



## THE POWER OF THE CROSS

1 Peter 2:19-25

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The verses we encounter today offer keen insight into the nature of Christ's death and, for that, they are a rich storehouse for our faith. And yet, before we explore these implications we need to acknowledge that they are also extremely problematic.

Peter is addressing slaves and, rather than condemning slavery, he tells them to be obedient and to accept every manner of beating. As a church and followers of Christ we abhor every manner of slavery, believing it is utterly contrary to the will of God and inherently evil. This, of course, leaves us with the problem of Peter's seemingly tacit approval of slavery.

It is precisely because of passages such as these that the Bible must be understood not only to be the inspired word of God, but also a product of its time and culture. The Confession of 1967, which is a part of our Book of Confessions, tells us not only that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit but that it is, "conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current."

Slavery was deeply embedded in Peter's world. God had inspired him to teach about the meaning of Christ's death. It is true that Peter believed Jesus would return soon, so it might be that he didn't want a full-scale, societal war when history would be concluded soon. And yet, it still pains us to know that Christian men and women quoted these words from Peter to justify owning and beating men, women, and children.

Even so, anyone using this passage to perpetuate abuse is taking precisely the opposite view that Peter is teaching. They are about enduring evil not perpetrating it. These words call us to be more like Christ. In fact, they disclose the central power of the cross. As Peter says, "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten."

It is this humility that compels us to follow him. He did not return abuse for abuse, which is an utterly alien concept to our flight or fight response.

In today's world, that would be called weakness.

And yet, it is the central strength of God. Jesus did not respond in kind, because the end does not justify the means. In Peter's day, and in our day, followers of Christ are called to walk a difficult path. We are told he was despised and rejected. When we refuse to return abuse for abuse, people will think you weak and dismiss you. It is almost an impossibly difficult task. But two things carry us through. First, God's word tells us we can do all things through him who strengthens us. As hard as it may be when we are struggling to follow Christ's call, if we look to him we will be given the strength.

Second, Peter tells us to entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly. This means it is not up to us to sentence or judge others. God will do it.

There are at least two reasons Peter calls us to follow Jesus in this manner. First, Peter does not want us to become corrupted by evil. To return abuse for abuse is to become an abuser ourselves. We know all too well in today's world that many of those who abuse others were themselves abused. Secondly, this high calling serves as a witness to Christ. If others see this unique strength in us, it can draw them to our Lord.

But there is more to this cross. Had Jesus simply endured the pain of the cross and that was it, we may excuse others for calling it weakness. To simply roll over in the face of evil can embolden it. Jesus took it to a whole other level. Not only did he refuse to return abuse for abuse, but he forgave it. And that is the true power of God.

At the very moment of his death he said, "Father forgive them." In this act Jesus completely took control of the situation. His killers believed they were taking something from Jesus. They believed they were making an example of Jesus in order to control the masses and lead them away from this dangerous Nazarene and his teachings. They believed they not only were robbing him of his life but of his power to control and lead the people.

However, in forgiving them, Jesus was leading them right where he wanted – into the hands of God. He turned the tables on them using what they believed was

their most powerful weapon, this awful death, as a means to free them all.

Their intent was to silence him once and for all but, instead, he turned it into the most powerful platform in the history of the world – to spread his message of love, of absolute unconditional love, no matter what.

In Jesus' act of forgiveness, we see the true power of God. This is one of the things about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* that bothered me so much. In that movie Jesus was a tortured wreck, there was no sign of interior strength; rather Jesus was only a victim being swept away by the events. Though Jesus did not want to face the cross, certainly he was not merely a tortured soul but someone leading others, even as he was lead to die.

Jesus disclosed at that moment that the core, the very center of God's being is not eternity, or physical power, or knowledge, but a love, a love that no one has the power to diminish, not even the slightest bit.

In combining the refusal to engage in abuse and offering forgiveness, Jesus creates a whole new world. That is the power of the cross. And it commands us all to live our lives in precisely the same way. To love and to forgive no matter what. All too often Christians will refuse to forgive or call for judgement and condemn others, thereby treating Jesus' death as a momentary strategy employed to effect salvation for the faithful, rather than a core trait of God.

Though the cross was a unique event in history it was not meant to be a one-time event. All too often Christians act as if the cross has crypto-magical powers, that anyone who bends to it will receive forgiveness, as if the wood was imbued with some supernatural power to atone sins.

This view treats Jesus' death like the ancient, virgin sacrifices to pagan gods. In those cases, the virgin was considered to be clean and somehow the act of killing something pure would magically appease divine wrath.

The cross, that piece of wood upon which Jesus was crucified, has no power. Rather the cross is that moment in history in which God's forgiving nature is disclosed. It is the moment in which Jesus, through his words, pronounces forgiveness in the moment of his death.

We sought to kill Jesus and he chose not to hold it against us, to not hold it against anyone, for all history. The cross is symbolic of the greatest evil and

paradigmatic of all our sin; and so, if the cross is forgiven, so is all the rest.

Forgiveness, and refusing to return evil for evil, is Christ's call for each of us. It is in this path that we discover true freedom: freedom from revenge, freedom from hatred, freedom from fear. For if we have found the true love of Christ, then we know we have it all.

This forgiving servanthood frees us, because it enables us to truly love, with god-like love, everyone and to see them as Christ does...with eyes of compassion, sympathy, and to see the goodness in everyone, no matter how deeply it might be buried.

Stan Chassin grew up in rural Mississippi, taunted by a militant, anti-Semitic bully named Tommy Tarrants. Forty years later, Chassin heard that Tarrants was returning home. Chassin had followed Tarrants' career over the years as a rising Klansman who was wounded in a police ambush in Meridian. But there was more to Tarrants' story.

Apparently, he had found Christ while in prison and, upon release, had made speeches around the country about being a changed man.

But Chassin was skeptical and made the drive to Spring Hill Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama where Tarrants was going to be a guest speaker.

Tarrants told his whole story that evening – about growing up filled with hatred, that he honed to a razor's edge, that filled him with a hunger to kill blacks and Jews. He spoke about his time in a prison cell, about reading classical philosophy and scripture and how it changed his heart as he came to understand the true meaning of God – the meaning of grace and forgiveness.

After Tarrants finished his speech, Chassin stood up and said, "It's hard facing you." He recounted to the entire stunned crowd everything Tarrants had done, including the time he grabbed him by the throat and said "I'll kill you, you Jew bastard, if I ever see you again. I'll kill you."

The crowd was dumbfounded; they weren't sure what Chassin was going to do. But Chassin remained calm as he told his story, while Tarrants visibly crumbled before him. Everyone could see the deep remorse on his face.

Chassin was not one to experience dramatic encounters with God in his life, but he been praying in

the synagogue on Yom Kippur when he heard God speak to him, "God told me to forgive you," which, of course, moved every person and then he said something I think that shocked everyone even more. "God also told me to ask you, Tommy Tarrants, for forgiveness for all the hatred and disgust I have felt towards you all these years." Tarrants thanked him for his forgiveness and his courage and then said to the audience, "Isn't it amazing what God can do!" The two men embraced as they wept in holy joy.

Peter reminds us that although we have gone astray, like sheep, we have been found and forgiven by the Good Shepherd. It is in the warmth of those arms that we find the power to be the people of love that God intended, because it is in those arms we know true love. Amen.