

Suppose for a moment that a person is driving along in his car and loses control, smashes into a tree and is pinned inside of the car. As he's trapped there, he is able to see and hear a passing motorist offer these words of advice: "You must exercise more caution when driving. You would do well to follow my example and drive safely." Well, the trapped driver is completely unable to follow that good advice. First, he must be rescued.

It seems self-evident that following a safe driver's example is not going to be helpful in that situation—or even possible. And yet, when it comes to a spiritual life, many want to believe they can follow an example out of a car crash. They want to hear messages about how to be successful; about God's principles for leadership or just living; but there's a tension. There's a complication; the problem being that when you dig into God's Word, over and over you'll hear that what you really need is rescue. You need to be pulled out of the wreckage. Following an example is not going to get it; you need to be saved. And this salvation is created by a man nailed to a wooden cross—a pretty gruesome image, when you stop and think about it. But as we let God's Word speak to us today, I believe that the message of Jesus' cross will show itself to be the most relevant thing that we can concentrate on as Christians. Jesus' loving sacrifice on the cross is God's greatest display of power. That sounds foolish to many, but it is the message that saves souls and changes lives for eternity.

In today's Epistle Lesson, the apostle Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that his bottom line is always going to be the cross of Christ. He writes: "...the message of the cross is folly [foolishness] to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

This is what it always comes down to: Jesus suffering and dying on the cross. Preachers can talk about Jesus in all kinds of ways—Jesus as a good example to follow; Jesus as a revolutionary leader; Jesus as CEO; but any teaching about Jesus that bypasses His cross and sacrificial death is at best incomplete; at worst, that kind of teaching gets Jesus wrong and leads people astray.

Why was the apostle Paul so adamant about this? Because souls were and are at stake. There is no forgiveness of sins and no such thing as eternal life outside of these simple facts: God loved each of us sinners so much that, rather than let us die and go to hell, He sent His Son into this world to die on a cross and rise again from the dead. In that dying, he absorbed all of your sins and the hell they deserved, taking them all away from you. And in that rising, he supplies you with never-ending life. That is the power of the cross. This is the painful length to which Jesus went to make it possible for you to live with him for eternity.

Therefore, if you believe that Jesus died and rose for you; if you believe that Baptism connects you to Jesus; if you believe that He loved you enough to sacrifice his own life for you, it's going

to change the way you think; the way you see life; the way you respond to things; in short, it will change you. The forgiveness received from Jesus changes your heart; so you are not just forgiven, but forgiving. We pray it all the time in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Since God has removed our sins, the Holy Spirit urges and enables us to forgive the sins of those who have hurt us. This has some very practical applications.

I'd like to read you a portion of a letter written by a Christian whose thinking was changed by the cross of Jesus. It reads as follows:

*Four years ago, I felt that God had thrown me into a pit and had deserted me. I never felt such intense pain, anger, and humiliation. Losing my title and position at work very nearly destroyed me. It forced me to face my biggest fear: failure. I had spent my life trying to prove myself, trying to impress others, so now the thought of facing my co-workers in my new circumstances was unbearable.*

*But it was not the fact that I had been demoted that devastated me; it was the manner in which it had happened. My boss, who I thought was a friend, lied about my job performance and his role in my demotion. He had given me an outstanding evaluation, and then, without my knowledge, had written a letter saying I had problems. I confronted him about his role in the matter. He denied any involvement, and I believed him. It wasn't until two months later that I found out about the letter that had been written. Now, not only did I have to deal with the pain of failure, but the betrayal of a friend.*

*It was only when I turned to God, remembering His forgiving love that he displayed on the cross, and asking for His help in forgiving this person, that I was finally able to leave my dark pit. When the Lord lifted me out, I was a new person. And after I forgave my boss, I experienced a peace and joy that I had never felt before. It was then that I realized that forgiveness truly has a healing power.*

*I thought that writing about my painful experience might help someone else to experience the love and forgiveness of God. He is the only One who can take away pain and anger and replace it with love, peace, and joy.*

Is there someone in your life right now that is in need of your forgiveness? Are you in pain today because you haven't forgiven someone? Take the time soon to remember how Jesus "swallowed His pride," how He was nailed to a cross and rose from the grave for you—for your eternal well-being. And in that remembrance, you will experience the love Jesus has for you; love that gives you the courage to say to others, "I forgive you." Does that sound naïve or weak or foolish? Many in this world would say, 'yes.' But the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.