

Jesus' Death Shows Us How to Live

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:21

Code: 80-62

INTRODUCTION

First Peter 2:21 says, "You have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps." His suffering and humiliation was for a vital reason.

Many understand that the life of Christ is an example for Christians to follow. The Bible tells us He was the perfect man--born without sin, committing no sin, holy, innocent, and undefiled. He is our perfect example. We are to be holy as He was holy, pure as He was pure, gentle as He was gentle, wise as He was wise, and humble as He was humble. Christ was obedient to God, and we are to imitate His example. Our service should be like His, and our attitude toward the world should reflect His attitude toward it.

But 1 Peter 2:21 says that Christ is our example not only in the way He lived, but also in His death. So often we learn more about the character of a person by how he dies than by how he lived.

The truest revelation of ourselves generally comes in the time of deepest trial. Trial reveals character; adversity reveals virtue --or the lack thereof. Generally the greater the trouble, the purer the revelation of what we truly are. I find I don't feel I really know a person if I've known him or her only during the good times. It is the trying that reveal character. And we find that Jesus, at the time of His greatest trial--in His dying moments--was as perfect as He was during His life.

In His death Jesus taught us how to live. We often look at His dying moments and observe that His death illustrates the seriousness of sin and the need for a Savior to pay the price for our iniquity. We recognize that by His substitutionary death, He died in our place. But Peter said that there's even more to the cross than that. Christ died not only for us, but also as an example to us. He died to show us how to live.

The character of Christ was revealed in His dying by what He said. It could not be revealed by what He did--He was nailed to a cross and unable to do anything. From the earliest years the church has celebrated the death and resurrection of Christ by remembering His last seven sayings on the cross. They are actually principles for living.

LESSON

A Look at the Seven Sayings on the Cross

I. The First Saying--Forgive Others (Luke 23:34)

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

A. Christ's Example

Christ died forgiving those who sinned against Him. That is a principle to live by. Jesus had a forgiving heart even after a lifetime of experiencing mankind's worst treatment. Christ made the world and came into it, but the world would not acknowledge Him. Eyes blinded by sin did not want Him and saw no beauty in Him. His birth in a stable foreshadowed the treatment He would receive from mankind throughout His life. Shortly after His birth King Herod tried to have Him killed, which was only the beginning of mankind's lifelong hostility toward Him. The cross was the climax of a lifetime of persecution.

Christ's forgiveness of His executioners came after a mock trial of trumped-up accusations. The judge admitted he found no fault in Him, but used Him to appease a clamoring crowd. Because no ordinary death would satisfy the implacable foes of Jesus, they made sure that He died the most painful, intense, and shameful death imaginable.

His forgiveness came as He hung on the cross, the victim (from a human perspective) of the hatred, animosity, bitterness, vengeance, and vile wickedness of men and demons. We would naturally expect Him to cry out to God for pity, or shake His fist in the face of God for his unfair execution. If we wrote the story, we might show Him crying maledictions and threats of vengeance upon His killers. But the Son of God did none of that. Instead, He asked God to forgive those who were taking His life.

Jesus understood the wretchedness of the human heart: "They do not know what they are doing." He was painfully aware of the ignorance of depravity. He knew His executioners understood neither the identity of their victim nor the enormity of their crime. They didn't know they were killing the Prince of Life, their Creator. They didn't know they were slaughtering the Messiah.

B. Man's Need

Christ's executioners needed forgiveness. The only way they could be ushered into the presence of a holy God was if their sins were forgiven. Christ prayed for the most profound need of His killers. He was more concerned that His wicked murderers be forgiven than in seeking vengeance. While "being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23).

Forgiveness is man's greatest need. It is the only way we can enter into fellowship with God and avoid hell, and that's why Jesus prayed for it. We need to recognize that apart from Christ we are sinners, unfit for the presence of a holy God. Noble ideals, good resolutions, and excellent rules to live by are useless if sin isn't dealt with. It would be the same as fitting shoes to paralyzed feet or buying glasses for blind eyes.

Jesus understood the deep need of man. It did not matter to Him that the sin He sought to be forgiven was the sin of killing Him.

C. The Christian's Response

Christians are to be more concerned with God forgiving those who sin against them than with vengeance. Stephen, while being stoned to death for preaching about Christ, prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60). He followed the Lord's own example. So should we.

II. The Second Saying--Reach Out to Others (Luke 23:43)

"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

A. Christ's Example

Two thieves were crucified with Christ--one to His right and the other to His. In response to the request of one thief--"Jesus, remember me when You come in Your Kingdom!" (Luke 23:42)--Jesus replied, "Today you shall be with Me in paradise." Our Lord died bringing the truth of eternal life to a damned soul.

It's hard to imagine how Christ, hanging on a cross, feeling the venomous hate of His persecutors, and bearing the punishment of sinners throughout all ages, could at the same time be immediately concerned with the salvation of one of those sinners. But He was. Christ was never too preoccupied to be interested in leading someone to salvation. His life commitment was to bring men and women to God.

B. Man's Need

The conversion of that thief is both remarkable and dramatic. At that moment what was so convincing about Jesus? There wasn't yet an outward sign that He was the Christ of God, Savior of the world, and the coming King. From a human standpoint, He was but a victim. He was dying because He had been totally rejected. At the time of the thief's conversion no one was saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). There were none to affirm that Jesus was the Son of God--even His friends had forsaken Him. He was weak, in disgrace, and in a position of extreme shame. His crucifixion would have been considered totally inconsistent with anything related to the Messiah. The earth had not yet quaked (Matt. 27:51), the darkness had not yet come (Mark 15:33), graves had not yet opened (Matt. 27:52), and the centurion had not yet said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54).

In the most unfavorable and unconvincing circumstances imaginable, the thief was convinced that Jesus Christ was the Savior. Although at first he joined his companion in mocking Christ (Matt. 27:38,44), he obviously had a change of heart and rebuked the other thief by affirming Christ's sinlessness (Luke 23:40-41). In asking Jesus to remember him, he was pleading for forgiveness. Therefore he understood Christ's sinlessness and His identity as Savior. His request that Jesus remember him when coming into His kingdom shows that the thief affirmed Christ's resurrection and second coming--he knew that death wasn't the end. The request also indicates he understood Christ's sovereignty--all affirmed under the most unlikely of circumstances.

How was it possible for the thief to come to Christ under those conditions? There's perhaps no clearer illustration that salvation is not a work of man, but the sovereign work of God. God--not circumstance--moved on the thief's heart to convince him of the truth about Jesus Christ. Too often professing Christians seek to account for salvation by the cleverness of human influence and instrumentality, or pointing to favorable circumstances, rather than attributing it to the matchless

grace of God. Some think salvation happens because the preacher spoke well, or as a direct result of prayer. But while salvation may indirectly result from those factors, it is the direct result of God's intervening grace.

C. The Christian's Response

Christ's desire for the salvation of sinners was constant. He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Paul wrote that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). He accomplished that even while dying on a cross. He is our example for reaching out to others with the truth of the gospel.

III. The Third Saying--Meet the Needs of Others (John 19:26-27)

"Woman, behold, your son ... [Son,] behold, your mother!"

A. Christ's Example

Jesus died expressing selfless love. Standing at the foot of His cross stood a group of five people far different from the mocking crowd. Along with the apostle John was Mary, the mother of our Lord, who was experiencing the full force of Simeon's prophecy many years before that her soul would be pierced through because of Jesus (Luke 2:34-35). Bound by love to the cross of her son, she stood suffering in weak silence. Beside her stood Salome--possibly her sister, the mother of James and John. There was also Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene out of whom Jesus had cast demons (Mark 15:40; Luke 8:2-3; John 19:25). It seems fitting that the name Mary means "bitterness" in Hebrew.

The Romans crucified people close to the ground, so it is reasonable to assume that John and the women could have touched Him--perhaps they did. They were able to get near enough to hear Him speak softly. When Jesus said, "Woman, behold, your son," He didn't call her mother because that relationship was over. Similarly, when He began His ministry He identified her as "woman" (at the wedding in Cana) (John 2:4). On the cross she was reminded again that she needed to understand Jesus not as her son but as her Savior. Yet His intent was not to call attention to Himself, but to commit His mother to the care of John, and John to the care of His mother.

B. Mary's Need

As Christ hung, dying His mother was on His heart. Out of the crowd at the foot of cross, Jesus' mother was perhaps the neediest of all. It is likely that Joseph had died by this time or Jesus wouldn't have had to make such a commitment. And He couldn't commit her to His half-brothers since they didn't believe in Him (John 7:5). He would not have committed the care of His believing mother into the hands of His unbelieving relatives.

C. The Christian's Response

On the cross Christ experienced the weight of the world's sins, the agony of the cross, and the wrath of almighty God--a far greater internal pain than His external pain. Yet in the midst His pain He showed compassion. His thoughts were directed towards someone else, a demonstration of the

purity of His character. That's how we are to live--never so overwhelmed with our own pain that we lose sight of the needs of others.

IV. The Fourth Saying--Realize the Seriousness of Sin (Matt. 27:46)

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

A. Christ's Example

Jesus died understanding the seriousness of sin. He died resenting its implications. Sin separates from God. "Forsaken" is one of the most painful words that a person could use to describe himself--alone and desolate. Jesus was forsaken. His cry meant, "My God, My God, with whom I have had eternal unbroken fellowship, why have You deserted Me?" Against that background of eternal intimacy, Christ's forsakenness has profound significance. Sin is seen to do what nothing else in the universe could do. Men couldn't separate the Father from the Son; demons couldn't; Satan couldn't. But sin caused the Son to suffer the most devastating reality in the universe--separation from God.

B. Man's Need

God is too holy to look on sin (Hab. 1:13). As a result, sin alienates man from God. When Christ bore our sin on the cross, He reached the climax of His suffering. The soldiers had mocked Him--crushed a crown of thorns upon His head, scourged Him, struck Him, spit in His face, and pulled out the hairs of His beard. Even when suffering pain beyond description--His hands and feet pierced--he endured the cross and its shame in silence. Though taunted by the vulgar crowd, and suffering the curses of those crucified beside Him, He had not answered back. But when God forsook Him, Christ experienced a pain beyond even all that, and He cried out in agony.

C. The Christian's Response

No earthly struggle, trial, or trouble should come close to the distress our own sin should cause us. Like Christ, believers are to be profoundly anguished by the separation caused by sin. Jesus experienced personally the searing pain sin brings because it separated Him from the Father. We must understand the implications of our sin--that it wrenches us away from God.

V. The Fifth Saying--Depend on Others (John 19:28)

"I am thirsty."

Christ experienced the conditions of true humanity. His statement didn't mean He was thirsty for God, but that He was thirsty for something to drink. He needed a drink and He couldn't get it for Himself. Jesus depended on others, and we need to do the same.

Because Christ is familiar with human need He is a sympathetic high priest (Heb. 2:17-18). The New Testament affirms that Christ was fully man--thirsty, weary, hungry, sleepy, happy, grieved. Christ depended on others to meet His needs. Sometimes those needs were met by Mary and Martha, sometimes by His mother. Like Jesus we must be willing to show our human weaknesses and learn

to live dependently.

VI. The Sixth Saying--Finish What You Start (John 19:30)

"It is finished!"

"It is finished" (Gk., *tetelestai*) is a triumphant pronouncement. Christ died completing the work God gave Him to do.

It is one thing to end your life, yet another to finish it. To say your life is over may mean something far different than to say your work is done. I saw that principle in operation during the Los Angeles Marathon: everyone started and everyone stopped, but not everyone finished.

For most people life ends but their work is not done. When Jesus said, "It is finished," He meant He had finished His redeeming work. He came into this world "to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9:26) and He did just that. He bore our sins in His own body, and dealt Satan a blow to the head (Gen. 3:15). Just as Christ finished perfectly what God gave Him to do, so are we. We must be more concerned with the work God has called us to do than the pain the work takes us through. Jesus endured the pain because He could see the result (Heb. 12:2). It's our motivation as well.

Paul faithfully followed Jesus' example. Therefore at the end of his life he could say, "I have finished the course" (2 Tim. 4:7). Yet in the same statement Paul affirmed it wasn't easy: he had to fight to finish. That's the way we're to live. Don't live your life just until it ends; live to finish the work God has given you to do.

VII. The Seventh Saying--Commit Yourself to God (Luke 23:46)

"Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit."

A. Christ's Example

Jesus died entrusting Himself to the promised care of God. We are to live the same way, casting all our anxieties upon God because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). That means you must put your life, your death, and your destiny in His hands. That is what is meant by a life of faith--a life of complete trust in God.

God promised to raise Christ from the grave (Ps. 16:10). Jesus knew that promise because He often affirmed that He would suffer and die but rise again (Matt. 16:21; 26:32; Mark 9:9, 31; John 2:19). Based on God's promise He committed Himself to God's care. That's the only way to live--to commit your life to God. "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Prov. 3:6).

B. The Christian's Response

We are to live totally committed to God. Romans 12:1 says we are to present ourselves to God as living sacrifices. That means all that we are is His and we trust Him for the outcome. First Peter 2:23 says Jesus "kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." He gave Himself to God no matter how great the pain, how much the hostility, or how difficult the task. He knew God would do what was right, judge righteously, and bring to pass what He had promised. He was willing to face death and hell (1 Pet. 2:3) because He knew God would not fail Him. That's the kind of confident trust we're to have.

CONCLUSION

A. Christ's Example

The Lord Jesus Christ lived a perfect life and died a perfect death. Both are a supreme example to us. His last words summed up the greatest elements of life: we are to forgive those who sin against us, give the truth to damned souls who are lost without it, love selflessly and show compassion to others, understand the serious implications of sin, admit our weakness and allow others to meet our needs, finish the work God gives us to do, and rest assuredly in the hands of a caring God whose promises are sure.

B. Man's Need

As a result of Christ's perfect life and death, God raised Him from the dead. Then He set Him at His right hand in glory. That was God's affirmation of the perfect Person and work of His Son, and affirms He will raise those who are perfect.

For anyone who's honest, that doesn't necessarily sound like good news. We aren't always faithful evangelists. We are often insensitive to the pain and needs of others, and naive regarding sin's destructive power. Pride keeps us from living dependently. Laziness keeps us from finishing God's work. We often find ourselves trusting only what we can see. So we know we are imperfect, and it is mankind's failure to live perfectly that makes all mankind fit for hell.

What hope can we have in that light? Hebrews 10:14 says, "By one offering [Jesus Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." Christ was the only perfect man. God has graciously provided that we may be given the perfection of Christ, and through Him approach God in perfection.

Christians often say they are in Christ because they understand that if they weren't in Him, God wouldn't raise them to glory. His perfection becomes ours when we receive Him as Savior--His righteousness clothes us and His perfection hides us. Because of our identity with Christ, God will raise us to glory and seat us on the throne with Christ. That's the good news of the gospel.

That doesn't mean Christians are perfect in this life. We still struggle with sin in this life, but we look forward to perfection in heaven. In the meantime we are covered by the perfection of Christ, and are being progressively conformed to His image (2 Cor. 3:18).

C. The Christian's Response

Because Christ has covered us with His perfection, we ought to do all we can to live as perfectly as possible--to forgive, evangelize, and love as He did. Our desire to be free from sin should be as great as His. We should depend on others, finish our appointed work, and totally trust God in the way He did. By doing all that we will not earn perfection, but live up to the perfection we received from Christ when we received Him as Savior. That's the gospel.

FOCUSING ON THE FACTS

1. According to Peter, Christ is our example not only in the way He lived, but also in His _____.
2. For Christ, the cross was the climax of a lifetime of _____.
3. What is man's greatest need?
4. Christ was never too preoccupied to be interested in leading someone to _____.
5. At the time of the conversion of the thief on the cross, what circumstances existed to convince him that Jesus was the Son of God? Explain.
6. The conversion of the thief shows that salvation is not a work of _____, but the sovereign work of _____.
7. On the cross Mary was reminded that she needed to understand Jesus not as her son but as her _____.
8. Describe the compassion of Christ on the cross for Mary. How does that apply to us?
9. When Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me," what did He mean?
10. What separated the Father from the Son?
11. How did Jesus depend on others?
12. What did Jesus mean when He said, "It is finished"?
13. In dying how did Jesus' demonstrate a life of faith?
14. What hope does mankind have in light of the perfection God requires?

PONDERING THE PRINCIPLES

1. Today we are often told that the example of Christ need not be lived out in the life of believers. It is

said that the burdens of the cross are only for those who desire deeper spiritual service. But Christ was emphatic: "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:38, NIV). Consider the self-denial of the cross in your life: Are you willing to rise earlier to spend time with Christ (and loose some sleep)? Are you willing to be bold to proclaim Christ (and loose some popularity)? Are you willing to present the claims of Christ to someone you love dearly (and loose that person's affection)? The example of Christ claims no less for those who claim Him.

2. Christ's greatest humiliation is what a Christian glories in most. Paul said, "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" (Gal. 6:14, NIV). The British pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon echoed Paul's thought in this way: "Look upon human glory as a thing that is tarnished, no longer golden; but corroded, because it came not to your Lord" (The Treasury of the Bible, vol. 3 [Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962], p. 474). Often what the world glories in is retaliation (not forgiveness), tolerance (not evangelism), and selfishness (not selfless love). It glories in sin, denies that God has a claim on the world's obedience, and refuses to trust Him (if it acknowledges Him at all). What has the example of Christ on the cross taught you about the attitude you should take toward what the world glories in?

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