

Ultimate Love

Luke 23:26-43

The Gospel of Luke tells the short but memorable story about a widow, who at the same time as the rich were placing their gifts in the offering box at the synagogue, placed two small copper coins in the box, worth in today's value about ninety cents¹ (Lk. 21:1-4).

Imagine for a moment that you were there when it happened, that you saw it. Or better yet, imagine that it happened here today. What would you think when you saw it? How would you react? An 80-year-old woman, whose husband had died, walks over to that box along the back wall and drops ninety cents in there.

Now if it were a child, we'd think it was cute. But not an elderly widow. I think some of us would think it was sad. It's sad that after living so much life, or even after serving the Lord for so long, that this is all she could afford to give. Some of us we would see something to be pitied.

The more cynical among us might even laugh when we saw it. Somebody dropping into the box ninety cents—is that even going to help the church?! You can't buy a soda at Stop & Shop for ninety cents. So why bother? It's the kind of thing that makes for good Sunday lunch gossip, or in our day, something you might try to secretly film and put on Instagram as a kind of public shaming. Some of us might see the widow's offering as something to be mocked.

But think about what Jesus would see—what he saw in the widow's offering. An elderly widow, living on a fixed income (or however you might modernize it), placing all she has to live for that day in the box. When Jesus sees that, but he sees not something to be pitied or mocked, but an incredible act of love. "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of [the rich]. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Lk. 21:3-4).

Now come to another scene from Luke's Gospel, just a couple chapters later. Imagine yourself standing near an ugly hill outside of Jerusalem, watching a ghastly and humiliating procession that you know is about to end with the public execution of three criminals, and central among them is the man who claimed to be the King of the Jews and Savior of the world (the story we just read). What would you see? Something to be pitied? (Poor soul.) Something to be mocked? (Some savior and king.) Or would you see the ultimate act of love?

Those are the three reactions to the same event, the same person, that we see in the story before us, the crucifixion of Jesus. The crucifixion is the climax of the Gospel narratives, the *crux* of the

¹ A *lepton* was worth about 1/128 of a denarius (a day's wage for a laborer). With the federal minimum wage at \$7.25 per hour, a day's wage is \$58, which would make each *lepton* worth roughly 45¢.

whole story (which is actually the Latin word for “cross”). Every story we’ve looked at so far has been leading up to this moment.

As Travis showed us last week in John 13, even as Jesus gathered to celebrate the Passover with his disciples and demonstrate his humble love to them by washing their feet, the narrator introduced the story by telling us that “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1). The cross was hours away.

In Luke’s Gospel, the story leading up to our passage moves there quickly. Jesus is betrayed by one of his own disciples (22:47-53), denied by another (22:54-62), mocked by the temple guards (22:63-65). He’s accused of rebellion against God before the Jewish council—of blasphemy (22:66-71), and then of rebellion against Caesar before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (23:1-5). He is eventually condemned to a rebel’s death, when Pilate capitulates to the crowds and sentences him to crucifixion—death on a cross (23:13-25).

Now the cross is such a common fixture of the Christian faith today, that we forget how scandalous it really was in the first century. We decorate with it, we wear it around our necks, because it’s such a precious symbol. But in the first century, that would be a bit like hanging a guillotine behind the pulpit, or an electric chair. The cross was an instrument of execution, and a cruel, shameful one at that. As John Stott explains, crucifixion

is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigner or other non-persons.²

It was illegal for a Roman citizen to be crucified. The Roman philosopher Cicero said, “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him is an abomination; to kill him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is—what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”³

And the stigma was no less outrageous for the Jews. Again, as John Stott explains, the Jews “made no distinction between a ‘tree’ and a ‘cross’, and so between a hanging and a crucifixion. They therefore automatically applied to crucified criminals the terrible statement of the law that ‘anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse’ (Dt. 21:23)”⁴ (cf. Gal. 3:13-14).

And so, as Jesus is led away to be crucified, those who followed him or encountered him saw it in different ways. First, in vv. 26-31, the crowds, and particularly the women, saw Jesus’ crucifixion as something to be pitied.

Something to Be Pitied? (23:26-31)

Verse 26: “And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him” (vv. 26-

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 23-24.

³ Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.566 §169-170 (LCL: Cicero, *The Verrine Orations* 2.655-57); as quoted in Stott, 24.

⁴ Stott, 24.

27). Seeing Jesus—the one who claimed to be Israel’s king—being paraded out of the city to his death, was for some, something to be pitied, lamented, mourned over. It was a tragedy. And of course that’s true; this is the greatest tragedy in human history—the murder of the Creator by his own creatures. It is the darkest moment in the human story.

But there’s no indication that the crowd understood that dimension of it. For them, it was a tragedy on a human scale. Here is a man so weak from being beaten and tortured, that he’s unable to carry his own cross (as was the custom for the criminal, probably referring to the crossbeam that was then hoisted onto the upright part that was typically left in the ground⁵). It’s a heartbreaking scene, even for the criminals who were guilty. Think of the emotion in a courtroom when a life sentence is handed down—the devastation, the tears—it’s a tragic moment, even when the person is guilty and deserves that sentence. For anyone with an ounce of compassion, it’s still a sad thing to watch.

So the crowds, especially the women, are lamenting, mourning, pitying the crucifixion of Jesus. But then look at what Jesus does. Verse 28:

But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (23:28-31)

What a strange response to their grief. Rather than receiving their lament, Jesus redirects it. He’s essentially saying, if you’re weeping over the death of a rebel against Caesar, or over the curse of God falling on one of his people, then you ought to weep for yourselves. Because the day is coming and will soon be here when Jerusalem will face the same fate. God will judge it when Rome shows up to destroy the temple and the city together (cf. 17:22-37; 21:20-24). And you don’t want to be here when that happens. As Jesus himself lamented back in ch. 19, when he weeps over Jerusalem, saying:

“Would that you, even you [the city], had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation” [—because you rejected God’s Son]. (19:42-44)

There’s a deep irony in the crowds’ reaction of pity for Jesus. They see his crucifixion as something to be pitied, yet it’s Jesus’ pity for them that led him to this point. It was his pity for a broken and rebellious world that moved him to come down to earth and accomplish his Father’s will. It was his pity for broken people that moved him to love those he encountered. It was his pity for a rebellious people that moved him to accept the false conviction as a rebel, to accept his sentence to be crucified as a rebel, so that he might bear in himself the human and divine penalty of rebellion and so rescue the real rebels, the Jews and the Gentiles, you and me. It’s his pity for the weeping crowd that moves him from the midst of his own pain and humiliation, to warn them

⁵ See D.A. Carson, *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Re:Lit; Wheaton, Crossway, 2010), 20-21.

of the judgment to come and reveal their need for deliverance—a deliverance available through the very event they pity him for.

When we see Jesus' crucifixion through the lens of God's redemptive plan, in the context of God's redemptive rule, it's more than something to be pitied; it is itself a result of Jesus' pity for us.

But pity wasn't the only reaction. When we look at vv. 32-38, we find that for others, Jesus' crucifixion was something to be mocked.

Something to Be Mocked? (23:32-38)

Given the gruesome nature and excruciating pain of crucifixion (in fact, the word "excruciating" also comes from the word "crucifixion"), it's remarkable that the actual event itself, the moment when Jesus is nailed to the cross and hoisted up, is covered in a just a few words of a single verse: "And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him . . ." (v. 33). What receives far more attention in these verses is the humiliation and scorn of his crucifixion. The mocking and taunting he received.

First, his company. He's led away with two other criminals (v. 32). He is "numbered among the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12), paraded through the streets and out to Golgotha as a common criminal.

Second, his clothes (v. 34b). Criminals were crucified naked. Again, it's all about humiliation, shame, showing power over the condemned; showcasing their weakness and humiliation. And so the soldiers cast lots for his clothes—they play a dice game to see who gets to take them home (unwittingly fulfilling a prophecy in Psalm 22).

Third, the ridicule. The rulers make fun of him. Verse 35: "And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!'" Then the soldiers join in, v. 36: "The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine [which is a prank—it looks like it will quench your thirst, but it's gross and will make him more thirsty] and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'" (vv. 36-37). Even the criminals get in on the fun, v. 39: "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!'"

Fourth, the sign. "There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews'" (v. 38). It's meant to be ironic, insulting. You know how clothing companies will produce Super Bowl championship T-shirts for both teams before the game is even played, so they're ready to go right afterward? It'd be like the winning team forcing their opponents to wear their "Super Bowl Champion" T-shirts even though they lost. It's to make fun of them.

Some see the crucifixion of Jesus as something to be mocked. 'You thought you were a great king?! You claimed all of this power, all this authority. But you lost! Kings don't get crucified. God's Messiah isn't a loser. You say you're the chosen one of God; you can't even save yourself! Why should we trust you? It's not pitiful; it's pathetic.'

And yet notice, in the midst of this volley of insults, in between the spit and slurs, Jesus responds not by returning their insults, or burning them with a sick comeback (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21-25). He responds by asking his Father to forgive them, for they know not what they do (v. 34).

What kind of love is this? That in the midst of their mocking, their cursing, their slander, Jesus' heart is burdened not for revenge, but for their restoration. For their forgiveness. For the canceling of their debt of sin before God that they might be justified, reconciled, at peace with the God whose kingdom they have rejected. Jesus prays for their forgiveness—for they know not what they do.

Their mockery betrays their ignorance. Ignorance of Jesus' true identity—he really is the King they're making fun of him for claiming to be—the eternal Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world. Their mockery betrays their ignorance of their own guilt. Here they are crucifying a rebel when in fact they are the ones guilty of rebellion. Of disobedience against God, of sin and rebellion. The Jews, the Romans. In fact, everyone who is guilty of sin is complicit in the cross. And that means everyone but Jesus. We all stand condemned, guilty—and he prays for our forgiveness from the cross.

Finally, their mockery betrays their ignorance of God's plan of redemption. They make fun of him for getting himself crucified, not realizing that his crucifixion is the very means by which he offers forgiveness to those who mockingly rebel against God. 'If you're the Son of God, come down from the cross'? No, *because* he's the Son of God, he *cannot* come down from the cross. His love binds him there. His loyalty to his Father, and his love for rebels like you and me.

And that brings us to third and final reaction, vv. 39-43, and the one person who sees the crucifixion as the ultimate act of love.

The Ultimate Act of Love (23:39-43)

The final scene begins with the mocking we just looked at. "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him . . ." (23:39-40). And look carefully at what this criminal says, what he *sees* when he sees the crucifixion. He rebuked him saying, "'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'" (23:40-42).

Think for a moment about what this man just said. First, he recognizes his own guilt. It's not lost on the man that he is hanging on the same kind of cross as Jesus, but because of something he has actually done. He deserves what he's getting and he owns that. He recognizes his own guilt.

Second, he recognizes Jesus' innocence. "This man has done nothing wrong." He doesn't deserve what he's getting; he is truly innocent.

Third, he recognizes Jesus' identity. He doesn't just see in Jesus a man who is wrongly convicted and executed, he sees in the cross of Jesus the king of the Jews, the Savior, his only hope. And he puts his trust in him: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

This is incredibly remarkable. As one author explains, “This criminal . . . is the first to recognize that Jesus’ death is *not a contradiction* to his messiahship, his role as Savior; he is the first to recognize that Jesus’ crucifixion is a *precursor* to his enthronement”⁶—that the crown and the throne are still coming, not despite the cross, but *through* it! By God’s grace, this criminal is able to see through the pity and scorn that everyone else sees, and instead, what he beholds is the ultimate act of love.

And Jesus recognizes his faith. From the midst of excruciating pain and public humiliation, he rescues a rebel and promises him a place in his kingdom. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43).

The crucifixion is Jesus’ ultimate act of love. His willingness to lay down his life so that rebels like us might be redeemed. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). Like the widow who gave everything she had as an act of love, Jesus gave his very life. He paid the ultimate price—his precious, sinless, perfect, obedient life, given for us to accomplish his Father’s will and to rescue a rebellious world. That is how he loves us.

And I want nothing more for us than to see and receive that ultimate love. And it’s the thief, hanging next to Jesus, who shows us how to receive the love of Jesus, how we ought to see the cross.

First, to recognize our own guilt. Until you’re convinced that you’re a sinner, you won’t see your need for a Savior, and the cross becomes something merely to be pitied or made fun of. To receive the love of Christ, we must recognize that before God’s holiness, we deserve what he received as the just reward for our deeds. And second, we recognize his innocence as the only qualified Savior, and his true identity as Savior and King. In his love, he lived for us, died for us, and rose again for us to bring us to God. But receiving his love is more than just agreeing that he is who he says he is, or acknowledging that he *can* save; it’s trusting him as Savior and King. Believing in him, putting the full weight of our hope for life and salvation on him.

As John Stott says,

The cross undermines our self-righteousness. We can stand before it only with a bowed head and a broken spirit. And there we remain until the Lord Jesus speaks to our hearts his word of pardon and acceptance, and we, gripped by his love and brimful of thanksgiving, go out into the world to live our lives in his service.⁷

That is receiving the ultimate love of Christ. I love how John Newton illustrates this in one of his hymns. Just listen to this portrait, this story:

In evil long I took delight
Unawed by shame or fear;
Till a new object struck my sight
And stopped my wild career.
I saw one hanging on a tree

⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 822-823, italics mine.

⁷ Stott, 12.

In agonies and blood;
 Who fixed his languid eyes on me
 As near his cross I stood.
 Sure never till my latest breath
 Can I forget that look;
 It seemed to charge me with his death
 Though not a word he spoke.
 My conscience felt and owned the guilt
 And plunged me in despair;
 I saw my sins his blood had spilt
 And helped to nail him there.
 Alas, I knew not what I did
 But now my tears are vain;
 Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
 For I the Lord have slain.
 A second look he gave which said
 "I freely all forgive;
 This blood is for thy ransom paid
 I died that thou mayest live."
 Thus while his death my sin displays
 In all its blackest hue;
 Such is the mystery of grace,
 It seals my pardon too.
 With pleasing grief and mournful joy
 My spirit now is filled;
 That I should such a life destroy
 Yet live by him I killed.⁸

That is coming to grips with the ultimate love of Christ. I want that for us. I want that for you. I want that to be in our hearts and on our lips and shaping every part of our lives. Because there is no greater love available, in heaven or on earth, than the ultimate love of Christ.

If you don't know that, I pray that you would, and I'd love to talk to you more. If you do know this love, I pray that you would *believe it in the core of your being*, that his word of pardon and acceptance would grip you by his love, and send you out into the world to live your life in his service.

⁸ John Newton, "In Evil Long I Took Delight," *Olney Hymns, Book 2: On Occasional Subjects* (London: W. Oliver, 1779); as cited in C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 139-140.