

Title: **ONE TAKEN, THE OTHER LEFT**
Text: Luke 23:39-43
Subject: *Seven Lessons from the Penitent Thief*
Date: Sunday Evening — August 27, 2006
Tape # Z-9b
Readings: *Merle Hart and Ron Wood*

Introduction:

Turn with me to Luke 23:39-43. He did not learn it until he was in hell, but in hell the rich man learned that between him and Lazarus “*there is a great gulf fixed; so that they who would pass*” from one side to the other cannot (Luke 16:26). So it has been, so it shall be, and so it is. The human race is divided into two parts: sheep and goats, elect and reprobate, Jacobs loved of God and Esaus hated by him, vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath. Goats will never become sheep; and sheep will never become goats. Elect will never become reprobate; and reprobate will never become elect. Jacob will never become Esau; and Esau will never become Jacob. Vessels of mercy will never become vessels of wrath; and vessels of wrath will never become vessels of mercy.

The gulf was fixed in eternity. The division was made in the decree of God. The distinction was established in eternity. It will be made clear to all at Christ's second coming, in that great day when the Son of God sits in judgment upon his Great White Throne (Luke 17:33-36).

(Luke 17:33-36) “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it. (34) I tell you, in that night there shall be two *men* in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left. (35) Two *women* shall be grinding together; the one shall be taken, and the other left. (36) Two *men* shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.”

In that day, “*one shall be taken, and the other left.*” As it shall be in that day, so it is today. When the appointed time of love is come for the salvation of God's chosen, one is taken, and the other left. We see that fact vividly set before us in the two thieves who were crucified with the Lord Jesus.

(Luke 23:39-43) “And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. (40) But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? (41) And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. (42) And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. (43) And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

Only Luke was inspired to tell us of our Savior's abundant mercy and distinguishing grace bestowed upon this dying thief. It is a story that deserves to be written in gold, told often and remembered by all.

SALVATION BY GRACE

The *first* thing that is obvious in this story is the fact that salvation is altogether the work of God's free grace, altogether without works. This dying thief had no merit of any kind. He had no pre-disposition of heart toward the Son of God. He rendered no service to the Lord. He observed no ordinance. He was not baptized. He never united with, or even visited a church. He never observed the Lord's Supper.

Everything we know about this man tells us that he was a depraved sinner, a moral degenerate, whose life of infamous shame was about to be ended by penal execution.

Yet, this poor, wretched, degenerate man was saved. No explanation can be given for that fact except this — “*By grace ye are saved*” (Rom. 9:16; Eph. 2:1-5, 8-9; Titus 3:3-7). — “**BUT GOD!**”

(Romans 9:16) "So then *it is* not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy."

(Ephesians 2:1-5) "And you *hath he quickened*, who were dead in trespasses and sins: (2) Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: (3) Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. (4) But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, (5) Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)"

(Ephesians 2:8-9) "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: (9) Not of works, lest any man should boast."

(Titus 3:3-7) "For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, *and* hating one another. (4) But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, (5) Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; (6) Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; (7) That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

SOVEREIGN, DISTINGUISHING GRACE

Second, God's saving grace, in every instance of it, is set before us in Holy Scripture as sovereign, distinguishing grace. Certainly, that is obvious in the story of these two thieves. — Both of the other malefactors crucified with the Lord Jesus were guilty thieves, justly condemned. — Matthew and Mark tell us that both joined in the rabble of Pharisees and the soldiers, mocking the Lord of Glory and railing upon him.

Then there was a sudden change. One of the thieves ceased to curse the Savior and sued him for mercy, crying, "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*" — Both were equally near the Savior, one on his right hand and the other on his left. — Both saw and heard all that happened, during the six hours that he hung on the cross. — Both were dying men. — Both were suffering acute, torturous pain. — Both were alike wicked sinners. — Both needed forgiveness. — Yet one died as he had lived, hardened in sin, proud and without repentance, unbelieving and without hope. The other repented, believed, cried to the Son of God for mercy, and was saved.

What made the difference? Grace! Grace alone! — The penitent thief was made penitent because the Lord Jesus gave him life and faith by the power of his omnipotent grace. He snatched the dying thief from the very brink of hell and took him with him to heaven as a trophy of his rich, free and sovereign grace. His conversion cannot be accounted for in any other way. We can only say, "*Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight*" (Matt. 11:26).

How can two people hear the same sermon, from the same preacher, in the same condition, and one is converted while the other remains dead in sin? — How can one be totally indifferent and the other bowed in brokenness before God? — How can one pray for mercy, while the other blasphemes? — How can one see, and the other remain blind? There is only one answer that can be given to those questions. — "*The LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel*" (Ex. 11:7; 1 Cor. 4:7).

- In Election!
- In Redemption!
- In Effectual Calling!

(1 Corinthians 4:7) "For who maketh thee to differ *from another*? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive *it*, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received *it*?"

TIMELY GRACE

Third, let me show you something that many fail to see in the conversion of this dying thief. — Grace is always on time. Many say, concerning this man, "He was saved just in the nick of time." But that is hardly the case. He was saved precisely at the divinely appointed time. He could not have been saved at any other time; and he could not have been saved at a better time.

He could not have been saved at any other time because, for him, this was "*the time of love*," when he must be called (Gal. 4:4-6).

(Galatians 4:4-6) "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, (5) To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. (6) And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father."

Some are saved in youth. Some are saved in the middle of life. And some saved in old age. But all who are saved are saved at the only time they could be saved, because for each of us it took the whole experience of our ruin to bring us to our Savior.

- Gomer
- The Prodigal
- Onesimus

And he could not have been saved at a better time. You might think, "But, wouldn't it have been better for him to have lived longer, that he might serve and honor Christ upon the earth?" Let me answer that question by asking you...

- What human being has ever been more useful?
- What man has ever been more influential for good?
- What person has been such a blessing to so many others?
- Who has ever been more instrumental for the glory of his maligned, blasphemed, and ridiculed Redeemer than this man?

Every saved sinner is saved at God's appointed time; and each one is saved at the best time.

THE MEANS OF GRACE

The *fourth* thing that strikes me about the conversion of this man is this: — **The means of grace is not always obvious**. We know that "*faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God*" (Rom. 10:17). We know that sinners are "*born-again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever... And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you*" (1 Pet. 1:23-25). But many point to the dying thief and say, "That man was saved without hearing the Gospel." Was he? No. Let me remind you of the things he heard, as he hung upon the cross. I do not know what he heard, or did not hear beforehand. But as he hung by his dying Savior, he heard and saw the Gospel as clearly as anyone ever could.

- He heard him hailed as "*the King of Israel*" (Matt. 27:42).
- He heard that the man hanging beside him had claimed to be the Son of God. — "*He said, I am the Son of God*" (Matt. 27:43).
- He heard the chief priests and scribes say, "*He saved others; himself he cannot save*" (Mark 15:31).
- He heard the Lord Jesus himself pray, probably just as he and the other thief had railed upon him, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34).

- How many times he heard people that day crying, “Save!” “Save!” “Save!” to the Savior, as they derided him!
- He read Pilate’s testimony, “*THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS*” (Luke 23:38; John 19:19).
- And he saw the Lamb of God dying as a substitute in the place of a guilty man (Barabbas), who was released from death because he died in his place.

THE CHARACTER OF FAITH

Fifth, the dying thief shows us the character of true, saving faith. This man stands before us as a defining example of God-given faith (vv. 39-42).

(Luke 23:39-42) “And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. (40) But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? (41) And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. (42) And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

Here are seven things that are always characteristics of that faith that comes by the gift and operation of God the Holy Spirit. True faith...

- Is the result of conviction, arises from Holy Spirit conviction.
- Acknowledges justice. — O fall down and own that the sentence of the law which curses you for sin is just. Denounce the pride and self-righteousness of your heart.
- Confesses sin.
- Confesses Christ’s holiness. — “*This man has done nothing amiss.*”
- Confesses Christ as Lord and King.
- Looks to Christ alone for mercy. — “*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*”
- Obtains God’s salvation (v. 43).

(Luke 23:43) “And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

This man’s faith was, in all those respects, precisely the same as that which God gives to every heaven-born soul. Yet, his faith in Christ is the most remarkable display of faith to be seen in all the Word of God, the most remarkable faith to be found in the history of the world! — He trusted Christ as God his Savior, his Lord and King, when all others had forsaken him, as he was dying!

A WILLING SAVIOR

Sixth, this inspired narrative declares in bold letters that the Lord Jesus Christ is willing to save all who come to God by him, and “*able to save to the uttermost*” (Heb. 7:25). The Lord Jesus Christ is able to save any sinner, in any circumstance, in any place, at any time. And he is willing to save. But that is not all. — The Son of God will save all who come to God by him (John 6:37-40).

(John 6:37-40) “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. (38) For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. (39) And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. (40) And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

- No one can come to Christ (John 6:44).
- Anyone may come to Christ.
- Someone shall come to him.
- And all who come to him shall be saved by him.

GLORY NEAR

Seventh, this brief history of the dying thief tells us how near we are to Glory. Heavenly Glory is but a breath away! What a consolation that fact ought to be to us all, especially when we find ourselves dying. Heaven is but a breath away. Our Savior said to this new-born soul who would soon cease to live in his tortured body, "*Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*"

- Without works past.
- Without works future.
- Altogether by the work of Christ!

That word "*today*" speaks volumes. It tells us that as soon as this earthly house, this tabernacle of clay is dissolved, we have a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. — "*To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord*" (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 4:17-5:9).

(2 Corinthians 4:17-18) "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory; (18) While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen *are* temporal; but the things which are not seen *are* eternal."

(2 Corinthians 5:1-9) "For we know that if our earthly house of *this* tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (2) For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: (3) If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. (4) For we that are in *this* tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. (5) Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing *is* God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. (6) Therefore *we are* always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (7) (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) (8) We are confident, *I say*, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. (9) Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him."

And in that blessed state, in that place called heaven, we shall be with Christ! What is heaven like? Look yonder to the assembly around the throne. What are their joys, their feelings, their happiness? All is explained by this simple expression, — they are with Christ.

If the sheep are with the Shepherd, — if the members are with the Head, — if the saints are with him who loved them and gave himself for them, — if the Bride is with her Beloved, — if the redeemed are with the Redeemer, — if the saved are with the Savior, all is well. Nothing is lacking. Their joy is full!

I do not know and cannot describe heaven is, but the name of that city is Jehovah-shammah, "*the Lord is there*" (Ezek. 48:35). I want no more. I ask no more. I can have no more. — "*Christ is All!*" Well does the Psalmist sing, "*In Thy presence is fulness of joy.*"

(Psalms 17:15) "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."

(Psalms 27:4) "One *thing* have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple."

"Jesus, Thou art the sinner's Friend
As such I look to Thee.
Now in the bowels of Thy love,
O Lord, remember me.

Remember Thy pure word of grace,
Remember Calvary,
Remember all thy dying groans,
And then remember me.

Thou wondrous Advocate with God,
I yield myself to Thee;
While Thou are sitting on the throne,
Dear Lord, remember me.

I own I'm guilty, own I'm vile,
Yet Thy salvation's free;
Then in Thy all abounding grace,
Dear Lord, remember me.

However forsaken or distressed,
However oppressed I be,
However afflicted here on earth,
Do Thou remember me.

And when I close my eyes in death,
And creature helps all flee,
Then, O my dear Redeemer God,
I pray remember me."

APPLICATION

When Joseph had interpreted the chief butler's dream, how pathetically does he plead with him! "*Think on me when it shall be well with thee*" (Gen. 40:14). But such is the base ingratitude of man, that all was in vain. When the butler was restored to he cared nothing for Joseph in prison. Exalted men seldom care for needy souls. But it is not so with the King of kings. He is ever the Friend of poor sinners. He remembers us in our low estate. For us he hung on the accursed tree between two accursed sinners. One was taken, the other left. You and I are represented by both.

In the saved thief we see the marvellous power of God's sovereign grace. Here is a reviler changed into a suppliant. What caused the change? Let every proud notion of self-righteousness, self-worth, and freewill forever perish! Fall down before the Son of God and adore his distinguishing grace. One malefactor was left to himself and went to hell blaspheming. The other died in faith, trusting Christ, and praying, worshipping him. He was snatched, by omnipotent grace, from the jaws of hell, as a brand our Savior would not allow to be burned. Do you see your nature to be as wicked and your state as desperate as this thief's? If so, your soul is humbled before him. Do you see that nothing but the same grace of Christ can save you? If so, you will exalt the free grace of God in Christ. O my soul, exalt the mercy, love and grace of Christ!

Oh, may God the Holy Spirit teach you to pray as he taught this man to pray, "*Lord, Remember me*. There is no Savior but you, no salvation but by you. I am a hopeless, helpless sinner; unless you save me, I must be damned forever. You are the King. Yours is the kingdom. O bring me with you into your kingdom!" If God will grant you such faith in the Savior, Christ Jesus, you will soon be in Glory with the same Lord, who "*is rich*" in mercy "*unto all who call on him*" (Rom. 10:12).

Oh, what a great magnet the crucified Christ is to poor, needy, helpless sinners! — "*I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die*" (John 12:32-33).

Amen