



The Cross of Christ

A Symbol Not of Our Worthiness, but Our Unworthiness

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Years ago I spoke at a Christian event where the vocalist got up to sing one of my favorite songs, “Amazing Grace.” But I was taken aback when I heard the first line: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a *soul* like me.”

Notice the revision? The word “soul” was substituted for the writer’s word “wretch.” Why? The word “soul” was more *psychologically correct*. To use the word “wretch” is considered by some to be demeaning to human beings. I couldn’t help but think of John Newton, writer of the song. He was an immoral slave-trader and blasphemer, a man who *knew* he was a wretch, who had wept over the depth of his sins. Only because he understood that fact so profoundly, could he then understand why God’s grace to him was so utterly amazing.

If we were just morally neutral “souls,” or lovely worthy souls (which is the theology of self-esteem), then there was nothing amazing about God’s grace. And that’s the problem. When we elevate ourselves and our worthiness, we denigrate and undermine the wonder of God’s grace toward us.

An example of our easily skewed thinking is the way that Christ’s death on our behalf is now routinely used as a proof of our worthiness. How do we reassure ourselves that we are really worthwhile people? “Christ died for us, and look at the price he paid!” We were worth dying for, right? The amazing truth is that Christ died for utterly unworthy people (Romans 5:7-8).

Romans 5:7-8, For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

To minimize our unworthiness by emphasizing our value is to minimize the redemptive work of Christ

The fact that Christ died for us is never given in Scripture as a proof of our value as wonderful people, but a demonstration of his unfathomable love. So unfathomable that he would die for *rotten* people, “wretches” like you and me.

The cross of Christ is a demonstration of God’s utter goodness and grace, and our utter depravity and unworthiness. Indeed, the idea that God died for morally good or morally neutral “souls” is a heresy of the worst kind. It is “psychologically correct” (that is, popularly believed in psychological circles) but it is theologically as incorrect as it could possibly be.

Suppose a man murdered five children and his bail was set at ten million dollars. (Hopefully no bail would be set, but go with me for the illustration’s sake.) Would you look at the enormity of the price of his freedom and conclude, “Wow, this man must really be worthy! I mean, his value is set at ten million dollars!”? I doubt his lawyer or anyone else would point to the cost of his bail as an indication of his worth or a basis for his self-esteem.

Yet that’s exactly what we do when we say “we *must* be worthy—look at the price that had to be paid for our redemption.” No, the astronomical price of our redemption—the shed blood of God—is a testimony not to how good we are, but to how *bad* we really are! If we hadn’t been so bad, a lower price would have been sufficient. The higher the price, the greater testimony to our depravity and the wondrous love of God. The cross of Christ should make us feel worse about ourselves . . . and better about God!

Now, of course, because of God’s grace, there is much for us to be happy about! We can feel good about what God has done *for* us and *to* us and *in* us. We can be delivered from sin and guilt and shame. And in that sense, we can and should feel better about our redeemed, blood-covered and Heaven-bound selves.

We need not worry about ceasing to deserve God’s grace because *we never deserved it in the first place!* We don’t have to fear becoming unworthy of Him precisely because we were never worthy of Him! We are forever secure in the love of Christ, as we could never be if our relationship with Him depended upon our worth. Yes, he loves and cherishes us, but in a way that fully credits Him, not us.

It’s not only for God’s glory but for our good that we understand the cross of Christ doesn’t show our worth, but God’s.