

The Doctrine of the Cross

Credo: Truths That Shape a Christian Life Sermon 4

Romans 5:1-11

February 9, 2020

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. **2** Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. **3** Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, **4** and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, **5** and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. **6** For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. **7** For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— **8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **9** Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. **10** For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. **11** More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-11, ESV)

At times, countries or movements choose a symbol to represent them. This is typically an image or object meant to capture, vividly, the essence of who they are, or what they stand for. Countries are a common example. A Golden Lion stands for Belgium, Iran chose a Lion and Sun, Kenya uses Two Lions. Eagles are also popular: Austria's a black eagle, Mexico Golden Eagle, and, of course, the United States' Bald Eagle. Australia stays close to home with the symbol of the Kangaroo, and New Zealand is the Kiwi (not a fruit, but a small bird). Canada is symbolized by the handsome Maple Leaf. Lions and eagles are the most popular, as they convey strength and dignity. A symbol is meant to symbolize the essence of what it represents.

At first glance, it is therefore both peculiar and shocking to consider the symbol that Christians choose for their faith: a *cross*. In these early days of the faith, a cross was not a religious icon, as it is today. It stood for one thing: a torturous death. French writer Maurice Goguel captures the horror behind the symbol:

[The Cross] represented the acme of the torturer's art: atrocious physical sufferings, length of torment, [humiliation], the effect of the crowd gathering to witness the long

agony of the crucified. Nothing could be more horrible.... The cross represented miserable humanity reduced to the last degree of impotence, suffering and degradation.... [C]rucifixion combined ... torture ... degradation, and certain death, distilled slowly drop by drop.¹

However, there were other options. A lion for the tribe of Judah, a scepter that symbolizes Christ's reign. The fish, which was used at times. But at the end of the day, none of these other images captured the essence of what God had done in Jesus Christ. Taking stock of his whole life, the great Apostle Paul would say: "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). As a symbol, only the Cross captures the focal point and power of the Gospel. As we continue our series, *Credo: Truths That Shape a Christian Life*, we arrive at the Doctrine of the Cross. The Apostle's Creed reads:

He [Jesus] was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried ...

Worth noting is how the Creed moves immediately from Jesus' incarnation to the Cross—or His suffering and death. It passes over His earthly teaching and ministry without a word. This is not to downplay the significance of his miracles, healings, and words, but to underscore the importance of the Cross. The life that Jesus' miracles and teaching point to is only possible because of what He does on the Cross.

What happens on the cross to make it the focal point? How does the Cross shape a Christian life?

It's with these questions that we will turn to Romans 5:6–11 and consider the Doctrine of the Cross of Jesus Christ. In the first four chapters of Romans, Paul emphasizes that the way to enter into a right relationship with God is not through keeping all the rules—as if anyone could do that. Rather, it's through faith, faith in Jesus Christ. In Romans 5, he starts to unpack why faith in Jesus Christ is so powerful, and the type of life it generates. The hinge upon which all this turns is the Cross.

This is all summarized in the opening sentences, Romans 5:1: "Therefore, since we have been justified (made right with God) by faith, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ." A new life with God is based on faith, and that life and faith, as we'll see, hinge upon the cross.

To better understand this, I want to focus our attention on Romans 5:8–11, using three words to work our way through: to understand the Cross, we need to grasp the meaning behind these three words: **Sinners** [v. 8], **Blood** [v.9], (**Reconciliation** [v.11]).

I. Sinners: Loving the Solution Requires Feeling the Problem

The Cross of Christ is a solution to a great problem. And the key to enjoying a solution lies in first feeling the problem it solves. If the maintenance guy comes to fix your heater but you've sensed no problem with it, you don't care much for his dropping by. If he shows up after three days of freezing temperatures, you've never been so happy to see him. Let's try to feel the problem that the cross is the solution to.

1. Sin defined

Paul uses several terms in Romans 5:6 and 8 to describe who Christ died for: *weak, ungodly, sinners*. "For while we were still **weak**, at the right time Christ died for the **ungodly** ... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still **sinners**, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8).

We'll focus on the last term, *sinners*, and define sin.² The terms "sin" and "sinners" sound like a refrain throughout the Bible. The term "sin" carries the idea of "missing the mark." In Scripture, sin is a complex idea, however, and is both: a sinister force outside of humans that acts upon us, as well as a dark presence within humans that influences our minds, hearts, and actions.³

Put in the most general terms, sin is anything and everything contrary to the purposes and designs of God our Creator.

It is little surprise, therefore, that the consequences of sin are death. The Bible further teaches that the reach of sin is **universal** – "we all are sinners," and the problem of sin is **intractable** – we cannot rid ourselves of the disease.

2. Hard to believe

The idea that you are sinful and cannot rid yourself of sinning may be an easy idea for some of you to grasp. For others, however, it can be hard to grasp, and this for a few reasons: One reason the biblical

view of sin may be hard to grasp is that it's easier and more popular to locate the root of human ills, not in ourselves, but in others or the systems that surround us. People are victims of systems; that's where the problem lies. To be sure, many are victims of terrible injustices. *But is this the whole story?*

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is someone who thought deeply about the idea that all people, even victims of gross injustice, are still sinners. Solzhenitsyn was a Russian writer, philosopher, and eventual winner of the Nobel Prize in literature. He is remembered for his years as a political prisoner in Stalin's labor camps, an experience he recounts in gross detail in *The Gulag Archipelago*. What's illuminating about Solzhenitsyn's story is that as a bright youth he turned away from a religious view of the world and accepted an ideology that chiefly saw humanity's ills as caused by poor social structures. The problem, so to speak, lies not within us, but around us. But through his long exile—nearly dying of starvation, overwork, and cancer—he writes of the following change (or, conversion) that occurred:

In the intoxication of youthful successes, I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel.... In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good.... And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.... And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted small corner of evil.⁴

Solzhenitsyn found the Christian view of humankind more convincing than any ideology. We are created in God's image, and our hearts are made for righteousness. But man is a being to whom something *happened*. No matter how much chaos we see without, every human must reckon with evil within.

The Cross of Christ has much to say to the oppressions and systematic evils that have been unleashed in history. It calls people to do something about them and assures us God will judge them. However, you cannot approach the cross in any real sense unless you realize that Jesus is dying to deal with an evil *within you*. "All have sinned," Paul says in Romans 3, "and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). When God finds us, we are in the midst of a problem as serious as death: we are all sinners. But this is not where God leaves us. Paul writes in Romans 5:8, "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8). Let's now turn to our second word, "Blood," and better understand the solution to the problem of sin—or what actually happens on the cross.

II. Blood: Enjoying the Solution Requires Understanding the Blood and Its Effects

After writing that Christ died for us in verse 8, Paul offers a further explanation of what this means in verse 9: “We have been justified by his **blood**” (Romans 5:9). Paul can summarize how God deals with our sin with the word “blood.” What does he mean by this?

1. Jewish Sacrificial System

Paul does not use the word *blood* to describe the cross primarily because crucifixions were bloody. Rather, he uses it to draw the reader’s mind into the complex thought-world of the Jewish sacrificial system. Elsewhere he locates Jesus’ death in the center of this system when he refers to Jesus as “our Passover Lamb, which has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). To understand the Cross, we need to understand a thing or two about this sacrificial system—which is as foreign to us as it is ancient. Long before the life of Jesus, God had given his ancestors, the Jewish people, a sacrificial system in order to deal with the problem of sin. Risking some generalization, the system worked as follows:

A) Sin taken seriously—life or death:

Sin was taken seriously by the Holy and Righteous God and understood to move someone from a place of life toward the path of death. Sin was a life-or-death issue—which it is, if understood rightly.

B) Cleanse and pardon:

The sinner was marked by two types of experiences (or problems): uncleanness and guilt. Hence God speaks through Jeremiah of a day when: “I will **cleanse** them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will **pardon** all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me” (Jeremiah 33:8). There is a need for cleansing from the tarnish of sin and a need for pardoning of the penalty from sin.

C) Scapegoat:

The sacrificial system allowed that the sinful Israelites could have their sins put on the head of an animal, and then that animal would die in their place (the term scapegoat comes from this). Through this exchange, therefore, God would both uphold justice—taking sin seriously—while also showing

mercy. The blood of the animal represented its life, and through this act the Israelite was both pardoned of guilt, and then seen as clean from their sin.

D) Atonement:

There is a word used for what this accomplishes in Scripture, “atonement.” There is a day on the Jewish calendar known as the Day of Atonement. Atonement literally means what it sounds like: at-one-meant. The sacrifice and blood are meant to bring the estranged sinner back into oneness with God and community. The word Paul uses to describe what Christ’s blood does for us here in Romans is similar: “reconciliation,” which we consider below

2. Cross as Fulfillment

To underscore the importance of the Cross of Christ, the writer of Hebrews connects Christ’s death with this Jewish sacrificial system but also writes that Jesus fulfills and surpasses it:

1 Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. **2** Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? **3** But in these sacrifices, there is a reminder of sin year after year. **4** For it is **impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.** (Hebrews 10:1–4)

The writer then concludes a few verses later: “It is by God’s will that we have been sanctified [cleansed from sin] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10). When Paul writes in Romans 5:9 that we have been “justified by his blood,” he is telling us that when Jesus died for us on the Cross, He did everything the Jewish sacrificial system pointed to, but did so finally and fully: Through His death, we are both cleansed from the stain of sin, and forgiven of the penalty of sin.

Having said something about the problem (we are sinners) and the solution (Christ’s death on the cross), I want finally to consider a third term in our passage, “reconciliation.” This term draws our attention to the *experience* of the Cross and the life it releases.

III. Reconciliation: What Does it Feel Like to be a Reconciled Sinner?

Paul moves along in Romans 5:10–11 to speak of the effect of the Cross, which is reconciliation: he writes, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received **reconciliation.**” (Romans 5:10–11)

We have “received reconciliation.” What does this mean? Reconciliation is a relational term, speaking of two parties that were formerly estranged being reunited. It carries with it the idea of a state of harmony. This reminds us that the goal of the Cross is far more than a clean legal or moral report card. The goal of the Cross is the reuniting of Adam with His Maker. This is so because sin, at its core, destroys this profound relationship between humankind and their maker.

The solution of the Cross, therefore, brings about not merely a legal reality, *I am forgiven*; but a dynamic and experiential reality, *I have been saved and made new.*

I’d like to close, therefore, by noting three ways the Cross is experienced as reconciliation by sinners being saved. Or, how the experience of the Cross shapes the Christian.

To do this, we will note the three most common metaphors for sin in the Bible and pass them through the Cross.

1. A Burden

In his book, *Sin: A History*, Gary Anderson insists that the main metaphor for sin in Scripture is that of a burden to be borne.⁵¹ Isaiah speaks of a “people laden with iniquity,” and the Psalmist is most vivid: “My iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me” (Psalm 38:4).

Sin produces guilt, because we know we’ve hurt others and dishonored God. When you reckon with your sins, especially particular ones, guilt can accumulate, first like an ache on your neck, then like a burden you cannot be free from. Guilt is a weight on your mind and heart. The only relief is to have your sin expunged.

You may lay your burden on the head of Jesus Christ, and know you are forgiven for certain and forever.

2. A Stain

Anderson also notes that sin is likened to a stain, as Isaiah says, “Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (Isaiah 1:8). Sin is likened to a stain, because it makes us feel unclean. Uncleanness gives rise to shame, and shame sends us into hiding. There are things about you that you want no one to know.

If you lay your sins on the head of Jesus Christ, you can be cleansed from your sin, for certain and forever, washed as white as snow.

3. A Lion

Sin is also likened to a lion, “crouching at our door, hoping to devour us.” (Genesis 4:7) This is because sin, when you really face it, is too powerful for you. Like Paul in Romans 7, you lament: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:19, 24). Christ, the Lion of Judah, defeats the power of sin.

If you will come to the Man on the Cross, you will find in him a protector and a deliver, and sin will not have the final word over your life.

The early Christians could have chosen many symbols to stand for their faith. But only the Cross spoke clearly enough: that in Christ, God had forgiven man his sin—unburdened, cleansed, saved—and called him into a whole new way of life.

Endnotes

1. Maurice Goguel, *The Life of Jesus*, 535–36; as cited in Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 113.
2. The Oxford Dictionary defines sin as “an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law.”

3. In Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*, Cassius insists, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." Paul would agree: Christ died for weak, ungodly, sinners. We will never feel the force of the cross unless we feel ourselves as sinners.
4. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*.
5. Gary Andersen, *Sin: A History*, 15ff.