

## Introduction

I begin this morning by showing you something that all of you recognize, a swastika. Please answer two questions about it. First, what do you think of when you see it? I think of racial supremacy and nihilism. Second, what do you feel when you see it? I feel dread.

## The Cross as Symbol

The swastika is what is called a symbol. A symbol is an object, image, or action that stands for something else. Many things, pursuant to that definition, can be symbols. Hairstyles, kinds of music, bodily gestures, logos, actions like burning bras or flags, and clothing styles are examples. The guitar and organ, for instance, have become symbols in the church today, standing for contrasting styles of worship.

Those examples teach us something about symbols. They have a strong emotional linkage to ideas. They mediate the power of ideas into the activities and places of our everyday lives. They are, therefore, heavily laden with feeling and thus stir us in the very core of our being.

With what I've said about symbols in mind, I'd like you to identify the focal point of our sanctuary, the one object to which our attention is most drawn. What is that? It's the cross on the front wall behind me. There's a reason it's the focal point. It's because the cross is, beyond any doubt, the central symbol of Christianity today.

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 of that fact?

A secularist once contended to me that we shouldn't and drew an analogy to make his point. A mother's son, whom she deeply loves, hangs himself. She then displays a hangman's noose in the middle of her living room as a vivid reminder that he did. Christians displaying crosses, he argued, is as morbid and detestable as that.

But it isn't! Remember what I said about symbols. They mediate

ideas to us, which is exactly why the cross is a valid symbol of Christianity. It's because of the ideas it mediates to us. There are three of those, each of which I want to explain.

### **The Death of Human Beings**

The first idea is the death of human beings. The cross has a modern day equivalent, the electric chair. An electric chair, because it's an instrument of capital punishment, makes us think of human death. The cross, also an instrument of capital punishment, does the same.

Romans 3:23 declares our plight in that regard, "**For the wages of sin is death.**" That's the devastating truth about us. We're sinners who sin and are, therefore, dead. We're dead in two ways.

First, we're dead physically. Three people somewhere on earth die every second. Someday, you and I will be one of the three. And when we are, we'll no longer have any power to act on or respond to the material world around us. We'll be what we call a corpse.

Physical death profoundly impacts human life. In his book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law tells about a busy, notable, and prosperous 35 year-old businessman named Penitens. Listen to what Penitens told friends from his deathbed: "**Feasts, business, pleasures, and enjoyments seem great things to us while we think of nothing else, but as soon as we add death to them they all sink into equal littleness. What happens after death makes all that goes before completely trivial.**" It's what I call "the plus death principle."

Think about it. Barak Obama wins the presidency and becomes the most powerful man on earth. How significant is that to a person? It's huge – until we add death to it. Win the presidency - death = big deal. Win the presidency + death = little deal. How important will his presidency be to him when he knows he's minutes from death? Not very! That's what Penitens was saying and he was right. The fact of death robs all earthly enterprises and achievements of their subjective importance.

We're dead in a second way, spiritually. The Bible teaches that

there are two kinds of reality. One is visible material reality. The other is invisible spiritual reality. That reality is God and the kingdom of heaven, which includes the powers of the age to come.

Now, people can be alive physically but dead spiritually. They have the power to act on and respond to the material realm around them. But they don't have the power to act on and respond to the spiritual realm around them. They're as dead to God and the kingdom of heaven as a corpse is dead to its family and job.

We talk about the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, for instance, which is one aspect of the kingdom of heaven. The Holy Spirit speaks discernibly to us through our mental, emotional, and/or volitional processes. He enlightens, convicts, guides, and encourages us. After my mother died, my brother leaned over her corpse and told her he loved her. People apart from Jesus are as dead to the Holy Spirit's still small voice, as my mother was dead to my brother's voice.

Spiritual death profoundly impacts human life. Every normal human being desires and seeks the same condition of life, abundant life - one of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. Those who are spiritually dead cannot attain that. There are no exceptions to this.

That then is the first thing that the cross as a symbol represents. That's the first idea it mediates to us - the death of human beings.

### **The Sacrifice of God**

The second idea it mediates to us is the sacrifice of God.

When you and I see a swastika, we automatically think of Adolph Hitler. When we see a cross, we just as automatically think of Jesus and rightly so. That's because He, God the Son, hung on one.

The Bible reveals why He did. It's because He wanted to save us, to give us abundant life now and eternal life forever. But He had to do something first and I quote Colossians 2:14, "**cancel out the certificate of debt against us.**" Maybe you have a \$20,000 credit card debt. You think that's bad? This debt is far worse. According to verse 14, it

**“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. That payment is pain, shame, physical death, and spiritual death. Anyway, to save us, Jesus had to cancel out this certificate of debt against us.

Verse 14 explains how He did. He nailed it to the cross. There have been many means of execution down through the centuries: hanging, firing squad, beheading, burning at the stake, medical injection, electrocution, disembowelment, and more. So why, of all these means available, did Father God choose Jesus to be killed on a cross? Did you ever think about that? Why was it the cross and not the guillotine? It’s because that was the means of execution most suitable for doing what He had to do – cancel out the certificate of debt against us. To do that, He had to become our substitute. He had to bear our guilt and pay what we should have paid – pain, shame, physical death, and spiritual death. And the cross was the means of execution most suitable for doing that.

Frederick Ferrar’s description of crucifixion explains 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.

That makes Jesus’ voluntary death on the cross one of the two most sacrificial acts in all of human history. Think of it in these terms. Suppose you know you’re going to die on April 5, 2012, three years from today. Also suppose you know that you’re going to die by means of

crucifixion, as you saw it in the movie *The Passion of Christ*. Or suppose that you know that about your son or daughter. Now imagine how that'd weigh on your mind the next three years? Imagine how you'd dread it and have nightmares about it? It'd taint everything you do. Well, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit knew that about Jesus.

I've imagined all that and it dramatically impacted me. It made me recognize the depths of the sacrifice of God and be deeply grateful for it. So grateful in fact that I promised him this: **"I'll thank you profusely for your sacrifice, the cross, at least once every day until the day I die."** That's my promise and I'm keeping it.

### **The Death of Self**

The cross as symbol mediates a third idea to us, the death of self. Jesus Himself linked the cross with that idea in Luke 9:23-26, **"if anyone wishes to come after Me, He must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me."** That's the condition that Jesus sets down for following Him. We must take up the cross and kill our "self" on it.

The death of our "self" means, as a practical matter, the death of our will. In a vision one day, the great Quaker John Woolman heard a soft voice say, **"John Woolman is dead."** Not knowing what it meant, he "went deep" to find out. He eventually heard the words, **"I am crucified with Christ"** as he was doing so. He describes in his journal what happened next: **"Then the mystery was opened, and I perceived . . . that the language 'John Woolman is dead' meant no more than the death of my own will."** That's what taking up our cross and killing our "self" is all about. It's about the death of our will.

The death of our will is a supernatural process that the Holy Spirit directs and controls. But we have a part to play in it. The words of Jesus tell us what that part is, **"take up your cross daily."**

Taking up our cross daily is about intending to do what God wills. We start with what we know He has said. He reveals His explicit will in Scripture. I'm talking about the commands He gives. So, we start there.

We make and carry out the decision to learn and obey His commands. We learn a command and when the opportunity arises to obey it or disobey it, we obey it, even if we don't like it. Doing that is sometimes difficult. Habits of evil that reside in our bodies oppose us at many turns. But still, asking the Holy Spirit to help us, we intend and try to do God's will.

Take Job 31:1 for instance. It teaches what God wants we who are men to do - make a covenant with our eyes that we won't ogle women, that we won't look at them for the purpose of desiring them. The Bible teaches that is the first and most crucial step to sexual purity. That's what God wills. So, we do it. We intend not to look twice or to continue to look at an attractive woman and carry out our intention.

How many times in a week does a man have an opportunity to intend that? It's scores of times. It's the same with hundreds of other commands in the Bible. And that's the daily part of taking up our cross. Everyday life presents us with numerous opportunities to obey or disobey explicit commands of God. We take up our cross by training and trying to obey them. We surrender our will, situation by situation, to His will.

Doing that is a powerful thing. The Chinese had a form of execution called "death by a thousand cuts." The executioner cuts the victim only slightly but hundreds of times until it eventually kills him. That's what we're doing to the self here. It's death by a thousand cuts. The little daily surrenders of our will to God change us. They don't change us like a tornado changes things but like a grain of sand in an oyster changes things. The Holy Spirit works through them so that new graces continually emerge in us - until finally the self is dead. It hasn't been obliterated. It's been transformed - into conformity with the will of God.

## **Conclusion**

I close this morning with the celebrated words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "**When Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die.**" That's the personal challenge of the cross. It cries out to each of us, "**Come to Jesus and die.**" Have you done that? If not, do it today.