

The Cross the Test of Character

Gardiner Spring

This article is an extract from *The Attraction of the Cross*, published by The Banner of Truth Trust in December of 1983.

The eternal state of men is decided by their character. The Scriptures teach us, that in the day of judgment, God 'will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life', while to 'them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness', he will render 'indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish'. Every good man will then receive the rewards of heaven, and every wicked man will be condemned to the pains of hell. 'The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation'. With the exception of those who die in infancy, therefore, all have the opportunity of forming the character by which their eternal state is to be determined. Nor is there anything that exerts so powerful an influence in forming the characters of men as the cross of Christ. To some, it is the savour of life unto life; to others, the savour of death unto death. To some, the Saviour is the object of interest, of love, of confidence, and of glorying; to others, he is the object of indifference, and then of hostility, of distrust; and they turn away their faces from him for very shame. 'The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the wisdom of God, and the power of God'. The cross is the great test of character. This is a very plain truth, and needs illustration rather than proof.

I begin this illustration by remarking, that *the cross presents a vivid manifestation of those excellences of the Divine character to which all wicked men are hostile, and in which all good men have high complacency.* The glory of God shines in the face of Jesus Christ. All the perfections of the Divine nature there appear in the greatest fulness, richness, and splendour, in which they ever have been, or ever will be, revealed to men. No principle in the moral constitution of men is more obvious, than that those objects which they most hate are most hated when most clearly seen; and those which they love, when most clearly seen are loved the most. Wicked men there are who are slow to believe that they are the enemies of God, because they have not deep impressions of his being, nor just conceptions of his character; nor do they always admit the thought, that he is so holy that he cannot look on sin, and so just that he will by no means clear the guilty. And good men there are who doubt their love to him, because they do not always enjoy the light of his countenance, nor behold his beauty as they have sometimes seen it. The cross brings God near to both. Wicked men may see the low estimation in which they hold the God of heaven, by the contempt with which they

regard the method of salvation by his Son; and good men may discover the high esteem they cherish for him, by the high regard they pay to him, when, in the person of his Son, they discover him to be glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders. Very few men in the world look upon themselves as such enemies of God as to refuse to be reconciled to him on any terms; nor is it until they discover their hostility to the terms of mercy proposed in the gospel, that they have a practical demonstration that their enmity is vigorous and unrelenting. Very many good men know not how much they love God, until they enjoy those refreshing and repeated views of his loveliness which are so often imparted to them as they gather round the cross. Wicked men, who enjoy the faithful preaching of the gospel, have a fair trial of what is in their hearts; for the cross is continually disturbing them, and sometimes excites their enmity almost to madness. They are often led to see, when contemplating the truths of the cross, that they not only have not the love of God in them, but cherish a deeply – rooted aversion to his character, and give way to blasphemous thoughts, if not thoughts of malice, against the Holy One of Israel. They have no desire to exalt God, or to see him exalted. The principal reason why they do not fall in with the method of mercy by the cross is, that it brings glory to God in the highest; while good men, on the other hand, have the same trial of their hearts, by the same gospel; and it brings out and shows their love, their delight in God, their gratified and grateful love. The cross does not repel their hearts, but attracts them – attracts them to God their supreme good and joy; and if there be a thought that gives more value to the cross than any other, it is that it secures the highest glory to God, while it announces peace on earth and good-will to men. The only reason why wicked men continue to reject the cross is, that they are enemies to God; and it is because good men are his friends that they accept it. There is no surer test of character, and no greater proof that a man is the enemy of God, than that he is a despiser of the cross; and there is no greater proof than attachment to the cross, of honest and supreme attachment to the God of heaven.

There is another fact in relation to the cross, which shows that it is a test of character. *It establishes claims which wicked men are not disposed to admit, and in which good men cheerfully acquiesce.* One great object of the death of Christ was to enforce the claims of the Divine law and government, and give its sanction to the Divine authority over the consciences of men. Not one principle of the Divine government is yielded by this method of salvation, but every principle of it vindicated and magnified. It is no compromise between the Lawgiver and his rebellious subjects, but a method of mercy in which the majesty of the law is protected, and emphasis and efficacy given to the immutable authority of the great Creator and Governor of men. This is one reason why wicked men are not pleased, and why good men are pleased with the cross of Christ. It proclaims to them that God is their owner; and it is a claim which the wicked resist, and in which the righteous rejoice. It proclaims to them that he is their Lawgiver, and requires their constant obedience and their whole hearts; and while the wicked complain of these requisitions, the righteous regard them as holy, just and good. The wicked are restive under this omnipotent authority, but the righteous submit to it. The wicked try all in their power to break loose from God, and to throw off the hallowed influence of the cross; while the righteous press these obligations to their bosoms, and feel inwardly thankful that there is a power in the cross to bow their wills to the Supreme Governor.

The language of the wicked, in view of the cross, is, 'Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways'. The language of the righteous is, 'It is good for me to draw nigh unto God'. The language of the wicked is, 'Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?' The language of the righteous is, 'I will delight myself in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word'. The language of the wicked is, 'We will not have this man to reign over us'. The language of the righteous is, 'The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice!' Wicked men indulge the pride of human intellect, and the still more inflated pride of the human heart, in reasoning against the claims of the cross: they even boldly affirm, that such is their dependence on God, that they are not under obligations to become Christians, and if they never become so, the fault will not be theirs; while, on the other hand, good men adore that sovereign grace which makes them 'willing in the day of His power', and more and more, as long as they live, wonder why this great salvation is thus revealed unto babes, while it is hidden from the wise and prudent. Wicked men practically treat the claims of the cross on their faith and obedience very differently from the way in which they are treated by good men: the more clearly, the more tenderly, and the more urgently they are enforced, the greater rigour and point do they give to their resistance; while the conduct of good men shows, that the more clearly they are taught these claims, and the more powerfully they are enforced, the more do they honour them.

The truths of the cross, and its wonderful mercy, and its consequent authority, were designed to bring the great subject of controversy between God and men within a narrow compass, and to an obvious issue; and those who do not fall in with them, fall out with them with all their hearts. The cross is a standing memorial to the universe, that God is right, and that men are wrong; and therefore the righteous are its friends, and the wicked are its enemies. It decides the question in favour of truth and righteousness; and hence, the friends of truth, of righteousness, range themselves on the side of it, while against it are ranged the enemies of both. There is no difficulty, even by the lights of nature, and reason, and conscience, in seeing that, in their contest for supremacy, God is right and the sinner is wrong; much less is there any difficulty in seeing this, under the stronger lights of gospel truth and mercy. Here all the obscurity thrown around the question, by the pride and obduracy of the human heart, is dissipated. Every man that looks intelligently at the cross of Christ, must see that the claims of the God of heaven are just such as they ought to be; just such as all men ought cordially and cheerfully to acknowledge; and just such, that the cordial and practical recognition of them decides their character. It is not easy for them to have just views of their own character, until they see for themselves how they treat the cross of Christ. Here the thoughts of many hearts are revealed, and the child that was born proves the falling and the rising again of many. The children of God always most clearly discover their filial and obedient spirit when nearest the cross; and bad men, if once awakened from their indifference and stupidity, and brought near the cross, will be at no loss to see that they have a spirit within them that is not subject to the Sovereign of the universe. Here the obligations to piety come down upon them with such force, that if they are resisted, the evidence is painfully convincing, producing overwhelming solicitude and distress, because they are 'without God in the world'.

Another fact which shows that the cross is a test of character is, that it *implies allegations of sinfulness and ill-desert which the wicked deny, but which the righteous humbly acknowledge*. The cross speaks a language in relation to the sinfulness and ill-desert of men which cannot be misunderstood. 'If one died for all, then were all dead'. 'If they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?' The doctrine of salvation by the cross, is the doctrine of ruin by sin. We find the only cause of the cross in the hopeless state of man without it. That mighty movement in the government of God is the highest proof that man was sunk so low in guilt and perdition, that no finite remedy was adequate to his deliverance. The greatness and malignity of the disease are discoverable in the Divine nature and wonderful method of the cure. When we see the Eternal Son of God smitten by the sword of justice, and in the room and place of man, we no longer doubt that man is vile, and that he deserves that wrath of God, which, if endured in his own person, would sink him to perdition. This is the reason why wicked men are so unwilling to look at the cross, and why good men desire, with angels, to look into the combined mysteries of its justice and its grace. This is the reason wicked men deny a Divine Saviour and a Divine atonement, and comfort themselves with the thought, that inasmuch as their Saviour is human and his death has none of the properties of an expiatory sacrifice, their sins are neither many nor great, and deserve no such punishment as the eternal curse of a violated law. It is a just conclusion from false premises, and only shows how repulsive a lesson the cross reads to a mind that does not submit to the humbling conviction of its own sinfulness and ill-desert. Good men have been taught to feel that they have broken the law of God, impugned the rights of his holy government, despised his authority, and ruined their own souls. They are willing to feel the force of this conviction, and desire to feel it yet more deeply. Wicked men are not willing to submit to it, but resist it as long as they are able. Good men look not on sin as a trifle; they have no excuse for it, and urge no palliation. Bad men look upon it in a very different light, and excuse and palliate it as a small affair. Good men are sensible that they deserve to suffer all that God threatens – that they have done things worthy of death – and prostrate themselves at the footstool of sovereign grace, reigning through righteousness by our Lord Jesus Christ; while wicked men reject that grace, because they are not convinced of their ill-desert, and do not feel that the sentence of condemnation gone out against them is right and just. Good men feel that there would be no cause of complaint against God, should he execute the penalty of his law; wicked men complain that he is a hard master and a severe judge. Good men wonder how he can save; wicked men do not see why he should destroy. Good men cherish the convictions of their vileness and ill-desert; wicked men suppress and stifle them. Good men feel alarmed and suspicious of the state of their own minds, when they lose sight of their own sinfulness; wicked men feel a load thrown off from their consciences, and live at ease and in security, when they can forget it. Good men feel ashamed and humbled before God, and the more so that 'he is pacified towards them', while wicked men remain hardened in their pride. This is one reason why these two different classes of men regard the cross with widely different emotions. It discloses their true character. It detects the deceptions of the wicked, and discovers the honesty of the righteous. The cross is the proof of human guilt inscribed in blood, which can never be erased from the records of the universe; and which, wherever it is seen, and as long as it is remembered, enforces the truth, that the sinner deserves to die.

The cross is also a test of character, inasmuch *as it rejects the confidences on which wicked men rely, and which good men have been taught to renounce*. Wicked men often suffer under the struggles of natural conscience, and the convincing power of the Holy Spirit. They have some partial view of their sins and their danger, especially in the contemplation of their overt and more gross transgressions. At such seasons they always have recourse to sources of confidence which the cross condemns. They are very apt to compound with God, by proposing that their debts to his justice should be liquidated by paying a part of them. They are willing to give up one sin for the sake of indulging another; or to pay a part of the debt themselves, and, to draw for the balance upon the merits of Christ. Some concessions they are willing to make; but God must come to some terms of agreement with them, and make some abatement from his original and rightful claims. They persuade themselves that they are able to make some amends for their transgressions by works of righteousness which they have done, or purpose to perform, rather than, after all they have done, and the best they can do, come to the cross just as they are, and accept the salvation of the gospel as the chief of sinners. They think highly of their moral conduct and outward observance of the duties of religion, and at heart feel that they give them a sort of claim upon the Divine mercy. They are offended with the cross because it frowns upon all such sources of confidence, and requires them, however blameless their outward morality, and however exact and punctilious their forms of religion, to renounce them all, and place all their confidence and hope in its own complete and entire redemption. They feel it to be a hardship that they are allowed to do nothing to merit salvation, or at least that they may not do something to induce God to show them mercy. 'Being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness', they refuse 'to submit themselves to God's righteousness', as revealed in the gospel of his Son. They think to purchase what God freely gives, and by such fancied equivalents as are abomination in his sight, and which, even were they less abominable, were no equivalent at all. This is one of the ways of compounding with God, and of rejecting the cross, which, while it has been reduced to a system by the church of Rome, nevertheless finds a place in every natural heart. Men are all Romanists by nature, because they are all by nature the enemies of the cross of Christ. But this whole doctrine of human merit, whether found in the systems of Rome, or more covertly cherished in the bosom of the self-righteous Protestant, is altogether derogatory to the merit and sufficiency of the Saviour's satisfaction. It were strange to call that forgiveness, which men procure, either in whole or in part, by their own merit; or to ascribe all the glory to the cross, when men themselves 'have whereof to glory'. Just the opposite of all this, are the views and affections of the real Christian. He looks upon the work of Christ alone as furnishing the grounds and causes of his justification, and attributes the forgiveness of sins, and restoration to the Divine favour and eternal life, exclusively to the meritorious obedience and atoning death of the cross. A godly man, and one who is truly humble, and of a contrite heart, resorts to nothing else. He renounces every other confidence; places his sole dependence upon Jesus Christ; glories in him as the 'Lord his righteousness', looks to him for the supply of his every want; and finds his love and grace a stimulus to every duty, support under trial, and the progressive mortification of indwelling sin. His conscience is pacified, and he has the inward sense of pardoning mercy, only from the blood of the cross. Under the

consciousness of his daily infirmities, his resource is the same with that to which he first repaired, as a penitent sinner, under the conviction of his awful and aggravated guilt. He has but this one hope, that Jesus Christ 'is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him', he has but this confidence, that 'the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin'; he has but this cleansing, that he has washed his 'robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb', and he has but this song, 'Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood – to Him be glory and dominion for ever!' And thus the cross puts to the test the characters of men by rejecting the confidences on which the wicked rely, and which the righteous renounce; and because, while it shows that there is a class of men who have fled for refuge to lay hold 'of the hope set before them', who have renounced all dependence on their holier services, and yet have found 'joy and peace in believing', and living 'by the faith of the Son of God', it at the same time not less certainly indicates a class of men who are thankless for this grace, who, by the unhallowed addition of other confidences, are guilty of the sacrilegious impeachment of the merit and sufficiency of him who was crucified.

Nor is the cross less a test of character also, *in that it reveals a happiness, which is very differently suited to the taste of men, as they themselves are holy or unholy.* The characters of men are decided by those things in the pursuit and enjoyment of which they find their highest happiness. There is a spiritual relish and taste in the heart of every good man, that finds its gratification in objects that God approves; and there is a sinful relish and taste in the heart of every wicked man that finds its gratification in objects that God condemns. There is a natural taste, common both to the righteous and the wicked, which has no moral character, and by which they enjoy the beauty of natural objects, and are gratified in the contemplation of a finished composition, a splendid poem, an elegant garb, a polished demeanour, a fine painting, or an exquisite piece of music; and there is a moral taste, which renders men sensible to the beauties of holiness, to the excellence of God's word, to the pleasures of religion, to the glory of the cross, and to the blessedness of heaven. To some persons, these things have the strongest attractions, and, in their view, possess the greatest loveliness; while to others, they have no attractions at all, and are viewed with indifference, if not with disgust. It is not a blind instinct for which neither of these classes of men can specify any sufficient cause; but consists in those moral principles and affections which, in a good man, are the result of renewing grace, and are cherished by the frequent contemplation of spiritual things, and which in a wicked man are the result of his native sinfulness, and are strengthened by his familiarity with things that are unspiritual and evil. Now the cross is a sure and infallible test both of this spiritual and unspiritual character. It touches a string to which every holy heart vibrates, and to which every unholy one is discordant. It presents sources of happiness that are attractive to the former, and to the latter repulsive.

The sources of happiness which the cross reveals, are spiritual. They are the discovery of God, and the enjoyment of God, in everything – in his works, in his providence, and in his word. They are those exercises of genuine piety themselves, which are the fruit of the Spirit. They are God's word and ordinances; the praise, the prayer, the communion and fellowship which he has established in his church, and where his people sit at his

feet and behold his glory. They are the duties which God requires, rendering the ways of wisdom pleasantness and all her paths peace; neither burdening the conscience by inward remorse, nor dishonouring the character by the blush of shame. They are the high ambition of living to some good purpose in the world; of living, not to self, but to Him who died for us, and labouring to be accepted of him. They are in aiming at the highest end at which a creature can aim – ‘to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’. They are even in the very trials to which the Christian is ordained; because they are for the trial of his faith, and that he may learn what and where is his stronghold in the day of trouble, and find, by his own experience, that ‘all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose’. They are in retrospect and in anticipation: in retrospect, as he looks back upon all the way in which the Lord has led him, and with every recollected step and incident, magnifying the grace and faithfulness of his Father who is in heaven; and in anticipation, as he looks forward to victory over the foe, even to sin, death and the grave. They are the hopes and blessed assurances which the cross imparts, of the hour when, through him who is the resurrection and the life, ‘death shall be swallowed up in victory’, and he shall possess ‘salvation with eternal glory’. They are the life and immortality brought to light in the gospel; the heaven where God dwells, where Jesus reigns, where all the holy tribes are assembled, where the inhabitant shall no more say, ‘I am sick’; where sin shall never enter, and where all tears shall be wiped from every eye. Such is the blessedness which the cross discloses, and of which every holy mind has a quick discernment, and delicacy and readiness of perception, a faculty of enjoyment, not only unknown to the unholy, but from which they instinctively revolt. They have no power of receiving pleasure from such objects and pursuits. They scarcely excite their attention, for they have no disposition that is congenial with their nature. They cannot enter into them; they are not suited to their taste. Their joys are elsewhere. They are not found at the cross, but are crucified there, because there the world is crucified to them, and they to the world.

Let the reader then try his own character, by bringing it to the test of the cross. ‘What think ye of Christ?’ As you think of him, so you think of God; so will your views of yourselves be in accordance with his word, or in opposition to it; and so will you think and feel toward his kingdom in the world, and your own duty toward death and heaven. The cross is the great test. God designed it to be so, and so it has proved in every age of the world. The nations that have received it have been favoured of God, while those who have rejected it have perished from the way, though his wrath has been ‘kindled but a little’. The individuals who have gloried in it now live and reign with their once crucified Lord, while those to whom it has been ‘a rock of offence’ have stumbled over it into perdition. Capernaum perished for her rejection of Christ; Chorazin and Bethsaida perished for their rejection of Christ. For many a long century, the Jews have been given over to blindness and perdition, for their rejection of Christ. Nor is there any difference between Jew and Greek; be he Jew or Gentile, ‘he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth in him’. God sent his Son into the world, to try the characters of men. That Son of Mary has been set forth crucified, and his cross has been lifted up before your eyes, in order to ascertain, and to give you, and the world, and the universe the opportunity of ascertaining your true character.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).