

The Cross and the Crucifixion of the Flesh

by G.W. North

The sermon emphasizes the importance of crucifying the flesh and living in the Spirit in order to achieve spiritual objectives and glorify God.

Scripture: Romans 8:13, Galatians 5:22, Galatians 5:24

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Crucifixion of the Flesh"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the cross in crucifying the flesh, which serves as a hindrance to spiritual growth. He explains that true crucifixion is not a physical act but a spiritual one, where believers must apply the power of Christ's crucifixion to their sinful desires and inclinations. North asserts that the inward man, empowered by the Holy Spirit, must be distinguished from the outward man, and that maintaining a crucified life is essential for spiritual vitality. He warns that uncrucified flesh leads to spiritual impotence and conflict, urging believers to allow the Spirit to guide them to the cross for true transformation. Ultimately, the sermon highlights that the fruit of the Spirit is the evidence of a life lived in accordance with the crucified Christ.

Transcript

The fifth mention of the cross is again with emphasis upon the flesh -- what a hindrance to spirituality it is. This time Paul is not speaking with regard to flesh in the bodily physical sense, that is in the same substance in which circumcision was practised. When Paul says 'they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts' he is obviously not saying that it is every man's duty to crucify his own body on an actual cross. Literal self-crucifixion is impossible -- crucifixion is one of the few methods of death which cannot be self-applied. In any case Paul is not advocating suicide. Paul is talking about the application of the power of Christ's crucifixion to the evil propensities and powers of self operating in the flesh of a person; if not crucified these will destroy the spiritual life of a Christian. More than this, he is asserting in plainest language that by the Holy Spirit they who are Christ's have already done this thing -- they have crucified the flesh', he says: the heart of faith will always do it. Such a strong affirmation leaves no room to doubt that this is conditional to salvation, though at the point of conversion this may not necessarily be understood to be so. At regeneration the spirit of man becomes spiritually alive in Christ; from that moment he is spiritual, that is to say he consciously knows he is alive; he is a man made newly aware of his spirit, for he has new spiritual powers and affections and desires.

Until this happens to him man is a dead creature in spirit; though a natural, normal man, he is cut off from God and totally fleshly in his affections and desires. He may recognize that there is a spirit(ual) side to his make-up, but to do so may only add to the worsening of his state if he develops it wrongly. In company with all around him apart from Christ, a man cannot help living in this world for his own ambitions and fulfilments in the flesh. He loves these things and in common with his fellow men he lives for their expression and satisfaction and enjoyment. These inward affections and lusts develop into habits which, though not identical with the sensual fleshly cravings of the outward man, are correlated with them; they so closely correspond to these that they are often confused and indistinguishable so that they are thought to be the same. They are not. Those that are Christ's must learn to distinguish between the inward man and the outward man and their respective activities and potential.

The inward man should be thought of as having all the powers and possibilities of its outward counterpart. It should also be recognized as being far more powerful, having greater potential than the outward man -- he is only a shell. The inward man is the power of man and that does not differ from person to person or in male or female. This is borne out by Peter; when addressing himself to women in his first epistle he speaks of 'the hidden man of the heart', not the hidden female. The man hidden within is the one to whom God addresses Himself; alas, so does satan. This man has all the potentialities and abilities of the outward man; he is capable of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling; he has powers of conception, he can also beget; he can think, speak, work, he can run, walk, sleep, live, die, he is not limited as the body in which he lives is limited -- he is far greater than that. He is the one who forms habits and if they are to be broken or changed he is the one who must be changed. He is either good or evil, he is the one who by the grace of God is born from above, and having been born must obey the laws of Christ.

In order to keep spiritual, every regenerate person must know how to maintain the crucified life in all things. This is the secret all must learn, and a special watch must be kept over the affections and lusts. These likes and dislikes and fixations of ours are very strong, they are powers to be reckoned with, for they are not under the control of our conscious mind. They seem to range freely and at times hold sway over the entire spiritual, mental and physical realm of human being and capability. Being so natural and so strong they are perhaps the least controllable of all our appetites and abilities, and can so easily become habits and bondages. We must become very wakeful here and very aware, for often the restrained function of these powers is allowable and correct. Praise God it is precisely here that the cross makes its most powerful effect; unless all these powers, that is the full potential of the inward man, be crucified and raised again, spiritual degeneration will unavoidably take place. By crucifixion some powers will be totally eliminated, others will be made controllable. We must be taught of God in this.

The resurrection of the inward man into spiritual life will manifest itself in every person by many virtues called here the fruit of the Spirit. These are spiritual invariables; unless these be present there is no life, for the new life consists of them. They are listed here as 'love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith, self-control'. All these are spiritual qualities, they are also the natural characteristics of Jesus Christ, a choice description of His inward life; all these were consistently manifest in Him. Perhaps at this point more than any other it becomes clear why Paul associates the giving of the Spirit with the cross. This fruit is of the Spirit, it was of the Spirit in Christ. Except He had lived this life, except this had been His inward state, He could not have been an offering for sin. He once said that no man could take His life from Him and that He would lay it down, but how could other men have it except someone bring it to them? Hence the need for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes to a man in order to reproduce these virtues of Christ in him and will do so when that man agrees to co-operate with Him and

crucify his own flesh.

One of the lesser-known of the great wonders of the cross is its availability in the Spirit and one of the Spirit's greatest functions is to bring the cross within reach for our use. No-one unaided can discover the cross; the way of the cross is known only to the Spirit and unless He leads us there we can never find it. When He does so He will impart the secret of its use and the power to use it. Only when the Holy Spirit has procured the whole-hearted consent of a person's mind and sees and believes the voluntary intent of that man's will is He at liberty to release to him the secret of the cross and make known in that man's experience its spiritual power over the flesh.

In a wonderful passage in his letter to the Romans Paul makes this leadership and direction of the Spirit quite unmistakable: 'if ye live after the flesh ye shall die', he says, 'but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live; for as many as are led by the Spirit of God they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba Father'. Here the leading of the Spirit is set forth as being essential to the adoption and is spoken of in connection with sonship, liberty and the inheritance. These are included as being part of the forward drive of the Spirit as He leads the sons on to glorification and ultimate manifestation.

However, none of this is possible to anyone except the backward drive so essential to the correct forward drive of the sons is first known. The Spirit of God always leads to the cross of mortification first and therefrom constantly. The place of mortification is the place of death; mortification is vital death. This death must be sharply distinguished in the mind from vile death; this is a totally different death. Vile death, or the vileness of death, is spoken of here in sharp contrast to this vital death; it is not mortification of the flesh but corruption of the flesh. Paul speaks of this as the bondage of corruption and links it with vanity and pain. Mortification is by the vitality of the death of Christ. One of the reasons why Christ's flesh saw no corruption was because there was no corruption in Him. Because His inward man was without the corruption of sin His outward man was kept free from corruption in the grave. Our inward man can be kept clear of sin and shall be if we allow the Spirit to lead us to the cross so that the constant process of mortification may proceed without hindrance or cessation.

As the literal cross of wood had power over the physical body to bring to death, so does the spiritual power of the crucifixion bring to death the degenerating spiritual power of all God calls flesh. By far the greatest miracles which took place at Calvary were spiritual miracles, all accomplished by Jesus' superhuman power, none of which were seen by human eyes. The real power of the crucifixion was superhuman and supernatural: inhumane and horrible as it is, the death of the cross was not an unnatural death; it was an unwanted death enforced by law, but it was not a physical miracle. When at last the person died and escaped his agony it was only natural that it should happen -- that was what was intended and everyone expected it to take place and many came to witness it. But those who witnessed Jesus' death witnessed a miracle.

Jesus did not die as other crucified men died, the thieves crucified beside Him being witness to that; quite naturally they fought to live, but not He: He dismissed His spirit and died long before they did. Even in the macabre final moments He was Lord; He controlled His own death, but the thieves were mere men -- they could not die at will. His triumphant exodus must have been a very wonderful miracle; His death on the cross was an amazing exhibition of power, but even so it was not the greatest of the miracles Christ did on the cross. None of the onlookers saw the great spiritual miracles taking place there. Only spiritual beings could see them and no-one but God understood them fully; O what battles went on in and around the Lord

that day. Spiritual Man of righteousness and holiness that He was, offering Himself without spot to God on our behalf, He was at the same time dying as the helpless carnal man of iniquity, laden with sin and also as old Adam, condemned, unforgivable, rejected by God. In one act He combined all, He was as the penitent sinner making his peace with God, and as the mighty protagonist defeating the devil; above all He died to sin. The cross was the scene of His last temptation and His greatest triumph, and as it was with Him so it is with us.

The greatest point of temptation in a man's life is the place where the cross must be applied. It is always to a lesser degree and with different purpose than that for which Jesus died, but it is just as vital to us. We do not have to destroy the devil but we do have to conquer him. Likewise we do not have to bear and put away the totality of sin, but we do have to put away the particular sin. And let every man be sure that if he does not put away the particular sin the totality of his old nature will again assert itself. 'The flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh'. They are contrary one to the other and if this conflict is going on within the believer he is rendered incapable of doing what he wants to do. This impotence is a most frustrating thing, destructive of true spiritual life, fraying the temper and often causing quarrels between friends and brothers and dear ones. Paul warns of it emphatically, speaking about biting and devouring one another, even consuming one another -- spiritual cannibalism! Monstrous! So much for uncrucified flesh, that is what it does; it is a rebellious, lustful, ravenous, destructive beast, and the Spirit is against it. Its affections and desires must not be satisfied under any circumstances or for any excuse -- it and they must be crucified together without mercy if we wish to be the kind of spiritual man Christ was. Unless this is done it is not possible to be spiritual and if we are not spiritual we cannot live in the Spirit, and if we do not live in the Spirit we cannot walk in the Spirit and if we do not walk in the Spirit we cannot achieve spiritual objectives but shall constantly fail.

This means that we must not in any way direct our spiritual, mental and physical steps toward the gratification of fleshly desires and affections. All legitimate, simple bodily needs and desires may be attended to and at times satisfied to the glory of God, so indeed may those of the soul and spirit, but only as by the cross; nothing of humanity is acceptable and approved unto God, or can be for His glory except as from the crucified man. Only the crucified man can live in the Spirit, that is live to God as Jesus Christ. The man of the flesh cannot do so; he can live in religion, its traditions and customs, its beliefs about God, its symbols and prayers and songs, but it is a living death, vainglorious and worthless. The flesh does not produce the fruit of the Spirit of God; it only brings forth the fruits of its own spirit and does its own works, none of which are for God's glory or of His kingdom. The man who does his own works thereby declares he is his own king and an enemy of the cross. The power of the cross sets a man free from his own works to do the works of Christ.

But this is not Paul's chief concern here. He is really concerned with .the fruit of the living Christ in a life as distinct from works. He is talking about Christ within, bearing fruit unto His Father through the life of that person; Christ considers that His Father must be glorified in all, because He is the Husbandman to whom the fruit belongs. Fruit is life in entirety; it is an end-product, a complete personality in which all characteristics and habits are changed from mere earthly concepts and standards of good, which are for the satisfying of the flesh, to heavenly standards of virtue and good that satisfy God. Because life and time are progressive, this is a continuously repetitive and progressive experience. The Lord Jesus, using the vine as the basis of His teaching, told us of the expectations of His Father in this respect; annually the vine must produce more and more fruit. His business is to bring forth fruit to His Father through the branches.

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