

THE EXAMPLE

By

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“For Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow his steps” (I Peter 2:21).

It is most remarkable the simplicity with which the Gospel writers recorded the crucifixion. Without a doubt there was no form of execution more torturous and cruel than crucifixion. The intense pain and agony was enough to drive some victims insane. Yet, when the inspired writers came to this point, they simply recorded the facts: “When they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him” (Luke 23:33; Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:22, 24; John 19:17ff).

When Peter instructed us to follow, in the steps of Jesus, we are not to understand that he meant for each of us to get ourselves crucified. Indeed, there have been plenty of martyrs who have been put to cruel torture and death for their faith. And many are being persecuted even as you read this. But for all of us who are privileged to continue to live and serve the Lord, there is still an example in Christ's death that we are commanded to follow. The writer of Hebrews instructs us to look to Jesus. “Who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Here is the secret of what it means to follow in the steps of Jesus: *“despising the shame.”*

Jesus was sensitive. Perhaps more so than any one else. The cross was humiliating, reserved for the dregs of humanity. And those dying on one were considered guilty of gross evil. Jesus was treated with contempt, scourged, and hung on the cross nude. Yet he accepted it without complaint, and endured the shame willingly and with serenity, thus “despising the shame.” In the words of St. Philip of Neri, we are to “despise the fact that we are despised.”

Could this be what Jesus had in mind when he said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me?” (Luke 9:23) Unfortunately, something has happened to that cross. As A. W. Tozer has written, “There has come in modern times a new cross into popular evangelical circles. It is like the old cross, but different: the likenesses are superficial; the differences, fundamental.” The new cross demands no self-denial, no abnegation of the old life, and no difficult or unpleasant demands. Sinners are told only to say a little prayer and ask Jesus into their hearts. There is no shame involved, for the modern church, obsessed with “growth,” gladly promotes whatever the sin sick world embraces.

The cross did not modify one's life. It ended it. It didn't make the world easier to live in or make a man more acceptable to the world. It severed one from the world completely. To

take up the cross means to die to the world. Paul wrote, “Know you not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?” (Rom.6:3). He then added, “that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin,” and “reckon yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus” (Rom.6:6, 11).

But, oh how we hate to lose the world's approval, the world's honor, and the esteem of the world. How hard to bear the shame when we are labeled as religious fanatics, or accused of being judgmental. Or intolerant because we take Jesus seriously and uphold his commands. The modern church, instead of “despising the shame,” avoids it by making the Gospel acceptable to the media, to the celebrities, to the managers of education. It is easier to be politically correct and remain silent than to suffer the shame of the crowd by letting them know you are a follower of the one who died as a criminal on the despicable cross. What enthusiasm is shown for the athletes in the arena, and what silence is heard from the same people when the name of Jesus is mentioned.

When Jesus said that one should count the cost of following him. He was challenging us to take the cross seriously. The issue of the cross was life or death. It was God's solution to the problem affecting every person that the wages of sin is death. When Jesus went to the cross he was performing the one act that would make it possible for every believer to be free of sin and its penalty and receive life and immortality. He was doing his Father's will, and in view of that, the pain, the shame, and the disgrace of being seen as a vile criminal didn't matter.

The enemies of Christ thunder their blasphemies into every ear while Christians are shamed into silence, persuaded by the secular world to believe that the principles of Christ are not to be applied or even mentioned in the market place or in the political world. But what is a witness if it must be confined to designated and shielded areas of life?

Crucifixion carried such a stigma of shame that the apostle Paul correctly wrote: “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block (a scandal), and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor 1:23). He declared, “I am not ashamed of the gospel. For it is the power of God unto salvation. To the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). Like his Savior, he despised the shame and broadcasted the message even though it made him hated by his former colleagues and an enemy of the state. How shocked he would be at the apathy that permeates today's churches, including the clergy.

Our present society is ordered and dominated by atheistic humanism. Yet it is generally called a “Christian Civilization.” What is appalling is that most Christians seem to think that when they are accepted by this society it is a mark of success, and that to be rejected by it is a sign of failure. What they fail to realize is that things designed by and for fallen man are the very things that stand in the way of fellowship with God. Jesus gave us the example of one who willingly rejected man's traditions and ignored popular opinion in favor of the pure and simple obedience to the Father.

This was a lesson that the mother of James and John had yet to learn, when she asked of Jesus that her sons be given high places of honor. In our day, she would want her sons to have authority in some denominational hierarchy, and wear titles of Reverend. Or Doctor, or Senior Minister, or at least Pastor. But the apostles settled for no titles at all -just Peter, Paul, James, etc. It is easy to forget that Jesus said, "That which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15).

On the night before the crucifixion, the disciples sang a hymn in the upper room and then went out to the Mount of Olives. "Then said Jesus unto them, All of you shall be offended in me this night" (Matt. 26:31). Peter answered, "Even if I must die with you, yet I will not deny you." The other disciples agreed. (Matt.26:35). But it was only a brief time until the officials came to take Jesus and "all the disciples left him and fled." Peter followed at a distance, but finally denied him.

It is easy enough to sing, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory," when that cross is a beautiful polished emblem that decorates the pulpit, pews, and lapels. But it was not in the upper room that the disciples were put to the test, it was when they had to face the world, and they were not ready to despise the shame to which Jesus was subjected.

The offense and scandal of the cross happens at the point where we come into conflict with the fashion of the world, at the time when the stark sinfulness of man is brought into bold relief by the message and commands of the Son of God. Then here come the officials, the corrupt lawmakers and the lawyers that uphold their decisions, the media puppets, the religious hierarchy — all the witch doctors of law and religion with the support of the people who despise what they call "religious extremists." Jesus is no less despised by the world today than he was on that day 2000 years ago. To follow his example is to force the issue that all people, everywhere, including social and religious leaders, are worthy of judgment and death, and that Jesus is the only hope.

The Hebrew writer tells us to: "run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2). Despising the shame, he did the Father's will, endured the cross, and won the victory over sin and death, for which God exalted him to be Lord of heaven and earth.

Jesus endured the cross, with the joy of knowing that he would be raised from death to immortality. The same glorious hope of resurrection to eternal life is promised to every believer who follows him in faith.

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