

## **Introduction**

I'd like you to show you something, a swastika. What do you think of when you see it? I think of racial supremacy and nihilism. Let me show you something else, a cross. What do you think of when you see it? Answering that question requires that we be cross-eyed, to use a play on words, and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **The Cross as Symbol**

The swastika is what we call a symbol. A symbol is an object, image, or action that stands for something else. Many things can be symbols like hairstyles, kinds of music, bodily gestures, logos, actions, and clothing styles to name a few. A highly publicized symbol this past month is athletes sitting or kneeling down during the national anthem.

They doing so teaches us something about symbols. They have a strong emotional linkage to ideas. They mediate the power of ideas into the activities, experiences, and events everyday life. They're heavily laden with feeling as a result, stirring us in the very core of our being. Athletes sitting or kneeling during the national anthem have done just that. Most of us feel strongly about what we think of that.

With what I've said about symbols in mind, I ask you this. What is the central symbol of Christianity today? It's the cross.

But why is that? Think about it. On the one hand, we love Jesus. On the other, He was brutally tortured and killed on a cross. So why in the world do we display crosses everywhere to remind us He was? One secularist compares it to a mother displaying a hangman's noose in her living room to remind her that her son was hung. Christians displaying crosses, he argues, is as morbid as that. But he's wrong.

Remember what symbols do – mediate ideas to us. That's why the cross is a valid symbol of Christianity. It's because of the ideas it mediates to us. And we need to be cross-eyed in that regard. To be cross-eyed means to see (recognize and understand) the ideas the cross

mediates when we look at it. Let's examine what those ideas are.

## The Death of Humans

First, what do you think of when you see this? The electric chair, because it's an instrument of capital punishment, makes us think of human death. The cross is an ancient equivalent of the electric chair. It was an instrument of capital punishment that the Romans used to kill at least 10,000 people, according to one historian. It too, therefore, makes us think of human death.

Now, Colossians 2:13 contextualizes human death, pinpointing its ultimate cause, "**When you were dead in your transgressions (sins).**" That's the devastating truth about us. We're sinners who sin and are, therefore, dead. We're dead in two ways.

The word "**dead**" in verse 13 has a secondary connotation, physical death. Approximately 2 people somewhere on earth die every second. Someday, you and I will be one of the two. And when we are, we'll immediately be what we call a "**corpse**," no longer having any power to act upon or interact with the material world around us.

Physical death profoundly impacts human life. According to surveys, people's two greatest fears are public speaking and death in that order, prompting comedian Jerry Seinfeld to say, "**This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.**" His point is well taken. In reality, most people fear death more than anything, including public speaking.

Humans, as sinners, are dead in a second way. The word "**dead**" in verse 13 has a primary connotation, spiritual death. People can be alive physically but dead spiritually. They have the power to act upon and interact with the material world. They can hear and enjoy music, for instance, or cut down a tree. But they don't have the power to act upon and interact with the spiritual world. They're as dead to God and His kingdom at hand as a corpse is dead to music and trees.

Take the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, for instance, which

directs, informs, and encourages us. After my mother died, my brother leaned over her casket and whispered into her ear, **"I love you."** But she didn't hear him. People still in their transgressions cannot hear the Holy Spirit's still small voice any more than my mother could hear my brother's. They're dead to it.

Spiritual death profoundly impacts human life. Last week, I quoted Aldous Huxley. He described the substance of the material world as monotony, poverty of soul, and pain. In contrast, Jesus described the substance of the spiritual world, God and His kingdom at hand, as abundance and fullness of joy. The spiritually dead can engage only the material world. What they inherit as a result is monotony, poverty of soul, and pain. What they forfeit is abundance and fullness of joy.

We now know one idea that the cross as symbol mediates. It's the death of humans as sinners both physically and spiritually.

### **The Death of Jesus**

But there's good news for sinners in the second idea it mediates.

When we see a swastika, most of us automatically think of a person, Adolph Hitler. When we see a cross, we just as automatically think of a person, Jesus, and rightly so because He hung on one.

Colossians 2:13 explains why He did. It was to **"cancel out the certificate of debt against us."** This certificate of debt, as the verse goes on to state, **"consists of decrees against us."** The first decree is, because we've sinned, we're guilty. The second decree is, because we're guilty, we have to pay. The payment, as I've already explained, is physical and spiritual death. That's our certificate of debt. But Father God, because He loves us, wanted to cancel it out.

So He did. As verse 14 says it, He **"nailed it to the cross"** in the person of Jesus. There have been many means of execution through the centuries: beheading, burning at the stake, hanging, electrocution, medical injection, and more. Why, of all those, did Father God choose crucifixion for His Son? Did you ever wonder that? Beheading, for

instance, was an instrument of capital punishment in the Romans empire. Why was it crucifying, not beheading?

It's because that was the means of execution most suitable for doing what Father God wanted to do - cancel out the certificate of debt against us. To do that, Jesus had to become our substitute. He had to bear our guilt and pay what we should have paid – physical and spiritual death. And crucifixion was the means of execution most suitable for doing that.

Frederick Ferrar's description of crucifixion makes clear why it was: **"For indeed a death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly – dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, tetanus, shame, publicity of shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of untended wounds – all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness."** That's why Father God chose crucifixion for His son. It's because it was the most painful, shameful, and drawn out means of execution ever invented, which enabled Him to cancel out the certificate of debt against us.

But what does that mean? Let's think for a few moments about the cancellation of financial debt. In a Chapter 7 bankruptcy, a person can have all or part of his or her debt **"discharged,"** that is, cancelled. **"Cancelled"** means the person doesn't have to pay it. One person I know owed \$17,000 in credit card debt, but after successfully filing Chapter 7, paid and owed nothing. His debt was cancelled.

The consequence of Jesus' crucifixion is like that. Remember the two **"decrees"** in verse 14. We're guilty and have to pay.

But because Father God nailed our certificate of debt to the cross through Jesus, we're no longer guilty before Him. That's a stunning reality. I'm over 66 years-old, which means I've lived over 24,090 days. On how many of those days do you suppose I sinned in word, thought, or deed? In Father God's view, the answer is **"0 days."** If we follow Jesus,

He considers us to be utterly righteous – to have never sinned.

We aren't guilty, in other words, and because we aren't, we don't have to pay. As Paul states it in verse 13, Father God "**made you alive together with Him.**" He made us spiritually alive. We're able to act upon and interact with Him and His kingdom. He also made us eternally alive. As Jesus said it, we'll "**never die.**" Our consciousness and activity never cease, only increase, after we take our last breaths.

That then is the second idea that the cross as symbol mediates to us, the death of Jesus that makes us spiritually and eternally alive.

### **The Death of Self**

It mediates a third idea to us, which Jesus identifies in Luke 9:23-24. It's the death of self.

Notice His opening words, "**If anyone wishes to come after Me.**" They teach us what we must do for Father God to make us spiritually and eternally alive. We must "**go after**" Jesus, to use His terminology here. The rest of verse 23 discloses how we go after Him. We do two things.

First, we "**take up**" our "**cross.**" Jesus is speaking metaphorically of course. Something about us must be placed on the cross and killed. The words "**deny himself**" imply what that is. It's the "**self**" that we are. Jesus bids us here, "**die to self.**"

The opening line of verse 24, "**whoever wishes to save his life,**" reveals the necessity of this. It conveys something about humans in their natural state. Their defining quality is self-idolatry. They place the "**self**" that they are on the throne of their lives. They take themselves in practice as God in other words.

But as Jesus asserts in verse 23, self-idolatry excludes us from going after Him. To go after Him, we must die to self. As the Christian founders of Alcoholics Anonymous said it, we must "**quit playing God.**" Acknowledging deep in our souls that we aren't God, we take "**self**" off the throne of our lives. We quit taking ourselves in practice as God.

The testimony of George Mueller reflects how we do that. Mueller

was a friend of Jesus and founder of the famous Ashley Down Orphanage in Bristol, England. Listen to his words: **“There was a day when I died: died to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will.”** Jesus uses the word **“daily”** in verse 23. Consider these daily circumstances: a competitor outshines us; someone criticizes us; we’re late and get all the traffic lights red; a co-worker pushes his work off on us; a neighbor slanders us; a television commercial tempts us to lust; a person disagrees with us about politics, and on it goes. Question: What is the reference point of what almost all people think, feel, and do in those circumstances? Answer: It’s their opinions, preferences, tastes, and will. But if we’re dead to self, ours aren’t. They don’t direct what we think, feel, and do because we don’t let them.

What does? The words **“follow Me”** in verse 23 tell us. It’s the opinions, preferences, tastes, and will of Jesus. What He says and does in the Bible manifests His opinions, preferences, tastes, and will. So, we learn the details of what He says and does. Asking the Holy Spirit to help us, we then try and train our best to think, feel, and act as they direct us. Circumstance by circumstance in daily life, we surrender what we want to what He wants. We make His opinions, preferences, tastes, and will the reference point of what we think, feel, and do in all things. Doing that allows the Holy Spirit to increasingly change us until finally, self is dead.

## **Conclusion**

So there you have it – three ideas that the cross as symbol mediates to us. I’d sum it up this way. A website called *Wiki How to Do Anything* teaches us how to be cross-eyed literally just for the fun of it in 13 easy steps. What I’ve done today is teach how to be cross-eyed, to use a word play, in relation to the cross. The death of humans. The death of Jesus. The death of self. See those ideas when you look at the cross. You’ll be cross-eyed if you do.