

# The Centrality of the Cross

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thanks very much, Joel. John Stott wrote his kind of classic Christian book, The Cross of Christ, first published in 1986, an incredible book, a really recommended read.

And in the introduction to that book, he asks the question, why is it that from the very beginning, from the very earliest records or images or things that were written about the church, that the cross had become the symbol of Christianity?

When actually, as he makes clear, that the cross was originally a sign of ridicule. The cross was a means of torture. The cross was a sign of weakness, of defeat, of shame.

So why was it that the church, from its earliest days, adopted the cross as its very, it's the picture that people would think of, the image that represents it.

And the image, the answer that Stott gives is this. He says, the only answer is that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] And that it wasn't actually the disciples, it wasn't the early church, it wasn't some kind of marketing strategy that put ultimate significance on the cross, that put that front and centre.

It was Christ himself who drilled it in to his followers, that the cross really was the heart of everything. That the cross was what they had to understand, that the cross was what they had to hold on to, that the cross was what they needed to pass on to others down the generations.

And our verses this morning are one of those passages that show, I think that Stott there in writing that is absolutely right, that show just how fundamental Jesus saw the cross in his mission and in the life of his followers and his determination that they would understand it.

This is a passage teaching about the cross, and you might well ask, well, how is it doing that? Because actually, in those words Jill just read there, it doesn't mention the cross specifically, does it? So that's a good question.

How is Jesus teaching here about the cross? Well, the key to getting to grips with these verses is to see that Jesus washing his disciples' feet is really an acted parable, or is an illustration of the cross.

[ 2 : 2 8 ] And so the whole of this passage is about the cross. Let me just try and convince you of that before we dive in. Verse 1, John mentions the feast of Passover, and throughout John's gospel, Jesus as the true Passover lamb, the lamb that will be sacrificed, is a big theme that runs through John's gospel.

So straight away, John is making us think of Jesus' death, of the cross. He's linking what happens here to the cross. And then perhaps even more clearly, John goes on to say, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.

And you might, again, remember, if you've been with us, as we've looked at other sections of John's gospel, that little phrase, the hour. The hour had come. John uses that phrase time and time again.

And again, that is always referring to Jesus' death. The hour in John's gospel is always the hour of the cross. And I suppose the final confirmation, if you like, have a look at verse 7, a bit further down.

Jesus says, what I'm doing, you do not understand now, but afterwards you will understand. Jesus is saying what is still to come, the cross, just about 24 hours in the future, the cross is the lens that will make sense of what Jesus is teaching here.

[ 3 : 54 ] This washing the disciples' feet is all about the cross. And so that's kind of the aim of what we're going to look at this morning. We're going to look at four things here that Jesus teaches us, teaches his disciples, teaches us as his followers that help us see why the cross is and always has been and always needs to be the very heart of the Christian faith and of the Christian life.

And the first thing then is this, very simply, that the cross shows the depths of God's love. The cross shows the depths of God's love.

Have a look at the end of verse 1 there, if you will. It says, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Right from the beginning of this chapter, John wants us to have God's love, Jesus' love for his disciples in mind.

To the end, as it says there, that can mean in terms of time, he loved them right to the end. It can also mean to the end in terms of amount. He loved them to the utmost degree, we might say.

And it's with this unending and unfathomable love in mind that we then read on into verses 4 and 5, where incredibly, we see that Jesus rose from supper.

[ 5 : 14 ] He laid aside his outer garments and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Okay, now, feet at the best of times are not that great, are they? Not many people love feet. Feet in Jesus' time would have been significantly worse. It's not hard to imagine that in a kind of a hot, a dusty country where everyone walks everywhere in open sandals, where there's animal dung, where there's no sewage system, where pedicures were not a thing at this point in history.

And so washing people's feet was the lowest, was the least dignified job that there was. In many households, this task was considered so demeaning that Jewish slaves wouldn't be asked to carry out this task.

It would be saved for other foreign slaves. It was for the lowest of the low in terms of your social ranking. And yet, incredibly, Jesus, Jesus who the Father had given all things into his hands, verse 3, Jesus who had come from God and was going back to God, Jesus gets on his hands and knees to do this for his disciples.

An incredible demonstration of his love for them. And yet, even that is just a shadow of the depths that Jesus will go to when he plumbs the depths of suffering and pain in going to the cross, where he steps down not simply from his seat at the head of the table, but down from the glory of heaven itself.

[ 7 : 05 ] As he sets aside like a robe the majesty that is rightfully his and where instead he takes this place of shame, of humiliation and rejection.

The cross, crucifixion, is the ultimate form of torture. The cross, a death that only traitors and the most despised were subjected to, to make an example of them.

And yet, incredibly, that Jesus goes willingly to the cross for the sake of his people. The cross shows the depths of God's love for his people, the sacrifice he will make, that there is no limit to his love.

And again, we see here that's not a love because of something good in us. It's not a love that is in response to things that his people or that we have done. Just think of this, that John makes it really clear that Judas Iscariot, Judas, who will betray Jesus to his death, is there in this upper room.

And yet, Jesus washes his feet as well. And so, this is not a love for people who deserve it, but this is a love born out of God's gracious mercy for those who are far from him.

[ 8 : 27 ] And so, right from the beginning, as we take this time to think about the cross, before in some ways we get into that in a bit more detail, we might say, it's right and it is good that we begin by simply thinking about the love of God for us.

We can perhaps get used to that. God loves us. We can perhaps get used to the cross. Of course God did that for us. And yet, actually, we should never get used to that. It should amaze us each and every day at what Christ has done.

And all of us have this inbuilt desire to be loved. It's how we're made, how we're designed. Perhaps we've had what seemed like love, but it didn't work. Or perhaps there's real hurt and so we're anxious about kind of opening ourselves up for love again.

Perhaps many of us would recognize that we've looked for love or to fulfill that need in the wrong places and that's had negative consequences.

And yet, the Bible says, actually, it calls us to look to the cross and see the depths of God's love for us there. To see that Jesus gave everything, absolutely everything, the King of Heaven and yet, who came willingly, not forced or compelled into it, but who came and gave his life on the cross for people like you and me who had done nothing to earn or deserve that love.

[ 9 : 53 ] And so as we begin this section of John, and there's going to be plenty of things that we kind of dig into and plenty of kind of complex things we're going to be able to look at and hopefully make sense of. But first and foremost, we begin by saying whatever is happening in your life, however you're feeling, however others are treating or have treated you, this morning, perhaps the most important words that you can hear are that God loves you.

And even more than that, to look to the cross of Jesus Christ and to know the depth of God's love for you. To know that that is not just words, but that is love that has been proven at the greatest possible cost.

The cross shows the depths of God's love. And so that's where we begin and that's where John wants us to see what Jesus is teaching us through this.

And yet even that, to say that, is only just beginning to open up the centrality of the cross in the Christian life. Jesus goes on then in this passage so that we can understand what the cross actually achieved, what it's really all about.

And that's our second point here, which is this, that the cross brings God's cleansing. The cross brings God's cleansing. This foot washing is such an appropriate metaphor for the cross because yes, it's incredibly humbling.

[ 11 : 19 ] It's sacrificial service on Christ's part. But it's also service that achieves something. It brings about that cleansing. The point here being that the cross brings God's cleansing.

So Jesus comes to Peter. Peter's so often the most outspoken of Jesus' disciples. And verse 8, Peter says to him, you shall never wash my feet.

No way, Peter says. He will not let his master stoop down to that lowly position. He doesn't need Jesus to do that for him. And yet Jesus' answer is so stark, isn't it?

Jesus answered him, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Again, this is where we see again that what Jesus is speaking about is something far more significant than simply washing his disciples' feet.

Of course, it's not how clean people's feet are that enables them to have a place with Jesus. No, again, we're thinking here about the cross. We're thinking here about the cleansing it brings, which is ultimately forgiveness, which is the cleansing from sin.

[ 12 : 29 ] And so we see in this passage that the cross doesn't simply demonstrate God's love for us. It also achieves something as well. So to lay down your life for someone, perhaps to take a bullet for someone, that's only meaningful, that only makes sense, doesn't it, if it saves the other person from that fate.

Otherwise, you know, kind of what's the point? It's sort of an empty gesture. But the cross is so important because it's there that Jesus takes our sin upon himself and he pays the penalty for that sin.

That penalty is God's righteous anger. his punishment of sin. That penalty is ultimately death itself and separation from God.

And yet on the cross, Jesus takes that penalty that we might be forgiven, that our sins might be washed away, that idea of them being washed away, a common biblical description or metaphor for forgiveness that just as the dirt and muck and everything else is washed from the disciples' feet by Jesus, so their sins are washed away by his sacrifice on the cross.

And Jesus makes it clear as well, doesn't he, here, there's no alternative to that. This isn't just one way of cleansing but you could try something else if you like. Peter might think he's being very humble in refusing to let Jesus wash his feet but actually Jesus says, no, this is the only way.

[ 13 : 58 ] And again, that sounds true of the cross. Perhaps we have all sorts of ideas or motivations which would say, no, no, I don't need God to do that for me. Perhaps it's that we feel unworthy of that.

Perhaps it's we feel slightly proud. We don't really need that kind of help. We're pretty good people. And yet the reality is, yes, we do, Jesus says, need him to do that for us. Yes, we are unworthy but there's no other way and actually that none of us are good enough that this is something we don't need.

There's no other way than the forgiveness Jesus makes possible through his sacrifice on the cross for us to have a part with him as Jesus says. And you can think of those times perhaps when you've got covered in mud or something and you're trying to get it off and you end up just making things worse and worse.

I can think of plenty of times when my kids have managed to get in such a mess and as they try and sort it out it just spreads and gets further and further around and ultimately you just need to say like stop, don't move, don't touch anything, put your hands in the air and then because I'm clean and because I've got three packets of baby wipes I'm able to come in and sort out that situation that they couldn't deal with.

Well that is our situation like those kind of messy children. We need that cleansing and yet the fact is that we're too messed up to do that ourselves. We're too deep in to dig ourselves out of that hole.

[ 15 : 23 ] We need help from the outside. We need someone who can come and lift us out and that is what happens at the cross. Jesus comes perfectly clean, perfectly pure, perfectly righteous, lives the perfect life we all fail to live and yet he humbles himself.

He serves us. He takes our place in that mess. He takes our sin so that we can be forgiven, so we can be cleansed from sin.

The cross brings God's cleansing, that cleansing which is entirely necessary and that cleansing which continues to be the ground of our faith throughout the Christian life and I think that's what verses 9 and 10 are about.

Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head. Jesus said to him, the one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet but is completely clean and you are clean but not every one of you.

These are, I think, slightly tricky verses to make sense of but I think they're saying that this is a once for all forgiveness. The one who has bathed doesn't need to wash, he's completely clean.

[ 16 : 38 ] The idea being we're not kind of falling in and out of God's forgiveness. That actually if our trust is in Jesus and the cross that once we're clean, we are clean. And so there's that real assurance that there is nothing more that we need and yet also the other side of that coin yet throughout the Christian life we keep on coming back to God in confession.

We keep on being renewed in our walk with God through that forgiveness we receive day by day our feet being kind of rewashed as it was as Jesus says here.

And the point being we have that once for all assurance of what Christ has done and yet we never move beyond the cross. the cross remains the very heart of our hope and the reason that we have a place with Christ.

So the cross brings God's cleansing and really there to emphasize that key truth that at the heart of Christianity is not what we do but is what Christ has done.

That this cleansing doesn't depend on how I'm feeling today or how I've performed over the last week or so but the truth that actually if our trust is in Jesus then through the cross the objective fact of our forgiveness has happened.

[ 18 : 00 ] It is done. If you've not yet trusted in Jesus then we see in this passage that that offer is there and it is essential because it's only the cross that can bring that cleansing that we need.

If you have trusted in Jesus hold on to that truth that it is done. It is achieved. Our hope begins and continues throughout our Christian life with what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

The cross that brings the cleansing that we need. So the cross shows God's love. It's a demonstration. The cross brings God's cleansing. It's an objective achievement in that way. Thirdly, we see really from verses 12 down to 17 as well that the cross is the example for God's people.

Jesus says here that the cross lays down the pattern for his followers. The cross is the example for God's people. Let me read from verse 13.

Jesus says, You call me teacher and Lord and you are right for so I am. If I then, your Lord and teacher have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet for I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done for you.

[ 19 : 17 ] Okay, so remember, say this again, we're talking about the cross here not simply washing people's feet. That's the picture. The cross is the main thing and some ways you might be relieved about that.

We can all keep our shoes and socks on this morning and that's nice but actually does that not make what Jesus is saying here so much bigger so much more challenging doesn't it?

In light of the cross Jesus is saying look, I will give everything. I will give my own life. I will completely humble myself.

I will take the very lowest position possible. I will make the ultimate sacrifice. I will show the depth of that love as we spoke about and then he turns to his followers.

He turns to you and me and he says and that is the example that you're to follow in how you treat others. It doesn't get any more challenging than that, does it?

[ 20 : 15 ] And yet the Christian way of life is following that pattern of Christ. The cross is God's example for his people and that means that we need to carry the love that God has shown us in the cross into our relationships with other people, into our relationship with the world.

What does that mean in a kind of practical nuts and bolts way? Well a couple of things I suppose that it has to mean. It has to mean firstly loving people who don't deserve it because that's the nature of God's love for us.

That means when we are wronged by people, hurt by people, that responding in kind or simply bad-mouthing them to anyone who will listen or just kind of cutting them off, you know, one strike and you're out, that while that might be the world's approach, that that is not the cross-shaped approach.

Now that doesn't mean that we put ourselves in harm's way in terms of abusive people, but it does mean that our attitude toward people, our love for them, is not defined by, well, how well have they treated me?

What kind of person are they? Are they a good person that deserves my love? We love those who don't deserve it because Christ loved those who didn't deserve it and that is each one of us.

[ 21 : 38 ] And so that love means love for those who don't deserve it. What else? Well having the cross as an example means loving in a way that is sacrificial. Isn't it? That actually our love for people, even if that's demonstrated in a simpler way as spending time with people, maybe it's practical help, maybe it's committing to pray for people, it could be any number of things.

But actually those can't just be things that kind of fit around our schedule and are always easy and convenient for us. It can't be that just if we get all of our stuff done, well then maybe we'll have time to show this love to others.

It actually has to be that sacrificial love that costs us because again, that is the love that Jesus showed us. Whether that is in countless little ways or in really big ways, Jesus is modelling here for us a love that costs and he says to us that you should do as I have done.

And what he did was not convenient. He gave his whole life and paid the ultimate cost. The cross as example means love involves being humbled, it involves taking the lowest place, it involves a love or service that doesn't always get recognition or praise or reward but that stoops down to meet with others.

Because again, that is what Jesus did in taking the very lowest place for us. The cross is the example of Jesus' love and it's really important that we kind of recognise and face up to the fact that all of that is hard, isn't it?

[ 23 : 16 ] To show love that's undeserved, that's sacrificial, that's humble, that's difficult, it doesn't come naturally to us. But all of that is only possible when we really grasp what the cross has achieved for us, that we can be secure and loving in this radical, counter-cultural way even though it means we don't always get the earthly reward or recognition that we'd like.

That kind of love can often go unseen and unrepaid but we're free to do that and follow Jesus' example of love because we find our place with him. It's his incredible, sacrificial, cleansing love for us where our hope is found.

It's knowing that love that's shown to us on the cross that we build our lives on and it's only as we do that that we're then free to give out this love to others as we're filled up with the love of Christ.

The cross is an example for God's people but that we're only able to follow as our resources to love others, our kind of fuel tank as it were, if you want to think of it that way, is constantly being renewed, filled up, refreshed by the love that we have from Jesus by reminding ourselves of that, by reminding ourselves of the cross, the very centrality of the gospel message, the centrality of the Christian life, the demonstration and the achievement of God's great love for us.

It's as we dwell on the cross that we're also able to follow the example of the cross in our love for others. And so the cross shows God's love, brings God's cleansing, is the example for God's people.

[ 24 : 56 ] One final point here that is highlighted in this passage as Jesus teaches his disciples as he prepares them for what's to come and that's this, that the cross was God's plan. The cross happens according to his purposes.

I wonder if you notice throughout verses 1 to 17, there's this kind of undercurrent of deception or betrayal. John introduces it right at the start, verse 1, the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Jesus.

And this isn't hidden from Jesus. Verse 10 and 11, and you are clean, but not every one of you, for he knew who was to betray him. And Jesus makes this really explicit then in verses 21 onwards, where we read, after saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit and testified, truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.

And he goes on, doesn't he, to specifically identify Judas, who then goes out from them. And we get that really powerful close to our passage. He immediately went out and it was night.

Judas leaves Jesus and goes into the darkness to betray him. Why is Jesus wanting to be so clear in advance about Judas' betrayal?

[ 26 : 19 ] Well, the reason, as we've said, and this is the kind of big point of these chapters, really, the reason is so that when the cross happens, that Jesus' disciples and us today know that this isn't some big mistake, but actually, this is God's plan.

This is the path that Jesus willingly accepted and walked on. The cross was always the goal from the very beginning, and it's knowing that, the centrality of the cross in Jesus' mission, that he went there deliberately.

That is the confirmation, really, of everything else that we've spoken about this morning. How does the cross demonstrate the depths of God's love for us? Well, it can only do that because Jesus was willingly betrayed, that this wasn't something that unexpectedly happened to him.

It was the eternal plan of God put into his action because of his love and grace for people like us. How can we know that the cross actually achieved something, that it brings this cleansing from sin we all need?

Again, it's because it was God's design from the beginning. The cross is Jesus fulfilling God's plan to bring wayward people back to a holy God, only possible through cleansing them of their sin.

[ 27 : 36 ] How do we know the cross is an example for us? Again, because it was this deliberate action predicted in advance and not even just predicted here the night before but actually throughout the Old Testament.

Verse 18, that the scriptures might be fulfilled. He who ate my bread has lifted up his heel against me, Jesus says. Quoting from Psalm 41 back in the Old Testament, this has always been God's plan, this betrayal to death of God the Son.

And so our suffering service, our sacrificial love of others is not something that just happens by accident but it's actually something that we deliberately move toward as we follow Jesus, our Savior and Lord who deliberately went to the cross for us.

[ 29 : 17 ] Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.  
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Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.  
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Amen.

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