

Luke 23:39-43
Two Sinners, One Salvation

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"

41 "And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."

42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

42 – Word there is not *kurie* - Lord but *Iesou* – Jesus

There have been a few times, as we have gone through the gospel according to Luke, that I might have wished I was preaching from Matthew or Mark or John. But today, I rejoice to be preaching from Luke, because it is only gospel according to Luke that includes this exchange that took place between the thief on the cross and Jesus and these verses deserve, as JC Ryle put it, to be printed in letters of Gold. Why? Because this is one of the most remarkable stories of salvation in the bible and I know of know other place in all of the word where so much is taught, so concisely and so simply, about how amazing grace really is.

Have you ever wondered what it is that causes one man to believe the gospel and another man to reject it? I mean I have literally seen cases where you have two people who are similar in almost every respect, sitting in front of the same preacher, listening to exactly the same sermon, one of them is openly weeping, unable to control his emotions, as he is brought to repentance and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, while the other is doing the eye blink and the head bob, visibly bored out of his skull and barely able to stay awake.

Perhaps we might be tempted to say in those circumstances that one of them was more physically alert and prepared than the other, but friends I have heard the testimony of an addict who stumbled into a church high on drugs, who under the preaching of the word, was sobered up in a moment and who in a room full of "clean living people" was the only one who responded in faith to the word.

Well you could go on trying to posit hundreds of possibilities, one was smarter, one was raised better, and so on, grasping for some inherent quality or thing about that person that made them respond. But you'd be fooling ourselves, the message of the Bible is that salvation is all of God and none of ourselves. That God saves unworthy sinners, not they who save themselves. That is the Gospel, that God saves sinners.

I don't think God could have conveyed that message any more clearly than he does right here in these verses, could he? Here you have two men who are for all intents and purposes identical. They are both criminals, they have both been condemned for the same crime, and they are both now suffering and about to die. Both of them only have a few hours left to live. What is the difference between them? Well what makes the difference between them, is literally between them. Jesus Christ was crucified between these two thieves.

What did these thieves know of Jesus? We can't know for certain. From what they say, they knew he had claimed to be the Messiah, the Christ, and also they had both been watching Him and listening to Him from the time they set out with the execution party for Calvary. One of those thieves turned to him, and mocked him "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us". It's mockery, but it is also no doubt his dearest wish. He wants to live a little longer. He would give anything to be able to hold on to the life that is slipping away from him.

It is amazing isn't it, what men will do to live longer? We will spend our lives shunning the food that tastes really good in favor of the food that tastes like cardboard. We'll go through painful surgeries and treatments, and those are really just mild examples. Men can be brought to renounce their faith, betray their countries, even help to annihilate their own families just for the hope that they might be able to stay alive for a few extra weeks. Their eyes are fixed on this world and they will give anything to hold on to it. That's the kind of spirit animating the first thief.

But the second thief answers his former compatriot, in a way that shows he has had a major change of heart. He is angry at him - ***Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?*** He knows he is about to die, but his thoughts are no longer fixed on the earth and desperately trying to hold on to it. No, he has a totally different perspective.

You can see so much about that perspective from his words.

- 1) HE knows there is a righteous God before whom He is justly condemned.
- 2) He has a repentant heart, he confesses his crimes openly and willingly, he is not making vain excuses, blame shifting, "I'm up here because of the injustice of the system" for instance, that would be a sure sign of an unrepentant spirit. But this man not only confesses he is a sinner -
- 3) He knows that Jesus is entirely unlike him, Jesus is entirely Innocent. Jesus has done NOTHING wrong.
- 4) Far from mocking Him and His claim to be Christ He believes in Him. And think about this. If He knows Jesus is the Messiah, and that He has all authority and power in the kingdom of God, He knows that Jesus has the power to deliver him from the cross, and yet that isn't what he asks for.
- 5) What does he ask for? Only to be remembered after Jesus had returned in glory. He has finally realized the truth of what David confessed in Psalm 87:10 ***"For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness."***

His perspective has changed, because His heart Has changed. He no longer has a stony heart, he has a new heart, a heart of flesh. And that new believing heart extends the hand of faith to Jesus Christ and it does not come away empty. Because of His faith, he receives a reward far, far, beyond what he asked for. He asks for a reward that is essentially to be thought well of sometime in the distant future when Jesus returns in glory. But Jesus replies assuring him, **THIS VERY DAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.**

Now before I get to the Applications of these verses, let me ask you to consider something, its an essential question. ***What would you have asked for in the same circumstance?*** To come down from cross, to have a little more life. Or would you have had the faith in Christ that would allow you to accept your condemnation, and ask for instead for an inheritance in heaven.

Applications –

1) ***Salvation is by grace through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.***

You know of all the times I've asked the question of someone who said they believed in heaven "***do you expect to go to heaven when you die?***", I've never actually gotten a NO. But whenever I've followed up by asking why they expect to go to heaven, the answer is almost always, because I've tried to live a good life, because I've done more good things than bad things. People don't see themselves as condemned sinners, and they honestly believe that heaven is something we work our way into.

Well what about this thief? He didn't say "I've tried to live a good life" Quite the opposite he said, I've lived a lousy life and I deserve to be condemned. How about His good works. He knew he didn't have any. Even if he'd wanted to do some at this point, he's nailed hand and foot to a cross. There's no work he can do! His time for working is well and truly over and he's got nothing in the good works register.

And yet, Jesus gives him an absolute assurance that as soon as He breathes his last labored breath. He will be with Christ in Paradise. How can that be? Because we do not win salvation by working, we can't. Salvation is a gift won for us by the completed work of Jesus Christ, and is applied to us through Faith. The thief had all he needed to be saved as soon as He believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But maybe He did do a good work to be saved, maybe his contribution to His salvation was faith. Well Paul tell us, that even that faith is God's gift and it springs from the new heart only He can give. That is why even a life-long sinner in the midst of his own just execution can be saved.

A warning to those who may look at that and decide to "party hearty" until the bitter end, because I've met people who are actually "planning" to live lives of constant sin and then repent before it is too late. No one who does that ever gets the chance, it is not a plan that God blesses and rather a condition that God hardens you in, you are much more likely to end up bitterly railing against God like the other thief.

One thief was saved that no sinner might despair, but only one, that no sinner might presume. – JC Ryle

2) It goes without saying that this also absolutely disproves the teaching of some groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Boston Church of Christ that Baptism is the key to salvation and that without it, no one can be saved. As Ryle put it "***The dying thief was never baptized, belonged to no visible church, and never received the Lord's supper. But he repented and believed, and therefore he was saved.***" Now that isn't the same as saying that the sacraments aren't critically important or that Christians won't need them, but it is saying that they aren't essential or foundational to our salvation. Sacraments aren't what opens up heaven to Sinners. Faith alone can do that.

3) And this is a difficult but vitally important point, that faith that saves us, while it is an assurance that we will not suffer damnation, it is ***not an assurance that we will not suffer in this world.***

Think about it, this thief believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and yet his entire life as a believer in this world was composed of constant and terrible suffering and that only ended with his legs being broken by the soldiers, which in addition to being horribly painful meant he couldn't support his body any longer, and as his body slumped, he was no longer able to draw in breath, and he suffocated.

Calvin put it very well when he said: *“This reminds us that we ought not to judge of the grace of God by the perception of the flesh; for it will often happen that those to whom God is reconciled are permitted by him to be severely afflicted. So then, if we are dreadfully tormented in body, we ought to be on our guard lest the severity of pain hinder us from tasting the goodness of God; but, on the contrary, all our afflictions ought to be mitigated and soothed by this single consolation, that as soon as God has received us into his favor, all the afflictions which we endure are aids to our salvation. This will cause our faith not only to rise victorious over all our distresses, but to enjoy calm repose amidst the endurance of sufferings.”* I know that that message doesn’t go well with the false message of the health and wealth teachers who tell us that Faith is the key to never suffering but it should provide assurance to those of you who are currently in the refiners fire. Paul knew what that felt like as well. That is why he wrote these words about his thorn in the flesh -

2 Cor. 12:8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

- In closing let me say I hope you have thought about that question I asked you about which thief you are, kids have you been thinking about that? Which thief should you be, the one who mocked Christ and wanted to live in this world or the one that believed in Jesus and wanted to be with Him in heaven?