

Sermon

June 6, 2021

The Spirituality of the Cross Part I

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Introduction to the Series

Today we begin a summer sermon series entitled *The Spirituality of the Cross*. This series is based on the book of the same name by Gene Edward Veith Jr. I encourage everyone who wants to go deeper on the topics of this series to get a copy of the book and work along with me through the summer.

I know some of you like to do jigsaw puzzles. I remember when our children were young, some such puzzles had 5 pieces or so making it possible for the young ones to complete the puzzle. Then you can move on to puzzles with 10 pieces, then 20, 50, 100, 250, 500 and so on. The jigsaw puzzles with a lot of pieces can be very hard to put together. To help, there is a picture of the completed puzzle on the front of the box. After you complete the outside edge of the puzzle, you pick up a new piece and compare it to the picture to figure out where it goes. The book (and hopefully this summer sermon series) is like that puzzle picture on the front of the box. Every time we read the Bible, hear the Bible, and come to church, its like a whole bunch of pieces of the Bible get poured out onto the table. But there is no picture to look at and we are not sure how they all fit together. Hopefully this series will give us a picture we can use to help fit together all the small pieces we are always getting from the Bible.

Christ Lutheran Church here in Forest Hills did not just appear out of thin air. It grew out of the work of the Lutheran church here in America. However, the epicenter of the Lutheran tradition was in Germany. Like when you throw a rock into the pond and the waves ripple out from the center, the point of impact of our church was Wittenberg, Germany. In 2017 we celebrated 500 years since the rock of the Reformation hit Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. When it was clear that Martin Luther and the Pope were not going to find a way forward together, churches who followed the teachings of Martin Luther were called Evangelical churches. Luther in no way wanted churches to name themselves after him because he said Christ needed to be the focus. So they called themselves Evangelical churches. Many older Lutheran churches in the USA still have Evangelical in their names. These include First Trinity Evangelical (Ev.) and St. Matthews Ev. Lutheran churches here in Pittsburgh. Evangelical comes from the Greek word meaning *good news*. So the Lutheran churches see themselves as the Good News churches. In our way of doing things, every part of the Christian faith is based in the good news of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ: Salvation; Prayer; Worship;

Morality; Family; Work; Education; Government. It is all centered in the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

You may already begin to sense that in this spiritual tradition, the "spiritual" and "material" are not separated from each other with the "spiritual" being superior and the "material" inferior. This is the way of today's popular spirituality. Here, however, the spiritual completely permeates the material and you will never find one without the other. Every moment, every footstep, every speck of matter is saturated in the Spirit of God. This, at long last, is everyday spirituality for us everyday people.

With that background in mind, let us now proceed into the important teachings of the series. In his commentary on the Psalms, Martin Luther made a very all-encompassing statement that finds its way into everything that he wrote and taught and also everything I hope to cover in this series. In his commentary, Luther wrote,

"The CROSS alone is our theology." Martin Luther Commentary on Psalm 5.

You may have heard the Reformation slogans Grace Alone, Faith Alone, and Scripture Alone. Sometimes we even say Christ Alone. The idea of Cross Alone, however, really identifies what Luther taught. It gets to the very core of it all. What did Luther mean when he said the cross alone is our theology? Here I am going to quote from the book. Veith writes, "The Son of God came to us and saved us not by an act of "glory" but in the self-abnegation, weakness, and suffering of the cross. Similarly, our salvation comes not by glorifying ourselves by achieving some moral or spiritual merit but by facing up to our failures and clinging instead to Christ and His cross." By his work on the cross, Jesus has redeemed us and all creation. We, our relationship with God, our relationships with others, our work, our society, our ordinary life and physical existence are all redeemed by Jesus' cross. This is what is meant when we talk about the *Spirituality of the Cross*."

Part One: Justification by Faith – Paths to God

In his book *The Quest for Holiness*, Adolf Koeberle identifies three spiritual goals people often aspire to: Moralism; Knowledge; and Mysticism. These are the three most common paths people try to follow to reach God.

When people choose the path of moralism, the most important part of the Christian life is always doing what is right, carefully avoiding evil, controlling oneself by the brute force of the will, and holding to a veritable library full of scruples/ ethical reservations. For many, this is what Christianity is all about. Good people go to heaven. Bad people are thrown into the fire of God's judgement. They advocate and follow absolute

temperance, conservative dress, may avoid card playing, dancing, and things like that. They may also earnestly take up the cause of the unborn, the poor, and the ethical treatment of animals and the environment. Being moral is fine, even Godly. But with just a little self-reflection, we will soon find that we fall far short of our high standards. This leads to hypocrisy – justifying ourselves as righteous even when we are not. Moralism often causes us to lower our standards so we might have half a chance at pulling it off. We can be dishonest in our business, cheat on our spouse, lie, and be a lousy tipper, as long as we come to church, vote for the right candidates, keep our yard clean, and call our mom on Mothers’ Day. A third problem with making it about morality is that we can develop a sense of superiority when we compare the good things we are doing with other people who are not doing those things. We can become Pharisees.

Secondly, when knowledge is the basis of our spiritual life, getting correct information on the ins and outs of life is what it is all about. If we can get at all the truth, then our hearts will be at rest. Out of this have come all sorts of ideologies, philosophies, paradigms, scientific experimentation and exploration. Experience shows that truth is elusive. What was held to be true 20 years ago has now been replaced with better knowledge. This will go on until the end of time. It will go on because we are simple and small while the universe is infinitely complex and grand. It is as the Samaritan woman said – the well is deep, and we have nothing to draw water with. What happens then is these theories and assumptions go on to drive movements in society such as fascism, Nazism, and Marxism. Knowledge does not always take us to the right place.

Finally, there is today’s favored form of spirituality – mysticism. Mysticism seeks the ecstatic experience of becoming one with God. These people claim to get as much or more from being out in nature as they do in church, and they probably do! Mystics usually seek to experience God in their lives by denying themselves worldly possessions and pleasures, so they aren’t hindered by worldly concerns. They also practice contemplation and meditation to be drawn into the spiritual realms. Mystics seek to be one with God. In the end, the purest forms of mysticism have a common feature – not only do they desire to become one with God, they come to the conclusion that they ARE God. Look it up. If you follow the trail, this is exactly what you will find!

God’s holy law now enters into all our efforts to reach God through moralism, knowledge, and mysticism. What does God’s law say about all this mountain-moving human effort?

There is no one righteous, not even one [moralism]; there is no one who understands [knowledge]; there is no one who seeks God [mysticism]. Romans 3:10-11

In his law, God shreds every human effort to attain to him. We are all cut to the quick. Here is where the spirituality of the cross begins – with our complete and absolute condemnation without Christ. As we grope around for something to grab on to in order to keep from drowning, Jesus speaks to us and says,

I am the way [morality], the truth [knowledge], and the life [mysticism]. John 14:6

Moralism, knowledge, and mysticism send people on strenuous journeys to reach God. But, according to Luther, all human effort to reach God is futile. Our will is captive to sin, and not only can we not keep the moral law, deep down we don't even want to. Our minds are also chained by their own limitations and are corrupted by our sinful will. And rather than trying to ascend to God, most of the time we run away from him and try to avoid him! Rather than expending enormous amounts of futile effort trying to reach God, we accept God's verdict that left to ourselves we are lost. Then we focus on the enormous amount of energy God has exerted to reach us. We recognize God's work – what he accomplished on the cross and what he continues to accomplish in our lives. This is the beginning of a life lived according to the spirituality of the cross.

Well, I've reached the end of Part I. We pray God bless us as we go deeper into this subject, and may we be strengthened and enriched in our daily lives as we shift our focus from our efforts to the work of God in our lives, families, church, and society. Amen.

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