

Mocked Between Malefactors
Luke 23:32-43

Before diving into our passage, I thought I'd share a legend regarding the second thief. It tells of how Mary, Joseph and Jesus were attacked by robbers when they fled Bethlehem to go to Egypt. Jesus was saved by the son of one of the robbers. The Christ child was so lovely that the young brigand couldn't bear to lay hands on him, but set him free, saying, "If ever there comes a time for having mercy on me, then remember me and forget not this hour." And that robber youth who saved Jesus as a child met him again, on Calvary; and this time Jesus saved him.

In a way, it's a nice story, but I like sticking with what we can rely on from the words of Luke. Why? Because that fanciful story detracts from the whole point of thief's repentance on the cross. Maybe someone centuries ago just couldn't swallow the idea of an ex-con asking the Son of God for his favor, and more than that, receiving eternal life with less than hours to live. So, he made a story about this thief, something that would justify Christ's grace to this unworthy-getting-what-he-deserved-scum-of-the-earth ... But that blurs, in a horrible way, what the Holy Spirit through Luke is telling us. At the heart of these verses is the idea that we don't have to earn our salvation; that, in reality, none of us can do anything to secure God's favor.

Part of Luke's genius was highlighting a character who had nothing to give Jesus. The Samaritan woman at the well could go and tell everybody in her town; Zaccheus had money that could go to the cause. But this guy? What can he do? Nothing. That's the point! Jesus' love doesn't depend upon what we do for him. When you get right down to it, any contribution that any of us make in comparison to what Christ has done is ...

pretty puny. All of us - even the purest of us - deserve heaven about as much as that crook did. And that is what Luke helps us to see, in such an amazing way. [Pause]

All four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – want us to know about the two criminals on either side of our Lord. For one thing, it was prophesied in the Old Testament. Isaiah wrote, “He was numbered among the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12). And Jesus himself references this very prophecy just one chapter earlier in Luke 22:37. He wasn’t numbered among the members of the religious establishment. He wasn’t numbered among the politically connected. He wasn’t numbered among the good, upstanding pillars of the community. He was numbered among the “transgressors.”

Jesus did exactly the opposite of what you and I would do – if we’re honest with ourselves. We want to get away from the dregs of human society. Jesus voluntarily became a part of the dregs himself. Throughout his life, Jesus aligned himself with the “riffraff” In his death, it was the same: he was crucified between two “malefactors,” as the KJV puts it – two wrongdoers (v. 33). You might have heard the saying, “Jesus was crucified not on the altar between two candles but on Golgotha between two thieves.” It’s a good saying, but according to Matthew and Mark, they were worse than mere thieves; they were men of violence, prepared to kill as well as to steal.

This sort of person seems wildly unsuited to be in proximity to the divine. Fleming Rutledge puts it like this: “Think about it ... think deeply about the profoundly strange – indeed unacceptable – nature of a crucified God nailed up between two bandits for the scorn of the passerby. Would you in a million years ever have dreamed of having such an objectionable fact at the heart of your faith?” [Pause]

I love how Luke tells the story of Christ’s passion. You can tell he wants us to be drawn into the story. We are invited to see ourselves in these two thieves. There are

aspects of us in both of them. We are like the one on the left: we say, in different words at different times, “If you are the Messiah, show it! And save us while you’re at it!” Like this thief, sometimes we don’t see any sign of Jesus’ power. How could the Son of God allow himself to be caught in this horrible situation? In the 1st century, no one wanted to be connected to anything so shameful – it was a sign of weakness, ugliness, failure ... But the most glorious irony of all is that this is how God has chosen to save us!

Now, look at the other vagabond. Like this man next to Jesus, you may find yourself blessed, blessed by seeing glory where others see nothing but a hideous scene of helplessness, torment & death. What was it that this second man saw in Jesus? Picture it for a moment: we have before us three men in the same ghastly predicament with nothing to distinguish one from another except the mocking sign above Jesus’ head: “King of the Jews.” What did this man see in that mangled, tortured face? What sort of kingship did he glimpse there? What do you see in the Crucified One hailed King of the Jews? [Pause]

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” That’s what the second thief said. In the OT, when God “remembers,” it has a distinct meaning. It doesn’t simply mean “to recall to mind.” That wouldn’t mean very much. When God “remembers,” he doesn’t just think about us. He acts for us – with power to save!

Somehow, that crucified criminal was able to see something that day that no one else saw. He saw Jesus reigning as a King, determining destinies, even in his tormented and dying state! Luke is telling us that to see Jesus this way is to see Him as He truly is and to understand the nature of His power. Not by signs and wonders, not by shock and awe, but by an ultimate act of self-sacrifice does Christ rule.

His power is made known through his death. Jesus has turned the meaning of kingship on its head. He is hailed as king at last, but in mockery. He receives his crown

– but it does not carry nobility – it carries agony. Here comes his royal cupbearer – only it’s a Roman soldier offering him the sour wine that poor people drank. Here is his royal banner, announcing his kingship to the world, but it is in fact a criminal charge.

His true royalty, though, shines out in his *prayer* and his *promise* – his prayer for God to forgive his abusers – and his promise that the thief will be with him in Paradise. That is Jesus’ reply to the second thief: *“This very day you will be with me in paradise.”*

Like a king on his way to enthronement, Jesus promises a place of honor and bliss to the one who requests it. William Barclay tells us that the word “paradise” here comes from a Persian word meaning “a walled garden.” When a Persian king wished to do one of his subjects a very special honor, he made him a companion of the garden, which meant he was chosen to walk in the garden with the King. Doesn’t that remind you of how Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden in the coolness of the day? Christ here is bringing back to us what was lost. It was more than immortality that Jesus promised the repentant thief. He promised him an honored place as a companion of the King in the garden of glory! [Pause]

You see, Jesus is saving people even as he hangs on the cross. Those who thought their taunts of him being “Messiah” and “saving others” wouldn’t come to pass missed what was taking place; because even as they hurl their taunts, Jesus is saving the lost. What they think is impossible for Jesus to achieve while nailed to the execution stake is precisely what he is accomplishing. Amidst the shadows of the cross, the Light of the World penetrates the darkness and provides access to God. The ripping of the temple curtain shows that no barrier exists between God and humanity that cannot be removed

by turning to God through Jesus. Stopping Jesus' power to save with some lumber and a few nails, is like trying to hold back a dam with Lincoln logs and thumb tacks.

If there was ever a passage that taught "it's never too late to turn to Christ," it's this one. So long as a person's heart beats, the invitation of Christ still stands. But at the same time, this passage does not in any way justify putting off such a decision to the end of one's life. Someone has said that the Bible records one deathbed repentance that no person may despair, and only one that no person may presume.

So what's our response? Phillip Melancthon states our response to the work of Jesus this way: "We are made alive by the word of grace promised in Christ: 'Paradise' ... And so we cling to Christ in faith, not doubting in the least that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, and that the resurrection of Christ is our resurrection. In a word, we do not doubt at all that our sins have been forgiven." [P]

I ask all of you now: Can you see yourself as one for whom Jesus died? Can you say with the second thief, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"? It was not only for bandits that Jesus died; it was for us too, with our masks of innocence and delusions of our own righteousness. His death was for me and for you.

As His life takes root in us, we will come to cherish more and more how it is that God has assigned infinite value to those who were desperate, destitute, and dead. And how through His crucifixion (and resurrection), we have experienced, and will forever experience, the incomparable love and power of our Savior Jesus Christ! Praise God!