

8. The Thief on the Cross

Luke 23:32-43

5 June 2022

An old preacher was dying. He sent a message for his banker and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home.

When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling.

For a time, no one said anything. Both the banker and lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, uncomfortable sermons about greed, covetousness, and avaricious behavior that made them squirm in their seats.

Finally, the banker said, “Preacher, why did you ask us to come?”

The old preacher mustered up his strength and then said weakly, “Jesus died between two thieves, and that’s how I want to go.”

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Well, our story today is exactly that – Jesus dying between two thieves. But it’s also the story of a dying man who had an encounter with Jesus, and it changed everything for him...

So why don’t we pray that God would reveal the truth of what happened that day as we open his word.

Heavenly Father, as we open your Bible today, help us to have a fresh encounter with Jesus. Help us to see him in new ways, to meet him in new ways, and to trust him in a way that changes everything. Father, help us to encounter Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen

Well we are almost at the end of our sermon series called *Encounters with Jesus*. Just one more week to go after today. It’s a series all about what happens when people meet Jesus, and how a whole life can be changed just from that one encounter.

And that’s exactly what we’ll see for one of the characters in our Bible passage today.

Now our story takes place on the very first Easter, the very first Good Friday. And so this encounter with Jesus is one that takes place in confronting circumstances. It takes place while Jesus is on the cross.

A week before our passage, Jesus had entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, with people shouting out ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’

But where our passage begins, just a week later, the king is sentenced to death.

Jesus had been arrested, beaten, and dragged before the Jewish religious council, accused of blasphemy.¹ Seeking the death penalty, they religious leaders brought Jesus to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for trial. Pilate finds no basis for a charge, but the crowd bays for Jesus’ blood. And so Pilate gives in to their demands. Jesus is handed over to be killed.

And that’s where our passage begins:

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.
(Luke 23:32-34)

Disinterest

I’m always struck by Luke’s account of the cross. For all the drama that had happened in the leadup to this moment – the late-night arrest in the garden, the court-room travesty with Pilate, the crowds shouting “Crucify him!” – this moment seems to leave all the drama behind. Listen again to the language Luke chooses to describe what happens at the place of the Skull (btw this is where we get Calvary from – it’s the Latin word for skull).

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

Luke skips over the horrifying details of the crucifixion – the reality of men nailed to large wooden beams and hung up to slowly die – Luke skips over that detail. Perhaps because the detail is too hard to think about, too much to process. So we kind of block it out, whitewash it and quickly make the cross a symbol of hope and victory, rather than the symbol of torture that it was. Maybe that’s it...

¹ Matthew 26:65

Or maybe Luke skipped over the detail because he was making a point about the soldiers who performed the crucifixion.

The soldiers are more interested in gambling for Jesus' clothing, than they are in him. Jesus didn't matter to them – they were just following orders, it was just another day like any other, and Jesus was no more special than the criminals they hung either side of him.

The soldiers have an encounter with Jesus. And it means nothing to them. These verses have a kind of impersonal ring to them, and I think it's to reflect the absolute **disinterest** of the soldiers.

I think lots of people share the same disinterested attitude towards Jesus. They know about Jesus. They know what happened on the cross – that Jesus was killed. Perhaps they even know he was killed somehow **for them**. But they don't pay it more than a moment's attention. There's a detachment, an impersonal response to Jesus, and an impersonal response to the cross. Their encounter with Jesus is characterized by... **disinterest**.

Disdain

The second set of encounters with Jesus in the passage is much more personal. Luke captures the **disdain** of some of those watching the crucifixion:

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." (Luke 23:35)

I'm not sure what to make of the people who were watching. Luke just tells us that they were there. Was an execution seen as some kind of grotesque entertainment? It seems perverse, even voyeuristic. I want to think that we're different as a society, but I'm not so sure. I'll leave that for you to ponder.

Then there are the rulers – these were the religious rulers who had conspired to have Jesus killed. They are there at the execution to sneer at Jesus. They mock him. They take pleasure in his demise, performing for the crowd with a show of sarcastic comments. (v35)

"He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." (Luke 23:35)

It's disturbing to me that religious people would speak this way.

Yes, these leaders had their reasons for punishing Jesus. They thought that Jesus had done the wrong thing. That was the heart of their complaint – everything about Jesus' ministry had painted him as the Messiah, the long-awaited savior king of God's people.

But this Messiah had challenged their traditions, their interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. He had threatened their authority, as he questioned the genuineness of their faith. They were right to be angry. Jesus told them that they weren't good enough, even as seemingly upright, religious people...

And so they lashed out.

I want to hit pause on the sermon for just a moment, to come back to that thought I offered a moment ago. I find it really disturbing that God's people, would delight in this kind of mocking of enemies. That they would delight in Jesus' demise and take such smug pleasure in it.

Especially when Jesus himself taught that we ought to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Jesus had practiced what he preached. Look back at v34 – did you see it? Even as the soldiers crucified Jesus, he prayed:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

There is something very disarming about sowing peace where others expect a fight. Sowing love where others are preaching hate. Seeking to understand when everyone else wants to create division. We learn an important lesson from this encounter between Jesus and the religious teachers: as God's people who follow after Jesus, let us never take pleasure in the demise of our enemies. Let's keep praying for them, keep loving them, because you never know what opportunities might open up for genuine dialogue, and the chance to change someone's life...

But back to the story. The religious rulers, their encounter with Jesus is characterized by their *disdain*. In fact, if you look at v35, they don't even speak directly to Jesus – they just speak about him in front of the crowd, belittling him.

“He saved others; let him save himself *if* he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.” (Luke 23:35)

Funny, that was the same thing the devil had said to Jesus in the wilderness: *if you are the Son of God...* (Matthew 4:3,6)

The soldiers join in the taunting. (v36)

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” (Luke 23:36)

Even one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus takes up the cry: (v39)

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39)

Disdain. That's the attitude towards Jesus in these encounters. Disdain for Jesus because the cross is a symbol of weakness, and shame, and failure.

Disdain because the Messiah that they pictured would be an all-conquering king, a redeemer of his people, a mighty warrior, not this beaten and bloodied figure hung up to die.

Disdain because for all Jesus' talk of saving others, it didn't look like he was able to save himself, let alone anyone else...

I sometimes wonder why people have so much disdain for Christians. Perhaps it's because they see Jesus the way the rulers, and the soldiers, and the criminal saw Jesus. They don't see success; they only see failure. They don't see strength, they see weakness. They don't see a savior because we've been taught that salvation means winning all the time.

It's so frustrating because everybody there that day 'got it' that Jesus was meant to **save**. They understand that '**saving**' is Jesus' core mission.

But they don't understand **how** Jesus saves. And so they write him off as a joke, just like they write Christians off as sad, pathetic, pitiable fools... They encounter Jesus, but can't see past the foolishness of the cross.

That's the second encounter with Jesus – an encounter characterized by disdain.

Deserving

And that brings us to the final encounter in our passage. The story of the second criminal, who saw what the other criminal could not.

Remember the first criminal hurled insults at Jesus (v39):

"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:39-40)

The second criminal brings us back to the reality of the scene – Jesus and two other men have been nailed to crosses, and all three are on their way to death. It seems almost impossible that the first criminal is still spitting out venom at Jesus, even in the throes of death. Maybe he expected Jesus to save them all, like in the old Western movies when somebody was about to get hung, and then the good guys shoot the rope and they escape.

But there was no escape from the cross. And the second criminal knew that he and his friend weren't the good guys. They were the baddies. Their crimes had caught up with them, and they were getting what they deserved. They were being punished justly.

But he also knows that Jesus wasn't one of the baddies. "This man has done nothing wrong..." (v40) he says to his friend.

And this idea stands at the heart of the cross, and why Jesus had to die that way. The Bible is very clear that each one of us does things that aren't right, or good. That's what sin is. Things we do, but also our attitude to God.

Did you notice in v40, the second criminal says to the first: Don't you fear God?

The Bible says that when we die, we will be held accountable for the things we do in this lifetime. And like the criminals on the cross, our sin renders us guilty before God, and deserving of death.

But our passage today is a reminder that God does not want to give us what we deserve, when it comes to punishment. God isn't like the religious rulers, sneering at us and mocking us in our failure. He's like Jesus who loves his enemies and desires good for us. He offers forgiveness and not punishment, at least not for us.

This week Jo and I watched the fire burning on the side of Soda Canyon. It was scary to see it so close, and so close to the homes of people we love. What is amazing is that you can see where the airtankers dropped the fire retardant – it looks like big strips of red paint on the side of the hill. In some places, you can see that the fire burned right up to the retardant, then stopped.

There's another way to stop the fire, and that's by back burning. (Do you use that expression in the US?) In Australia, the fire crews used controlled back burning in winter to create fire breaks around key structures and to remove the build-up of undergrowth. The firemen burn the ground, so that when the wildfire comes, there is nothing left to burn.

And that's the same with God's punishment of sins. God pours out **our** judgment on Jesus, so that when his judgment comes to us, there is nothing left to fan the flames, nothing left to punish. Jesus who never did anything wrong stands in the way of our judgment, so that we **don't** receive what we deserve.

That's love. That's mercy. And that's the gift that God the Father and God the Son made available that day on the cross. He made it possible for the criminal to go free.

And that's how the story ends for criminal #2. (Reading from v42)

⁴² Then [the criminal] said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Today, you will be with me in paradise...

That was the second last thing Jesus ever said. He promises a criminal that he will go to heaven. Truly I tell you, Jesus says.

There is something special about this story, because it tells us how much we earn our way to heaven. How much we deserve our salvation.

And the answer is: not at all.

There is nothing this man does, other than acknowledge Jesus as his only hope. He hangs his hope on Jesus. He sees the kingdom of Jesus that everybody else was blind to. And he asks Jesus to look after him in his death...

Such a simple picture of faith.

I wonder how many people get to their death bed, and look back on their life and realize there are parts that they are not proud of. Parts that weren't good. Things that they want to make right. I would guess that a lot of people turn to God in those dying moments, and like the criminal, I believe that Jesus welcomes them just like he welcomed the thief on the cross.

But I also don't think that's how God wants us to live our lives – doing whatever we want and then repenting on our deathbed. If that's your plan, it feels a little disingenuous, a little insincere. The thief on the cross – he had a moment of clarity before it was too late. We need to make sure that we don't leave it too late – because you never know when Jesus will return, or call us home.

I think there is another type of person who gets to their death bed, and the thought of their sins is too much to bear. BTW you don't need to be on your death bed to have this realization. I had a friend who joined the army and did a couple of tours in Afghanistan, and at age 20 he didn't believe God could forgive him for the things he had done.

But this story of the thief on the cross is a story that tells us there is nothing God can't forgive. The theme of forgiveness is the subplot of the entire Bible, as God undoes the curse of sin so that he can welcome his children back into the garden once more.

Do you believe that?

In John 6:37, Jesus says:

whoever comes to me I will never drive away. (John 6:37)

That means, if you come to Jesus, no matter what you've done, no matter what sin you have committed, Jesus will never drive you away, if you come with sincere intentions desiring to be saved.

It almost seems too good to be true. And some of you are like my friend – perhaps there are things that you can't even forgive yourself for, let alone asking God to forgive.

But Jesus says: *Whoever comes to me, I will never drive away...*

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, imagines the conversation between us and Jesus (in kind of 17th century language, but you'll get the gist...)

But I am a great sinner, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I am an old sinner, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I am a hard-hearted sinner, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I am a backsliding sinner, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I have served Satan all my days, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I have sinned against light, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I have sinned against mercy, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

But I have no good thing to bring with me, say you.

"I will in no wise cast out," says Christ.

- John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*²

The thief on the cross knew that he was deserving of punishment, and undeserving of forgiveness. But that's the whole point – we can never get to the point of deserving salvation, because we have all done things that God should **not** forgive us for. But he **does**.

Pastor and author Dane Ortlund says:

"With Christ, our sins and weaknesses are the very resume items that qualify us to approach him. Nothing but coming to him is required – first at conversion and a thousand times thereafter until we are with him upon death.

- Dan Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*

² In Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, p62

The story of the thief on the cross reminds us that there is no more important conversation to have with Jesus:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Will you pray with me?

