

Two Thieves
Luke 23:32-43
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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

- I. Introduction: Our text for today is taken from Luke, Chapter 23. I've titled today's message "Two Thieves," in reference to the 2 men crucified alongside of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I suggest to you that in some respects, we all bear similarity to both of these 2 law breakers. But their eternal destinies were not one and the same. And I believe there's much to be learned concerning our own eternal destiny and the validity of our hope for salvation as we examine both the similarities as well as the distinctions between these two as recorded for us in God's Word.

- II. Text – Luke 23:32-43: Now Luke 23 begins with the account of Jesus being brought before Pilate, and subsequently sentenced to death by crucifixion. And picking up in verse 32 we read, ***"And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him <Christ> to be put to death."*** A malefactor is a criminal, a law breaker. In the accounts of Matthew and Mark they are referred to as "two thieves." Continuing in verse 33... ***"³³And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. ³⁴Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. ³⁵And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. <According to Mark's account these rulers were the Jewish chief priests – Jews who expected a Messiah chosen of God to come on the scene – but one who would subdue Rome and establish a kingdom on earth – not One who would die to establish a spiritual kingdom.> ³⁶And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, ³⁷And saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. ³⁸And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. <Now keep in mind that these two criminals witnessed all that was taking place and all that was said. Interestingly in John's account we're told how the Chief Priests asked Pilate to change the inscription to read that Jesus claimed that He was King of the Jews, but he refused to do so, sticking to a proclamation of truth, whether he personally believed it or not.***

Now before we go to verse 39, you should know that although it is not recorded by Luke, according to the accounts given by Matthew and Mark, both thieves had joined in this same derision of Christ earlier.

But now as we get to Luke 23:39 and following, a dramatic change has taken place within the heart of one of the thieves. One continued mocking Christ as they both had previously. We see this in verse 39 ...

³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. ⁴⁰But the other <the one who before had mocked Christ as well, now...> answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? <The word translated “condemnation” there comes from the same word that gives us the word “judgment.” As the words that follow indicate, this man had come to see that there was a judgment to face beyond his physical death. And there was a judgment that Christ Himself was enduring on the cross, but not for His own sins. And He says in verse 41 to the other thief concerning this condemnation or judgment...> ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

III. Similarities: I chose this text because Luke’s account of the crucifixion is the only record of the distinguishing mercy and grace that the Lord granted unto one of these two criminals. As it pertains to these two men, the other gospel accounts make no distinctions, which shows how much they actually had in common. So let’s begin there – with the similarities between these two thieves – what they had in common. Consider this:

A. Their Similarities:

1. Both were malefactors – law breakers. Many believe they were guilty of similar crimes in that they were tried and punished together. As I’ve pointed out, in Matthew and Mark they are referred to as thieves, but due to the severity of their punishment, many think their crimes of theft may have included violence, perhaps even murder. What we do know is that they were evil sinners – wicked enough according to the Roman law to be sentenced to the cruel and awful death by way of crucifixion. They deserved to die.
2. Since they were sentenced by the Roman government to death by crucifixion, it is believed that they likely were both Jews. As such they both were likely familiar with the writings of the prophets and shared in all the advantages the Jews had in being under the Old Covenant Law, with all its ceremonies through which Christ and the way of salvation (the Gospel itself) was set forth in picture and type.
3. Their experience during their last hours on earth were similar in that they both heard and witnessed the same things.
4. Fourthly, as with all by nature (i.e. - as we come into this world) they too were depraved sinners – born without spiritual life and with no predisposition to approach God according to His terms.

As I mentioned, in Matthew and Mark we're told that they joined in with the mocking of Christ by others. Let me read that to you from Matthew 27, beginning in verse 41: ***"Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, ⁴²He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. ⁴³He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. ⁴⁴The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth."*** That's another way of saying they cast upon Him the same reproach. And likewise in Mark 15, verse 32b we read, ***"And they that were crucified with him reviled him."*** So a short time before the change of heart took place in the penitent thief, both thieves had joined in the railing against Christ, showing no evidence of God-given faith at that time.

5. Both men were dying the same death, on the cusp of entering eternity. Both were helpless to save themselves – both physically and spiritually speaking. Physically, their hands and feet were nailed to a cross where they hung helpless on each side of Christ, but they were justly dying for their transgressions under the Roman law.
6. In summary, here's what they had in common: There was nothing about either of these two depraved, lawbreakers that could possibly find them acceptable in God's sight.

B. Our Similarities: Now consider how all men and women (including you and me) have something in common with these two thieves.

1. According to God's Word, we too are lawbreakers before God – depraved sinners with nothing meritorious to present for acceptance. Unlike in our civil laws, God requires perfection in thought and deed because He is holy and will accept nothing less. And He says of us [Cite Romans 3:23 (***"All have sinned..."***) and 6:23a (***"For the wages of sin..."***)]. That's all that any of us can earn as sinners – eternal death and destruction.
2. Just as these two were privileged in their last hours (if not significantly so before then, being Jews) – privileged to be presented with the Gospel (as I'll elaborate on in a moment), so are we. They had access to knowing God's way of salvation, just as all do who will hear this message today. But as with the thief who perished, none of us will come to Christ for salvation God's way, apart from God's regenerating grace. Aren't you glad Romans 6:23 continues beyond the "wages of sin being death." [Cite Romans 6:23b (***"...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."***)]. He must have mercy on us. We can't even believe on Him apart from His enabling us to do so. As Christ said in John 6:44a, ***"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him:..."*** This means we're just as helpless to save ourselves as these two thieves were. The one wasn't saved because of his free-will decision to come.

3. Like the thieves, we too all begin our religious journeys, railing against Christ in this sense – as we initially (and naturally as fallen, depraved sinners) dare to imagine God could save us based upon something that proceeds from us – my so-called free-will decision, my act of faith, my good works and / or sincere intentions, etc. That’s a mockery of the Lord of the Bible because the Bible is clear, that all the conditions for a sinner to be saved were fully met by the doing and dying of the Lord of Glory, the God-man, who lived and died to save His dear children. He bore the full wrath of God due unto the sins of those He came to save and yet, in our natural spiritual blindness and ignorance, we ascribe something that we do in rivalry with that which only God in the flesh could do, as though we make the real difference in our salvation – not bowing to the truth that NOTHING but the blood of Jesus, Christ the Savior could save me. That’s why God “**...commandeth all men everywhere to repent**” as we’re told in Acts 17:30b.
4. And finally, just like these two thieves, you and I are on the cusp of eternity. No matter your age, it really is just around the corner when you consider an eternal time line – the brevity of this life, compared to all eternity. That puts us all in our last hours doesn’t it? And we too have nothing to offer God of our own production. We’re at His mercy.

IV. The Distinctions: Well there’s good news. Praise God, there was something which made a distinction between these two thieves. And thereby, we can rejoice that there is hope, a good hope, even for malefactors / law breakers / sinners, just like you and me.

A. Distinguishing Grace: First and foremost, it’s important to recognize what (or more accurately Who) made the difference. We see the clear evidence that saving grace was bestowed on the one thief so blessed, but let’s not confuse these effects of salvation with the cause. Given the similarities between these two, there is but one explanation for why one was snatched from the jaws of hell, while the other was left to that which he deserved. So what’s the difference? BUT GOD!. In Eph. 2:4-9, Paul wrote to fellow believers, “**But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, ⁵Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) ⁶And hath raised us up together,** <Due to this union with Christ, the elect collectively died, was buried and raised again with Christ – not physically but in Him, their Representative. And by that same resurrection power He raises these objects of His mercy and grace to live, both a) spiritually – spiritually giving them life and making them willing in the day of His power (Psa. 110:3), and b) eternally – life everlasting. “...He raised us up together...> **and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: ²That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. ³For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: ⁴Not of works,** <nothing you do> **lest any man should boast.**” God gets all the glory!

Don't miss the distinguishing, sovereign grace of God on display here in Luke's account. Both thieves were wicked sinners in need of forgiveness. Both saw and heard the same things in their last hours. Both were dying in pain on each side of the Savior. Yet one died in his natural state, hardened in heart while the other died in God-given faith and repentance, in need of (and asking for) mercy. We naturally don't want to be at the mercy of anyone, but see what a blessing it really is to be brought to see your desperate need for God's mercy and grace in Christ! If you truly perceive your need for that – you've got it because that requires the God-given, blood-bought gift of faith. The Lord makes all the difference. He made a distinction between these two in:

1. Electing grace: One was chosen of God. Speaking to believers Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:3-5: ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: ⁴According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: ⁵Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,"***
2. Secondly, the Lord made a distinction between these two in Redeeming grace:
 - (a) We see this as we continue in Ephesians 1. In verse 5 He described those chosen ones as having been predestinated according to the good pleasure of his will, continuing in verse 6 saying, ***"To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. ⁷In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;***
 - (b) Think of these 3 crosses. On 2 of them hung sinners. There is a sense in which you could say they had sin in them. Adam's sin made them sinners and sin is what sinners do. And yet the One hanging on the cross in the middle had no sin in Him. But He was dying a just death for sin that was on Him – imputed to Him. As Paul said of those who are saved in 2 Cor. 5:21, ***"For he hath made him to be sin for us <He had sin on Him – imputed to Him>, who knew no sin; <no sin in Him> that we <those whose sins were on Him> might be made the righteousness of God in him."*** They have righteousness on them – imputed to them, but not in them, but they are accounted righteous in Him. They have His righteousness put to their account! That means this one low-life thief is as acceptable in God's sight as the Apostle Paul – both accepted based upon the same, perfect imputed righteousness of their Savior! One thief died in His sins. The other was watching His very redemption through the blood (the death) of His Savior whereby his sins were remitted – the penalty extracted, the debt forgiven – all according to the riches of His grace!

3. Thirdly, the Lord made a distinction between these two in Regenerating grace: There is an irresistible call heeded by those born of the Spirit. If we continue in Ephesians 1, where Paul had described those who are saved as redeemed by His blood, according to the riches of His grace, he adds in verse 8... ***“Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; ⁹Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, <the Gospel and our interest in it> according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself:”*** I marvel at the various providential means by which God brings His chosen, redeemed children to faith and belief of the Gospel. He makes His way of salvation known to them and loved by them. They discover that nothing but God’s mercy and grace in Christ will do for them.

- V. The Gospel Set Forth: Now consider what these 2 thieves heard and saw in their dying hours.
- A. They saw the Savior’s hands and feet nailed to cross. They heard Him ridiculed and mocked (as they both originally joined in with) and yet they heard the Savior pray, ***“...Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...”*** (Lk 23:34b). Keep in mind that shortly after the crucifixion came the Day of Pentecost. And so it’s likely that many of the same people present at the cross were among the 3000 or so converted that day under Peter’s preaching (Acts 2). I believe that, just as He had in His high priestly prayer of John 17, – that Christ here was praying for His own – those who had yet to be converted at this time. But these thieves heard His prayer addressed to His heavenly Father.
 - B. It is likely at some point these thieves would have seen the inscription written on the cross upon which Christ was crucified – the words which (in the providence of God) Pilate had refused to alter. This proclaimed in three different languages the truth that He, Jesus of Nazareth, was the King of the Jews – the promised Messiah.
 - C. And these thieves heard some truth in the derision by others of Christ as they said, ***“...He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.”*** (Lk 23:35b). Their derision could be Gospel truth heard by dying thieves. By God-given faith, could not the one thief become persuaded that this One who prayed to His Father, who according to Matthew’s account had claimed to be the Son of God, this One who saved others, might indeed be the promised Messiah of which the Old Testament prophets spoke?
 - D. It’s very possible that God may have brought to the memory of the penitent thief these words of Isaiah the Prophet, describing events as if they had already taken place – describing the promised Messiah as ***“...he <who> was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”*** (Isa 53:5). Do you see the substitutionary work of the Savior for His people in this prophecy? Perhaps the dying thief recalled this.

- E. Might the thieves think, could this be He who cried out in the Psalm of the cross, Psalm 22, sayings such as **“...they pierced my hands and my feet”** (Psa. 22:16b)? Or **“They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture”** (Psa. 22:18). And **“All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, ⁸He trusted on the LORD that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.”** (Psa. 22:7-8).
- F. Well, regardless of how the penitent thief came to hear and believe the Gospel, we know that to be the case. First because God makes it clear in so many places that the Gospel preached and believed is God’s prescribed means by which he saves. We’re told that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), that He who believes the Gospel shall be saved and he that believes it not shall be damned (Mk 16:15), etc.
- G. And we can know that the one thief came to know the Savior and His way of salvation by reflecting on dying words. A few years ago, Mark Pannell preached an excellent message emphasizing the words of the penitent thief, showing what we can know he understood by the things he said. His message title was taken from his words, “Lord, Remember Me.” So, let’s examine further what was spoken by these two criminals.
1. First, in verse 39, we read, **“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.”** Now we know from the context that this was said in derision; however, these words bear some resemblance to man’s natural, initial religious approach to God for acceptance in this sense: There’s always an “IF.” Remember from Matthew’s account how the crowd, along with the two thieves, mocked Christ saying, **“If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.”** (Mt. 27:42b). In other words, if you’ll be the Messiah we expect, if you’ll be the Christ who will save us according to the way that seems right to us, why, then we will believe you to secure our own salvation. We’re prone to approach God as if we’re bartering with Him for our own salvation. Preachers tell us “IF you’ll do so and so, make your decision, repeat this prayer, walk this aisle, profess Him in baptism, slip up your hand to profess your need of Him – IF, IF, IF you’ll meet the condition, then in exchange, God will save you. And so we make our decision or slip up our hand, or walk that aisle or repeat that prayer, daring to imagine that God is now indebted to save us because we agreed to our part to seal the presumed deal. Thank God He grants His people repentance from such God-dishonoring notions! This thief couldn’t walk an aisle. His feet were nailed to a cross. He couldn’t slip up a hand in response. His hands were nailed to a cross. In the inability of the two thieves to save themselves physically, we have a vivid illustration of the helplessness of sinners (in bondage to their fallen natures) to save themselves spiritually from the just wrath of God against their sins!

2. Now look again at verse 40 at the words of the penitent thief, "***But the other answering rebuked him*** <his partner in crime>, ***saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?*** <or judgment> 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.***"

For more detail, you may want to listen to Mark's message on this, but in the interest of time, let me briefly summarize the observations he made. He noted how this one thief, blessed of God:

- (a) Stated the truth about his own sin, saying we're getting what we justly deserve. He was convinced of sin as we know from John 16 that all are who come to Christ.
- (b) He stated the truth about Christ having no sin – having done nothing amiss.
- (c) So he came to see that Christ was not here for any wrong doing of His own but for some other reason. He knew that Christ's punishment was not due to the result of His own sin.
- (d) And his own words reveal that he knew Christ's death would have results – that through it a kingdom was being established.
- (e) He called Christ LORD – God our Savior. In I Cor. 12:3 we are told that "***...no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost.***" (I Cor. 12:3b). Unbelievers may (and often do) use the title Lord, but they can't acknowledge the Jesus of the Scriptures to be Lord unless they are taught of God.
- (f) And finally consider his words, "Remember Me." He expected the resurrection (that Christ would live) and the establishment of a spiritual kingdom – a reign of grace through the righteousness being established right before the eyes of this thief. Those were the words of David when He prayed that God would visit him with salvation, beginning that plea with "***Remember me, O LORD...***" (Psa 106:4a). This was a cry for mercy much like that of the publican who cried, "***...God be merciful (propitious) to me a sinner.***" These were the comments of a chosen, redeemed, and now a regenerated (born again) sinner.

H. Christ's response: And we can know with certainty that is so by Christ's response to his plea in verse 43: "***And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.***" What good news for someone like him / for someone like us, on the cusp of entering eternity! As we read from 2 Cor. 5:8, for a believer, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

VI. Closing:

Well, nothing can be clearer from Luke's account concerning these two thieves than this: that nothing that proceeded from either one could merit anything for him before God that would distinguish him from the other. The Lord made all the difference by distinguishing the one in electing grace, redeeming grace, and regenerating grace – all based upon the doing and dying of the God-man on the cross in the middle. And as Christ assured Him, He would be distinguished from the other by God's resurrecting grace into His presence in heaven's eternal glory!

We see salvation evidence in the words of the penitent thief, but it was the saving work of God almighty alone, through the redeeming work Jesus Christ was finishing on the cross that made the real difference. To believe otherwise, that your salvation is conditioned on how you respond, or on some causal role you play exposes one who has no real need for the mercy and grace of God. To think that way is to imagine God is indebted to save you in exchange for you doing your part – as so many lost sinners tragically imagine. Your sins must be punished. And they will be – either through the eternal condemnation justly due unto them or else they already have been punished in your Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore the full penalty due unto all the sins of all He came to save.

Many of you, like me, had a religious upbringing. And more often than not (as with me) it was not under the preaching and teaching of the Gospel of God's sovereign grace in Christ. I recall upon first hearing of the undeniable biblical truth of election and other related Gospel doctrine, asking myself the natural question, "How do I know if I'm among those chosen by God unto salvation in Christ?" Well, we can't know the secret things of God, but we can know personally if we are His (among His elect) by the 20/20 hindsight of God-given faith. And God assures us of that.

In John 10, Christ refers to the elect of God as His sheep, saying in verse 11, "***I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.***" A few verses later we read how some of the Jews were murmuring and said to Jesus that if He was the Christ to say so plainly. He replied I've told you but don't believe me. And in verse 26 he added, "***But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep,*** <You don't believe because I didn't come to die for you and purchase the blood-bought gift of faith. So who are they?> ***as I said unto you. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: ²⁸And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.***

So, how are God's chosen distinguished from the non-elect? They hear and follow Jesus Christ. Like the dying thief, they approach God for acceptance based solely on the merit of Christ's doing and dying – His very righteousness freely imputed to all those for whom He died. Have you been so convinced that nothing else will do for you? That thief (blessed of God) was. And likewise, all of His sheep are in God's appointed time – made willing in the day of His power, when God grants spiritual life and the gifts of genuine faith and repentance whereby we come to believe and love God's Gospel – His way of saving sinners as set forth in His word.

As Christ assures us in John 6:37: ***“All that the Father giveth me <those chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world> shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”*** He then addressed those who were murmuring against Him a few verses later in verse 44 (as I read earlier) adding, ***“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me.”***

So believers don't come to Christ in exercise of their free will decision. Their wills are changed. They come needing (and receiving) God's everlasting mercy and grace, knowing their acceptance to be in the beloved – the Lord Jesus Christ. And in God's due time, that revealed truth turns all of God's sheep into mercy beggars. If all your hope for eternal life is in Him and His finished work in your place – then rejoice with that dying thief in knowing of your election, redemption, and calling (and of your sure future resurrection) – all by the mercy and grace of the Lord in Christ our Savior!

Let's close with that old hymn, “There is a Fountain.” It begins, “There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emanuel's vein.” And then we sing,

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day
And there may I, though vile as he
Wash all my sins away!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.