

# The Importance of, and Responses to, the Cross

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] A Scottish minister of the 19th century, Alexander McLaren, once said this, the cross is the center of the world's history. The incarnation of Christ and the crucifixion of the Lord are the pivot around which all the events of the ages revolve.

That's quite a bold claim, isn't it? Do you hear what he's saying there? He didn't just say that the cross is the most important thing for Christians or the cross is the most important thing for the church. But actually saying that the cross is the most important thing in history.

The cross is the most important thing for the world. The pivot around which all the events of the ages revolve. That the cross divides history in two and the cross changes everything, whatever our response to that might be.

We're going to kind of dig into that claim a little bit this morning. We're going to be focused particularly on the cross today as we look ahead to Easter Sunday. Next week we were looking through kind of John's gospel over the last few weeks, that upper room discourse, that night before the cross.

This morning as we've just read, we've kind of jumped over into Luke's gospel to look at this passage and to focus our hearts and our minds on the cross this morning. If you're here as a Christian, it is good that we constantly return to the center of our faith.

[ 1 : 2 4 ] As Christians, we can never think of the cross too much. We can never take the cross for granted. We want to be constantly reminded of what Jesus has done for us at the cross.

That is the fuel really for the Christian life. That's our motivation for both living for Jesus and also sharing the good news of Jesus with those around us.

And also if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, then as always we are so glad to welcome you to be with us this morning. It's so glad that you're here and that you get to hear what is at the heart of the Christian faith, but also again what we believe is at the heart of history itself.

Why is it that Christians believe the cross stands at the center of all things? Why is it that we could believe as a church that the death of one man thousands of years ago is more significant than anything that happened before or since?

Why is Easter such a big deal and how do we respond to that? That's what we're going to be looking at this morning. We're going to see in this passage first what it is that the cross achieved, why it is so significant.

[ 2 : 3 3 ] And then we're going to look at the two different responses that we see in these verses to the cross. The responses of the eyewitnesses, the responses of those who were there, who saw it firsthand and how we can continue to see and to expect those same responses all these years later to that same central and eternal message of Jesus and the cross.

And so there we go. There's the first thing that we're going to see here. Really, I suppose the headline over everything else that we're going to talk about is this, that the cross is the most significant event in history because it makes forgiveness possible.

The cross is the most significant event in history because it makes forgiveness possible. We're going to see a few different characters in these verses. The first one that we're going to be looking at is Jesus himself as he goes to the cross.

In the first half of chapter 23, we didn't read all of that, but Jesus has just been through an entirely unjust trial. That's finished.

You can see it just a bit higher up the page in verse 22 with Pilate, the judge at that trial saying, I have found in him no guilt deserving death. And yet still Jesus is condemned to death, death on a cross.

[ 3 : 56 ] Now in verse 33, he is nailed to the cross. He is crucified between two criminals, excruciating injustice, excruciating pain.

And what is Jesus' response? Well, those incredible words that we read in verse 34, what does Jesus say? Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.

Jesus' first words from the cross are words of forgiveness. And it's so important that we recognize that, that we hold on to that.

The cross was misunderstood by so many people who were there, either observing or actively involved. They don't know what they are doing, Jesus says. And we'll see that's the case as we continue through these verses, that the cross is still misunderstood by so many people today.

It's the symbol of Christianity. We see it on churches. People have it on necklaces. But actually so many people are confused or unaware or mistaken as to what it's all about.

[ 5 : 07 ] Jesus died there. But what actually is the significance of that? So what? Well, Jesus makes it clear here, doesn't he? That the cross is all about forgiveness.

And it is what happens on the cross that makes this forgiveness that Jesus speaks about possible. On the cross, Jesus is going to die in the place of sinners.

And you see that there in verse 33. It says, They crucified him and the criminals, one on his right, one on his left. Jesus there counted among the guilty. Jesus identified with the guilty.

Jesus dies the death of the guilty. And yet, incredibly, Jesus does that as the innocent one so that the guilty can go free.

And that is what the cross is all about. At the cross, the price of sin is going to be paid. And sin, perhaps that's not a word that we use that much in our day-to-day life. What is sin?

[ 6 : 05 ] Well, sin is simply the attitude that really ignores God. Sin is the attitude that thinks that we know better than God or we don't really need God. We're fine just as we are. And yet, the Bible says that the dire consequences of that attitude is separation from God.

And the Bible also says that sin is an issue that all of us have to face with. Sin is not just something for some bad people over there. Sin is part of the human condition for all of us that we need to face up with and need a solution to.

And yet, Jesus is able to ask his Father God to forgive sins. To forgive even the sins of those soldiers who are nailing him to the cross.

And so, how is he able to do that? Because Jesus isn't just here saying, well, you know, let's just forget about sin. Maybe sin's not such a big deal after all. Let's just ignore it.

If that was the case, Jesus would have never had to go to the cross. I know Jesus is saying here that on the cross, I will deal with sin. The price of sin is going to be paid.

[ 7 : 13 ] The price of sin has to be paid. But on the cross, it is not paid by the guilty. But rather, it is paid on behalf of the guilty.

Jesus is going to endure that separation. He is going to die that death. So that we can be restored to God and have life. The great exchange, as it has been called.

That the only ever perfect person will die a sinner's death in between two criminals. So that the penalty of sin is dealt with. And we can know God again.

Why is the cross the most significant event in history? It's because it makes that forgiveness possible. It means that God's eternal plan to rescue, to redeem, to bring back to himself.

A people who will know him, who will live for him, who will worship him. It is possible, it is achieved there at the cross because of what Jesus did. No longer do we have to be far from God.

[ 8 : 12 ] We are separated by our sin. Instead, we are invited in to perfect relationship with him. Again, not because of what we've done. But because of Jesus' death in our place on the cross.

Nothing could be more important than that. It restores that relationship with our creator God that we are designed for. And the incredible thing before we move on here is who is this forgiveness there for?

Who is Jesus speaking directly about as he asks his father to forgive? Well, he's speaking, isn't he, about the very soldiers who are nailing him to the cross. Those who are crucifying him.

This forgiveness is available for the very worst. Jesus came and suffered and died for those, including those who were dead against him.

In order that they might recognize what he'd done for them. And through that, be forgiven. We probably fall into kind of two camps here, I suppose. Maybe we hear about God's forgiveness.

[ 9 : 19 ] We think, well, that sounds nice and everything. But deep down, perhaps we hold on to that thought where we say, well, actually, that could never be for me. You know, if God really knew what I'm like, he would know, well, actually, I'm too far gone.

Actually, the things I've done, the things that I think, the struggles that I continue with. You know, that forgiveness sounds incredible to have that kind of load lifted, taken away, dealt with.

We can see the attraction of that, and yet surely we think, that can't be for me. That is for other people who don't have the same kind of issues that I'm dealing with.

And yet the words we just read in these verses just blow that idea out of the water, don't they? The forgiveness Jesus goes to the cross to achieve is available for absolutely everyone, as he prays even for those nailing him to the cross.

And that forgiveness is available to each and every person here, to each and every person that we know. And there is no one who is too far gone for what Jesus has achieved for them on the cross.

[ 10 : 30 ] Now, perhaps the other response, perhaps the second camp we fall into is the other end of the spectrum, where we think, well, I didn't, actually, I don't really need that much from Jesus. You know, I'm pretty good, all this talk of the cross, all this talk of Jesus dying, that maybe just seems a little bit over the top.

I just need a boost from Jesus. You know, I'm not perfect, but you know, I'm maybe 85, 90 percent. You know, I'm getting there. Perhaps we easily compare ourselves to other people around us, and we can think, well, I'm pretty moral.

I'm pretty good, even to other people at church. I'm doing okay. And yet, actually, the Bible tells us that that is not how sin works. The Bible says the truth is that all of us have missed the mark.

All of us have rebelled against God, have turned our back on him. All of us deserve that penalty of death. To put it in a really stark way, where we're all people who are responsible for Jesus being nailed to that cross, for the crucifixion, because we all deserve the punishment that he is hanging there to take.

The cross shows just how serious sin was, because there was no other way to deal with it, but that Jesus took that penalty for each and every one of us.

[ 11 : 50 ] And so there's the headline, that the cross is the most significant event in history because it makes forgiveness possible. The forgiveness that we all need, even in our very best of days, that forgiveness that continues to be available for us, even on our very worst of days.

The forgiveness that is possible because Jesus takes our place. The cross is the most significant event in history because it makes forgiveness possible. Well, let's move on then and look at the two responses that we see to the cross in these verses.

And I think as we look at these two responses here, we see the two responses that we continue to see in our world today toward Jesus and to the cross. The first one is this, that many will mock the cross of Jesus.

And that's the main thrust of the middle verses of our passage, is that many will mock the cross of Jesus. Which people? Well, pretty much all the people in this passage.

Verse 35, The rulers scoffed at him. 36, The soldiers also mocked him. 39, One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him. Everywhere we look in these verses, the people are mocking Jesus as he's crucified.

[ 13 : 05 ] Why is that? Why are they doing that? Well, partly, that would have just been what happened in these circumstances. At a crucifixion, a crowd would gather to mock and hurl insults at the convicted criminal.

That's just part of the shame that Jesus was willing to bear on our place as he went to the cross for us. That would have happened to everyone. But these verses also show there's another layer, there's another thing at work here in this mocking of Jesus as he is on the cross.

And so we see there are different groups who mock, but they all mock for the same reason. Have a look down if you're Eli. He saved others. Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.

If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself. Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. Even the sign above Jesus' head as he's crucified is designed as kind of ironic mockery.

This is the King of the Jews. The reason people laugh, the reason people mock is because this is precisely the opposite of what they think should happen if Jesus really is the Christ, really is the King, really is the Chosen One.

[ 14 : 22 ] This guy who made great claims about himself has fallen flat on his face. And the crucifixion is their definitive proof that Jesus is not who he said he was.

And that is why they mock. And yet the great irony of this passage, the thing these onlookers are unable to see, is that it is precisely by being on the cross that Jesus is carrying out his role as the Christ.

Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us, one of the criminals says. In fact, it is by staying on that cross. It is by refusing to save himself that Jesus is saving us, that Jesus is making forgiveness, making salvation possible.

The cross is victory through what looks like weakness. And I think this is one of these passages where we have to be honest with ourselves, don't we?

We have to take a step back and say, actually, if we were in that crowd, if we were seeing what they were seeing, if we were there firsthand, we would have probably thought exactly the same as the vast majority of the people there did.

[ 15 : 40 ] This is a failure. This is not good. This is not what is supposed to happen. The sign of weakness doesn't figure in our definition of victory either.

The idea of suffering doesn't mesh, doesn't overlap with our understanding of success or things being just as they should be. And yet, actually, to be a follower of Jesus means being willing to associate with a crucified, a mocked Savior.

It means seeing that actually victory, success, glory, so often comes through what looks weak and powerless.

And the cross is the ultimate example of that. In the days of the early church, the crucifixion would have made Christians a laughingstock. It was the ultimate sign of failure, of disgrace, of shame.

How could these Christians claim Jesus was who he said he was if he'd been crucified? It was laughable in their culture. In fact, the earliest surviving image of Jesus, who perhaps mentioned this before, but is in some graffiti found in Rome.

[ 16 : 56 ] It depicts a man worshipping a figure on a cross. And this figure has a donkey's head. And underneath there is this inscription which says, Alexa Menos worships his God.

This is kind of graffiti taking the mick out of some guy called Alexa Menos. We don't know anything about him. He was obviously just a run-of-the-mill Christian. But someone here is saying, Alexa Menos, you are an idiot.

How can you think that Jesus is God? He was crucified. He's a donkey. And yet, fascinatingly, just a bit further down the wall from this piece of graffiti, there is another inscription in different writing.

This one has no picture. It simply says, Alexa Menos Fidelis. Alexa Menos is faithful. That Alexa Menos was obviously willing to be associated with the crucified Savior.

If Christians follow a Savior, a king who is mocked, it's not a huge surprise that we would be mocked. And it is the cross that is still the stumbling point for so many that will cause that mocking.

[ 18 : 11 ] To have Jesus as a good moral example, that's fine. To have Jesus as a kind of a wise teacher who gave good advice, people are maybe happy with that, that's okay. But actually, to say that we are a people whose focus is on his death, to say that the cross, that ultimate sign of weakness and disgrace, to say that that is the pinnacle of his achievement as the Bible, as Jesus himself says he is, well, that is where people have an issue.

And it's good to be honest about that, isn't it? And to recognize that does sound weird, doesn't it? We can understand why that's difficult for people to take in. A man crucified 2,000 years ago having any significance to my life, that sounds unlikely.

The idea that I need forgiveness, that that makes possible. Perhaps that even sounds offensive to us. Why would I need to be forgiven? And yet that is the message of Easter that says that Jesus wasn't just any man, he was God himself who'd come for that exact purpose.

Because all of us have fallen short, all of us have missed the mark, all of us need that forgiveness. And God, in Jesus Christ, came himself to make that possible.

That wasn't made possible ultimately through what he said or through following his example. It was made possible through the cross. And so we have that at the very heart of our faith.

[ 19 : 40 ] But if we do that, if we're going to continue holding fast to Jesus and saying it's first and foremost about the cross, we will face, I suppose, that same mocking that Jesus faced, that same decision that Alexa Menos there faced.

Will we associate with Jesus that doesn't really necessarily equate to what the world values or will we sideline Jesus and attach ourselves to something more impressive looking?

And yet I love that, that ancient inscription of some unknown Christian, Alexa Menos Fidelis, Alexa Menos is faithful. So often we want a triumphant Christianity, don't we?

We can end up rejoicing in celebrities who become Christians as it makes it all seem that bit more respectable. I remember being, you know, quite excited when Kanye West had his kind of Christian phase.

I think that's all gone kind of off the rails a little bit now. Or we long for our nation to be a Christian nation where Christian values are upheld, perhaps where Christians seem to have the upper hand or at least just be the norm.

[ 20 : 47 ] And neither of those things are wrong. It's great whenever anyone is converted and we should be encouraged by that. It's great when Christian values are recognized and celebrated as good and wise as they are.

We would love more of that. And yet actually we also need to take seriously and recognize that the standard pattern in the Bible and the most common state for the church throughout history is God's people following a crucified and a mocked savior and remaining faithful as they themselves are willing to be mocked as they hold onto the cross over and above everything else.

Now what does that look like for us? Maybe that's at school, maybe it's at work, whether it's the school gate, whether it's around family, friends who don't believe. really just boils down to that simple question, are we willing to be associated with Jesus?

If we are Christians, are we willing to claim the cross as the most significant moment in history and in our lives? To speak of Jesus not only as teacher or example but also as savior.

Perhaps for many of us here the challenge is to first of all just be willing to speak of Jesus at all in the world and in the circles in which we move. That's not particularly a route into the in crowd.

[ 22 : 16 ] We might take stick for that. It's always so much easier to pivot the conversation away from that, isn't it? And yet while the world might mock the cross, ultimately Jesus is the only one who is able to offer the forgiveness that we need.

Jesus is the only thing that we can commit our lives to who loved us enough to die for us and whose death can offer hope for eternity.

And so we see that first response. It helps us be realistic that many will mock the cross of Jesus and yet when we remember what the cross achieved we remember that it is worth it to stick with Christ, to stick with the cross at whatever the cost.

Jesus' people are called to remain faithful through that because the cross is the most important thing in history and our response to it means everything. So there's response one to the cross in these verses is mocking.

We want to be realistic about that. We want to be prepared for that. But the second response then that we see here in contrast to everyone else's response we get this really encouraging response that while some mock we see also secondly some will believe.

[ 23 : 30 ] Verse 40 here that the condemned criminal on the cross having heard Jesus be mocked, slandered, railed out. Here is his wonderful response. Do have a look at these words in your Bible where he says 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 and he that is Jesus said to him truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise.

A famous writer J.C. Ryle says that these verses deserve to be printed in gold such is their significance such is the importance of this criminal's response to Jesus on the cross and what it teaches us.

What does it teach us? What does he believe? What does he see? What does he understand? That everyone else really has failed to grasp. Let me run through that so much in just these two or three verses but firstly he believes that Jesus is the son of God and that in mocking him this other criminal is mocking God himself.

Do you not fear God he says. This criminal sees who Jesus is that it is not just anyone who is hanging on that cross. It is the creator of all things who has come to his people who has come for his people.

[ 25 : 02 ] Secondly he understands that while he is on the cross as the just reward for his sins that he has done things wrong Jesus is on the cross as an innocent man.

Verse 41 we are receiving the due reward of our deeds but this man has done nothing wrong. He recognizes he is on the cross because he deserves it but Jesus does not. And thirdly most importantly of all he understands that Jesus is able to save him.

He understands to some degree the truth of the forgiveness that Jesus himself has spoken about and offered through the cross. Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.

He understands that Jesus is the king that he will have a kingdom no matter how things might look at the moment. That Jesus is the person to throw his lot in with.

Jesus is the person to stake his life on despite how things might seem. He understands that Jesus can bring him into this kingdom as well.

[ 26 : 08 ] And so how is this criminal, how is this man who even in his own words is rightly being condemned to death, how is someone like that ever going to get into Jesus' kingdom, the kingdom of God?

Well he understands that it's only through Jesus and what Jesus is achieving on the cross. This man is not able to make up for all the wrong that he's done in his life.

He is nailed to a cross. This man is not able to turn over a fresh leaf and start again and do better this time. He is nailed to a cross. This man is not able to and has no illusions about being able to earn his way into Jesus' kingdom, to put things right.

He is nailed to a cross. These are literally his dying words. It's too late for all of that. It's too late for anything that would depend on him and his efforts and actions. But he is able to cry out to Jesus.

He is able to recognize who Jesus is, to understand the offer of forgiveness that Jesus makes to depend completely on Jesus. He perhaps wouldn't articulate it like this, but he understands that salvation is by faith in Christ alone.

[ 27 : 26 ] And that is not a unique situation for him because he's on the cross. That is the situation for each and every one of us. There is nothing we can do. There is nothing we can merit. There is nothing we can earn.

But our salvation is by faith in Christ alone. And what's Jesus' response? Well, he says there, doesn't he, truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Because of his faith in Jesus, this man is saved entirely through what Jesus has done for him at the cross and has that promise of paradise which awaits.

The message of Easter is that Jesus has done what we cannot do, that at the cross Jesus makes forgiveness possible, that despite people mocking, despite what it looked like, he went through that for us and won that victory in our place.

And because of that, because of the cross, if our trust is in Jesus and not ourselves, if we cry out to him, we can look forward to an eternity with him.

[ 28 : 31 ] We are offered paradise through the cross. We're invited to accept that, to understand that, to enjoy the assurance that comes with that of knowing it's not our work but his.

We come to the cross with empty hands, just as this criminal did, and yet we are welcomed home by Jesus. One incredible invitation that is, and that is why we are eager as Christians, eager as a church, to share the gospel with people.

It's not about forcing our views or opinions on anyone. It's not about shoving anything down anyone's throat. It's about saying that in the pages of scripture we believe as we look at Jesus we have the rescue that all of us need, but also the greatest blessing that any of us can imagine and the thing that all of us are looking for ultimately in our life, that paradise with our creator for all eternity.

And the encouragement for those of us who are then keen to share this good news with others is that while many will mock, many might be uninterested and there is that challenge to be faithful in that, so also others, just like this man, the most unlikely perhaps, will understand and will believe.

That people will come to recognize the cross is both the most significant moment in history but also in their lives as it is the only place where forgiveness is found. We continue in that security the cross offers and we continue holding out the cross, knowing that it is God's power for salvation, that forgiveness is available to everyone and through it God will continue to bring people to him, to build his church for his glory and through that we get to share one day in paradise with him for all eternity.

[ 30 : 34 ] Let's pray together.