

**LENT 2015—THE CROSSES OF LENT**  
**The Cross of Change**  
**Matthew 5:3-11**

*“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...”* I Corinthians 1:18

The Messiah, dying on a cross is incomprehensible to our human way of thinking. Jesus’ disciples, who spent over 3 years with Him, didn’t understand it even when Jesus tried to spell it out for them just hours before his arrest. Observers at Jesus’ crucifixion thought He was crazy—how could a man who claimed to be God’s Son, have his life taken from him by hanging on a cross? Faithful Jews, who had been waiting for over 700 years for the Prophet Isaiah’s prophecies to come true, were anticipating a military ruler who would lead his people to victory over the Romans, not a man who would be executed by the Romans on a cross. A Savior dying on a cross was utter foolishness.

And yet, when we reflect on Jesus’ teaching and on the way in which He lived his life, the cross isn’t really a surprise. Almost everything Jesus did and taught ran counter to normal human thinking. Nowhere is Jesus’ countercultural approach to life more clearly articulated than in his most famous sermon—“The Sermon on the Mount”—found in Matthew’s Gospel chapters 5-7. In this sermon Jesus explains what the Kingdom of God looks like. His kingdom has rightly been called, “The Upside Down Kingdom.”

For the Brethren in Christ—the denomination of which McBIC is a part—Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount has always been central to our identity because of its focus on how disciples of Jesus should live their lives in the world. Some followers of Jesus tend to focus more on theological concepts and doctrine than on living out the faith. And while what we believe is critical, the Brethren in Christ give priority to Jesus’ teaching and to his life. We’ve always insisted that life transformation accompany increasing knowledge.

Recently, I saw an interesting on-line discussion that made this point well. The subject was the Apostles’ Creed, which since the 4<sup>th</sup> Century has been viewed as an excellent summary of basic Christian beliefs. I invite you to stand and read the Apostles’ Creed with me aloud:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. AMEN.

The on-line contributor in the discussion I just referenced, pointed out that while the Apostles' Creed does a good job emphasizing the core beliefs of our faith, it says almost nothing about Jesus' life and teaching. A BIC Pastor in that discussion pointed out that for the BIC, the comma between Jesus' birth and his suffering contains all that Jesus did and taught while He was on the earth and is central to our faith. I thought that was a neat insight and a good way to highlight the priority we place on Jesus' life and teaching. Doctrine and theological frameworks are important, but we can never lose sight of the goal of life transformation.

That brings us to the cross we'll be studying today—the Maltese Cross—known as the “Cross of Regeneration,” or the “Cross of Change.” This cross focuses us on the life transformation available to every person through Jesus' death on the cross. The “Cross of Change” is the 4<sup>th</sup> cross we're studying in our Lenten sermon series called, “The Crosses of Lent.” Each week of Lent is associated with a unique cross accompanied by a core theme relating to Jesus' sacrifice for us at Calvary.

Unlike the crosses we've studied so far, there isn't a lot of information surrounding the “Cross of Change,” with one exception—the 8 points of this cross represent the 8 Beatitudes that Jesus spoke in Matthew chapter at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes are 8 blessings God promises to his people who live under his covenant and follow the teachings of Jesus. The Beatitudes show us what followers of Jesus' lives look like. The Beatitudes are Jesus' first words in his Sermon on the Mount. I'd like you to read these with me aloud:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:3-10

In the Beatitudes Jesus holds up a different standard for his followers than the world’s standard. The qualities Jesus affirms—poverty, grief, humility, hunger, mercy, purity, peace and persecution (mention that there are 9 “Blessed” statements, but the 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> go together) aren’t qualities the world usually celebrates. In fact, in contrast to these qualities, our world celebrates—wealth, happiness, pride, gluttony, justice, immodesty, violence and popularity. And while the culture we live in is fixated on instant gratification in the here and now, in the Beatitudes Jesus points to eternity with phrases like: the kingdom of heaven, inheriting the earth, seeing God, being called sons of God and receiving a reward in heaven. **Jesus’ kingdom really is an “upside down kingdom” and those who live in it give evidence that their lives have been dramatically changed.**

One of the best examples we have in Scripture of the life change that encountering Jesus brings about is the life of the Apostle Paul. We read about Paul’s dramatic encounter with Jesus Christ in Acts chapter 9. Paul, whose name at that time was Saul, was leading a contingent of men to a city called Damascus to terrorize, to imprison and to kill Christians. As he came near Damascus he was struck down by a blinding light and the voice of Jesus called out to him, asking why Saul was persecuting God’s Son. Through this experience, Saul became a committed follower of Jesus Christ. Prior to his encounter with Jesus, Saul was a legalistic zealot—a rising star among the Jewish religious group known as the Pharisees. After meeting Jesus, Paul became the Apostle of grace. Prior to meeting Jesus, Saul was a bitter, angry, violent man. After encountering Jesus, Paul was marked by Jesus’ love, mercy, grace and peace. Prior to his Damascus Road experience, Saul was a murderer of Christians. Following his life-changing encounter, Paul put his own life on the line for Jesus—he was imprisoned numerous times and eventually was executed for his faith.

Paul was dramatically changed by his encounter with Jesus, so it’s no wonder that in almost every New Testament letter he wrote he emphasized the change that occurs in our lives through Jesus Christ. Paul was an intellectual—a prolific writer who penned nearly half of the books in the New Testament—but Christianity for Paul wasn’t just a set of beliefs or well-

formulated doctrines. Paul's Christian experience was marked by dramatic life change and his writings reflect his understanding that life change lay at the heart of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ. In nearly all of his 13 letters that are found in our Bibles, Paul wrote about life transformation. Here's a sampling...

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*  
2 Corinthians 5:17

*In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.* Romans 6:11-14

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.* Ephesians 5:8-10 and 15-18

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Colossians 3 selected

There is so much in these verses about the change Jesus Christ brings to our lives. To help us apply what Paul says in these passages of Scripture to our own lives I'd like to emphasize three realities that Paul emphasizes and which come through other writings in the New Testament. First, **our transformation began at the cross.** On the cross, Jesus took the sins of every person upon Himself. No matter what we've done; no matter what's going on in our lives at present; and, no matter what our future holds—forgiveness and new life is available to every person who calls on the name of Jesus. I love the line, "*The ground is level at the foot of the cross.*"

Secondly, when we take hold of the forgiveness and salvation that Jesus makes available to us, **our identity is changed.** "*We are a new creation—the old has gone, the new has come.*" We are no longer a sinner. We're a saint. We're no longer distant from God. We are his

daughter or his son. We're no longer a slave to sin. We're free in Christ. Our nature has been fundamentally changed.

Third, **living out our identity as a new creation requires ongoing submission to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.** Herein lays our greatest challenge. Jesus has completed the work at the cross—it is finished. When we accept what Jesus has done for us we become a new creature—our identity has fundamentally changed. But living out our identity requires ongoing submission to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Let me personalize this—in the hope that as I share, you'll allow the Holy Spirit to personalize this for you. When Jesus died on the cross at Calvary God did everything He could do to forgive Layne Lebo's sins. When I took the step as a child of 8 or 10 years old of inviting Jesus into my life and accepting the gift of forgiveness and salvation that was made available to me on the cross, I became a new creation. My sins were washed away. I had a clean heart, a new spirit—my identity was now Layne Lebo child of God. And yet, I'm still prone to sin. Greed, lust, impatience, selfishness, anger and envy are areas in my life which I need to submit to the work of the Holy Spirit on an ongoing basis. I am a new creation and I've been transformed, but there is still work to do (no need for any of you to say "Amen" to that) in my ongoing transformation. I am unable to live up to my identity as a saint, a child of God, apart from the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in my life. Submitting to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life is an ongoing process and it will continue until the day that I die. This is true for me and it's also true for you.

In his book, Ordering Your Private World, Gordon MacDonald shares an analogy that I found helpful. He likens the ongoing work of God in our lives to the process to clearing a homestead of rocks. MacDonald writes,

Some years ago, when [my wife] Gail and I bought the old abandoned New Hampshire farm we now call Peace Ledge, we found the site where we wished to build our country home strewn with rocks and boulders. It was going to take a lot of hard work to clear it all out so there could be grass and plants. The whole family went to work on the clearing process. The first phase of the clearing project was easy. The big boulders went fast. And when they were gone, we began to see that there were a lot of smaller rocks that had to go too. And so we cleared the area again. But when we had cleared the site of the boulders and rocks, we noticed all of the stones and pebbles we had not seen before. This was much harder, more tedious work. But we stuck to it, and there came a day when the soil was ready for planting grass.

Our private lives are much like that field was. When I first began to follow Christ seriously, He pointed out many major behavior and attitude patterns that, like boulders, had to be removed. And as the years went by, many of those great big boulders did indeed get removed. But when they began to disappear, I discovered a whole new layer of actions and attitudes in my life that I had not previously seen. But Christ saw them and rebuked them one by one. The removal process began again. Then I reached that point in my Christian life at which Christ and I were dealing with stones and pebbles. They are too numerous to imagine, and as far as I can see for the rest of my days on earth I will be working with the many stones and pebbles in my life.

The work of change that Jesus does in us is ongoing...we never fully arrive. We're always in process of being transformed. As I was preparing this sermon I thought about having a person or two give testimony to what God has done in their lives, but I wanted to leave it more open-ended so the Holy Spirit can identify things in our life. My question for each of us is **"What is God putting his finger on in your life and asking you to submit to Him?" What change does God to work in your life as you continue on the journey of being shaped and molded into the likeness of Jesus?** At the cross, the forgiveness for your sins and mine was accomplished. When we accept Jesus' gift of forgiveness and salvation we're new creatures. But the strength and power to live out our new identity isn't something we can do on our own, it's only in submitting to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that Jesus' ongoing work is accomplished in us.

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 2 Peter 1:3 & 4*