

The Foolishness of the Cross

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Let's read together now from Luke chapter 23 and from verse 32 to 38. Luke chapter 23, page 32 to 38, page number 884.

Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him.

And when they came to the place that's called the skull, there they crucified him. And the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by watching. But the ruler scoffed at him, saying, He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one.

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself. There was also an inscription over him, This is the King of the Jews.

[1:28] Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Among the many ways to execute someone, crucifixion was by far the most cruel. Even the harshest of political regimes in our world today refrain from using death by crucifixion. It's too cruel even for them.

Although it wasn't invented by the Romans, they took crucifixion to new heights of brutality. During the slave rebellion of Spartacus, 6,000 slaves were executed by crucifixion.

It was only outlawed as a method of execution by the Christian emperor Constantine the Great. But still, crucifixion fills our hearts with dread at how cruel and humiliating it was.

[2:39] Stripped naked, the victim's death was fully exposed to the watching crowds. Nothing was hidden. Perhaps it's because we're so used to the story of Jesus' crucifixion that its shockiness is lost to us.

But here in Luke 23, verse 33, using just four words, we read the most absurd words ever written. There they crucified Him.

There they crucified Him. This is what it all led. All the accusations and all the trials, there they crucified Jesus. Tortured and humiliated, in weakness and shame, Jesus was killed by the Jewish leadership.

Yet through it all, it was not Jesus who was humiliated as much as it was they. They were not defeating Jesus. It was Jesus defeating them.

Never was, as Anne rightly said, Jesus more the king than when He was dying in shame upon the cross. He then was the King of Israel, the King of the world, the King of our salvation.

[3:59] Today from these verses in Luke 23, from verse 32 to 38, I wanted to consider two aspects of the foolishness of the cross of Jesus and ask the question, who is the foolish one?

Is it the Jesus who has been crucified? Or is it en masse the Jewish leadership crucifying Him? So I want to think, first of all, of the criminal who prays for forgiveness, and secondly, of the fool who dies as king.

The crux, the cross is literally the crux of history. It's the most important event in the history of our world. We must understand what was happening there, at least for this reason, that we believe Jesus was dying there not for His own sins, but for ours, and that through believing in Him, we may offer Him our lives as sacrifices of living worship.

So first of all then today, we want to consider the criminal who prays for forgiveness, the criminal who prays for forgiveness. In verse 33, we read, when they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left.

Having dragged Himself up the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows, Jesus was crucified at this place called the Skull. We don't know why it was called the Skull. Some have suggested it was a small hill in the shape of a skull, whatever the reason, it was a terrifying place to die.

[5:36] The Latin translation of the word the Skull, I believe, is that from which we get the word Calvary. Jesus was crucified at Calvary. And He was crucified there between two criminals.

There were three crosses, but all eyes were on Jesus in the center. However, the message is, as far as the Jewish leaders concerned, there were three criminals being crucified that day, and Jesus was the most dangerous.

As far as they were concerned, Jesus was the worst of the worst. He was a blasphemer. However, He was a false Messiah. Of course, it was meant to be Barabbas, the terrorist on that cross. But they chose to crucify Jesus instead. Jesus, the worst of criminals, the most guilty man in the world. There is, of course, a deeper truth in Jesus being crucified as a criminal than the Jewish leaders could possibly have known.

We know from Jesus' history that there was never less a guilty person than Jesus. Even Pontius Pilate, the Roman proconsul, was convinced of his innocence.

[6:49] Never was a man more righteous. Never was a man more loving. Never was a man less deserving of death than Jesus. And yet, here he is. He's dying as a criminal. He's bearing the punishment deserved by the worst of criminals.

And here we reach at the beginning the very heart of the cross. An innocent man dying the death of a guilty man. A righteous man dying the death of an unrighteous man.

Why then is Jesus dying that death? If it's not for his own sins Jesus is dying, then for whose? The answer is, he was dying for our sins.

He was bearing the punishment we deserved. He was being crucified so that we, the guilty ones, could go free. Here is the grace of the gospel in a nutshell.

Jesus died that I may live. But at face value, if you were there, Jesus is dying as the worst of criminals, worse than the murderers, worse than the terrorists.

[8:00] On April the 19th, 1995, the American terrorist Timothy McVeigh perpetrated the Oklahoma City bombing, killing 167 people.

He was executed successfully. on June the 11th, 2001, by lethal injection. One of America's worst ever criminals, McVeigh's last words are recorded as being these.

I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. The last words of many criminals like McVeigh are even more narcissistic and nasty than his was.

But what about Jesus? The worst of them all. Falsely accused, shamefully treated, brutally tortured. One might assume they'd be proclamations of his innocence. I'm being punished for crimes I did not commit. Or appeals for clemency. Please have mercy upon me.

[9:07] Or even cries of revenge. When I get to heaven, I'll pay you back for this. But with what is a stunning declaration of his divine love, as he endures the most inhumane pain and humiliation, he looks out over the mocking crowds and cries out to them.

Cries out to God, rather. Father, forgive them. They don't know what they do. What kind of man prays for those who persecute him?

What kind of man loves his enemies like this? Does a dying Jesus sound like a criminal to you? On March the 7th, 2001, Dennis Douthwit was executed in Texas.

His last words were a plea for forgiveness. I guess he was a southerner soul. He said, I'm so sorry that y'all had to go through this.

If I was y'all, I'd have killed me also. On the cross, Jesus did not pray for his own forgiveness like Douthwit did.

[10:24] He prayed for the forgiveness of those who were executing him. Led like a lamb to the slaughter, though he had done no wrong. He does not speak to the crowds.

He speaks to his father. Though the whole world is against him, his father's with him, that's enough for him. He prays not for the relief of his suffering and pain. He prays for those who are crucifying him, those who are causing his suffering and pain.

He prays for the Jewish leaders who hated him so. He prays for the Romans who had driven nails into his hands and his feet. He prays for those ghoulishly standing by to watch the spectacle of an execution.

Jesus prays for them. He prays for them that God would not hold this sin against them. What kind of man prays for those who execute him?

What kind of man loves his enemies like this? Surely not just a man. Surely only a man who is God can do this. The God who is filled with compassion and mercy, love and grace.

[11:37] And of course, this proves an example to us to follow in the footsteps of our master, to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. We all have people like this in our lives. When the Jewish leaders stoned him to death, the last words of the famous Christian martyr, Stephen, were, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

Now, there was a man like Jesus. There may be people in our lives who hate us because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Do not hate them in return. Love them.

We pray for God to forgive them. Easier said than done, of course. But with the Spirit of Christ within us, even this is possible. But more than us, more than us, Jesus, the criminal who prays for forgiveness, is telling us more about himself than ever we could know.

Is this not why Jesus was dying on the cross to earn our forgiveness? He, the righteous, was dying for we, the unrighteous, to bring us to God, to make our forgiveness not just possible, but certain. Jesus was the answer to his own prayer. The death of Jesus is not the end for us. It's the beginning of a life of forgiveness, mercy, and grace because there they crucified him between two criminals at a place called the skull.

[13:15] For all that, we don't look with pity upon Christ. We look with praise upon Christ. We look at him with hearts filled with adoration for here on that central cross is our forgiveness and our eternal life.

Jesus earned it at the highest of costs so that we might receive it free of charge. He died as a criminal that I may go free.

He gave his life that I might live. So surely, the only reasonable response for any of us is to offer ourselves up through faith in him as living sacrifices to God.

He's the criminal who prays for forgiveness. But secondly, he's the fool who dies as king. The fool who dies as king.

Crucifixion really was a singularly painful way to die. It took many days usually to kill its victims. The pain was excruciating. But for Jesus, that was only a small part of his suffering.

[14:29] He did not die on the cross with the surrounding crowds weeping and mourning, cries of, have mercy and we love you, Jesus. He died to the sound of mockery.

Jesus, the greatest criminal in the world, the greatest fool in the world. The Messiah whose worldly, whose kingly rule was exercised not from a wooden, whose criminal, whose kingly rule was exercised from a worldly cross.

He's a fool. His crown is not made of gold, it's made of thorns. And he's crucified there between two criminals. His reputation is shattered.

In Isaiah 53, of course, it tells us that he would be numbered with the transgressors in his death. He did not die in the glorified halls of a palace. He died in a terrifying place called the Skull.

There never was a green hill far away. There was only a small, rocky outcrop called Calvary.

Surrounded, Jesus was not by princes. Surrounded, he was, by criminals.

[15:42] And then his executioner stripped him. He is left absolutely naked. No loincloths, as you see in Renaissance paintings. He is left absolutely naked.

And the executioners played dice for his clothing. There's no dignity in crucifixion. Jesus is stripped bare for all the world to see, to stare, to gloat.

We remember the prophetic words of Psalm 22, where Jesus says to himself, I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me.

They divide my garments among them. And for my clothing, they cast lots. Naked Jesus was born. Naked Jesus died.

His clothes, whatever they were worth, are toyed over because they belong now to someone else. He's got nothing left, not even his dignity.

[16:44] He's the poor, naked fool dying on the cross. The Lord of heaven clothed with infinite glory and majesty, humiliated. in his death.

And there are crowds gathered around that cross. The people of Jerusalem have come as rubbernecks, as they would say today, to watch the gruesome spectacle of another execution. Some will be there just to watch, others to laugh at Jesus, and one or two to support him.

They're all there. Even in death, Jesus has afforded no peace, only the shouts of a crowd. Dying people need their loved ones near them at the end, but Jesus didn't have them.

The Jewish rulers who were there were delighted at what they'd achieved. They'd not have missed the execution of Jesus for the world. They hated him in life and now they laugh at him in death. They deride him, they mock him, they sneer at him, they think they've won and they want to rub their victory into Jesus.

He saved others, they say. Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one. They spat these words to Jesus without realizing how true they were.

[18:02] Because Jesus was the Christ of God, because Jesus was the chosen one, he couldn't save himself and others. He could only save others by not saving himself.

by giving himself for them. That's why he's there on that cross. He's there willingly to give himself as the sacrifice for the sins of the world so that through his death he could save others.

He saved others by not saving himself but dying on the cross for them. He was the kind of Christ the Jewish rulers hated, a humble Christ who serves others.

They wanted a Christ who'd be proud and would be served by others, a king for whom his servants would gladly give themselves rather than a king who would give himself for his servants.

You see, he saved others by not saving himself because he was the Christ of God. The Roman soldiers tasked with the execution of Jesus also laughed at him.

[19:18] Rather than letting him die in peace, they came to him. They offered him sour wine. Now, some suggest that the kind of sour wine they offered him was a type of anesthetic given to dull his pain.

They suggest that the soldiers were being compassionate to Jesus, but Luke's view is not that at all. Luke's view is that the sour wine was given not out of compassion, but out of crass mockery.

You see, worldly kings are offered the finest of wines consistent with their royal position. By offering him the sourest of wines, the soldiers are scoffing at Jesus claimed to be king.

Kings aren't crucified, they say. Therefore, Jesus is no king. He doesn't deserve our best. He deserves our worst.

And again, they cry out, if you are the king of the Jews, verse 37, save yourself. Now, by saying this, they meant something different from the Jewish leaders.

[20:25] The Jewish leaders were laughing at Jesus from the position of him being a false messiah, but the soldiers were saying something different. They were taunting Jesus. They were saying, if you really are the king of the Jews, you should be able to appeal to the hundreds of people gathered around, all of whom are Jews, commanding them to save you from this cross.

The fact that you don't, Jesus, is testimony that your claim to kingship is false. Jesus, you're no king.

Jesus, you're a deluded fool. So, they laugh at him, and they mock him, and they sneer at him, and as far as they're concerned, there's nothing Jesus can do about it.

Now, of course, we know that if Jesus had wanted to, he could have done whatever he wanted to save himself on the cross. He could have saved himself from all their hatred, malice, and torture.

He could have called down a million angels from heaven to destroy all his enemies, all those hateful Jewish rulers, all those callous, evil Roman soldiers, but he chose not to.

[21:36] He knew that he had to stay on that cross. He knew he had to endure all that suffering and mockery. He knew he had to die there, because if he did not die there, there would be no forgiveness or life for us.

We're here again. We're back here again. We're always here from this pulpit. The gospel of Jesus Christ, but through his death on the cross, we live.

You'll notice that Luke is very sparing in describing the physical aspects of Jesus' suffering. It doesn't go into the excruciating pain of the nails in Jesus' hands and feet, the exhaustion of having to pull himself up to draw air into his lungs, the extreme fear of approaching death.

Luke's focus is not on what Jesus suffered, but on why Jesus suffered. His focus is on the big story of the cross. And that's why Luke completes this passage in verse 38, as Anne rightly said, where we read, there was also an inscription over him, this, this is the king of the Jews.

Now, we know from other gospels that it was Pilate, the Roman proconsul, who had ordered this inscription be placed on the cross. He did it not as an act of mockery, but as a token of his sincere belief that Jesus was an innocent man, that he had not done what he was accused of, and that of all

the Jewish leaders he knew, Jesus was the greatest of them all.

[23:27] Pilate, the Roman proconsul, he recognized royalty when he saw it, and in Jesus Christ he saw it.

Jesus, dignity and suffering, Jesus, self-control and wisdom and speech even though beaten and bruised. Pilate was not scoffing Jesus like his soldiers were, Pilate was stating the fact.

above the cross of Jesus written in words the whole world could see, this is the king of the Jews.

But just like the Jewish leaders in their scoffing of Jesus were saying more than they knew, so was Pilate.

Because the Jesus dying in shame and weakness on the cross was the king and lord not just of the Jews but of the whole universe, seen and unseen, heaven and earth of angels and men.

I wonder what the angels thought when they saw their king and master dying upon the cross. They had only ever seen him dressed in the glory of his majesty and they recognized him, they still knew him, but they'd never seen anything like this before.

[24:43] Listen carefully. In every other world system, be it religious or political, rulers do not die for their people.

Rulers protect their own power bases at the expense of their people. People die for their rulers. In Ukraine last month, 36,500 Russian soldiers died to protect the power base of their leader in Moscow.

people. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ, a greater wisdom is revealed altogether, where the king of kings and lord of lords dies for his people.

And the irony is lost on us. The greatest of all kings offers himself as the sacrifice for his people. Not King David in Jerusalem palace, not King Solomon in the Jerusalem temple.

It was Jesus on the cross, the king of kings, the lord of lords. Jesus may have appeared to the crowds gathered at the cross to be the world's greatest fool.

[26:10] And still today, many consider the message of Christianity to be one of weakness and of falling. But to we who have trusted in Christ for salvation, Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

He is very far from being the world's biggest fool. He is the world's greatest ever king. There are many with whom you will share the gospel who will think that you're an idiot for believing what you do.

They can't conceive that a crucified man could possibly defeat sin and death. They won't believe in him as king because he died in such weakness.

but when they see Jesus the way you see Jesus, when they realize exactly why Jesus died the way he did, they'll do what you did.

They'll believe in him also. They'll fall down in worship and praise him as Lord also. The final thing as we close, it's in the nature of kings to conquer and by his death on the cross, Jesus conquered darkness.

[27:32] He conquered darkness. The Jewish leadership thought that their cruelty had destroyed Jesus, but the reality is through his suffering for us, Jesus' love destroyed them.

Jesus was the victor on the cross. the king conquered. He is now seated on the throne of heaven, the glory of his majesty seen and worshipped by all.

The day is coming when you too will see him with your own eyes, the man they called the fool, the man who from the cross prayed for your forgiveness.

And when you see him with your eyes, you too will worship him as you realize that all the believing you did in him now, whatever you had to suffer on behalf of being called a Christian, all of it is worth it.

Let us pray. Lord, we recognize that there are so many religious and political systems in our world today which cost ordinary people their lives as their rulers command them to fight and die for them just so they could have their power base secure.

[29:07] Lord, we want to pray that the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that the king has died for his people, would overcome and conquer all these false belief systems and false political systems.

We want to pray that you would sound the gospel over the whole earth so that the name of Jesus and not the names of our great presidents and religious leaders and prime ministers may be sounded.

Lord, glorify your name we pray and begin here with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.