

The Comfortable Cross by Jeff Strite

1 Corinthians 1:18-1:23

OPEN: Clarence Jordan, author of the "Cotton Patch" New Testament was getting a red-carpet tour of another preacher's church. With pride the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple.

"That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars," the minister said with a satisfied smile. Jordan looked up at the cross and said:

"You got cheated. Times were when Christians could get them for free."

Time was you could get a cross for free.

But most people back then didn't want one.

Crosses back then were the way Romans executed criminals.

These days we wear crosses as jewelry.

Crosses decorate the walls of our homes.

Churches have embedded them into their stain glass windows and they place them on spires that advertise to the world that this is a church.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that.

Using crosses in this way is an excellent way to declare to the world who we belong to and what we believe, But using crosses so freely tends to make us forget what crosses were all about.

Crosses were instruments of death.

It was THE MOST horrid way to die ever conceived by man.

Some people have compared the Cross of Christ to our modern day executions by electric chairs. But people who've died in electric chairs generally died in a matter of moments. By contrast, those who hung on crosses often slowly died over hours or even days.

Imagine if you will, wearing a an electric chair for pendant. Or decorating your house with pictures and plaques showing an attractive electric chair. Or putting an electric chair on the spire of a church building.

How appealing would that be do you think?

The cross was an instrument of death - that's how criminals died.

And yet Jesus said take up your cross daily and follow me.

You know what Jesus was saying?

He was saying I want you DEAD.

I want you dead... to this world

I want you to be so dead to this world that it doesn't attract you anymore.

That's what we were taught when we became Christians.

Romans 6:2-6 says "... don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.

ILLUS: Now I want you to put on your "sanctified imaginers" for a moment, because I couldn't get this prop for today. I want you to imagine a corpse up here on stage. I tried to get one from the morgue... but for some reason they wouldn't let me have one, so you're just going to have to imagine a dead body up here in the corner of the stage.

Now imagine that out of that side door there comes a scantily clad woman who comes up here on stage and prances back and forth in front of our "guest."

Does he watch her as she moves?

No? Why not?

Because he's DEAD!!!

She has absolutely no appeal to him because he's dead to her allures.

Now let's say we take him out in the parking lot and put him behind the wheel of a fancy sports car. Is he impressed? (no) Why not?

Because he's DEAD!!!

That car doesn't appeal to him at all because he's dead to its beauty.

Let's say we take him to a high rise apartment that has all the amenities we could ever want in a living space. Will it make any difference to him? OF course not... HE'S DEAD.

Nothing in this world attracts him, impresses him, appeals to him.

Because He's dead to this world.

A contemporary Christian artist named Rob Frazier wrote a song that went this way

"Dead people don't mind the pain,

Don't get offended so they never complain.

They're not concerned about personal gain,

Does that sound like me or you?

The truth is rising from the mist

And the word is this;

That when Jesus calls a man He calls him to come and die!

He doesn't want you better, He wants you deader."

Now, the problem for a lot of us is that we don't want to offend anyone.

And the cross and all it stands for offends people.

ILLUS: In the first church I served I was eventually let go because I refused to go along with the church in looking the other way on an adulterous deacon. It was obviously a fairly difficult situation and though the church liked me it seemed obvious I'd lose my job over the

confrontation.

In the midst of the issue, one of the local golf club owners (who I'd struck up a friendship with, but was not a Christian) invited me over to his house for a talk. He couldn't understand why I would put my job and livelihood on the line for such an issue. Why not just let it go and let the Deacon off? His one comment was: "If you were in L.A. you wouldn't preach against homosexuality would you?"

(PAUSE) Well, yeah I would!

But that was something this man couldn't understand. Why put your job on the line for something like Biblical morality? Why follow the cross and lose your livelihood?

ILLUS: More recently the California State University, which has 23 campuses, has "de-recognized" a college group known as Intervarsity. Intervarsity is a Christian based college ministry totally run by college students. They have the traditional college presidents, vice-presidents, treasurers and secretaries. Up until now they've been just one of many recognized campus organizations that were allowed access to meeting rooms, or certain discount other campus groups would receive.

But not anymore. CSU is offended that Intervarsity would "discriminate" against having students in leadership who live with their boyfriends/girlfriends, live a homosexual lifestyle or otherwise live immoral lives.

Now, the California State University is offended by the teachings of the cross.

They're annoyed that any group would stand up for Jesus.

ILLUS: One of the big things now is the concern about "Millennials" (the new generation). Churches are worried they're not reaching these Millennials and they're thinking they should change their message to be more appealing.

So how should they change their message?

One CNN reporter (Laura Sessions Stepp) spoke on this and said "(Millennials) don't appreciate being condemned for living with a partner, straight or gay, outside of marriage or opting for abortion to terminate an unplanned pregnancy."

These Millennials are offended.

The teaching of the cross annoy them... so they're going elsewhere.

Paul wrote: "... the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 2 Timothy 4:3

They don't want to hear about the cross and what it means to them.

They want to hear what they want to hear... and nothing more nor less.

So, how do you deal with itching ears?

How do you deal with folks who are "offended" by the cross?

Well, one option is to just AVOID offending them.

Live and let live.

Let them believe what they want to believe.

After all, speaking up might make them mad.

You might lose a friend, a job, or an opportunity to get on in this world.

(PAUSE) Now, frankly, there are times to keep your mouth shut.

There are times when it's better NOT to say something than to end up saying something harsh or mean spirited. I've been in conversations with people about the things of God and all they want to do is argue. They're objective to WIN an argument... not to discuss.

But Paul wrote in II Timothy 2:23-26

"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

There are times when all folks want to do is quarrel... and we're not supposed to quarrel. Don't get into it with them.

Tell them you're not interested in discussing it right then.

But where it is possible we should "gently instruct" the person we're talking to.

We should be KIND and GENTLE with folks.

We should not be resentful.

Now frankly it's hard to be like that sometimes.

Sometimes folks are morons.

But what we need to understand is that many people live like they live and think like they think because they're going to hell. They don't know or understand the things of Christ. They make no sense to them and so they will die in their sins... unless we can gently pull them closer to the cross. All we succeed in doing in arguing with the lost is in making them better arguers. They learn to dig deeper trenches and build higher walls.

But if we're gentle and kind, it's harder for them to fight us.

Also note that Paul stressed we don't have to win the argument.

We just need to LET GOD WIN the argument.

"... gently instruct, in the hope that GOD WILL GRANT them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

You see, the goal is not roll people over with our great wisdom.

The goal is to make them feel empty without Jesus.

Our every story and word should be designed to make people feel jealous of our relationship Christ.

However we must be willing to present Jesus.

We MUST be known for the cross of Christ.

Folks need to know what we stand for.

Paul wrote the church in Corinth and said "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." 1 Corinthians 2:2

To the Galatians he wrote: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Galatians 6:14

To the church in Rome he wrote: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Romans 1:16

ILLUS: A man named Paul Thigpen shared about the time one of his "college buddies at Yale, a devout Christian and a member of our campus fellowship, was chosen captain of the football team. It was an old Ivy League tradition that the team captain should be welcomed into a prestigious "secret society" on campus.

But this group had a reputation for bawdiness, so my friend declined the invitation.

His decision puzzled many in the university community. Once his reason became public, his stand started countless conversations among students about the nature of faith commitment. In one bold stroke, my friend had scattered seed all across Yale's campus. ("Evangelism by the Ounce" in The Christian Reader July/Aug. 98 p. 72)

Paul said that he "... resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." 1 Corinthians 2:2

Now, what would it be like if you decided to live like that?

1. What would it be like if I decided to know nothing at my JOB except Jesus and Him crucified?

It would mean that when I work somewhere, I will work for my boss as if my boss were Jesus Himself. My mortal boss may not be a very nice person to be around, but I must still work there as if pleasing Christ in my actions and ethics.

2. What would it be like if I decided to know nothing in my family except Jesus and Him crucified?

It would mean I have decided to treat my family as if they belonged to Jesus.

3. What would it mean if I decided to know nothing in my leisure time except Jesus and Him crucified?

It would mean that while I'm out fishing/camping/laying in the hammock I'm going to spend time talking to Him and thanking him for the beauty of nature or for the pleasure of relaxing. I would do my best to focus my thoughts on HIM!

And when you tell stories...

My dad used to tell all kinds of neat stories and I loved them. But he was always the hero in those stories. I've picked up dad's trait to tell stories but I've decided to focus on stories that don't focus on my being the hero. I've instead focused on stories that show God as the hero.

I have decided that my stories will focus on Christ and Him crucified.

Now, very few people are going to be able to do this consistently (I'm a preacher and I find it hard to do this effectively all the time). But what I'm trying to get you to see is the importance of the Jesus and His cross influencing every aspect of our lives.

You see, we tend to compartmentalize our lives.

(Going to one side of the stage) God is over here on Sundays. We go to church, we sing some songs, pray some prayers, listen to the sermon and read the bulletin.

But then (going to the other side of the stage) the rest of our lives is OVER here. Monday through Saturday we do our things, but God isn't included... because He's back over there (pointing to the other side). We left Him behind on Sunday and didn't bother to haul Him into our daily lives the rest of the week.

And that's just the way the world would prefer it to happen, because the cross is offensive to them.

ILLUS: A few years back Rick Warren, a preacher and popular religious writer was asked to lead the invocation at President Obama's inauguration. It was an unabashedly Christian prayer in which Warren invoked the name of Jesus at least 4 times and closed with the Lord's Prayer.

Steve Chapman, a columnist for The Chicago Tribune, wrote

"If I were a Christian, I'd have been embarrassed by Rick Warren's invocation at the Inauguration. It was aggressively evangelical, serving to exclude everyone who doesn't accept the divinity of Jesus. He seemed to think he was at a revival rather than a secular event meant for all -- in a country whose constitution rejects official sponsorship of any faith."

That man was complaining that Rick Warren should have been an American 1st... and a Christian 2nd.

But that would have been an evil thing for Warren to have done.

An EVIL thing!

Warren may have been there to pray an invocation for the President of the United States, but he was there as a representative of Jesus Christ. And in his prayer Warren resolved to know nothing except Christ and Him crucified.

And if that upset others... that's just too bad.

Because that was what he was called to do.

And we have WE have been CALLED to do.

We were saved by the cross to become Christ's representatives in this world.

We have been called to be CHRISTIANS FIRST

We need to realize that this is the MOST important thing in our lives because as Paul wrote: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." Romans 1:16

The gospel of Jesus – His death, burial and resurrection – should be THE most important thing in our lives because it is by that Gospel that we have been saved. Nothing else in this world should take 1st place in our lives. NOTHING!

Thus, we are called to be Christians FIRST and Americans SECOND.

Now, I'm proud to be an American. This is a great country and I have been blessed to be born here. But I'm more proud to belong to Jesus Christ.

We're called to be Christians FIRST and a Republican or Democrat SECOND.

We are Christians FIRST and employees of our companies SECOND.

We are Christians FIRST and brothers/sisters/uncles/aunts/fathers/mothers SECOND

Nothing else in this world should take 1st place in our lives. NOTHING!

Because we have died to this world. We were buried in the waters of baptism and risen up to live for Jesus and stand for His cross in a lost world.

CLOSE: I want to close with these thoughts...

I've read a lot of articles on archaeology. And one of the things that caught my attention has been the fact that in ancient cultures it was very important to many peoples to be buried with items they loved in this life.

- In some graves archaeologists have found mirrors and beauty items that appealed to women.
- Certain graves of men included tools and weapons they used in their former lives.
- An ancient grave in Italy had the remains of the owner's horse and chariot.
- And, of course, in Egypt, the pyramids held the great wealth and possessions of ancient Pharaohs that they hoped to use in the next world. One crypt even included a boat!

Even in our present day, many people do the same thing. They put items in their caskets and graves that represent the things they loved most in this world. A Christian writer named Roger Duncan told about going to a funeral where a young man who had been killed in a motorcycle accident. His mother buried him with the Harley-Davidson bike he'd been riding when he died!

Through her tears, the mother explained, "it was his whole life!

Duncan noted: "How tragic to have a whole life wrapped up in a motorcycle!"

Yet, what if this became a common practice?

What kind of things would people be buried with?

- * One might be buried with his stocks and bonds.
- * Someone else with bottles of beer and whiskey.
- * Another's grave might be filled with fishing poles or golf clubs or hunting rifles.
- * Another casket could be filled with the latest romance novels.
- * Still another would have season tickets to all the baseball, football and basketball games.

My question this morning is this:

If you died tomorrow... what would they put in your casket?

What has been so important in your life that your family would put tokens in your grave?

Would it be a political symbol?

Would it be a souvenir of your hobbies and passions?

Would it be a memento of your years in a company?

Or would your family fill your casket with something that stood for Jesus?

You've been saved by the cross of Jesus Christ.

To die to the things of this world.

So, have you died?

Have you your put your life on the cross?

"The truth is rising from the mist

And the word is this;

That when Jesus calls a man He calls him to come and die!

He doesn't want you better, He wants you deader."

Dead to the things of this world... and alive to the power of Jesus.