided to satisfy the law. The Son of God, who did not have to, offered up His life to pay the penalty. This fulfilled the legal demand, and enabled God to acquit the guilty. The death of Christ was substituted for man's death, and by this means he did not have to die but could live forever. According to this interpretation, the cross liberated God to do what He wanted to do but could not have done before. The change was on the Godward side. Satisfaction had been made; a substitute had been offered; now God was able to accept those who before would have been rejected. That which was changed by the cross was God's ability to save the sinner.

Undoubtedly you are familiar with this approach, for it is one of the oldest interpretations of the cross. But what shall we say about it? Is what I grew up believing and have just described an adequate understanding of what took place at Calvary?

In all honesty I would have to admit that this was never very convincing to me. Although it was the only interpretation I had heard, it somehow had a hollow ring to it. I had trouble putting my finger on it, but there was something about the system

that seemed unreal to me. For one thing, it was so mechanical, as if God were the rigid Enforcer of impersonal Law and nothing else. Then, too, it was removed from individual experience. It seemed to me that man was more or less a passive spectator of the whole process. He was the one who had sinned, but God was now juggling the factors "out there" so man could walk away "scot free." Like a bank robber who is guilty but then let off through no action of his own, so the transgressor finds himself treated like an innocent man, and the whole process remains external. I was also bothered by how this interpretation seemed to divide up the Divine Being. A little boy once startled his parents by saying: "You know, I love Jesus but I hate God." When they began to talk to him, they found that he understood the cross as pitting one Expression of God over against the Other. Jesus was love, but the Father was wrath. And such an understanding is not at all farfetched on the premise of this view. I once saw a frieze over the door of a cathedral in France. It depicted the Father and Son looking down from heaven on sinful man. The Father had a terrible frown on His face and lightning in both clenched fists, while Jesus was on His knees before Him pleading in behalf of man. This split in the Being of God is a possible implication of this view, and creates real theological problems. These, then, were some of my youthful reservations, and I would not be surprised if you have wondered about them too. Is the cross really an instrument of change in relation to God?

When I really got down to studying the Biblical evidence, the issue began to look differently. I found that what I have described is more a theory superimposed on the Bible than it is the Bible itself. As I began to plow back and forth in the New Testament, I came to this crucial verse in our text for the morning: "That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...." (II Corinthians 5:19 RSV). I immediately saw that God was doing the reconciling, not being reconciled. He was the Agent, not the Object of this event. The whole process was "of God," and the movement was toward the world and not toward Himself. And as I went on, I discovered this is not just the witness of one passage; this is true of the whole New Testament. Nowhere does it speak of God being reconciled; nowhere does it depict a change in the Divine Being as a result of this cross; nowhere does it suggest that God was altered by what happened on Calvary. The change is always on the manward side. God was in Christ, not watching from somewhere in the clouds, and what was done was aimed at effecting a change in man and not in God.

Now I can only speak for myself in saying that this was an exciting breakthrough in my spiritual understanding. What once had been a puzzling enigma began to make sense. I suddenly saw this action in its relation to the whole, and illumination began to stream into the darkness. I then realized that the cross was no static event in God's eternity, but was rather a dynamic instrument that corresponded exactly to what needed to be done in the human situation.

Let me attempt to share this illumination with you. Think of the cross in a personal rather than a legal frame of reference. Realize that the problem to be solved is that of a broken covenant rather than a broken law. The essence of sin is that man violated his trusted relation with God. He did more than break an abstract law; he broke faith with the One who had made him and loved him. It is this type of problem--personal rather than legal--that had to be solved.

I can understand this dilemma a little better because of something that happened to me a few years ago. I had the joy of marrying a young couple with whom I had counseled for a long time. I stood at the altar when they exchanged vows and saw the two



become one in a sacred commitment. Because of this happy privilege, it was doubly painful when that young bride came to my study in less than a year and sobbed out her heart. To my unbelieving ears she told me that her husband had been unfaithful. He had violated the most intimate dimension of their relationship, and she was crushed beyond measure. The problem here was not legal as much as personal. This man had not just broken a rule; he had broken a heart. A sacred covenant had been breached. Yet in the face of it all, she wanted things restored. She longed to build back what had been torn down and reclaim what had been lost.

I say this experience helped me understand, for this problem is of the same nature as that which faced God in man's sin. It was the rupture of a personal bond that had taken place, and this was the problem to be faced.

I remember pondering with this young woman how she could achieve her goal of restoration. The obstacles were not satisfying a law as much as changing another's heart. Here was the real necessity. Two things had to be done. First, her husband needed to be made aware of the evil he had done. He must see it as she saw it, in all its horrible implications. He must be repelled by it and want to change. In addition, he needed to be made aware of her willingness to forgive and to know how much she wanted him back on this basis. These two realities had to take place if restitution was effected. And the same conditions hold true at the higher level of God's intention. If redemption is achieved, these things somehow must be done.

With this background, I would have you see the relevance of the cross as a Divine strategy. What needs to be done by the very nature of sin is done in the death of Christ. Here is God's redemptive reaction to the human tragedy. The cross is a precise instrument, aimed at the very heart of this problem. Notice carefully exactly what it can do.

On the one hand, it creates an awareness of evil. The method used is that of contrast, and this is always the most effective. If you want something black to stand out, then set it right next to something white. If you want a light to shine, you set it against a background of darkness. By bringing absolute opposites right together, their character is heightened. And this is exactly what the cross does with good and evil. There hangs Jesus, the very epitome of righteousness and innocence. He had never tortured or hurt anyone in His life. And this is what makes that scene so utterly horrible. The fact that He does not deserve crucifixion makes the forces about Him all the more hideous. Evil never looks quite as bad as when it stands in the presence of perfect goodness. In seeing what happened to a man like Jesus, you see how demonic the forces of evil really are.

The revealing power of innocent suffering is truly amazing. Nothing gets through to the heart quite as quickly as observing this scene. I was walking down the street in a slum section once and heard some commotion on the other side. I went over, and witnessed a scene I still cannot forget. There I saw a big hulking bulk of a man--crazy drunk--brutally beating and kicking his five-year-old child. People in a slum area are usually indifferent, but that spectacle aroused us all. We rushed in to restrain him and save the child. I had always known drunken fathers were bad, but I never realized how bad until I saw it poured out on an innocent one. This is by far the most potent revealer of evil that there is. When the innocent suffer, the contrast is stark and disturbing. There stand absolute opposites side by side, the one making more obvious the other. The cross, as no other scene in history, is such contrast. Seeing Him who knew no sin having to die the death of a criminal produces an

awareness of evil as nothing else can.

But the cross also performs a second task--that of conveying the possibility of forgiveness. Has God given up on man? Has sin forever shut the door on human hope? No, the spectacle of the cross reveals that God is still involved with us and is willing to pay any price in order to win men back. The giving of gifts has always been the medium of expressing love, and it follows that the greater the love the more precious the gift. What would be the supreme expression? Would it not be one's most precious possession? And what is that? I would have to answer--one's life, the only chance one has to live upon this earth. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

I learned this truth in a strange place. Several years ago a relative of mine was sick and needed blood. I went down to the Red Cross Center to meet this need, and was feeling fine until they began to take the blood. Suddenly, my head began to spin, everything became hazy, and I felt my consciousness draining away like water out of a basin. In that moment--suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness--I came to realize the preciousness of life. Had I thought I were dying, I would have fought back with all my strength, so great was the desire to survive. And there--in a Red Cross Blood Center of all places--I came to a deeper understanding of what happened on the cross. For centuries ago, Another experienced the same spinning, the same dizziness, the same emptying of consciousness. However, He realized He was dying. But because He loved something more than He loved Himself, He voluntarily let His life go, to demonstrate how much He wanted man to be redeemed. Surely it is more true: greater love hath no one, than a God who lays down His life, not for friends, but for enemies. And that is exactly what happened on the cross. To prove that no sacrifice was too great and that reconciliation was His highest desire, Christ laid down His life--the greatest gift. If there were any doubt about God's intention, it was forever dispelled.

Here, then, is why I say the cross has come to have relevant meaning for me. As an instrument God uses to undo what sin has done, it reaches right into my life and makes a difference. It says to man, not to God: "Be ye reconciled." Moreover, it does the two things that must be done in the process of reconciliation: it convicts me of my sin and conveys to me God's love. It is "the power of God unto salvation," His redemptive thrust into the world.

This is what the cross now means to me, and I hold it forth to you this morning as best I can. And if you will see it, not as something aimed at God, but something pointed straight at you, who knows, the miracle can happen all over again, and what you need, by virtue of your sin, will be done in you, by virtue of Christ's cross. It is not God, but man, who needs to be changed. And this is the purpose of the cross!