

Seven Last Words Part 2

This morning we continue our Lenten series Seven Last Words, reflecting upon the seven sayings of Christ from the cross. Last Sunday we talked about the first saying, this amazing demonstration of forgiveness as Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” This morning we consider his second saying, found in Luke’s gospel, **“Today you will be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:43.** Let’s look at the context and to whom Jesus was speaking.

Luke tells us two other men, both criminals were to be executed along with Jesus. He writes, **“When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left.” Luke 23:33.** The fact that Jesus was crucified between two thieves reminds us of the accuracy and dependability of God’s word. Seven hundred years before Jesus the Messiah was born and before his crucifixion, the prophet Isaiah said of the Messiah **“...he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.” Isaiah 53:12.** Jesus wasn’t just dying along side these criminals, he was numbered with them, in other words he was considered to be one of them.

This is the heart of the gospel. I mentioned Wednesday night the old song we used to sing that said, “when the Savior reached down for me, he had to reach way down for me.” It almost sounds as if Jesus remained aloof from us, reaching down with one foot and one hand in the safe realms of heaven to pull us out of the muck and mire of this world and our sin. But he didn’t reach down, he came down. He didn’t just reach down, he became one of us to die among us in order to take away our sins. He was “numbered with” us. He was one of us.

The gospels tell us there were two thieves or robbers executed along with Jesus, one on each side. Some traditions say the repentant thief was named Dismas (Gestas was the unrepentant thief). The bible tells us in addition to all of the physical brutality and pain Jesus was experiencing, there were groups of people who stood mocking and watching him die. Luke tells us the rulers and leaders said, **“He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” Luke 23:35.** The Roman soldiers said, **“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Luke 23:37** People passing by shouted **“Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God.” Matthew 27:40**

Matthew and Mark tell us both criminals mocked Jesus along with the crowds. **“In the**

same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.” Matthew 27:44. But in the midst of all the pain, in the midst of all that was going on, one of the robbers, one of those crucified with Jesus had a change of heart. What changed his mind? Good question. We don’t know, but I can suggest a couple of things. First of all, he was out of options. He wasn’t going to get out of this. There was no escape from a cross. He couldn’t talk his way out, he couldn’t work to save himself, he couldn’t bargain his way out. He was dying, helpless and hopeless and that makes a person with any sense begin to re-evaluate their life and their choices. “I’ve been at the wrong place at the wrong time all of my life. I’ve made nothing but bad choices and this is where it got me. I deserve to be here and now I’m paying for my crimes, but what’s next? What’s after death? What becomes of me? He was finally ready to listen.”

What changed his mind? I don’t know, but perhaps it was the influence of that prayer Jesus prayed, asking the Father to forgive them for they didn’t know what they were doing. In more than a dozen details concerning the Messiah prophesied by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53, he said the Messiah was not only numbered with the transgressors but that he prayed for the transgressors. **“For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” Isaiah 53:12.** Jesus’ prayer included those two thieves that had been mocking him and insulting him and this one thief had a change of heart.

What changed his mind? I don’t know. Perhaps it was listening to the haters, the people insulting Jesus. In their taunts they inadvertently reveal Jesus identity to the thief. “He saved others, but himself he cannot save.” “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” Maybe the thief began to wonder, “what does that mean, he saved others...king of the Jews....Son of God. Who is this guy?”

It’s interesting, the disciples spend three years with Jesus watching him perform miracles and listening to him teach and they keep asking the question over and over, “who is this guy?” He walked on water, calmed the winds and they ask, “Who is this man?” He raises the dead, makes the lame walk, forgives sin and they wonder, “who is this man, what kind of man is this?” Finally, Jesus asks them “Who do you think I am?” and Peter says, “I know who you are. You are the Christ, the Messiah.” They had three years to figure this out, the thief on the cross has three hours. But dying men don’t have time to ride the fence. “Who is this guy? What do they

mean he saved others? What do they mean by king of the Jews? What do they mean Son of God? There is nothing about this man that would suggest he is the Messiah, the Chosen One. He sure doesn't look like a Savior. He doesn't look like he could save anyone now. He doesn't look like a king. The only crown he has is made out of thorns. He doesn't look like a son of God, He barely looks like a human being after the beating he's received. He just looks like a criminal, dying, just like one of us." But something begins to happen to the one thief as he hangs on that cross. One continues to hurl insults at Jesus. Luke records, **"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'" Luke 23:39-42**

As I studied and prepared for this message today, I grew more and more impressed with this thief. Look at what we see in this dying criminal and his last words. **We see the thief's faith.** As we said, there was little about Jesus at this moment to cause anyone to believe he was the Savior and Messiah. The crowd and the other thief were saying, "Show us proof you are the Christ. Come down off the cross. Save yourself and save us. Do something and we will believe." This man asked for nothing. He needed no sign, he just needed a Savior.

The disciples believed because of all they had seen, but remember what Jesus would say to Thomas in a few days, **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** **John 20:29.** This thief hadn't seen the miracles, he hadn't heard the teaching, but, convicted and convinced in his heart, he trusted. He believed. There was nothing that suggested Jesus had a kingdom or was a king, but the thief said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." He believed he was a king. Erwin Lutzer in his book *Cries From The Cross*, wrote, "this thief believed before darkness settled over the land; he believed before the earthquake and before the veil of the temple was torn in two. He believed without the evidence of the Resurrection and the Ascension. He believed without seeing Jesus walk on the water, feed the multitudes or turn water into wine. Improbable as it was, he believed." Arthur Pink wrote, "How can we explain the fact that this dying thief took a suffering, bleeding, crucified man for his God!" It was by faith. The same kind of faith required for all of us. What else do we see in this dying thief?

We see the thief's fear of the Lord. The bible says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). By fear of the Lord, we are talking about respect, a healthy, appropriate, acknowledgment of who God is. The fear of the Lord means a recognition of his sovereignty, of his justice. It means to recognize he is God and we aren't. The repentant thief understood he was guilty of sin and that judgment was coming when he died. He would have to stand before a holy God. Notice what he said to the other thief. "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence?" He didn't ask "don't you fear death?" Death isn't the scary part. We're all dying, it's facing the judgement of God without Jesus as our Savior and advocate.

The thief wisely acknowledged what we must acknowledge - there is judgment ahead. We are all going to die and after that comes judgement. Maybe it had never been very clear to him before, but it was clear as crystal now. He was ready to tell the truth. "I'm guilty. I'm a sinner. I'm going to stand before God, guilty with no defense and I'm afraid." We lack the fear of the Lord in our culture. He has become the man upstairs and we think we can sit down and have a chat with him and clear up any misunderstandings after we die. Don't be foolish. This dying thief recognized the truth. He was guilty and dying without a Savior, without forgiveness. He was dying and was going to face God and he knew he had to do something about it. What did he do? That's essentially what we see next.

We see the thief's repentance and confession. The thief admitted he was a sinner in need of a Savior. He told the other thief, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." He acknowledged his guilt, his sin, he was getting what he deserved. And he acknowledged Jesus' innocence.

Everyone is innocent in jail. Everyone pleads not guilty, right? It wasn't their fault. But this thief admits his guilt. He tells the truth. He repents and confesses. He is sorry for what he has done. No excuses, just the truth.

We see the thief's utter dependence upon Christ's mercy. What an example this thief is to us! The thief turns to Jesus and says simply, "**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" It's the only time we hear anyone call him simply by the name Jesus. He wasn't being disrespectful, he was coming to Jesus on the basis of what he knew. He was coming to him in desperation and humbly and in hope. He had nothing to offer to commend him to Jesus. All of us in order to be saved have to realize the same thing. We have nothing to offer.

We can't save ourselves. We need saving. We need a Savior. Arthur Pink wrote, "This is what the conversion of the dying thief shows us. What could he do? He could not walk in the paths of righteousness, for there was a nail through either foot. He could not perform any good works, for there was a nail through either hand. He could not turn over a new leaf and live a better life, for he was dying." There was nothing he could do but call upon Jesus and trust utterly and completely in the mercy of the Lord.

The hymn writer said, "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." That's what this thief shows us. He has nothing to offer for salvation. He doesn't even dare to ask for forgiveness, he simply asks that Jesus would remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

This thief shows us that the good news is for people just like us. People who can't save ourselves. People who are lost, messed up, dying without hope. Think of it, the first person saved was a thief, a robber, a condemned man. Lutzer said, "What a day for this thief! In the morning he was justly crucified on a cross; by late that evening he was justly welcomed into paradise by Jesus!" That's the last thing we see about the thief.

We see the thief's new future. He asked Jesus to remember him. He didn't say "deliver me, get me down off of this cross." He didn't say what the other thief was saying, "save yourself and save us." He was saying, "I believe you. I believe you are who you say you are and so, would you just remember me? Don't forget me when it all works out." And Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Talk about exceeding expectations! I don't know exactly what the thief expected, but I'm pretty sure this was more than he could have bargained for. Four words that changed everything. **Today. With me. Paradise.**

What hope. Not someday. Not after the resurrection, not after you've slept in the grave for centuries, today. Today you will be with me. With me. Not "it will all be okay somehow," but "today you will be with me. You are going where I'm going! With me!" Jesus told the disciples in John 14 he was going away to prepare a place and he would come again and take us to be where he was so we could be with him. With him. Isn't it amazing? Jesus wants to be with that thief on the cross and with the likes of us. "With me" he said. In paradise! Today, with me in paradise. "Jesus, remember me." "Today you will be with me in paradise." Cardinal Basil Hume wrote, "He was suffering too, the good thief, abandoned with no family to comfort nor friends to help. Who remembers a common thief, dying on a cross for the wrong he

has done? Who will stand by him, claim his friendship? That thief prays, 'Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.' Sad, sorry, repentant, broken almost, anxious, he sought to make amends. The answer comes: 'This day thou wilt be with me in paradise.' This day – could he have expected that? This day – when his final agony came, he was at peace. Death came, not a foe, but a gentle friend. This day A humble, contrite heart is never spurned. Sorrow for sin never too late; wrongdoing never so great that forgiveness will be refused. Others may ignore, forget, lose interest. He never does. He cannot forget nor cease to wait for that word of sorrow for our wrongdoing, a word that heralds our entry into his kingdom. Do not despair nor give up hope; however far you may have wandered, whatever wrong you may have done, despair must never be a word for you. He wants us, wants us more than we have ever wanted him, or ever could. 'This day you will be with me in paradise,' it will be said to you when you have prayed, 'Remember me...'” ... Cardinal Basil Hume

I want you to close your eyes this morning. Picture Jesus hanging on that cross. Can you see him? Can you see him on the cross? We quote Galatians that we were crucified with Christ, meaning that we were united with him by faith, dying to sin and to self through baptism and resurrected to walk with him in new life. But I wonder if we could put ourselves on that other cross beside Jesus today. I am crucified with Christ takes on a new meaning as we see ourselves hanging on one of the other crosses, dying the death we deserved, along side the other sinners and thieves. Can you see yourself as you turn to him and cry out to him saying, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** And can you hear him say it? Can you see his face as he turns toward you and says, **“...today you will be with me in paradise.”** **Luke 23:43**

It was for you and for me. He came to give his life as a ransom for us. What will you do? You need a Savior. If you've not received Christ as your Savior and Lord, I encourage you to open your heart and life and call upon him today. Repent of your sins and ask Jesus to redeem you and save you. Ask him to forgive you and remember you. He is waiting for you. He wants you more than you have ever wanted him.

If you struggle with whether you are good enough to make it to heaven, wondering if your past sins might keep you out of heaven, remember the words of Jesus to the thief on the cross. Today you will be with me in paradise. Erwin Lutzer wrote, “The thief's forgiveness reminds us

that there is more grace in God's heart than sin in our past." ...Erwin Lutzer