

## WHAT THE CROSS DOES IN YOU

ROMANS 6:1-14

A six year old boy was out exploring in the garden around his home one fine spring day. His mom was outside, too, absorbed in her work. He picked a daffodil bud, sat down on the ground and studied it. He tried with his little fingers to force it open into full blossom. That pretty much just destroyed the daffodil bud. Frustrated now, he said, "Mommy, it just falls to pieces and dies when I try to open the flower. How does God do it?" But before his mother could answer, the proverbial light bulb went off in his own brain. "Oh, I know," he said. "God always works from the inside." If you take nothing else home with you this morning, please remember that simple truth: God always works from the inside. God is in the process of gradually transforming you and me into the likeness of Jesus. And He changes us from the inside out not the outside in.

Lent is a forty day period preceding Holy Week when Christians all over the world reflect on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This Lenten season we've been thinking about the cross – how it's far more than just a piece of wood. Last week we considered what the cross does for you. You might remember that we simply said that because of the cross, you are delivered from God, you are purchased for God, and you are accepted by God. Now, this morning I want to change one word in our title – "for" to "in." Last week: what the cross does for you. Today: what the cross does in you. To help us understand that great truth, we want to read and think about several verses in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. Paul was one of the first, great leaders among the first followers of Jesus in the first century. He probably wrote this letter two or three decades after Jesus died, rose again, and went back to Heaven. There are two simple but profound facts that help us grasp what the cross does in you and in me. Here's fact number one:

### I DIED WITH JESUS.

Most people are reluctant to face the fact of death. It's just a normal, human reaction. When someone has just died, you hear people say, "Oh, no! It can't be true!" Shock. Disbelief. Denial. Death is something all of us naturally abhor and avoid, because we know it's a complete separation from what we know in this life. It means separation from the people we love – even for a while. Sure, as Christians, we believe that physical death is a doorway into eternal life with God. That doesn't mean we like or look forward to death. That doesn't somehow make the fact of our own impending death or the death of people we love easy to face. Death is just flat out difficult.

The Bible makes it clear that more than one person died on the cross with Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago. Not physically, of course, but in a deeply real, spiritual way, nevertheless. Every person who has or will place his or her faith in Jesus either was or will be crucified with Jesus spiritually on the cross. True, Jesus' death was physical and only He died literally and historically on the cross. But every person who puts his or her faith in Jesus dies on that same cross spiritually. Isn't that the clear statement of Paul in what we just read? "We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ.... For when we died with Christ...." (Rom 6:6-7 NLT)

If you're a follower of Jesus, is that a spiritual fact that's real to you? You died with Christ. Have you ever imagined yourself up there on the cross with Jesus? Have you thought about what that says about you spiritually? Unless you face the fact of your own spiritual death with Jesus, you'll never be able to live into the new life God has for you. So, here's a very important step in your spiritual journey as a follower of Jesus: Acknowledge your own death. Face your own death. It's a fact. Deal with it.

OK, but all of us are walking around looking very much alive, so the obvious question is, "What part of me died with Jesus?" The Bible teaches that the moment you put genuine, real faith in Jesus and what he did for you on the cross and God declared you right with Him, your old self died in a spiritual way. The Bible says, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Cor 5:17 NLT) Now, right here it's important to be precise. Your old self died with Jesus, but not your old sinful nature. That's still very much alive and kicking, isn't it? You know that because you snapped at your spouse last night, you lost your temper this past Tuesday, you told a lie two weeks ago on Thursday, and you're weighing the benefit of telling another lie tomorrow! For that very reason, Paul says in the passage we read earlier, "Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin...." (Rom 6:12-13 NLT)

What does it really mean, then, to die with Jesus? It means you die to the guilt of your own sin. Whenever you do something wrong or fail to do what is right, the Bible calls it sin. God holds you personally responsible for that action or attitude. That's guilt. But when you put your faith in Jesus, the Bible says the guilt for any and all of your personal sins is transferred onto Jesus. It was there He was willingly punished for all of your sins and mine. Then, you die to the penalty of your own sins. An absolutely holy, righteous God has declared that the wages of sin – any sin and all sin – is the death of the one who committed the sin. And death means total separation from God for all eternity. But, thanks be to God, He has allowed a substitute. So, for the follower of Jesus, the penalty for your sin is transferred onto Jesus. He died in your place. Also, however, the power of sin in your life is broken the moment you put saving faith in Jesus.

Now that truth needs to be unpacked for a moment. How is sin's power broken in your life and mine? All of us struggle with different expressions of sin even after we put our faith in Jesus: pride, selfishness, gossip, lust, resentment, racism, inappropriate anger, love for money and the things it can buy – just to name a few. It means that as a follower of Jesus you now have a choice to sin or not to sin. Sure, you can give into any and every temptation that comes at you, but you can also resist and reject it. Can't anybody do that? Can't even someone who doesn't follow Jesus reject a temptation to sin? Perhaps, but not as well and for not as long. He or she is on their own. And sin is a very real, very powerful spiritual master. But a follower of Jesus has the Holy Spirit living in him or her to help resist temptation and ultimately conquer any and every sin. Some battles with sin and temptation can be won pretty easily. Some battles, however, are "knock down, drag outs" that might take years of prayer, confession, and making

yourself accountable to other Christians. Some of those battles can feel very much like a two steps forward, one step back kind of experience.

We have to co-operate with the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to give you the desire to grow, to change, to let go of sin, and to take hold of His power. Otherwise, you will live an absurd life. Here again what God says here in His Word. "Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?... We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin." (Rom 6:2, 6 NLT) Can you still be a Christian and be a slave to different kinds of sin? I suppose it's possible, but it's absurd. It's ridiculous. It's like a married women pretending that she's single. She has a husband, but she lives in a different house, dates other men, and only occasionally speaks with her husband. Absurd! Or, it's like a prisoner who's been released from jail deciding that he'd prefer living out the rest of his life locked up in the same, old prison cell. Ridiculous! Who does that?

It's very important for you to consider yourself dead to sin's power. It's the first step in truly living out your new spiritual freedom in your normal, everyday, walking around life today. Do you hear that in what Paul wrote, "So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus." (Rom 6:11 NLT) So, what is this, then, a kind of mind game? Is it a kind of spiritual pretending? That question reminds me of a story former professional basketball player and coach, Johnny Kerr, tells about the then expansion Chicago Bulls franchise. The team had lost seven games in a row and they were about to face the mighty Boston Celtics. Coach Kerr thought the team needed a psychological pep talk. He told one player to go out and pretend he was the best scorer in basketball. He told another player to go out and pretend he was the best defender in the game. He challenged yet another player to pretend that he could run the offense better than anyone else. He looked at another player, Erwin Mueller, and told him to pretend that he was the best rebounding, shot-blocking, scoring center in basketball anywhere on the planet. Despite the psychology, the Bulls lost the game by 17 to the Celtics. After the game, Coach Kerr was trying to figure out how to pick up his demoralized team when Erwin Mueller walked up, put his arm around him, and said, "Don't worry about it, Coach. Just pretend we won."

So, is that what Paul wants you and me to do here in a spiritual way? Just pretend that the power of sin is broken in my life, when I know full well it's very much alive in me? Absolutely not! God is never about denying reality. Instead, God invites you and me to live out our lives on the basis of a new reality. You really did die with Jesus on the cross. Sin's power was really, truly broken in your life when you put your faith in Jesus. Live into that reality. But experiencing that kind of a spiritual victory begins with your acknowledgement that everything has changed. Probably all of us, at one time or another, have seen a tree that was overtaken by a vine of some kind. If left alone, a vine can eventually overwhelm a tree completely. When that happens, the tree can be in danger of having its life squeezed out of it. Here's what a gardener or a park ranger can do. Take a saw and sever the trunk of the vine from its branches. The tangled mass of vine branches will still cling to the tree for a long time, but they're dead. That

will become plain as the weeks pass and the vine branches begin to die off and fall away from the tree.

Now, in the same way, sin can start out in your life and mine as something small and insignificant, but then it can grow into something powerful that has a strangling grip on our lives. When Jesus died and you put your faith and trust in His death, the power of sin over you was cut like the vine trunk was cut. Sure, the vine branches can still cling to you. But the power of sin has been severed by Jesus and sin's grip on your life should gradually dry up and fall away. So, live into that truth! That brings us to a second, great spiritual fact about what the cross does in you and me.

### **I HAVE A NEW LIFE IN JESUS.**

Discovering what it means to live in and for Jesus everyday began the moment you put saving faith in Jesus. It continues until you step through the doorway of death into the eternal presence of Jesus. Yes, you died with Jesus, but you were also raised to new life in Him. Listen to God's Word again, "And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him." (Rom 6:8 NLT) So, what does that look like – living out this new life in your ordinary, normal, everyday, walking around life?

Let me suggest a few examples. To live a new life in Jesus means consciously choosing godly attitudes about life and how to live it. The Bible says, "Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth...." (Col 3:1-2 NLT) That's all about what kind of attitudes you allow to dominate your life every day. If you're a follower of Jesus, you should have the most joyful, the most wonderful, the most inspiring, and the most positive attitudes of anyone around you. The tragedy, instead, is that so many followers of Jesus have become slaves to defeated, selfish, sour, and negative attitudes. If you died with Jesus and you have new life in Jesus, your attitudes toward life and in life should be increasingly godly. A lot of spiritual battles are won or lost at the level of attitudes.

Let me throw out a few examples of godly attitudes that you and I should live into more and more every day. The cross is a constant reminder that God loves you and puts great value on your life. You aren't some worthless, hopeless failure. Jesus shed His precious blood for you. What would happen if you believed and lived into that godly attitude every day? The cross is a reminder that your past is completely forgiven. Don't let your past sins dominate and discourage you! If you've confessed them and turned away from them, God has forgiven and forgotten about them. Don't let the devil keep on reminding you of them. What would happen if you believed and lived into that godly truth every day? The cross is a reminder that through the Holy Spirit immense spiritual power is at your disposal every day. He will guide you, correct you, lead you, and strengthen you. What would happen if you really believed that great truth and lived into it every day? The cross is a reminder that your future is absolutely wonderful. I can't blame those who don't follow Jesus for having terrible attitudes. If my destiny was Hell, I'd have a rotten outlook on life, too! But if you know Jesus and you're following Him as

His disciple, the best is always ahead. This life is an adventure - a journey to a wonderful eternity with God. Of course, there are some very real disappointments and heartaches along that journey. Nevertheless, if you're a follower of Jesus, God promises to work out all things for His glory and our good. What would happen if you really believed that great truth and lived into it every day? Is there any good reason to live a fearful, anxious, or depressed life? If you do, shame on you! Get a life! Or better yet, get the life that Jesus has given you. Enter into it. Live it out.

What does it look like – living out this new life in your ordinary, normal, everyday, walking around life? To live a new life in Jesus means choosing a godly lifestyle every day. What does that mean? Here's a few examples – not an exhaustive list by any means. Decide to live in a way that honors Jesus at all times. Do you remember this question, "What would Jesus do?" Some people even wore little bracelets with the letters WWJD on them to remind them. Not a bad idea. Here's a choice. What would Jesus do? Here's a decision. What would Jesus do? Here's a person before you – any person, every person. How will you relate to him or her? Well, what would Jesus do? Would Jesus lie to, steal from, lust after, gossip about, be selfish towards, or act superior to this person? Instead, how might Jesus show love to, respect for, and kindness towards this person?

What does it look like – living out this new life in your ordinary, normal, everyday, walking around life? Well, because of the big emphasis that God puts on it in His Word, it does mean killing off the attitudes and behavior in us that need to die. I know that sounds violent and maybe even a little suicidal, but it's imagery found in many places in the Bible. For example, the Bible says, "So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires.... But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self...." (Col 3:5, 8-10 NLT) When a surgeon cuts out and removes a cancer from your body, there's definitely a negative, down side to that process. But the goal is wonderful – life and health. Please understand that the Holy Spirit - in addition to being the great Comforter and Counselor – is also a skilled, spiritual Surgeon. Every single one of us has some areas of spiritual cancer that God wants to cut out and remove. Like what? Like an explosive temper, a manipulative spirit, a tendency to steal, lie, or gossip, a desire for pornography, a weakness when it comes to alcohol or drugs, a contemptuous attitude toward the poor or people of a different ethnicity than you, a prideful spirit, or just a lazy approach to living life. Why does God want to cut it out? Because He wants you to experience spiritual life and health in Jesus to the highest degree.

What does it look like – living out this new life in your ordinary, normal, everyday, walking around life? Make up your mind to develop a personal relationship with God intentionally. It won't happen if you're not intentional about it. Read and meditate on God's Word regularly. Learn how to pray. Take some action to build yourself up spiritually. Here's another example of a pursuing a relationship with God that's under increasing attack today. Identify with and work alongside God's people faithfully. An

increasing number of people in our country who say they follow Jesus personally don't want anything to do with other Christians. They don't want to become active or involved in any local church. They think that a relationship with Jesus is just a "Me and Jesus" experience. They couldn't be more wrong. The Bible says God's people are the Body of Christ. You can't really know or follow Jesus well without knowing the people for whom He died and rose again. Figure out your spiritual gifts and put them to use for the Kingdom of God. Get a servant's heart if you don't already have one. Most of the stuff we give most of our time and energy to in this life – our careers, our jobs, our retirement, our hobbies, our leisure activities, even our families – will pass away. "Only one life 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

Years ago, a pastor was about to perform a wedding uniting the children of two wealthy families in his church. Both he and his wife couldn't help speculating on the amount of the honorarium which he might receive for preparing the couple for marriage and performing the wedding itself. At the end of the wedding and during the reception, the groom expressed his appreciation for the pastor's service and gave him a pair of very fine leather gloves. It was a nice gift but not exactly what the pastor was expecting. But he was a good sport about it. When the pastor returned home, he shrugged and laughingly tossed the gloves in his wife's lap, saying that they were too big for her and that he rarely wore gloves. So, his wife put them away.

Some months later, the pastor was planning a trip and his wife suggested that he take those nice gloves along with him since the forecast was for very cold weather. She found the gloves and gave them to him. When he tried them on, he discovered that there was some kind of object stuffed into the one of the fingers of the glove. Digging it out, he unrolled a \$10 bill. To his surprise, he and his wife dug out a \$10 bill in each finger of the glove - a total of \$50. When they checked the other glove, they discovered the same thing – a \$10 bill in each finger for a grand total of \$100. Now this was years ago. \$100 would have been a very generous, even a lavish gift, back then.

When did that pastor receive the \$100 gift? When was it given to him? On the day of the wedding. When did the pastor realize, appreciate and begin to enjoy the \$100 gift? Months later. When did you die with Jesus and begin your new life in Him? The moment you put saving faith in Jesus. When are you going to start living every day in the reality of those two amazing facts? Well, that is the great question. God always works from the inside. You died with Jesus and you have a new life in Jesus. That's what the cross does in you. And that's why the cross is indeed more than a piece of wood.