

# Ego vs. The Cross

*By John Austin, January 5, 2021*

The long, square, wrought-iron nails pierced his wrists as a Roman centurion hammered them between the radius and ulna bones of his tired forearms and through the metatarsal bones of his aching feet. The spikes were driven deep into the abrasive wood of the massive crucifix that held his eviscerated body. It was a miracle he even made it to the execution site, after enduring multiple lashes from a flagrum of leather thongs with lead appendages that cut into subcutaneous tissues and arteries, ripping his muscles and sinews into quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. As he pulled his body up in searing pain, agonizing to breathe, he bore every act of evil and every transaction of selfishness committed by humanity while God seemed to ignore his lonely pleas.

The most important aspect to this cruel execution is that the one being executed—the Lord Jesus Christ—could've thwarted the entire ordeal and be justified in doing so. He *was* innocent after all.

Like a popular worship song reminds us, “he paid a debt he did not owe,” it’s important to consider that he *chose* to endure that horrific ordeal on *our* behalf.

To most of us—especially in the ‘rights-obsessed’ West—the idea of suffering for the crimes or misdeeds of others is unfair and unconscionable. In our self-loving culture, punishment by proxy would look at best, self-abasing and at worst, masochistic.

Yet our blameless and sinless Messiah offered himself to suffer unthinkable torture. He foreknew his ordeal as he prayed under duress in the garden of Gethsemane. Bloody sweat dripped from his body, resulting from hematidrosis, a condition in which the capillaries in the sweat glands rupture from traumatic stress. What seems even more bizarre to our notions of justice is *why* Jesus willingly submitted himself to the *ecclesiastical* authorities of his day (the

Sanhedrin) to die for the violation of a religious law that seemed petty by the moral standards of the *secular* authorities of his day (the Romans).

The reason for such skepticism lies in the view that many have of Christ: that although he was a great teacher, he wasn't God.

For those of us who belong to Him though, we know differently. The fact is there's no way a person could admire what Jesus did *unless* they believed in the gospel message: that he died for the sins of humanity and rose from the dead so that all people might be reconciled to God, thereby receiving forgiveness for sin.

To believe in the validity of the gospel is to believe in Christ's deity; to believe otherwise would mean to believe that he was a mere lunatic or imaginative idealist.

The apostle Paul underscored that truth in reminding us that without the Resurrection of the dead, all biblical teaching would be false, humanity would be lost and without hope, and those who follow Christ would be pitiable people. (1 Corinthians 15:12-19) If that were the case then ego wouldn't be much of an issue and life would be utterly meaningless because it would be a temporal, zero-sum game with the inevitability of non-existence for all. The rationale of that view would be a moral free-for-all with a Darwinian, 'survival-of-the-fittest' axiom governing our behaviour. It would give everyone ethical license to 'look out for number one (ourselves)' as the secular worldview would have us do.

As I'm sure many addicts (and *anyone* for that matter) can attest to, the desire to always be right even when we might be wrong is at the heart of a warped ego. Blinding ourselves to other peoples' perspectives facilitates our psychic charade of infallibility. I can personally recount many occasions when I've argued with others, convinced I was right, only to discover later how much I ignored their perspective, talked over them, and dismissed their feelings about their point. Sadly, I forgot that these people—even if they *were* wrong—were made in God's image and no less deserving of dignity than me.

That same, sin-warped ego drove me to drugs and booze, fantasizing about worldly success that would be pointless by God's standards, in the negative profit of forfeiting our own souls for that success (Luke 9:25).

Egotism, which drives people to brag about their success, drawing attention to themselves while ignoring others, is but one part of this nasty spectrum and is the root of envy and covetousness. Egoism, equally ugly, stems from one's obsession with self in the negative sense, asserting the greater importance of one's problems over others, therefore claiming more of a right to be miserable. Sadly though, it forgets others' misery. If men and women 'are merely players' on the world's stage as Shakespeare said, then sinful ego has tunnel vision and refuses to take off its' blinders, lest it realize it's not the only one standing on stage.

In the hypocrisy that is so common to humanity, in our certainty of how ‘right’ we are, we forget how *unqualified* we are to accurately read the hearts and minds of other people. The only one who *is* qualified to do that is the one who became ‘wrong’ on our behalf by becoming sin, thereby suffering, ‘once-for-all’ the eternal punishment we *all* deserve –Hell.

I’m not suggesting we never speak the truth when we’re right about something but I am echoing the admonishment in James to shut up more often and be better listeners and not lose our tempers so much (James 1:19). In other words, to not always have to be right.

Of course, to do that requires an overhaul of our egos and that requires divine help from the one who *did not even open his mouth* when wrongly afflicted (Isaiah 53:7).

In our post-modern world of *subjective* rather than *objective* truth, Christ’s propitiatory death might seem like the strangest of paradoxes. If everyone can be right—and therefore nobody wrong—it would be pointless for someone to become wrong to get punished for everybody else who are already right in the first place. Post-modernism and the advance of self in a culture of deteriorating morality is the broader, societal orthodoxy of everybody having the right to be right and having their own truth. This view is at the core of the naive belief that humanity can cure themselves of all the evils of this world through education or self-awareness, but there’s no breakthrough in this.

What seems ‘new’ in modern psychology actually has its roots in ancient mysticism. We think we’re ‘masters of our own destinies,’ pathetically repeating the same failures of our ancestors. Like Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, “There’s nothing new under the sun.” Centuries of dictators promising *utopia* but giving us *dystopia* with slavery and destitution demonstrate this tragic delusion, as does other human behaviour –spousal and child abuse, rape, murder, genocide, con-artistry, adultery, addictions, theft, etc. God’s not surprised though; he’s always understood the evil intents of the human heart that lead to such behaviour, as seen in Jeremiah 17 and echoed by Christ in the gospel of Matthew.

As C.S. Lewis has said, “Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a cleverer devil.”

Some reading this might wonder why I’m writing about ego and how it relates to the struggles of addicts. But if one looks closer, they’ll see that the problems of ‘addicts’ can also be the problems of anyone, in one form or another, and that the human ego—warped by sin—is the root cause of all our problems. We’re reminded of that sin of pride—inflated ego—and the evil it can drive us to in James 4:2.

Many people blame the devil for evil and misery in this world but in truth we make his job far too easy because we’ve asked him to give us what God would *not* give us –the right to always be right; to be as God. That shouldn’t surprise anyone since the devil tried to acquire the same thing because of *his* pride, and we know how that ended.

The problem is we've never earned that right; we never could because we're not God. The one who created life and died to restore life is the sole proprietor of that deed—the Lord Jesus. But the good news—the gospel—is the most beautiful paradox ever, and we can see it in Luke 9:23, 24, where Jesus tells us: “If anyone wishes to come after me he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it.”

It's amazing how it all comes back to the cross. To correct our evil, warped ego, we must *deny* that ego—kill it—like Christ was killed on the cross so we can truly live and become like him—other-centered, not self-centered. As we're instructed in Philippians 2:1-11, we are to follow his example. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. But in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.” (Phil.2:3, 4)

Jesus exemplified the antithesis of ego during his brief tenure on Earth. He chose to be nothing...for us and he foresaw the result of that sacrifice (Heb.12:2). He didn't come to get served or applauded; the love that hung on that cross poured out his whole life to serve humanity especially when he was hated. The only perfect being to ever walk this troubled Earth was the one who created us and died for us so we could be our *real selves*...not who we think we are.

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