

Scripture Reading:

Luke 23: “32 There were also two others, criminals, led with [Jesus] to be put to death. 33 And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. 34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots. 35 And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." 38 And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 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."

"Two Thieves: Two Humanities"

I want to first express my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to Mike & Theron and Mark for all the work they did to cover the services for the past two weeks and for bringing you God's Word. Next week it will be our privilege to have Pastor Tom Brainerd in this pulpit so this would have been an ideal Sunday for a topical sermon. However, our journey through Luke today provides what many would consider a stand-alone sermon! We come to the account of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, one on the right and the other on the left: Two thieves who clearly represent the two humanities spoken of in the Bible as the sheep and the goats, the saved and the lost. It is a good time for us to remember the themes we see in the orderly account that Luke has written for His friend Theophilus:

- In Luke's Gospel we are learning how Jesus has come to save His people from their sins
- In Acts, Luke shows how Jesus sends the Holy Spirit as the promised Comforter Who empowers and guides God's people as the Church: The Body of Christ... The New Jerusalem
- In the end, Luke shows how the Kingdom of Jesus will fill the earth, bringing every authority under the rule of Jesus

This is God's plan and we need to understand that each of us who are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, play a role in carrying out this great plan

- We must believe that each and every one of us has a role to play in the advance of God's Kingdom!

Many of us doubt that we are important and some even use the example of this repentant criminal to make that case...

- How could he have contributed to the advance of the Kingdom when all that was left for him to do after his conversion was to die a horrible death on that cross?

Please notice that we are still talking about his story today and that many such sermons have been given!

Whether it is the faithful covenant child who quietly obeys the commands of Jesus their entire life or a hardened criminal who turns in repentance in the final moments of his life, God is able to use them for His glory and we must trust that He does so!

As we consider this account, I would commend to your homework, the parable of the landowner who pays all who work for him during the day the same wage in Matthew 20...

A picture of the Gospel of Grace that confounds all of our human pride!

We come now to the crucifixion of the Lord of Glory: In two weeks, we will Lord-willing begin three sermons to consider those three words about Jesus we confess each week at this Table: That He was crucified, dead and buried! Simple powerful words that we confess simply, just as the Gospel narratives waste no words in presenting the pivotal events in human history.

As we come to Calgary we are told that Jesus was crucified between two common criminals which was prophesized by Isaiah long ago when He said the Messiah “poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.” It is the story of these transgressors that we will consider this morning:

- Two thieves who represent the two humanities presented in many ways throughout the Scriptures.

This is fully explained in the chapters of Romans that are often avoided because we either do not like what is being said, or don't quite understand what it all means... Yes, I am talking about Romans chapters 9, 10 & 11!

- Chapters where we clearly see the sovereignty of God in salvation and the command to take the Good News to the entire world!

Many wonder how these two seemingly contrary concepts go together, but God reveals both, and these two thieves will help us understand how they work together. I have often told the story of a good friend I had as a young Christian who had a real passion for witnessing to the cults. One day in the midst of some discussion the truths of Romans chapter nine were brought up and his reaction was, ‘how could you present a God like that?’ I am not sure I gave much more of an answer than this is what God Himself said & that we should bring thinking in line with what He says. These are not just academic questions, as this man would find out some time later when he fell away from his family and the church!

- IF we doubt God at any point, we are falling for the oldest temptation brought to Eve in the garden where that serpent said, “hath God said...”

As we often discuss around this Table, the truths of the Gospel are simple enough for any child to understand and yet God also reveals mysteries that go back to the Council of the Trinity before the foundation of the world which are almost beyond our understanding.

- My point here is that these two common criminals give us the child-like view of what Paul explains in detail in those troublesome chapters in Romans.

Here we have two thieves, just as Paul explains that Rebecca had two sons in her womb.

Both thieves begin we are told by both Matthew and Mark by mocking Jesus just as the religious leaders, soldiers and crowds are doing...

[Yes, all three of the groups Jesus had put on trial have come to the cross!]

However, after seeing the reaction of Jesus to His persecution, how He remained silent before His accusers and then His prayer that the Father not hold this crime against them...

- One of the thieves has a change of heart!
- He defends Jesus to the other thief, turns to Jesus in repentance, and cries out to Him for salvation.

Paul used the example of Rebecca's sons for this same reason:

- Both are certainly members of Adam's fallen race!
- But one strives to be faithful and comes to repentance while the other sells his birthright for a bowl of stew.

The obvious and very human question to ask in both cases is why does one man choose wisely and the other so poorly?

- The simple answer a child would give is that Jesus drew one thief to himself and not the other.

In Romans nine, Paul quotes those words from the Prophet Malachi that cause us to squirm in our human pride... "Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated."

- We certainly understand and are comforted by the first part, but are not quite sure what to make of the second.

Jacob was chosen from before the foundations of the earth to be given the gift of faith meaning that he was destined to come to salvation.

- This is God's great love for His people.

But why did God hate Esau? Here we must remember that God's hatred is a righteous judgment against sin and not what we feel when we get mad at our neighbor or a brother or sister.

Skeptics and those who doubt will be quick to say that IF Esau and the unrepentant thief are lost because God did not choose them THIS IS NOT FAIR! These same skeptics and doubters will also be very upset if we try to explain to them that Adam made a very bad choice in the garden that placed ALL of mankind under the curse and penalty of sin. God had said, "in the day you eat thereof you will surely die." This was not only a warning of physical death, but spiritual death that would bring eternal damnation.

- God loved Adam in His righteous state and desired that He and Eve eat from the tree of life and go forth to fill the earth and subdue it!
- After their fall into sin, God could no longer love them as they were, but rather His justice demanded that He hate what they had done and punish them for it.

God at this point could have justly cast both Adam and Eve into hell...

God could also have left Noah and His family to die with all of the rest of humanity, but He did not!

God had determined to save an elect group of people from Adam's race, those who would become the Church, a bride for His own beloved Son.

His plan to have righteous men fill and subdue the earth would be carried out, with His Son as their Savior and King.

Just as God could have killed all those living under the curse of sin without a Savior, God could also have chosen to save EVERY person that ever lived under the redemption provided by His Son.

- God did not choose to do so and we are simply not told why.

Again, Paul explains this in Romans nine, quoting God's words to Moses where He said, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion"

- Paul explains that salvation is "not of him who wills nor of him who runs but of God who shows mercy."

Paul then continues with the explanation that we are given of these things which my friend in Chico, and all of us, must pay close attention to:

"19 You will say to me then, "Why does [God] still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" 20 But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? 22 What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?"

- Here we see the two humanities, the sheep who are vessels of mercy and the goats who are vessels of wrath.

The great story of salvation is how God calls a people out from the fallen race of Adam, and yes this story includes leaving those who were not chosen to die in their sins, just as God had promised in the Garden of Eden. In these two thieves, the sheep and the goats are seen right here at the cross where the penalty for sin was paid by God's own Son and it is pictured throughout the entire Bible:

God laid out this contrast in the very first promise of the Gospel when He explained that the seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent

As the history of redemption is recounted in the Old Testament we see God's people growing in number and stature as a picture of the coming conquest of the earth by Jesus...

The first contrast is between Cain and Abel. Satan uses Cain to try and destroy the seed of the woman, but Abel is saved and Seth is given to Eve

Next we see a contrast between the whole of mankind and Noah...

- Here we see that sin destroys all those in its path and yet now we have an entire family that is saved by faith.

Next comes Abraham who is called out of the entire pagan world and set apart to be the Father of Nations. Now we see a large family saved as under God's care his grandson Jacob goes to Egypt with seventy souls... *Perhaps one for each of the nations of the earth?*

God's people are later delivered from Egypt by Moses who is contrasted with Pharaoh. Paul uses Pharaoh as one who is hardened in his sin in his discussion in Romans nine.

- We all know the story and now God's people are delivered out of Egypt as a mixed multitude of over a million people

We can move on to the contrast between Kings Saul and David where Satan again tried to destroy the Godly line through Saul's sin

- But God brings redemption to David, who was certainly a fallen member of Adam's race
- As an object of God's mercy David establishes a Kingdom that grows mightily under his son King Solomon.

And finally, when all seems to be lost with God's people in exile under the brutal boot of Babylon, we see the contrast between King Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, the great Empires of the world and God's people. While it might appear that Satan and the goats have the advantage over God's sheep, the great dream of the King shows it will be otherwise. The great statue representing the pagan empires is crushed by the stone cut without hands, Jesus and His Kingdom fills the whole earth.

As this great story of salvation unfolds in the New Testament we see Jesus fully explain the reality of sheep and goats and we see more examples:

- **The contrast of Peter and Judas in the very disciples of Jesus**
- **The contrast among the religious leaders between those like Caiaphas and Nicodemus**

Even as we come to the crucifixion the contrasts continues:

- **We see a hardened Pilate contrasted with the Centurion at the cross who declares that Jesus is the Son of God**
- **We see the soldiers who nail Jesus to the cross and gamble for His cloths contrasted with John and Mary standing near the cross**
- **And finally we will see the temple guards bribed to lie about the resurrection of Jesus contrasted with the believing women who came to the tomb.**

This is the great story of salvation and it is what we see with these two thieves at the cross of Jesus: Two thieves representing the two humanities: The sheep and the goats who will stand before God on the great day of judgment.

The final objection to Romans nine and presenting the story of these thieves in such simple terms will be that it removes all desire to evangelize:

- **If God has already chosen those who will be saved, then we do not need to do anything!**

Nothing could be further from the truth and that is exactly what Paul explains in Romans Ten:

"...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." 14 How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? 15 And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!"

- **The greatest call to evangelize sits right there in THOSE chapters of Romans!**
- **You see it is the fact that God has determined who will be saved that gives us the confidence to share the Good News...
God's appointed means of bringing people to faith.**
- **No amount of human effort or persuasion will enable me to save a single fallen man or woman!**
- **ONLY the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of faith can enable anyone to repent and turn to Jesus for salvation!**

Finally we are left with that sometimes haunting question:

- How do I know if I am saved?

The answer is quite simple...

- Have you heard and believed the Good News?
- Jesus says that His sheep hear His voice.
- If you have heard His voice then you are a sheep!

If you have turned from your sin and called out to Jesus to save you in the same manner as this thief on the cross then you have the same promise Jesus gave Him:

- Today, you will be with me in paradise!
- A promise of sure salvation
- A promise Peter declares is for us and our children!

These two thieves represent the sheep and the goats, the two humanities and leave us contrasting examples to follow and we should choose wisely... The unrepentant sinner blamed God until the very end, demanding that Jesus come down from the cross and save him... Just as Adam insisted that the woman that God gave him was to blame for his sin in the garden or how modern skeptics are quick to blame God for everything.

- The repentant sinner rebuked this man and defended Jesus
- The repentant sinner was honest about the gravity of his sin and the punishment it deserved
- The repentant sinner then turned to Jesus with a simple prayer, "Lord remember me when You come into Your Kingdom!"

May this account of two thieves lead us to a better understanding of what Paul is saying there in Romans...

- May it help us to obey the clear command to preach the Good News, trusting that God will give His children ears to hear even if they are as desperately lost as this repentant thief!
- Let us learn to heed the warnings of Romans 11, that we not become proud and presumptive Gentiles in the same way that the Jews had done
- And finally, may we always end with the same praise that Paul brings to God at the end of chapter 11 whenever we ponder so great a salvation:

33 "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" 35 "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" 36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen!"

Communion Meditation: Psalm 141:

"1 A Psalm of David. Lord, I cry out to You; Make haste to me! Give ear to my voice when I cry out to You. 2 Let my prayer be set before You as incense, The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. 3 Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips. 4 Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, To practice wicked works With men who work iniquity; And do not let me eat of their delicacies."