

"The Center Cross"—John 19:18

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, "The Center Cross", is John 19:18 → *There they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Keeping Jesus, His Person and His Work as the central focus in every area of our lives is a challenging task to say the least. It is especially difficult in the thick of spiritual battles and temptations as well as at times when you're in the grip of physical illnesses.

Focusing on the centrality of Jesus can even be difficult when encountering His passion presented by reenactment or even the Scriptures themselves. While viewing the movie "The Passion of the Christ" I struggled with focusing on Christ because of their portrayal of His mother's presence every step of the way. It seemed curious to me since the only mention of Mary's presence during Christ's suffering and death is simply her standing next to one of His disciples at the foot of the cross.

Where is your focus as you view Christ's crucifixion? As at other times in the history of God's will for people's lives Jesus took the

center place in the events connected with this crucifixion. As the events and dynamics of His crucifixion unfolded even the mention of them were intended to direct our focus on Jesus, the Christ. So it is with our text mentioning that Jesus was *crucified* on Golgotha with *two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them*. Even the positioning of the crosses directs our focus to the Man in the center.

The other Gospels tell us that the *two others* crucified with Him were thieves (cf. Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27-28; Luke 23:32). The focus on these two criminals brings our focus to Jesus since their presence was a direct fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's words spoken about 700 years before Christ's crucifixion in Isaiah 53:12 → *He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors*.

In one respect, Jesus being crucified between two thieves could have been an added insult to Jesus on the part of those who crucified Him. There was plenty of room on Mt. Calvary for each one to have their own "focused group" just as happens today when someone is executed for a crime. This may have been done deliberately to give the impression that Jesus was just as guilty as these thieves. Luke 23:4 tells us that following his questioning of Jesus *Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man."* The chief priests and the people knew He was innocent. That's why they had to stage a secret night trial to condemn Jesus to death. So maybe

placing Jesus between two robbers was an act on the part of Pilate and the Jewish leaders to cover their guilty consciences, knowing He had done nothing wrong.

Such an act would be true to the nature of our sin. It is interesting how human beings will try to deal with the guilt caused by their sin by running away from rather to Jesus. Instead, they, much like the chief priests and crowds, find ways to put Jesus at fault by rationalizing Him out of the picture **instead of seeing Jesus on the cross as central to the remedy for that sin and guilt**. Jesus' being placed between two criminals shows us that He came to save **sinners such as we**.

That's why the prophecy from Isaiah also says, *yet He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors*. Remember Jesus' words as He was placed center stage during His crucifixion? *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* (cf. Luke 23:34)

Jesus' centrality on Mt. Calvary was no coincidence. It was part of God's plan of drawing all people to His Son and the great impact He has in the lives of people! Jesus had said in John 12:32 → *I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself*. There were many people who were at the foot of that cross during His crucifixion, some mocking Him and others sorrowful. It appears obvious that those mocking Him were doing so in unbelief, including one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus.

However, the “drawing to Himself” on the cross to which Jesus referred was to draw people to respond to God in repentance of their sins and trust in His atoning work for them. Luke 23:47-48 records the centurion being drawn to Jesus in faith and apparently affecting others standing there. It says: *Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.*

One of the thieves was drawn to faith in Jesus and expressed His faith by rebuking his fellow convict, *saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”* Then he said, *“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* Jesus reassured him, *Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.* (cf. Luke 23:40-43)

Even while dying on the center cross Jesus had the privilege of working the miracle of faith, giving the gift of forgiveness and eternal life to this thief next to him!

Jesus still has the central position in people’s lives whether or not they realize it. His purpose of being lifted up on the center cross was ***to draw all people*** to Himself. His work on the cross is for ***all people***

and thus ***all people*** will be held accountable for their encounter with Jesus on the center cross. How we either respond to His centrality in faith or react to His centrality in unbelief will determine our position with or without Him in eternity.

The events and dynamics connected with Jesus' passion recorded in the Scriptures are intended to place your faith focus on Him. They are intended for you to recognize God's eternal plan for you as the events fulfill His promises and prophecies in the Old Testament. They are intended for you see your own sinful rebellion, self-righteousness "and other great shame and vice" so that you repent of your sins and confess with the centurion at the foot of that center cross: *Truly this man was the Son of God!* (cf. Mark 15:39) They are not intended to simply make you feel sorry for Jesus that He *endured from sinners such hostility against Himself* (cf. Hebrews 12:3). They are intended to bring your faith focus to Him on the cross and see His love, forgiveness and grace poured out in His blood for you!

As you are drawn to Jesus on the center cross the Holy Spirit creates faith and repentance of your sins, as well as the desire to let Jesus have the central position in every area of your life. After all, His cross defines who you are, from being united with Jesus' death on that cross and His resurrection in your baptism to proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes as you nourish your faith with the Word

and the Lord's Supper regularly. Your desire is for the events and dynamics which make up your everyday living to bring the focus for yourself and others to Jesus on the center cross. Amen.

*May I never boast
except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
through which the world has been crucified to me,
and I to the world.*

(Galatians 6:14 NIV)

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