

THE COMFORTABLE CROSS

Good morning! We're in the fourth part of our 6-part series on "Not a Fan." I'm glad you're still around. I'm glad you're still following. You're not just a fan. Why don't you say to your neighbor, "I am not a fan".

So, we've been talking about how to be a true follower of Jesus. We said that what separates a fan from a follower is commitment. A commitment that is total and complete. Not a flexitarian kind of commitment. You know, just like what Kyle said in the video, a flexitarian is a vegetarian who doesn't eat meat unless it is served.

This morning, we're going to talk about the comfortable cross. We're going to look at what the cross has become to many Christians. And what it should really be and its implications in our lives.

Let me ask you: If you got to choose between a Tempur-Pedic[®] mattress and a box-spring, what would you choose? What about having to choose between your favorite pair of tennis shoes and some wooden clogs? If you could choose between a weekend at a spa clinic and a weekend camping in the desert at the hottest time of the year, what would you choose?

I know, I know, these are all pretty loaded questions. But their common denominator is what? Comfort. All told, our society places pretty high value on comfort. There's a lot of money to be made on products that enhance people's comfort. Memory foam for your bed, Lazy-boys for your living room, body pillows, Snuggies, and we even found a way to turn steel into wool for the kitchen.

On top of that, there are TV shows that exploit our love of comfort. Ever heard of the show *Dirty Jobs*? It's a show that goes around and documents some of the world's filthiest, most uncomfortable jobs.

And we sit on our cushioned couches, laughing or wincing, all the while grateful we don't have to work that job.

But there's a danger in loving comfort too much, and I don't just mean putting on extra pounds. See, it seems that as we've continued to put more and more of an emphasis on being comfortable, our faith has followed suit. We've become Christians accustomed to comfort. We come to our buildings that are warm in the winter and air-conditioned in the summer. Our pews and chairs are padded. Even our Bibles are mostly soft, leather bound books, easy on the hands. And before you know it, it's not just the pews that are padded. The messages are padded with easy teaching. The doctrine becomes lifeless and leathery, and eventually the message of the Messiah becomes moral code mush.

In Luke 9:23, Jesus says, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me."*

So what do comfort-craving fans do with something like the cross? I mean, it's pretty hard to avoid the cross when you're a Christian, right? What can you do with a phrase like, "take up your cross"? What I've found is that fans eventually find a way to even make the cross comfortable. They create a comfortable idea of the cross and what it means for us today to take up our crosses. So the phrase, "We all have our crosses to bear" gets thrown around loosely, referring to even the most menial or everyday tasks and inconveniences.

And the cross gets pushed to the back of our sermons and Bible studies, only making its annual appearance at Easter. And even though it's on our churches, our t-shirts, and around our necks, we end up with a comfortable cross.

But what else are we supposed to do, right? The cross is a tough sell. It's bad enough that Jesus had to die on the cross, but why did He have to go and insist we all end up with our own crosses? Isn't that kind of ruining Christianity's hope for decent public relations? Doesn't the cross hinder our ability to recruit new people?

You're supposed to put your best foot forward, right? And don't we want more people to come to Jesus? That's supposed to be the point, isn't it? Having more people come to Jesus. So we try our best to make Christianity sound as appealing as possible, but what have we sacrificed in return?

(VIDEO)

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 Paul talks about how the world sees the cross – in verse 18 he writes, *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

For those living in the first century the cross was the ultimate symbol of weakness. For many, then and now, the message of the Gospel – that God came to earth in the form of man and was crucified – is complete foolishness.

I mean why would God use a symbol of torture, of death, of weakness to save the world? I suppose the idea of the cross seems more appealing to us because it's no longer used to execute people and we've dressed it up. We are used to seeing the cross as an ornament, decoration or a piece of jewelry. But if a first century Jew came in and saw an illuminated cross hanging from our walls – they would think we were sick. Imagine people walking around with a guillotine hanging around their neck or an electric chair dangling from their ears. For the Jews the cross meant weakness.

And I think that's God's point. That's what makes the cross so beautiful. God takes what, from a human perspective, is foolish. He chooses what has no glory and carries no honor. He finds the least likely symbol for love and life and says, “I'll use that.” God takes what the world says is foolish, demeaning, and shameful, and says “watch this” and turns it into the power of salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:18 says that he turns the foolishness of the cross into the power of salvation. Look down at verse 22: *“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and*

foolishness to Gentiles...for the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Who else but God could take a cross that represented defeat –

and turn it into a symbol of victory?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented guilt –

and turn it into the symbol for grace?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented condemnation –

and turn it into a symbol of freedom?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented pain and suffering –

and turn it into symbol of healing and hope?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented death –

and turn it into a symbol of life?

No one else could, but he can. What seems like the ultimate moment of God's weakness was in reality the ultimate moment of God's strength. Here's why that matters. Here's what I don't want you to miss. This is our one point for this message, and it's so important, it's the only thing you need to get from this morning:

What God Did For the Cross, He Can Do for You.

That's when you are the weakest – you are exactly where you need to be for God to be the strongest. The upside down truth of the cross is that when you are weak – you are strong. Look at verse 27 of 1 Corinthians 1 “*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*” It's not that God used the cross in spite of its weakness – he chose the cross because of its weakness.

Paul says that God chooses the weak things. Throughout Scripture God continually chose the weak over the strong. I came across some examples of that: Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was humiliated, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was proud,

Rahab was immoral, David had an affair, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was disobedient, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. The Bible is a long list of imperfect misfits who discovered that weakness is strength. So, God, do for us what HE did for the cross.

Though it seems backward to us, God teaches us that when we think we're strong we're really weak – but when we acknowledge our weakness and humble ourselves before the Lord we put ourselves in a position to receive His strength.

Paul talks more about this truth in his second letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 12 verses 9-10, it says *“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

God says to you, too, this morning, “My grace is sufficient for you.” You need not look anywhere else, just look to God to help you go through your most difficult situation. He is faithful and he will come through for you.

Many of you know that I’ve suffered from panic attacks for several years. That was due to my disobedience to God. Because in my early years as a Christian, I became self-sufficient thinking I can do things on my own and pretty much neglected Jesus. In short, I became backslidden, went back to my worldly ways. Until God in his grace drew me close to him again. But I struggled. As I came closer to God, I suffered the panic attacks as well.

And I would plead with God to heal me there and then but each time he would say, “My grace is sufficient for you.” He spoke to me through my pastor in Australia.

I told him what I was going through and he said, “Rolly, God wants you to know, my grace is sufficient for you.” And then a friend of mine in Jersey City, who I confided with, told me the same thing, “Rolly, God is saying, my grace is sufficient for you.” Am I healed? I would like to say ‘Yes’ but it comes every now and then although not as much as before but each time God reminds me, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

I remember one time, I just enrolled in my very first class as a Bible student in New York. In our first meeting, we were assigned to do a report on a particular Bible verse. I got Romans 12:1. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship.”

It was an oral report and at the time just thinking of doing an oral report before English-speaking students, there were about 15 of us, and expecting them to ask questions afterwards, already gave me a panic attack.

The day came for me to give a report. I already wanted to quit. But I came to class anyway, very anxious. I walked to the front slowly and held on tight to the podium because my knees were shaking. I started to speak. It was softer than my normal soft voice but I think my classmates heard me anyway or they pretended to hear me noticing that I was struggling. Until I was midway through my report when I felt my knees suddenly stopped shaking, and my voice became louder and I felt a confidence I never had before. Someone interrupted my report and asked a question, and I was amazed I gave an answer that amazed them as well. To cut a long story short, God came through for me at that most difficult moment in my life. His grace was sufficient for me.

Now, Paul says “I delight in my weakness – because when I am weak, then I am strong.” Now I don’t know anyone who naturally delights in their weakness. In fact most of us go to great lengths to disguise our weaknesses.

Like when you're on a job interview and they ask the dreaded question, "What's your greatest weakness?" How do you answer that? Well, I'll tell you what you don't want to do – you don't tell them your weakness – because if you do, they aren't going to hire you. You don't say, "I'm never on time – I constantly procrastinate – I have trouble getting along with coworkers – I am not sure how to turn on a computer." You don't say that.

But you have to say something. What do you say? Well you try to come up with a weakness that sounds more like a strength – I can be a little bit of a perfectionist. Or you say – I tend to be a bit of a workaholic. Why do we do that? Because in our world – in our economy – weakness isn't strength – strength is strength. There are 2000 self-help books published every year that communicate one message – you can do it. You have what it takes. Look deep and find the strength within yourself. But Paul says strength comes when we realize our weakness.

I read the story of a dad who said that over one spring break his 7-year old son had packed some toys and books into a back pack and insisted on hauling that thing around himself. He volunteered several times to carry it for him. But his son wanted to do it himself. It was clear that the boy wanted him and his wife to notice and point out how strong he was. They came to that conclusion when he would say to them repeatedly, "Look how strong I am!" But on one occasion they parked in a hotel parking lot late at night and they weren't very close to the entrance.

He knew the boy was tired, and he started off strong, but soon was struggling. With a heavy sigh he stopped and he didn't really say anything...he just turned and looked at his dad and dropped his backpack on the ground...

Dad picked it up and put it over his shoulder. They walked a few more steps and the boy stopped again...another heavy sigh...this time he reached up and dad scooped him up in his arm.

He was happy to carry not only his son's backpack, but also carry him.

I am like the little boy sometimes. I want to carry my own load to try to prove I'm strong. But I'm not. Only God is strong. When I admit I'm weak and turn to him, he scoops me up gently in his arms and shows His strength in my life. He does for me what he did for the cross. You see, it's part of my pride that I want to carry my own load – and I refuse to admit my weakness. But the cross makes it clear that when I am weak – He is strong.

And that's a test for followers. Will you, like Christ did before us, trust God enough to let your weakness be His strength? Because it's when we let go of our need for comfort, our need to be in control, our need to glory in our strengths or accomplishments or our paycheck or our trophies or our co-workers' approval or whatever it is that keeps you from abandoning a comfortable version of the cross—it's then that God does in our lives what he did in Christ's death.

It's then that God does in our hearts what He did for the cross. And He takes followers who were hanging by a thread and bolsters their spirits. He takes followers who were at their weakest moment and uses it for enormous kingdom good. He takes followers who were all but defeated and He turns their testimonies into life-giving messages of truth and hope, all to His glory.