

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 10, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MARK 6:3 and JOHN 19:17

“Is not this the Carpenter?”

“So, they took Jesus, and He went out, bearing
His Own Cross, to the place called the Place of
the Skull, which is called in Hebrew
Golgotha.”

(Revised Standard Version)

THE CARPENTER IS STILL AT WORK!

“Is not this the Carpenter?” The question was asked by friends and neighbors who had known Jesus intimately from the time He was a little boy. Our Lord lived the first thirty years of His earthly life in Nazareth. There He had grown up, in that little town just off the great highway that ran at the foot of the hill. Nazareth was a small town, with a population estimated at no more than 500 people. There is but one natural water supply there, so that if you visit Nazareth today you will find that the well is authentic, and the water supply couldn't maintain more than 500 people.

And from the actual wording of the text we are led to imagine that in that backward little town of Nazareth Jesus was the one and only carpenter. “Is not this the Carpenter?” They knew Him perfectly well. And His workshop was perhaps the center of village life. As a carpenter, Jesus touched life at every point. Everybody in Nazareth would need Him at some time or other. Almost everything in the home was made of wood in those days. Studdert Kennedy begins one of his best-known poems with the wistful question, “I wonder what He charged for chairs in Nazareth!”

But it wasn't only chairs. He made wooden cups and spoons and tables and beds and every conceivable contemporary household requisite; and almost all kinds of agricultural instruments such as ploughs and yokes and spades and rakes, barrows and carts. And what about the boys and girls? What about their toys? Yes, He would make those as well - dolls and cradles and toy soldiers.

You see, Jesus, the Son of God, was indispensable to the people of Nazareth. And that is the point I want to make. He was indispensable to the men and women of His day. And when He took off His carpenter's apron for the last time, and laid down His axe and plane and hammer, if I may say it reverently, He did not cease to be a worker in wood, for He took the timber of the Cross, and He became indispensable to each of us as the one and only Savior of men -- the one and only Way to God. “Is not this the Carpenter?” “And He went out, bearing His Cross, to the place called the Place of the Skull...”

1. Our Lord Jesus Christ made out of the Cross a PULPIT from which He proclaims pardon for the penitent. As we look at the Cross of Christ we see several things, but first and foremost we see God dealing with the question of sin. When God entered into the covenant relationship with Israel in

which He was to be their God and they were to be, in a very special sense, His people, that relationship was founded upon the Law enunciated in the Ten Commandments. But the people could not keep the Law perfectly, and transgression of the Law is sin. A problem for many Christians is: Why did God give the Law if He knew that man could not possibly keep it? And the answer is this: The Law was given as a mirror. We look into the Law and we see our spiritual condition. The Law says, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not," and as we view the Law of God we see how far we fall short, and we recognize that the Law proves to us that we are sinners. The Law reveals sin but it cannot save the sinner, and so the Law drives us to the Cross. Because we break the Law of God we need forgiveness, and where can we find forgiveness except at the Cross? Therefore, the Law was our "custodian," says St. Paul (Galatians 13:24), our "disciplinarian" to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. This is why Christ came to earth - to redeem those who were under the Law and condemned by it. Christ came because sin had to be atoned for.

Under the Jewish Law those who had sinned brought sacrifices of lambs and offered them to God. The sacrifices were types and shadows of the final and perfect Sacrifice that was to come. And if we had been living in Old Testament times, then we would have come to the sanctuary this morning with our lamb, our sacrifice, with an innocent thing that would take the thrust of the wrath of God. We would bring a substitute, and we would have placed our hands upon the head of that little lamb, and confessed our sins, and, as it were, transferred our sins to that little creature. That is why every sacrifice on Hebrew altars, in Tabernacle or Temple, pointed to Christ, "the Lamb of God," Who would come to take away the sins of the world. The animal sacrifices were instituted to point out our great need of a Savior. They pointed to the Cross that God Himself would provide, and upon which would be offered an eternal Sacrifice that would forever satisfy the demands of His holy justice. So, we read in the Letter to the Hebrews (9:12), "He (i.e., Christ) entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but His own blood, thus securing for us an eternal redemption."

In Christ's atonement for sin He stood in the guilty sinner's place. If God had forgiven sin by a divine decree, without atonement; if He would have said, "It's all right," and turned His head away from our sin and not brought justice to bear upon the sinner as represented in Christ, then man could and would have assumed that God had overlooked, had blinked at, or was indifferent to sin. But in the substitutionary suffering and death of Jesus we have the participation of Almighty God Himself in the very act of atonement. Sin pierced the inmost heart of God. Remember that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself." God felt every piercing nail and spear thrust. God felt the burning sun, the mocking derision, the body blows. God felt the shame, as the spittle ran down that blessed face. Here in the Cross is the suffering love of God bearing the guilt of man's sin. That love alone is able to melt the sinner's heart and bring him to repentance and salvation.

Dear friends, we can never preach the Gospel faithfully unless we point you to the Cross and to the crucified Lamb of God. We all need to come to that Cross. It stands there in the midst of our dire human dilemma as our only hope. Here we find the justice of God fully satisfied. Here we find the mercy of God extended to the most depraved transgressor who will but put his trust in the crucified Lord. Here we find the power of God to transform any human life. Here is God crying out from the Cross, "I love you!" Here is God exclaiming emphatically, "I can forgive you!" for here God laid the only lasting foundation for forgiveness. There was no other way. Because Christ died, God can justify the sinner and still be just Himself.

Yes - that Cross is a PULPIT from which Christ proclaims the good news of pardon for the penitent sinner through the power of His shed blood.

2. Jesus, the Carpenter of Nazareth, made a COFFIN in which to bury your sin forever. There is a famous and familiar story about a Christian who was summoned before the ruthless Roman Emperor Julian, in the days of diabolical persecution. "What about your Carpenter of Nazareth?" asked the Emperor scornfully, "Is He doing anything now?" To which the prisoner courageously and unhesitatingly replied, "The Carpenter of Nazareth is busy -- He is making a coffin for you!" Within a few months Julian was dead.

But what I want to say is this: The Lord Jesus Christ has made a coffin in which to bury our sins. Once a person has seen Jesus bearing his iniquity upon the Cross, that person can never sin comfortably again. No matter how he may lapse, no matter how far short he may fall, no matter how far he may go into the far country, having seen Jesus as the sin-bearer, no one can ever again enjoy his sin, or settle down to a life of calculated wrongdoing. The Christ upon His Cross thrusts upon you an inescapable responsibility -- you may not want it, but you must accept it. He opens for you the only way to God, and you will have to answer for it. He becomes to you and to me a savor of life unto life, or a savor of death unto death. And whatever you do with Him, you will never be the same again.

In one of his most popular books Dr. Leonard Griffith tells a memorable story of something that happened in Paris many years ago. An archbishop was preaching in the Cathedral of Notre Dame. In the course of his sermon he related this incident. He said that more than half a century ago there came into this very cathedral three young men, three wild, dissolute youths. And two of them made a bet with the third that he wouldn't have the temerity to go into one of the confessionals and give the listening priest a bogus confession. The young man accepted the challenge, and, going into the confessional, he began to spout off a lurid but quite fictitious list of personal wrongdoing. For a while the priest listened patiently, but at last, it became patently clear to him that the whole thing was a hoax. He let the young man carry on until at last, he had nothing more to say. And then the priest said, "Are these all the sins you have to confess?" "Yes," answered the young man. "Well," proceeded the priest, "you know that to every confession a certain penance is attached, and the penance I prescribe for you is that you go over to the great crucifix which hangs on the wall behind the high altar, and there, beneath the life-sized figure of the agonized Redeemer, I want you to kneel, and look up, and I want you to say these words, 'All this You did for me, and I don't care about You at all.'"

The young man emerged from the confessional, rejoined his companions, told them exactly what had happened, and then said, "I've done what you bet I wouldn't do. Pay up." "Oh no!" they replied, "not until you've completed the whole thing. Go on up to the high altar and do what he said." The young man, with much bravado, went forward. He knelt in front of the crucifix, and gazing up into those pain-drenched features, he started to say, "All this You did for me, and I don't care." But somehow, he couldn't finish the sentence. Once again, he tried, "All this You did for me, and I don't..." But again, he couldn't get the words out. There was a lump in his throat. There were tears in his eyes. And that was the end of that young man's dissolute life, as he experienced his personal encounter with the crucified and loving Savior. And, startlingly, the archbishop concluded the story with this confession, "The young man in the story was I myself!"

The Carpenter, the Savior, had made a coffin for his sins! He had met the Christ of the Cross

Who spoke His word of forgiveness.

My friend, I take you not even to a crucifix, but to the living Lord. I would simply get out of the way and say, "Friend, meet Jesus Christ!" Meet Him, for through His Cross, He has made a coffin in which to bury your sins. The Scriptures express this truth so beautifully and so often: "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19); "For Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back (Isaiah 38:17); "As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:12); "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). He takes our sins and He buries them, for in that Cross, as it were, He made a coffin in which to put them, never to be remembered against us anymore.

3. Christ, the Carpenter, made out of His Cross a LADDER by which the trusting soul can reach Heaven. Dr. Alexander Whyte, the renowned preacher who exercised such a wonderful ministry in Edinburgh, Scotland, used to tell of how at family worship one evening he was reading about the Cross. His little boy, four years of age, was sitting beside him. And the father turned to him and said, "Do you know what the Cross is, my boy?" "Oh yes, Father," came the reply, "it is just the thing we climb on when we're going to heaven!" How right he was!

When those rough Roman hands lifted the Cross up, they were fulfilling God's eternal plan. They were carrying out His method by which men and women, boys and girls, would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. From that Cross, our Lord gave the promise to one at His side who was in the depths of sin and despair, "Today you will be with Me in paradise!" Blessed Christ -- the Ladder up to heaven! There is no other way to reach heaven but by that Cross.

But remember -- a ladder is a means of ascent for one at a time. No two people can climb up a ladder side by side. The ladder points to a personal ascent. My friends, we enter heaven one by one. We do not reach the gates in a multitude. We enter one by one. You may have godly parents, but you must accept Christ for yourself. You may have a converted wife or husband, but you must come to Christ yourself. You cannot capitalize on the spirituality of a loved one. You must come to Jesus for yourself.

Put your foot on the first rung now -- the rung of repentance toward God. Put your foot on the rung of faith in Christ. The second stanza of "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" is invariably omitted in our American hymn books. Listen to what it says,

Oh safe and happy shelter,
A refuge tried and sweet,
A trysting place where heaven's love
And heaven's justice meet!

As to the exiled patriarch (a reference to Jacob, you remember)
That wondrous dream was given,
So seems my Savior's Cross to me -
A ladder up to heaven.

The Cross becomes the ladder by which the sinner can scale the skies! Christ made out of His Cross a ladder to heaven!

The Cross of Christ - a PULPIT, a COFFIN, a LADDER.

4. Finally, Jesus the Carpenter made out of His Cross a YOKE that binds the believer to Himself and to His service forever. Jesus said, “Take My yoke upon you.” Why does a farmer place a yoke upon the neck of an animal? He does it in order to bring the animal under his complete control. A yoke speaks of discipline and of obedience. To the yoke is attached a set of reins, and the reins are in the hands of the farmer.

You remember the remarkable words of St. Peter in his first letter (2:21), “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps.” That is to say, our Lord perfectly obeyed the Father’s will in going to the Cross; and therefore, we are to submit unconditionally to God’s will in every department of our life and so follow in the steps of the Savior, steps that led Him to Calvary.

Unquestionably here is a place to which many Christians have not yet come -- the place of death to the self-life, and a willing abandonment to the way of the Cross. It is possible to be converted but still to go on living a self-centered life -- accepting Christ as Savior, but refusing to submit to Him as Lord. It is possible to be “saved,” but just “saved.” It is possible to be a very ordinary Christian. And God wants and the world today needs extraordinary Christians. We cannot evade the challenge to full surrender. This morning God wants you to experience the grace and power of a truly sanctified life.

St. Paul speaks of certain believers as being “carnal.” Are you a “carnal” Christian? What is a carnal Christian? I’ll tell you — he is a person who trusts Christ as Savior, but you could work alongside him for ten years and never suspect that he is a Christian. Remember -- that person who works with you could confront you at the Last Judgment and say, “You were supposed to be a believing Christian, believing that there is one way only to God and people who never took that way went to hell -- and you never told me!”

Dear friend, what is now important, so important indeed that everything else is relatively unimportant, is the place which the Cross has in your life and mine. Jesus is saying, “Take My yoke upon you.” He has made His Cross to be a yoke by which we are bound to Him in obedient, selfless service. He claims us completely for Himself. Maybe there is some sin, some habit, something that you are holding back, and God is saying to you, “Be done with that sin! Take it by the throat! Say you’re finished with it. Let the principle of the Cross be real in your life.” Too many Christians are like St. Augustine who, in his early days, often said, “Lord, I want to be done with sin in my life, but not yet!”

The Word of God says, “Put off the old man -- the old sinful nature. Have done with it. Put on the new man!” My friend, is your whole life laid upon the altar in absolute surrender and obedience to Christ? Are you entirely His? Do you know the “yoke” that is upon you, binding you to Him so that He is in complete control of you?

“Take My yoke upon you,” He says, “for My yoke is easy.” There is an old legend which says that hanging outside the carpenter shop in Nazareth was a sign which read “My yokes are easy.” Jesus would never turn out shoddy work. He would finish off every wooden yoke with such skill and painstaking care that it would never chafe or irritate an animal’s neck.

Now when our Lord says, “My yoke is easy,” He does not mean that it is an easy thing to be a Christian. Far from it! What He does mean is that you can never find true satisfaction, lasting peace, or abundant joy apart from wearing and responding to the yoke. It is the undisciplined life, the life of disobedience to God that is the unhappy, frustrated, powerless life.

Are you willing now to say,

All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power,
Let Thy blessing fall on me.

I surrender all, I surrender all;
All to Thee, my blest Redeemer,
I surrender all.

May it indeed be so!

“Is not this the Carpenter?”

“So, they took Jesus, and He went out, bearing His Own Cross, to the place called the Place of the Skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha.”

AMEN.