

About Face: Thief on the Cross - “Jesus, Remember Me”

Matthew 18:1-5, 12-14, 21; 19:14, 16, 21, 30; 20:1-16; Luke 23:39-43; Acts 4:12; Romans 6:1-4; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 2:8-10; 4:7

This is the third week of our series we are calling ‘About Face’. It’s the story of the ‘villains’ in scripture who had an encounter with God and their reaction to God’s move in their lives. This week of ‘About Face’ is a bit different than the last two. It’s a story about God’s grace and how it works in our lives. But before I reveal who our ‘villain’ is today, I want to tell you a story that Jesus told a crowd of people that will foreshadow who we are talking about today.

Parable of the Vineyard Workers:

Read Matthew 20:1-16. This doesn’t seem very fair does it? It does not matter what your political affiliation is or what your views on labor laws are, I am guessing that everyone in this room would agree that the vineyard owners actions were not fair! So why would Jesus tell us this story if it is unfair?

All of Jesus’s stories, or parables were usually in response to a question. So what was the question that was asked of Jesus? Let’s back up to Matthew 18 and 19 where we will find some questions that were asked.

Read Matthew 18:1, 21 and 19:16. In addition to these questions, in Matthew 19:13 we see children gathering around Jesus, but the disciples rebuke them and try to run them off. So what are the disciples, especially Peter confused about? Why were they asking these questions?

The disciples were confused about Salvation and Grace. Up to this point in their faith, salvation had required a sacrifice of something tangible, and Grace was given to those who were righteous in God’s sight.

We have a completely different understanding of salvation and grace now, but only because we have grown up learning about God’s forgiveness and how it fits into our lives. So what was God’s response to these questions?

Read Matthew 18:2-5, 12-14 and 19:14, 21, 30. So is our story in Matthew 20 about wages? No. Our story in Matthew 20 is about Salvation and Grace. There were many in that crowd that did not understand that story. There were many who left that day thinking that it was unfair, but I am betting based upon Peter’s later words in scripture that he understood this story.

Read Acts 4:12. Grace and Salvation have nothing to do with a lifetime lived for Christ. It isn’t dependent upon how many good deeds you did or how much you gave to charity over your life. It isn’t a sum total of your thoughts or your actions. Salvation and grace are a gift given to all. The Greek word for "grace" is χάρις (charis), meaning favor, kindness, or unmerited divine favor.

The Two Thieves:

So let's meet our 'villain' today. Read Luke 23:39-43. So we have two 'villains' being hung on the cross next to Jesus. Both have done something worthy of being put to death, and at least one of them understands that their punishment is fair and just.

In later writings, not in the Bible, but found in a few older writings such as the Gospel of Nicodemus. These two criminals' were given the names Dismas and Gestas. We don't know for sure if these names were names that were given to them later, or if these were their actual names, but there is still significance here that is pretty cool.

Gestas was the thief that ridicules and mocks Jesus's authority as Christ. Deimas was the thief that rebukes Gestas and accepts Christ as lord. Here is something I found interesting. The name Deimas derives from the Greek word Δυσμάς (*dysmas*). It refers to the setting of the sun or the end of the day. Because *dysmas* translates to sunset or the setting sun, the name poetically came to represent the end of life, twilight, or a final hour conversion leading to redemption.

The word Gesta in Latin literally means "Deeds" or to be proud of one's deeds. In other words, Demias was about to experience a sunset at the end of his life, a peaceful moment where all of his deeds could be forgiven. While Gestas would have the burden of carrying his deeds with him to death.

So what was the difference between the two thieves? What made one worthy to be forgiven and the other not? There is actually an entire Reddit thread about this that I found very interesting. Here was the guy's question. "St Dismas (the good thief on the other side of Jesus) gets all the praise, a sainthood even, for accepting Jesus as the son of God on the cross. Gestas, on the other hand, was said to have doubted Jesus' claims, and now he's rotting in hell for all eternity. How can anybody think that's fair and just?"

There is that thread again... Fair and Just. This Reddit user is right. Each criminal did bad things and they were receiving the same punishment...which leads me to believe that whatever they did was of equal badness. However, there is one difference between the two of them.

Just like in the last two weeks, we have talked about Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. The Pharaoh's heart was so hard that he couldn't accept God, even though God had shown himself to the Pharaoh. Even though God had given him every opportunity to change his mind. Even though it took a while for Nebuchadnezzar to come around, he eventually did accept God.

Gestas is like Pharaoh. He has allowed his heart to become hard and will not allow the Son of Man to carry his burdens. On the other hand, Dismas puts his pride to the side and humbly accepts Jesus's offer of Grace.

Is it fair? No, but that's the point. None of us are good enough to truly receive God's love and goodness, and yet Jesus made it all possible. Even in the last hour, even when you haven't lived a life of goodness.

So naturally my mind immediately goes to this thought, What if both thieves hanging next to Jesus were allowed at the last minute to live and taken down from the cross? What might their lives have looked like? My guess is that Gestas would have still been prideful and continued his bad deeds, while Dismas would have spread the news of the gospel far and wide.

Here is the thing. God gives us a choice. We can have good intentions in this life, and make all the right choices, but still not have God's grace in our lives if we allow our pride to stand in the way of accepting him. We can also live terrible lives and at the last minute accept God's grace and be forgiven.

God's Grace:

Read Romans 6:1-4. When we do finally accept God's grace for our lives, in the beginning, or at the end it demands a response from us to change. But we will talk about this next week as we introduce yet another 'villain.'

Today I want you to understand this. Read Ephesians 2:8-10. As Christians we tend to do this thing where we compare our good deeds and say 'look at what I have done in the name of the Lord.' Additionally, we criticize other Christians because we feel like they have not done enough. Even worse, we look at people and think that they could never receive salvation. They are unsavable, too wicked, or too far gone. But that isn't what Christ taught us. This isn't in his teachings at all!

We are saved only through Christ's sacrifice and grace. This is why we see writers and songs referring to it as scandalous grace because our rational human minds can not comprehend or understand this. Every human construct across all of history is based upon merit, hard work, and earning. You have to earn your wage, your position, or my love...which takes us back to Matthew 20 and the problematic wages. You see people understood wages, but in this metaphor Jesus isn't talking about wages is He? What if we replaced the wages with 'Grace'? How would that read?

*' "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them with **grace** for the day and sent them into his vineyard. "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received **grace**. So when those who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received **grace**. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for **grace**? Take it and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own*

grace? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”’

That changes the whole vibe of the story right? God doesn’t give us different levels of grace. There is just grace. It’s whole and complete. There is One God, and His grace is sufficient for all.

Ephesians 4:7:

Read Ephesians 4:7. Doesn’t that mean that God has different amounts of grace for each person according to their gift? Nope. There is only one grace...one amount. It’s not some milk jug full of grace that he bestows on some and not on others.

If you break this verse down from its original Greek it would read something like this, *“Each one of us is given grace in proportion to the measure of the gift of Christ.”* In other words, grace isn’t a measuring scale where some get more than others. YOU are given the same amount of grace that Christ has given to you. It is a 1 for 1 transaction. You now possess grace and the ability to use it to forgive like He forgave (to forgive yourself and to forgive others). No matter if you come to him early in life, or when the sun is setting.

Closing:

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9. Here is my closing thought today. If we could earn our salvation, we would have grounds to boast in our own good deeds. So salvation cannot be earned—it is simply given to those who believe and accept Christ as Lord and Savior. Is that fair? No. But it is good. Yes! And because it is good, it can only come from God, who alone saves us. That goodness, in turn, calls us to lean into God's goodness rather than lean on our own understanding of what is fair.

Reflection Questions:

- How does the parable of the vineyard workers help you understand God’s grace?
- The two thieves on the cross were both facing the consequences of likely similar sins. Yet their reactions to encountering Jesus were completely different.
 - What were the differences?
 - Which thief are you like?
- Are you trying to earn what Jesus already freely offers?
- When you accept God’s grace, you now possess the ability to use it to forgive as He forgave you.
 - Do you forgive yourself/others in this same amount?
 - Who do you need to forgive?