

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God & Father (Galatians 1:4).

Luke 9:18-24

In recent years, the Tonight Show with Jay Leno often featured special surveys of random people, taken on the streets of Los Angeles. One member of the tonight show staff would walk the streets of L.A. asking people different questions and then Jay Leno would critique their comical responses. This whole process was called, “Jay Walking”. One of the more memorable “Jay Walking” skits came when people on the street were asked whether they wanted to end “Womens’ Suffrage.” Suffrage (you and I know) is the right to vote in our national and state elections. But your average person on the street often thought *suffrage* was a bad thing, more like *suffering*. So people, even women, would say, “Yeah I’m totally against women’s suffrage.” Then Jay Leno & crowd would have a good laugh at their expense... But what if that survey was a religious survey? What if people were asked to choose between a religion of pain or pleasure? Sacrifice or self-satisfaction? What would your average person choose? They would undoubtedly choose a religion of pleasure and comfort, a faith of self-satisfaction. In the account before us today Jesus gives us a radically different view of Christianity. What we know and believe, what we experience and expect, is the complete opposite of what the world wants and thinks. Jesus gives us the *Theology of the Cross* and it’s a theology most people would call crazy! Yet, we have the perspective Jesus gives. The Lord encourages us: **“Rejoice that you are Christians under the Cross!” 1. We are Centered in Christ. 2. We are prepared for persecution.**

1. Centered in Christ

When I say the phrase, *The Theology of the Cross*, what teaching comes to mind? Naturally we would think of the teaching (the theology) of Christ’s suffering and death for us. And that’s correct but it’s only part of the definition of the *Theology of the Cross*. There’s a second part that directly applies to us and deserves our attention.

Look at Jesus’ discussion with his disciples. He said, “Who do people say I am?” Sometimes a question is more than a question. Sometimes we ask something when we already know the answer but we want to lead people to a certain conclusion. A mom asks her son, “Did you clean your room today?” Fully knowing that the room had not been cleaned, yet expecting junior to do some cleaning. Jesus knew what people were saying about him. Jesus also knew who the disciples said he was. But he wanted to lead them to confess that confidence. Peter answered boldly with a faith-filled heart: “The Christ of God.” Jesus was helping his disciples see who he was and confess who he was. In a clear and concise way, he told them what it means to be the Christ of God. It means he must suffer and die and be raised to life. Jesus told them, “The Son of God must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” This suffering Christ is at the heart of the *Theology of the Cross*. **Rejoice that we are Christians under the Cross of Christ.**

But Jesus wasn’t done with his disciples. He went on to help them see who they were and what it means to be a follower of Christ. He said to them all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself.” **We are centered in Christ.** Therefore, we aren’t centered in ourselves. Jesus made the chief mark of discipleship, the chief mark of one who follows him, *self-denial*. This is the *Theology of the Cross*. We do not focus on ourselves. Rather, we deny ourselves and focus on Christ. He is the one who has suffered and died for us. He is the reason we have a home in heaven with God. We have no power or ability to save ourselves. As

Christians, we continually reject any notion that we can help God along. Self-denial reminds us: Christ is everything. I am nothing. Christ must increase. I must decrease. Christ is the perfect Savior. I am the miserable sinner. Only then do we understand *the Theology of the Cross*. Only then do we **Rejoice that we are Christians under the Cross.**

Self-denial, however, is not easy. The *self* inside each one of us wants only to burst out and satisfy its desires. We want our own way; we want to get ahead at the expense of another; we want to be *egomaniacs*¹. Maybe you know someone who is so forceful and blatant—simply put, he/she is an egomaniac. But the person who acts as an ego driven maniac is only labeled as such because he doesn't hide it as well as the rest of us. His intentions and his self-centered drive fills everything he does. But the little egomaniac inside us is smarter. It knows it must hide its sinful intentions behind a wall of holiness and goodness. We smile politely at the success of another person, waiting for our turn to pounce and succeed. We privately plot ways to look better in the eyes of others, and then try to act surprised when our pride is satisfied. When the collection plate comes around, our maniac shouts in protest: "You're giving all that?!?! Imagine what you could do with that around the house. Look at what that guy gives! Let them carry the load for a while!" The desire to assert *self* festers at the bottom of our souls; it kicks; it claws; it wants to be heard; and this side of heaven it continues to wear on us.

The call to *self-denial* is a radical departure from what we hear in our world and what the little egomaniac inside us wants to do. That's why the cross of Christ gives us what one writer termed, "our crazy Christianity". One man, lived perfectly, taught God's truth, died innocently, and rose victoriously—and because of him, the Christ of God, you and I are forgiven in God's sight. What foolishness this is to everyone who doesn't believe in Jesus! **Rejoice that we are Christians under the cross!** His life and death now serve as the motivation and the example of our self-denial. Without him and his victory we would not have a future at all. Yet, because of him and his victory we know what our future will be filled with—*self-denial*. God wanted to be known through the weakness of his Son's sacrifice. Now we will be known as Christians through the self-denial we exercise. Our neighbor needs help carrying in groceries, and we step away from the baseball game on TV to help her. Your daughter wants a ride to a friend's house as you're in the middle of a project; yet in self-denial you drive her. This is the life of a Christian. Not always glamorous; not always going to make the Newspaper headlines. **We are centered in Christ; we are denying self.**

2. Prepared for Persecution

Jesus continued his description of his followers: "If anyone would come after me... let him take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." Christ Jesus is the sole Savior of our lives. You and I don't get any closer to God or heaven based on what we do. Jesus has already made that clear, as the Christ of God. His cross saves. Our cross testifies that we are saved. Our cross is the result of his cross. Our cross means we are **Prepared for Persecution.**

Once again, God's *Theology of the Cross* shows the connection between Christ and us. Christ lived a life of suffering and persecution. We can expect the same as his followers. He has promised us that in this world we will have trouble. The world hated him and it will hate us also. The Cross of the Christian is everything the believer suffers BECAUSE he has a relationship with Jesus. Because we have a relationship with Jesus, we can expect people to call us intolerant. Some might say, "You call Jesus the ONLY Way, Truth, and Life. That's not

¹ Many thanks to Professor Daniel Deutschlander and thoughts gleaned from his book, *The Theology of the Cross* (NPH: Milwaukee, 2008) and used throughout this sermon.

politically correct.” And we would have to agree that it’s not politically correct, but it is biblically correct. The cross we pick up and bear as Christians is the suffering we endure as his followers. We don’t need to go looking for persecution. Jesus made it clear that his enemies will find us and try to drag us away from him. Co-workers might tempt you to skip church and take that fishing trip. Friends might want you to admit that it doesn’t matter what you believe—yet the cross of Christ calls us to be ready for this persecution.

In the face of suffering, we also follow what Paul said: “We rejoice in our sufferings.” These are the marks we bear as followers of the one true Savior. They are not curses, they are blessings. God does not punish us for our sins—he’s already punished Christ. So, our cross prepares us and opens our eyes to confess. Again, someone might say, “Pastor, you’re crazy! Rejoice in suffering? Rejoice in persecution?” and I would say, “Actually Jesus is giving us a crazy Christianity. Rejoice that we are Christians under the cross!” Jesus did say, “In this world you will have trouble...but take heart,” he added, “because I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). More....

This is what we rejoice in as Christians. This is what we treasure as Lutherans. Martin Luther uncovered God’s teaching of the *Theology of the Cross*. It’s the reality Jesus lays before us today. God wanted to be known in the weakness of the sacrifice and suffering of his Son, Christ Jesus. God continues to work in our lives through the weakness of sacrifice and suffering. This side of glory we don’t see the streets paved with gold—no we see struggles and temptations. This side of heaven we are the church militant, waging war against sin, Satan, and the world around us. This is the *Theology of the Cross*: self-denial and suffering. **Rejoice that we are Christians under the Cross!** Rejoice with the hymn writer Paul Gerhardt: *Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is near with his cheer, never will he leave me. Who can rob me of this heaven, that God’s Son for me won, when his life was given?* (CW 428 v.1) AMEN.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20,21)

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