

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

The Lenten season is a good time to examine some of the things that can divert our attention from the Kingdom of God. One such thing is materialism—the phony and fleeting attractions of the kingdom of this world that draw our hearts and minds away from the eternal treasure we have in Jesus Christ. Then there’s what we might call “scientism”—the belief that science and technology can solve all the problems of mankind and that we don’t need religion anymore. Tonight I’d like to consider another diversion that can be a stumbling block to believers—one that prevents us from experiencing the real power that Jesus Christ can bring into their lives. This stumbling block is called the “scandal—or offense—of the cross” and it consists of the bone deep aversion we have to the idea of following Jesus down the path of self-denial and sacrificial love.

I’ve always had a great interest in the history and lore of the American West. Throughout the history of the West there were many range wars. Bloody conflicts would break out sporadically between different factions: cattlemen and sodbusters would fight over the right to build fences across open range; ranchers would fight over the right to use certain watering holes. A lot of blood was spilled before things finally settled down. The same situation could easily have developed between Abram and Lot. We are told that *“Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, but the land could not support them while they stayed together for their possessions were so great.... And quarreling arose between Abram’s herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot.”* This was a situation which could easily have exploded into the first range war, but Abram acted quickly and effectively to prevent that from happening. He simply let Lot have his choice of land and agreed to take what was left.

Of course Lot’s response was fairly predictable: *“Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord....so Lot chose for himself the whole plain of Jordan and set out toward the east.”* Given his druthers, Lot took the better land and Abram got what was left. As has often been said, Lot walked by sight, while Abram walked by faith. The outcomes for the two men were markedly different, but not in the way one might expect. We are told that... *“Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom [where] the men were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.”* We know how that story ends: later on, Abram had to rescue Lot when the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. But of Abram we read: *“The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.’”* Lot ended up with salt and ashes; Abram ended up in a land of milk and honey and became a model of faith to God’s children throughout the ages. Lot

operated by what Paul calls “the basic principles of this world” and ended up a welfare case; Abram trusted God and became a blessing to all mankind.

How about you and me. Do we walk by faith like Abram? Or do we go for the gold and, when we get it, call it a victory and dismiss those who fail to get it as losers? If so, we are operating by the basic principles of this world rather than tasting what life can be like in the Kingdom of God.

To our worldly mentalities—which Paul calls our “flesh”—there is no more challenging proposition in the Bible than the one Jesus presents to us when he said: *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”* In order to find life in the Kingdom of God, we must reject the values of this world and follow the way of the cross. And the way of the cross begins with *self denial*.

The words almost seem like an oxymoron don't they? Like “dry water” or “cold heat.” How can we possibly deny ourSELVES? We ARE ourselves, aren't we? How can I deny ME? It almost sounds like a joke.

Well, let's stop a moment and give some thought to this word “self.” What precisely is my “self?” It's a more complex question than you might think. You see, in the beginning, God created us in His image. We were altogether good, as God is altogether good, and that included our “selves.” The problem, of course, is that sin entered the world and was passed down from parent to child right up to the present day, with the result that our good and Godly selves came to be steeped in sin and corruption. And so the self we deal with—our ego, our “I am,” our will or our soul—whatever you want to call it—is a far different thing than the self that God created in us. That self which delighted in God and all creation became an anxious, alienated, perpetually dissatisfied monster who demands our worship and is never satisfied with what we give it. Like any idol, it always wants more. That's the self we know and spend our lives protecting and feeding. That's the self to which we are enslaved, the same self the world tells us to “esteem” and “actualize” and serve with every ounce of our strength.

Well, I've got good news for you. You don't have to love and serve and pamper and worship that monstrous self of yours, ***because that monstrous self is not the real you.*** To put it another way, the self you know is not the new self that God has created in you—a self that He wants you to get more and more familiar with. It's a self who worships God rather than you, a self who delights in manna from heaven rather than wallowing in an insatiable appetite for things of this world. God wants you to get to know that self, to become that self, but you have to begin by denying the other self you've been worshipping for so long. Once you've begun to do that, it's not all that hard to find your true self. He lives at the foot of the cross.

The path which leads to your true self is the path of Christian love: the valuing of our neighbor above ourselves. Now there are two ways to think about this path: a right way and a wrong way. The wrong way to think of it is in terms of the Law: that by serving others you are securing your place in the Kingdom of God. That's been the way of false religion ever since the world began: you work your way into God's favor by doing good and righteous things and you keep His favor by continuing to do good and righteous things. The person who follows that path only ends up with another layer of self-ishness: his name may appear on libraries and hospitals, he may be admired by one and all, but he has his reward only in the eyes of men, not in the eyes of God.

There's a Gospel way to think about this path and that's the way Jesus describes it: Christian love provides us with an escape from selfishness, a way out of Vanity Fair, a door into summer weather where one can breathe the fresh air of freedom from the tyranny of the world, the flesh and the devil. C. S. Lewis describes how that might feel to the believer in *The Screwtape Letters*. A senior devil, Screwtape, writes to his nephew, a junior devil by the name of Wormwood: "*When [the believer] leaves you and all your temptations behind it will seem to him like a giant scab has finally fallen off his back and he is free of all that once made him sick.*"

When you set out to pick up your cross and follow Jesus, the first step will be the hardest. But soon you begin to realize that the steps get lighter over time. It begins to dawn on you that what you are leaving behind is far inferior to what you are walking toward. As Jesus promised, His yoke is easy and His burden is light—certainly much lighter than the weight of the world and all of the cares you'll be leaving behind. God sent his Son to bear it's full weight so that it might rest easy on our shoulders.

Well, what do you think? Isn't it time you shed a few pounds?

Amen.