



HAVING A LITTLE TALK WITH JESUS Luke 23:38-43

Today I want to share some thoughts and reflections from what historically has been designated as the second word - - from the Seven Last Words of Jesus Christ from the cross on Calvary.

From my study this past week I believe this is the last known conversation between Jesus Christ and a human being before he dies a sacrificial atoning death on the cross.

Today we will think for a few moments about the two other crosses that also surrounded our Savior's cross - one cross on the left - one cross on the right. They were both filled with persons who had been called - thieves or criminals.

My research leads me to believe that the two thieves who were also crucified that day were men who - in their early years - had noble ambitions. They had the noble ambition of being part of a revolutionary political group who had great hopes of overthrowing the repressive regime of Rome - - and hopefully bringing **PEACE AND PROSPERITY** to the nation of Israel. I believe as they became involved in the political ramifications of this movement they had to begin to accept **LITTLE COMPROMISES** which unfortunately became a career of murder, torture, and eventually insurrection. So often good people who have good intentions lose their religious and moral direction when they get involved in the political process of life.

As we examine this the second word - we see that not only were thieves and criminals crucified - - **BUT THE TRUTH WAS ALSO CRUCIFIED AS WELL.**

As we open up this passage of scripture today, we see that two "Prayer Requests" were offered that day. The first thief's request is that of an insult which is hurled at the man on the cross in the middle who he at least thinks might be the Messiah. It was a prayer request - but it was all wrong in the attitude in terms of what he wanted the Messiah to do. Be glad - be eternally grateful that Jesus did not answer his prayer that day.

The first thief wanted to be saved from Death - - but only to kill some more Romans that he had missed. He wanted to be saved from the penalty of sin - - but only to sin again. He cries out, "Jesus save yourself - - and then we can talk." If Jesus had saved himself - - you and I would be people of great despair today. For we would only have the option of hell itself.

Once, King Frederick the Great was visiting the jails of Potsdam speaking to the inmates. Surprisingly, every inmate expressed to the King that they were totally innocent of the charges against them. Near the end of the King's visit, one of the inmates shared with him, "My King, I am guilty and deserve the punishment I am receiving." The King ordered

the man to be released. With a smile, the King said, **"I don't want him to corrupt all the innocent people in here."**

This is a humorous but penetrating way to share the truth that we are all sinners who stand this day in need of the all-sufficient, sacrificial, substitutionary, atoning death of Jesus Christ for their sins.

In seminary we were taught that we needed to preach a delicate balance of law and gospel. We appreciate our freedom in Christ – when we realize what we have been rescued from and for. This is what I find so lacking in much of 21st century Christianity and preaching.

During Lent the lessons are designed to remind us of our need of a savior. There is a reason we preach the cross and carry it. Every time I look at the cross I am reminded of my need of a savior/deliverer. Without a deep recognition of our own perversity to evil and sinfulness – real worship is not a possibility. The gospel is truly good news. However, I need to be reminded that I have been rescued from something evil. The law exists to teach me of that reality. That reality unfortunately represents itself day by day.

The first thief failed to realize that our prayers and desires for the Kingdom must be focused on God - and His truth - and His will for our lives - not our self-centered, near-sighted temporary wants and needs.

The first thief does not want to move in a new direction. He hurls insults. Muckraking is not gospel work. Witch hunting is not gospel work. Terrorizing the outcasts is not gospel work. Forgiving sin is gospel work. Yes, God deals with sin by forgiving us. At the cross we see forgiveness on a cosmic scale. Unfortunately, the first thief was blind to it even though Jesus was literally alongside him. (1)

The second thief on the cross is just as guilty as the first -but from his conversation with Jesus we see that he has discovered some insights about life and our relationship to a Holy God that are life saving.

A. He admitted he needed help - he could not save himself.

B. On a cross he could recognize the pure, spotless, perfect character of Jesus. He recognizes Jesus as the Son of God.

C. He had the courage to admit that the Kingdom he was working for and had unfortunately given his life for was built on the quicksand of hate and violence.

D. He doesn't say, 'Jesus, if you can bring me into your Kingdom' - but cries out, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.'

E. Somehow this thief begins to see the real reason for Jesus dying a substitutionary death on the cross.

For me, today, the only thing more arrogant and outlandish in the thief's request was the fact - that Jesus gives a positive response to his request. It was truly only something

that God could do. It was pure **Grace**. I believe Jesus still responds to hearts open to the truth of faith. There is no postponement, Jesus simply says, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." It was a simple request - but a powerful response from God.

A sinner going to Hell one moment - forgiven sinner going to Paradise the next. Truly amazing - only God could do this.

It is also amazing to me that Jesus not only promises him immortality - but his companionship for all eternity.

I believe we are all a spiritual stand-in for the thieves. We also have a way of praying and making requests to God that are most inappropriate. We seek to build our own little empires and kingdoms. God invites us to participate in his kingdom through Jesus. We say to Jesus, "Come down and save yourself." We must remember - while we share and participate in His rule – it is His rule. (2)

It was a deliberate act by the Roman authorities to crucify Jesus between two known criminals. It was done to further humiliate Jesus in front of the crowd. Imagine a King being mocked and killed between two thieves. However, even in this circumstance, Christ is at work turning the tide of this event to one that will be known forever in the pages of history. All the powerful rulers that this world has known - and to think that a common thief is known in the annals of history more than them, because of the One crucified on the cross in the middle.

Surely, this powerful lesson today demonstrates again - that it is **NEVER** too late to turn to Christ. A poet once compared this story to a man who was killed as he was thrown from his galloping horse.

BETWEEN THE STIRRUP AND THE GROUND.
MERCY I ASKED - -MERCY I FOUND.
THIS IS HOW AMAZING THIS STORY IS. (3)

It has always amazed me the stinging rebuke the second thief gives to the first thief and to his request and reviling thoughts. He cries out, "Have you no shame? Don't you fear God?"

The second thief in modern day lingo comes without **EXCUSE**. He pleads no explanation. He simply shares, "We are getting what we deserve - Death - we deserve death." We also must make no excuse when we come to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ. Our hearts must also share with the hymn writers who expressed the thought:

"IN MY HAND NO PRICE I BRING
SIMPLY TO THE CROSS I CLING
THOU MUST SAVE AND THOU ALONE" (4)

"JUST AS I AM WITHOUT ONE PLEA BUT
THAT THY BLOOD WAS SHED FOR ME
AND THAT THOU BIDST ME COME TO THEE O LAMB OF GOD
I COME, I COME. (5)

The second thief rebukes the first and then offers his own repentance. Then he makes his own request known to Jesus. Notice the proper order here. His request is simple, **JESUS, REMEMBER ME, WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM.** Notice he didn't say – 'Jesus, save me. Jesus, glorify me. Jesus, justify me' - he simply said, 'Jesus, remember me.'

To think that so many others had seen and heard about Jesus, about his raising the dead, healing lepers, performing miracles, had heard him preach and teach in villages and on mountain tops and no one except the demons of hell itself and this thief knew that Jesus Christ had the power to bring in the Kingdom long promised in prophecies.

To think that this man only saw Jesus in one moment in life and Jesus is dying on a cross but by grace and the mercy of God he was able to see more than those who had walked and talked with Jesus for years.

This story unfortunately represents the timeless way that so many men and women of history have responded to the gospel which is that of rebuking, reviling, rejecting, and requesting all the wrong things.

Another great insight I think that this story teaches - is that even in the agony and suffering of a horrible death on the cross - Jesus is not so preoccupied that he fails to hear the cry of this man's voice.

I know today that so many people fear God is so preoccupied with running this great, large universe and untold galaxies that he might just be too preoccupied to hear your cry for salvation from sin and the desire for new life in Christ. Notice, Jesus declares to the thief, "**TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**". This event is positive proof that Jesus is never too preoccupied that he won't listen to the needs of your soul, regardless of your position or past performance.

I believe this thief was the first trophy that Christ presented to the host in Heaven of the power of God's redeeming.

A famous churchman tells of visiting the **CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE** in Jerusalem. It is the famous site which is believed to be the place where Christ was crucified. Ironically, it is now divided among the Roman Catholic - Orthodox and Coptic faith traditions. It is the end of what is called the Via Dolorosa. It is the last station of the cross in the Good Friday liturgy that some churches observe.

There are three crosses now built over a magnificent altar. It is magnificent in its wealth and beauty. The famous churchman described how he went to this famous place and was ready to kneel at the **CENTRAL CROSS** - where other Christian pilgrims had gathered in devotion. He shared, "I started to kneel there - but then I knew my place was at the other Cross where the penitent thief uttered his cry that has echoed through the ages. Then I knelt there and repeated the words of the penitent thief, **'JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM.'**"

The hymn writer says it best when he writes,

**ARE YE ABLE TO REMEMBER
WHEN A THIEF LIFTS UP HIS EYES
THAT HIS PARDONED SOUL IS WORTHY
OF A PLACE IN PARADISE. (6)**

It seems to me that on that historic day when Christ died, called **GOOD FRIDAY**, a dividing line is forever sketched on **Calvary's Mountain**. One man finds the grace and forgiveness of God - the other man unfortunately dies with the burden of sins on his back. I believe those two choices are still with us today. We can also respond positively to the all sufficient, sacrificial, substitutionary death of Christ on the cross for our sins - or we can reject the cross and walk right on by and be lost for all eternity.

There is something very chilling about that last thought.

I have already shared with you that when I preach a sermon about the cross – I am always reminded of my need of a savior. However, there is a powerful second message from the cross – that at the cross I am already forgiven. I only need to accept the gift.

Today, the best advice I can give you to keep the spirit and solemnity of this great Biblical text is to repeat the words of the penitent thief with great boldness and confidence:

JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM.

Amen and amen.

**Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

The following resources were helpful in the development of this sermon.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, pages 186-187.
2. Ibid, Peterson,
3. William Barclay, **The Daily Studies Bible Series**, Luke Volume, Westminster Press, 1975, page 287.
4. **The Methodist Hymnal**, The Methodist Publishing House, 1964, Page 120.
5. IBID, page 119.
6. IBID, page 413.