

What If Jesus Was Serious...About Justice?

Week 6 ~ Chapters 31-38

Chapter 31 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Cross Has Cosmic Implications

Jesus did not come to give us a divinely inspired self-improvement guide. In fact, the whole message about Christianity isn't about us, rather it's about Jesus. Sure, we benefit from who Jesus is and what Jesus did (and is continuing to do)...but make no mistake, at the end of the day, the story, and even life itself is NOT about us.

As Skye points out in this chapter, those of us born and raised in a consumeristic society like America have been formed to have an inflated view of ourselves. As such, *"We see ourselves and our problems as the center of the universe. Therefore, we assume what Jesus did on the cross was merely for our individual benefit."* (page. 152)

What Jesus accomplished on the Cross was defeat evil and sin...of which we are complicit with and infected by. Jesus came to deal with the seriousness of this sin-sick world and our sin-sick selves. Jesus' victory over evil and sin, through which He made a way for us to be reconciled to God and opened His Kingdom to us, is the GOOD NEWS/GOSPEL. To not understand this is to not understand Christianity at all.

Sadly, a faux-gospel pervades our society that's probably best captured by the label Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (You can Goggle it.) It is the primary religious view of most Americans, and has infected most American congregations. The remedy? Repent and Refocus.

- *What is the primary/core message of Christianity? (Hint: It's NOT love one another...though that's the primary resulting imperative.)*
- *How have you been formed (disciplined) by consumerism? How have you been formed (disciplined) by the Cross?*
- *Why is it important to understand evil both on a systemic level and on a personal level?*

Chapter 32 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Jesus's Cross Is Bad News Before It Is Good News

In this chapter Skye explores the question, *"How does a biblical understanding of God's justice help us make sense of Jesus's self-sacrificial death?"* (page 155) In other words, what's the connection between justice and the Cross?

Remember, justice is about things being properly ordered, in the right relationship with one another, as well as restoring that order/relationship when things go awry. Therefore, *"..the cross [is] the place where Jesus redeemed the world by defeating the powers aligned against God and His ordering of creation...The cross is not only where Jesus saved me from evil but also where he defeated me as an agent of evil...the cross cannot save us from evil if it does not simultaneously condemn our evil."* (page 157)

Please allow me to throw a little Scripture your way...

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”

(Ephesians 2:1-5, emphasis added)

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.” (Colossians 1:21-23a)

- *What do you think about being (or having been) an agent of evil?*
- *When you consider all that’s wrong with the world, where do you factor into that equation?*
- *What do you think/feel about the idea that before we can really accept the “good news” (gospel) we have to come to grips with the bad news?*

Chapter 33 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Ugliness Of The Cross Reveals God’s Goodness

We easily miss the symbolic message of the Cross. We make jewelry and all manner of decorations out of it, for crying out loud. But just to sort of shock us into the scandalous nature of the Cross, imagine instead that the symbol of our faith was an electric chair, or a hangman’s noose, or a gun. How does that affect your perspective? How do you feel about that? We need to remember that a cross was an execution device...one meant to remind people of the empire’s power and what it did to rebels and dissidents. It was a symbol of cruelty, brutality, humiliation and oppression. Now it’s the most recognized religious symbol in the world...it’s OUR symbol.

Skye reminds us, *“...the cross is more than an instrument of forgiveness...the cross is also God’s instrument of justice...Before it reconciled us to God through the forgiveness of our sins, the cross first told us the truth about our sins.”* (page 161)

But isn’t it just like our God to take something as ugly and violent as the cross and redeem it, transform it, into a symbol of love and hope? That’s emblematic of the kind of transformation God is doing to the world, and to us. Yet, it nevertheless reminds us that we need to be redeemed and transformed.

Skye invites us to consider the alternative, “A cross-less Christianity does not take evil—in the world or in us—seriously. For God to be truly good, He must acknowledge the full gravity of evil and oppose it in every form.” (page 162)

Skye points out the mysterious paradox of the Cross, “...the cross of Christ is simultaneously the device of God’s judgment against evil and the instrument of His mercy toward those who’ve committed it.” (page 162)

- *What message would it send to victims of injustice if forgiveness was cheap, easy, no cost?*
- *If you were to “rebrand” the Christian faith, what symbol would you use? (And what would you want that symbol to communicate/represent?)*

Chapter 34 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then In What Way Did God Forsake Him On The Cross?

Theologically speaking, what Skye lays out in this chapter is known as an “atonement theory”, that is, a theological explanation for how the death of Jesus on the cross (and subsequent resurrection) reconciled humanity to God.

Just so you know, there are many atonement theories...some of which are better than others...none of which completely explain it. But at the end of the day, it’s not so important that we can understand or explain HOW atonement works. What matters is that atonement took place, by the love and mercy of our Triune God. As Paul said, “*But now He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*” (Colossians 1:22)

It is important to note that the reason atonement was needed was due to the sinfulness, rebellion, and evil of humans...which includes you and me. Sin is nothing to make light of because the remedy for it was Christ’s crucifixion.

That said, one important point Skye brings up is that we should not pit one Person of the Trinity against another. If we do that in order to explain something, that’s a good indication that explanation is wrong.

- *What questions do you have regarding Christ’s death on our behalf? What are you going to do with those questions...seek out answers or just let them linger? (On that note, how do you discern/decide whether something is knowable versus beyond our ability to comprehend?)*

Chapter 35 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Cross Is Primarily About God’s Love

In this chapter Skye brings up one particular atonement theory known as penal substitutionary atonement. While there are various atonement theories, it is important to distinguish between

the doctrine of atonement (that atonement/reconciliation took place on the Cross) and atonement theories (theological models to explain HOW reconciliation actually works).

I suspect some of you might think that this chapter, and the previous one, feels like “getting into the weeds” a bit. You may even be wondering, “Why do I need to know this?” That’s understandable. But it is important to note, as Skye alludes to, that we shouldn’t confuse an atonement theory with the Gospel itself. As you can imagine, people disagree on theories (and then divide over them), whereas the Gospel is our unifying message. Good doctrine should always be grounded in God’s love.

- *What is your interest level in atonement theories?*
- *How would you articulate the Gospel?*
- *What theological/doctrinal questions do you have?*

Chapter 36 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then He Did Not Think Of Me “Above All”

In a recent sermon pastor Cindy mentioned that we all approach Scripture with a particular lens that’s shaped by our context, culture, place/time in history, etc. That is a very important, and hopefully humbling, truth to keep in mind. That said, as modern day Americans a key piece of the lens we bring to Scripture is individualism (i.e. that the value of the individual is the most important thing). That most certainly will affect our understanding of Scripture when we consider that Scripture was compiled by a collective for a collective. Approaching it with an individualistic lens is fundamentally flawed.

As Skye shares, “*The Bible reveals that the scope of Jesus’s achievement on the cross goes far beyond the redemption of individual sinners. He died not merely for me or even humanity but to redeem all of creation...the cross isn’t merely how God rescued me from sin; it’s how He rescued the entire cosmos from evil, disorder, and chaos.*” (page 174) This is the same point we considered earlier this year in the book *The Very Good Gospel*.

The implication of this is that if Jesus was concerned about more than just me (or you), then I (we) need to be concerned about something bigger/more as well. The restoration of all creation is what justice is all about. Our faith is about more than personal salvation or personal piety. It’s about participating in the work of new creation. Or as Skye puts it, “*...it’s about carrying the healing power of Christ and the justice of His kingdom into every part of the world, including the social, the economic, the political, the physical, and the intellectual. It’s about seeing His will done everywhere on earth as it is in heaven.*” (page 175) And isn’t that our fundamental prayer?

- *When you/we pray the Lord’s Prayer, what comes to mind? What do you understand you/we are asking for?*

- *How would you say individualism has affected your understanding of the Christian faith, and your faith journey?*

Chapter 37 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then His Resurrection Did More Than Prove His Divine Identity

The actual, literal, physical resurrection of Jesus is the lynch pin of the Christian faith. If it didn't happen, then this whole thing is a farce. Personally, I rather like the simplicity of that. A person doesn't need to understand complex theological concepts. It all boils down to one thing: Did Jesus rise from the dead or not? Everything rises and falls with that.

Assuming Jesus did, in fact, rise from the dead, then the implications are ENORMOUS! In fact, all we really need to do, or focus on, is unpacking all the implications of the resurrection, and live accordingly.

Allow me to give an example of the importance of the resurrection. You're probably familiar with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statement "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*". Friends, that statement is only true because of the resurrection. Without the resurrection, that's just sentimentality and wishful thinking. Everything we hope for finds its roots in the resurrection. So, conversely, if the resurrection didn't actually happen, we have no basis for hope.

We know that evil was defeated, the curse has been broken, because Jesus rose from the dead! Amen! New creation is underway! Praise the Lord!

- *How deeply have you reflected on the Cross & Resurrection? How does it form, shape, affect your life personally, and our lives collectively?*
- *How can/do we, as the Church, bear witness to the reality of the Resurrection? How do people who live in light of the Resurrection live differently than those who don't know or believe it?*

Chapter 38 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then The Power Of The Cross Is Still Working Today

"Do this in remembrance of Me." (Luke 22:19) As Skye points out, "...remembering...[means] becoming an active participant in the past event that is being remembered and inviting all the power of that event into the present." (page 182)

Consider this: the very existence of the Church (the community/people that acknowledge Jesus as the reigning and rightful King), which has been around for 2000 years, and still going strong (though not without our missteps) is the living, breathing, sign post of the Kingdom...attesting to what God has done in the past, and bearing witness to what He is still doing in the present and what He will do into the future.

We bear witness, we remember, not only when we gather together to worship (singing, praying, teaching and being taught, participating in the sacraments, etc.) but also in/through every aspect of our lives.

Friends, we need to let our Spirit-guided imaginations, and our collective will, run wild with what is possible in light of the Cross and Resurrection. The Kingdom is made manifest as the citizens of the Kingdom (us) live in full/complete loyalty and devotion to our King in every nook and cranny of life.

- *When you partake of the Lord's Supper/Communion, what do you generally think about or focus on?*
- *How does the Cross and Resurrection guide and inspire your/our life? What do you think/sense the Holy Spirit would like to do with us...now, in the present, in this time and place?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Dream with Jesus & Resist Rating/Evaluating

Two invitations this week...

First, what do you wish was different...about you, about your family, about your church, about your relationships, about the world? Spend some time this week thinking, reflecting...dreaming about all that...with Jesus (prayerfully). Remember, He is alive and well. Spending time with Jesus is not a mental/intellectual exercise (though it does take a little imagination...but I would say we use our imaginations in all of our relationships in some way). Prayerfully consider what “dreams” Jesus might want to actually birth into reality in and through you

Second, as an exercise of loosening the grip of consumerism on us, resist any temptation to rate or evaluate anything. Instead, try to receive everything and everybody as a gift this week...even when you experience something as less than you had hoped. We are not the center of life, so we don't need to measure everything as if we are.

Read & Reflect on... (these are the scriptural passages Skye has at the end of each chapter)

- I Corinthians 15:20-28
- Colossians 1:15-23
- Romans 6:1-6
- Colossians 2:8-15
- John 12:27-36
- Romans 3:21-26
- Matthew 27:45-50
- I John 4:7-21
- John 10:7-18
- Revelation 11:15-17
- Hebrews 2:14-15
- Exodus 14:10-14
- Ephesians 6:10-20