



THE CROSS

There is no more central symbol of Christianity than the cross. Paul declares the cross the very core of the Gospel. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spend a third of their time on the passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand the Cross of Christ changes everything about how we understand God, the world—even life itself. When we consider all that Jesus did there, we stand amazed.

THE CROSS • Romans 5:1–10 • Tim McConnell • March 31, 2019

Children ask the simple question, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” The answer comes back, “Jesus died on the cross to show us how much He loves us.” Jesus died to show us He loves us. It’s true, but it’s not the whole truth is it? It kind of leaves you wondering: isn’t there another way to express love? Gary Chapman wrote a book called *The Five Love Languages*. We have different love languages—ways we are wired to give and receive love. He names five: acts of service, physical touch, words of affirmation, giving gifts and quality time. Basically, if you don’t learn the language of the person you love, you might be loving them as best you know how, but they don’t feel loved. You’re bringing them flowers when they need quality time. See? So they hate you. No, but there’s a lot of wasted energy. That book has sold more books each year than the previous one as long as it’s been out, now twenty-six years. Can you believe that? We really need help loving each other. But there’s one way of showing love that is notably absent. Not one of the five languages is what we are looking at today. Not one of them says, “Die for me.” That’s what Jesus did. He died for us.

The cross is a revelation of God’s amazing love. The cross is a monument to God’s unending love. Do you believe God loves you? The love of God can change your life. Is God’s love for you connecting? Are you receiving the love of God? Can you hear His love language? This verse says, “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). God’s love is poured into your heart. Not just your mind. Not just your sight, or your five senses. God’s love is poured into your heart. Do you feel it? If you don’t, you might start to give up. You might lose hope, you might lose faith, because you lost track of love—God’s love for you. Faith, hope and love sit together. Lose love, hope and faith soon follow. I was driving into work last week and came up next to another Monday morning commuter next to me, on Uintah actually, and she caught my attention. She was smoking a cigarette and blowing the smoke out her window. She looked dejected. And she was yelling at the radio. Maybe she was on a Bluetooth, but I don’t think so. It just caught my attention and I started praying for her. She seemed mired in bitterness—like the bitterness of life had taken her down, and now she was just marinating in it. Tasting it. Shouting it. Resigned to bitterness.

Know and feel God’s love for you. Loved people are different. God’s love makes you love God; it makes you love others; it makes you love yourself in a new way. Loved people

love people. The cross is a monument to God’s love for you.

Let me read this for you, and I want you to listen for three words. Faith, hope and love. Listen—underline them as you find them: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1–2). Hope is tied back to faith. Faith connects us to what Jesus did to justify us, to make our relationship right with God. By faith we receive the benefits of Christ’s work. By faith we are justified. The justification won by Christ becomes our own by faith. By faith we have access to the God of grace; the great breach between me and my God gets crossed. I get across that breach by faith—by putting my trust in Jesus, believing in Him. Jesus did it, but until you believe it, it isn’t yours. Faith makes it yours. Hope is connected to faith. Even hard things—even suffering looks different when we have the hope connected to faith in Christ. (Read Romans 5:3–5.) It gets down to love. Love is the sum of the equation. Hope is based on love. Faith on hope and love. Love, hope, faith. It might just start with love. Is God’s love connecting with your heart? Are you letting God love you?

Now, there are a lot of things we mean when we use the word “love.” It means lots of different things to us. It’s the word we use for a good feeling produced by contact with something we enjoy. I love skiing. I love horses. I love pizza, or sushi. What’s your favorite food? On the count of three, everybody shout out your favorite food. We’re in trouble, church. Nobody said kale. Love is a feeling of affinity. But that’s an immature way to look at love in relationships. Love in lasting relationships has got to be more. It’s much more than how you make me feel. Love grows into action. For us there is disconnect between what we think or feel and what we do. Not for God. God’s love is perfect and God is perfectly consistent. God has no feeling that isn’t also expressed. God has no attribute that doesn’t become action. God doesn’t just sit in righteousness, God makes things right. God doesn’t just feel love, God loves. When the Bible says God loves you, it isn’t just talking about a feeling—God acts in love toward you.

Listen, human love can disappoint. Human love can fail to connect. God’s love never disappoints. Hope is connected to faith is connected to love. It all resolves to love. Where do I see God’s love in action? Verse six says look to the cross: “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless,

Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6–8). God's love has been poured into us. Where do we see God's love in action? Where do we see it distilled into the most intense act, the most palpable demonstration of pure, selfless, visible love? The cross. "You see, at just the right time ... Christ died." But people die for each other all the time. Is that really special? Police officers, firefighters, soldiers. I've sat with soldiers before, and it doesn't matter if it was five years ago or forty-five, if they tell you a story about a friend who died for them, the toughest men break down in tears. It moves you. Why is Jesus different? Well, for one thing, because this man Jesus is also God, and this man Jesus didn't only die for one but for all who believe. Look at the cross where Jesus died and you see the love of God.

Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died while we were powerless. Christ died while we were still sinners. While we were his enemies (verse 10), Christ died for us. We love people in a lot of ways, but never without some level of selfish motive. There is always something coming back to us when we act in love toward another—hope of a little *quid pro quo*. Not God. God loves with no possible return, nothing to reward His selfless love. That's real love. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). John Stott wrote, "only one act of pure love, unsullied by any taint of ulterior motive, has ever been performed in the history of the world, namely the self-giving of God in Christ on the cross for undeserving sinners." This is the character of God's love. When we were not deserving, He gave his life. When we were enemies opposed, He stepped over the line to die for us. When we were the least and the lowest, He came down to take our shame. When we were valueless, he named our value equal to the life of his own Son. When we were orphaned, divorced from God's family by our disobedience, He gave us adoption and inheritance by faith in Jesus Christ. When we were unforgiveable, still in our sin, still hostile to his love, still among those shouting, by our own stubborn selfishness, shouting "crucify Him, crucify Him," God came down in his Son Jesus Christ, took on flesh and humbled Himself to die for us—not just death, but execution. Not just execution, but crucifixion. He humbled himself to take on death, and even death on a cross, for us.

Can you feel God's love today? Look to the cross. Are you losing faith, waning in hope? You may have lost track of the measure of God's love for you. Accept His love language.

Here's the thing: we don't have to worry about the love language because the Holy Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts when we look to the cross. God always loved you. God always loved us. The cross reveals it. Revelation means the unveiling of something that was always there and you just couldn't see it. What do you see when you look at the cross? God wants to reveal to you His abiding, eternal love. He wants His love visible, and He wants your eyes opened to it. Jesus died for us when we didn't deserve it. And let's be clear: the death of Jesus did not alter God's posture toward us. God doesn't hate us, then see His Son Jesus die, then love us. John Stott again said, "God does not love us because Christ died for us; Christ died for us because God loved us." God always loved you. The cross reveals it.

So, the cross is a monument forever of the supreme and abiding love of God expressed to us in the poured out life of His Son Jesus when we least deserved it. Some say that's all the cross is, an act of love. Some say, forget all the stuff we talked about two weeks ago about the atoning sacrifice, the blood for sin; forget what we talked about last week how Jesus won a "Hidden Victory" against dark powers, and just see the cross as an act of love we are supposed to emulate in our own lives. Is that all that was going on there on Calvary? The preaching of the work of Christ is supposed to be good news. That's what "gospel" means. Good news. Any preaching that expects me to behave my way into heaven inspired by a moral example is not good-news preaching. That's bad news. Because I know full well that I have no idea what it means to give my life as a sacrifice for others, and if I did know what it means, I know full well I have no capacity to do it. Christ did more than set a moral example.

It isn't just that Jesus lovingly died; it's that His death saved us. "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:9-10) His death paid our penalty. God moves against evil and injustice and wrongs. Again, there is no sentiment within God that does not express itself in perfect action. God moves against wrong things. That's what God's wrath is. Heavy word, "wrath," but a proper one. God never flies off the handle in anger, as we associate with wrath. God is steady-on opposed to wrong, injurious, life-stealing, sinful, broken things in this fallen and confused world. That's God's wrath, and his wrath is satisfied by Jesus' death. As we

believe in Christ, we are in Christ, we are sheltered in the atoning blood of Christ, and we never, ever feel again the wrath of God steady against us. But God didn't just want to get the account to zero. Look now, "For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:10). Jesus died. Our debt is paid. Jesus rose from the dead, and now we get to participate in eternal life.

So then, this is the cross. A monument forever of visible love. A monument forever to that day when Jesus hung there, suspended between heaven and earth, arms pinned open wide to receive all who come to Him. A visible sign, the cross, revealing God's abiding love for you. Can you feel God's love? Can you receive it? The Celtic cross is a cross with a circle in the middle. The circle represents the world—the arms of the cross are open wide, embracing the whole world in love. The circle represents eternity—the arms of the cross stretch open wide with God's all-encompassing love for all eternity. It's as though Jesus wanted us to see how permanent it is. "See my hands pinned, see my arms opened wide—this will never change. No matter where you go, no matter what you do, this will never, never change. My arms are open wide to you. I will never close them against you. They are always open in love." Will you turn to Him and receive it, or will you turn away, give up on love, lose hope, forget faith, swallow—and be swallowed by—the bitter, the cynical, the selfish and self-reliant?

Here's the thing: loved people love people. Unloved people look for love in all the wrong places. But when you know the love of God, when the Holy Spirit pours the love of God into your heart, you can love differently. You can love God. You can love others. You can love yourself again. Because loved people love people. Imagine for a minute releasing a church full of fully loved people. If every one of us filled up right now with the love of God poured into our hearts. What would that look like? What difference would that make to our families, our schools, our workplaces, our city if every one of us left here today brimming with the love of God poured into our hearts to the full? So here's what I want you to do this week. Take this little pocket cross, and each day this week I want you to take it out, at least once a day, look at it, look at the arms outstretched, and imagine the arms of Jesus stretched out in love for you. Look at it. Pray. And imagine, and know, and feel the embrace of God wrapping around you in perfect love.

STUDY GUIDE

THE CROSS • "Visible Love"

Romans 5:1–10

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Romans 5:1–10.

1. Reread verses 3–5. Paul is writing to Christians in Rome who have recently experienced persecution. The Roman government had expelled all of the Jews and Jewish Christians from the city and they had returned not long before Paul wrote this letter. What do you think about Paul's words to them in these verses? How does this serve as an encouragement?
2. Have you ever experienced this chain reaction (*suffering* → *perseverance* → *character* → *hope*) in your life? If so, can you describe the experience? If not, where did this break down?
3. Reread verse 8. God doesn't ask us to change before He extends grace to us. Jesus died for us when we were still sinners so that we might be reconciled to God. What is your initial reaction to hearing that His sacrifice was not dependent on any action on our part?

IN: How does this passage inform our understanding of what Christ accomplished on the cross?

5. Once again, this week we are focused on a theologically rich passage, but what are some of the practical implications for us in this passage?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

A couple of weeks ago we named people who we intend to invite to one of the Easter worship services. How is this process of inviting the person going?

Connect with Each Other

Close your time by praying for those who are in need of hope, for those who are suffering. Pray for those who do not know the Lord. Pray that the love of God would be evident to individuals in your life who do not know Jesus.