

Luke 23:33-43; 22:19,20

Mutual Desires of Remembrance

Lord, remember me...23:42; This do in remembrance of me – 22:19

Perhaps no other portion in Scripture magnifies the grace of Christ like this account of the dying penitent thief. Here was a condemned criminal literally within a breath of hell who managed in that breath to make a request to Christ that gained salvation to his soul. We certainly learn from this narrative that a sinner has up to his last breath to call upon Christ for salvation and Christ will be willing to comply.

There are those, of course, who abuse this story and reason in such a way as to suggest that they'll take in their fill of sin while they live in this world and shortly before they die they'll call on Christ to save them then. The problem with that kind of reasoning is that it plainly shows a love for sin but a desire to escape the consequences of sin in the end. The truth of the matter is that so long as you love your sin you'll never be willing to part with it. The thief on the other side of Christ wanted to escape the consequences of his sin but he didn't want to part with it and so we hear his cry in v. 39 *If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.*

The difference between these two thieves is that one showed very clear evidence of a changed heart while the other showed himself to be a sinner to the end. J.C. Ryle makes a vivid comparison of these two thieves in his commentary when he writes: *We are told that two malefactors were crucified together with our Lord, one on His right hand and the other on His left. Both were equally near to Christ. Both saw and heard all that happened, during the six hours that He hung on the cross. Both were dying men, and suffering acute pain. Both were alike wicked sinners, and needed forgiveness. Yet one died in his sins, as he had lived, hardened, impenitent, and unbelieving. The other repented, believed, cried to Jesus for mercy, and was saved.*

I want to focus this morning, in particular, on this thief's cry for salvation. That cry is contained in just a couple of words – *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.* We could reduce it even further by the words: *Lord, remember me.* Here, then, is a man that wanted to be remembered by Christ. And in the previous chapter where we have the account of the Lord Jesus instituting the Lord's supper we have the expressed desire of Christ to also be remembered. *This do in remembrance of me* he says in 22:19.

The Christian life, you might say, is a life of mutual remembrance. The Christian wants Christ to remember him and Christ wants the believer to remember him. In preparation for our time around the Lord's table this morning I'd like to raise and then answer the question:

What do we find in these remembrance statements that compels us to remember Christ?

Looking at these texts let's consider first that we're compelled to remember Christ:

I. Because of Our Desire to be Remembered by Christ

Remember me the condemned thief says in v. 42 *remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom*. When you keep in mind the kind of person this thief was it seems rather incredible that he would call on Christ to remember him. He's called a malefactor in v. 39. The word means simply a criminal. In one other place it's translated by the word *evil doer*. We're not told exactly what kind of crimes these malefactors had committed but their crimes were evidently serious enough for the one to acknowledge that he deserved to die for his crimes. Perhaps he was guilty of armed robbery, perhaps even murder and robbery.

The point that I'm trying to convey just now is that in the case of most criminals they don't want to be remembered by Christ or by God, they are hopeful instead that they'll be forgotten by God or that they can somehow be hidden from God. We find this desire in the words of Ps 10:11 *He hath said in his heart, God hath forgotten: he hideth his face; he will never see [it]*. They know in their hearts that their sins can bring on them not only the judgment of men which is delegated by God but they also bring to themselves the judgment of God following the judgment of men. But in their attempt to suppress the knowledge of God they harbor the hope that God will forget them.

Why would it be, therefore, that this thief would want to be remembered by Christ? If he deserves condemnation why would he want to be remembered by the One who not only had the power to kill but to cast into hell? And the obvious answer is that he perceived something in Christ that led him to hope for mercy.

This is rather incredible to think about. In a sense this thief was seeing Christ at his weakest. Here is a man that in spite of his character was nailed to a cross. What hope could be placed in a man who, like himself, was being executed and was dying a slow and painful death?

Would you notice that in spite of the circumstances surrounding Christ, the penitent thief acknowledges Christ's authority by referring to him as *Lord*. *Lord, remember me*, he says. He also confesses Christ's righteousness when he says to the other thief in v. 41 that he and his partner in crime, so to speak, were receiving what they deserved *but this man hath done nothing amiss*.

It's rather interesting to note that this thief quite suddenly develops a jealousy for Christ's honor when he says to the thief that was railing upon Christ *Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?* (v. 40). There's a sermon in that question. And there's certainly an irony that applies to all sinners that they suffer the same condemnation. There was Christ suffering as a substitute for sinners, suffering so that sinners would not have to come under condemnation and yet by refusing Christ they choose to suffer their own condemnation.

So the penitent thief recognized the authority of Christ, the innocence of Christ and became jealous for the honor of Christ and in that recognition of Christ he called on Christ

to remember him. We certainly recognize also in the penitent thief that he knew that death was not the end. There is life after death and this thief knew that Christ would be entering his kingdom after his death. *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*

This is something that we sometimes lose sight of from a practical perspective. We're so concerned about here and now. We're so concerned about the challenges and trials and difficulties that we face in this life that we make the mistake of thinking that Christianity must be geared to the here and now if it's going to be of any value to us. We forget that our days in this world are short – are but a vapor that vanishes so quickly into the cold air.

To those that lose sight of eternity's values and become completely attached to this world, they fulfill the words of Paul to the Corinthians when he tells them in 1Cor. 15:19 *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.* Do you see Paul's meaning? A religion that can't take you beyond this life is a religion that can only lead to misery. The penitent thief certainly saw beyond this life and with respect to what follows this life he called on Christ to remember him.

And so by observing the character of the penitent thief and seeing the evidence of regenerating grace in his life even at that late hour of his life we too should desire and call on Christ to remember us. Remember us, O Lord, even though our sins make us criminals before God. Remember us even though we're the ones that are worthy to suffer. Remember us who formerly had no concern for your honor but now have such a concern.

Remember us with regard to your mercy. Remember us with regard to your Kingdom. Remember us who hope in your mercy that we may gain thy favor in the day of judgment instead of the condemnation we deserve.

How do you see yourself today? Have you, like the penitent thief, come to see yourself as justly condemned? Do you see yourself as coming short of God's glory? Has your heart been changed with regard to your desire for Christ's honor? Do you believe in his authority and in his righteousness? If you do then you'll certainly want him to remember you – to remember you for good.

And you'll want God to remember about Christ the same things that you remember about Christ. You'll want God to remember that your sins have been atoned for. You'll want God to remember the high price that his Son paid to redeem you. You'll want God to remember the promises he has made to his Son – promises that have been ratified by the blood of his Son. And you'll want God to remember especially that you belong to him. He has purchased you.

So the words of our text compel us to remember Christ from the vantage point of our desire to be remembered by Christ. Would you consider with me next that we find ourselves compelled to remember Christ:

II. Because of His Willingness to Remember Us

We've considered how remarkable it was for the penitent thief to want to be remembered and how his desire reflected a change in his heart as well as hope in Christ. Let's think

now for a moment on Christ's response to the penitent thief. This is found in v. 43 *And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.* What a promise given at such a time in such excruciating circumstances. Can you imagine the grace and the strength that such a word must have imparted to that crucified thief?

You'll be with me – that in itself is glory. That's the real glory of salvation. You'll be with Christ. You'll be in the presence of the One who rules over all. You'll be in the general assembly and the church of the first born and in the company of the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb. 12:23). We've seen in our study of Philippians that it is far more desirable to depart because in departing you can be with Christ. *To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord* Paul writes in 2Cor. 5:8.

So the thief would be with Christ but he would be with Christ in paradise. I suppose one might argue that anywhere you could be in the presence of Christ, his presence would make that place a paradise but we know what Christ had in mind.

So one commentator writes regarding the word paradise: *This is a word of Persian origin, and means a garden, particularly a garden of pleasure, filled with trees, and shrubs, and fountains, and flowers. In hot climates such gardens were peculiarly pleasant, and hence they were attached to the mansions of the rich and to the palaces of princes. The word came thus to denote any place of happiness, and was used particularly to denote the abodes of the blessed in another world. The garden of Eden means, also, the garden of pleasure, and in Gen. 2:8 the Septuagint renders the word Eden by Paradise. Hence this name in the Scriptures comes to denote the abodes of the blessed in the other world.*

Could any contrast be greater than the torment of that penitent thief and the pleasure and refreshment and blessing that he would soon know? And how soon would he know it? *Today* Christ says to him, *Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.* This certainly does away with any Catholic notions about purgatory doesn't it? You would think that if any further suffering was called for, even by the followers of Christ after death, that this thief would have to spend years in purgatory but Christ's promise to him was that there would be no delay – today, that very day, the penitent thief would be with Christ in paradise.

We understand, of course, why Christ would and could say to the thief *today*. At that very moment when Christ made this promise to the thief Christ was paving the way for the promise to be honored. He was making propitiation for the sins of that thief. That thief would know something of the physical pain that Christ was suffering since he too had been crucified. But the time would come when Christ would plunge to greater depths than that thief would ever know.

The day was never darkened during the times of ordinary crucifixions for common criminals but in the case of Christ there would be darkness over all the land from the 6th to the 9th hour. We cannot penetrate that darkness to see all that Christ must suffer in order to make atonement for our sins. We can't penetrate it but can surmise from it that it must have the same power to satisfy Divine justice as an eternity in hell for that is the penalty we would face.

And while we can't penetrate that darkness we can hear the cry that comes from the other side of the veil – *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* In solemn and humble and deep reverence we would answer Christ's question by confessing that without such a forsaking of Christ by his Father we cannot be saved. Apart from such suffering our sins cannot be atoned for; apart from such suffering we must suffer eternally and be forsaken by God forever; apart from Christ being forsaken there can be no promise made to the penitent thief that he would that day be in heaven with Christ and there can be no hope for heaven for sinner.

But on account of Christ's suffering, Christ could not only make the promise to the thief, and hence to all who, like the thief, would place their hope in him, but he could add a word of assurance to that promise to indicate to us its certainty. Notice the word *verily*. Christ does not simply say to the penitent thief that he would be in heaven with him that day but he says it to him in such a way as to make it a matter of certainty and assurance *Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise* (v. 43).

It's no wonder that J.C. Ryle can say in his commentary that: *The verses we have now read deserve to be printed in letters of gold. They have probably been the salvation of myriads of souls. Multitudes will thank God to all eternity that the Bible contains this story of the penitent thief.*

Perhaps no other narrative portion of the New Testament so magnifies the grace of God by displaying for us Christ's willingness to save the greatest of sinners and to save a sinner that is so close to perishing. And no other portion of Scripture shows us so plainly that salvation is by grace through faith and that our works have no part in it. It shows us how salvation is dependent on Christ – not our works, not our church, not even the ordinances of the church but Christ and Christ alone.

And the narrative, along with the other narratives in the gospels, show us the work Christ had to do in order to secure our salvation. There is certainly a sense in which the elements of the Lord's table say to you *verily – truly – certainly* you will be in paradise with Christ. *Verily – certainly – truly* your sins have been atoned for. That's a good word to contemplate as you partake of these elements this morning, the word *verily*. The bread, symbolizing the broken body of Christ says *verily*. The cup, symbolizing his shed blood says *verily*. There is a basis for that word and for the certainty conveyed by that word.

So we find ourselves compelled to remember Christ on account of our desire to be remembered by Christ. And we find ourselves compelled to remember Christ on account of his willingness to grant us our desire to be remembered. It remains for us to consider finally that we find ourselves compelled to remember Christ:

III. Because of His Desire to be Remembered by Us

The penitent thief called on Christ to remember him – *Lord, Remember me, when thou comest into thy kingdom*. You and I have that same desire. Psalm 25 contains the Psalmist's petition for what he wants the Lord to remember and not remember: *Remember,*

O LORD, thy tender mercies and thy lovingkindnesses; for they have been ever of old (v. 6); Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness' sake, O LORD (v. 7).

But Christ himself also expresses to his people his desire to be remembered. *And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me (22:19).*

I should point out here that Christ's desire to be remembered by us is not because he needs us to supply anything to him that he lacks. We desire that he remembers us because we are altogether lacking if he doesn't remember us with his favor but the same thing does not apply to his desire to be remembered by us.

He desires to be remembered by us for our own sakes. He certainly is aware that when we forget him we expose ourselves to magnified misery. When we forget him we become vulnerable to sin and we make ourselves vulnerable to the burden of guilt. When we forget him then we lose our motivation for our Christian duty and our duty becomes forced. And when we forget him our assurance of salvation languishes and we mistakenly feel that we're on our own.

So it is for our sakes that he calls on us to remember him but I dare say that it is also that he may enjoy communion with us. He does desire you. How could he not desire you when he gave his body to be broken for you and he shed his blood for you. He does desire to inhabit the praises of his followers. He wants you to draw near to him so that he too may draw near to you.

So let's honor his desire to remember him this day. Let's remember his condescending love and let's remember the price he's paid to redeem us. And let's remember all that he's secured for us in his atoning death. Let's remember that he's purchased us in order to be with us. Let's remember that these elements preach to us that he will never forget us, he will always remember us and he will always be with us and will never forsake us.

Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. This do in remembrance of me.