

A Criminal Meets a King

Our New Testament text is Luke 23:39-43, and my reading will begin with verse 32 (on page 89 in the NT section of the pew Bibles). Jesus has been tried by Pilate and Herod and sentenced to die by crucifixion. Two other men, dangerous criminals who were probably involved in an insurrection movement against the Romans, have also been sentenced to crucifixion. Our text is not a footnote to Jesus' crucifixion, but rather is at the core of Luke's passion account. The conversion of one of these criminals on the cross is a dramatic display of the reason for and the power of the cross of Christ. The placement of Jesus' cross between these criminals was perhaps intended to disgrace him as the "putative" King of the Jews. In fact, as we shall see on Christ the King Sunday, Jesus is graced and glorified as the crucified King of kings.

Follow as I read **Luke 23:32-43**.

³² *Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.* ³³ *When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]* *And they cast lots to divide his clothing.* ³⁵ *And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"* ³⁶ *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,* ³⁷ *and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"* ³⁸ *There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."*

³⁹ *One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"* ⁴⁰ *But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"* ⁴¹ *And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴² *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* ⁴³ *He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

Crucifixion was a horrible form of execution, reserved only for the worst of criminals. It was "one of the strongest forms of deterrence against insurrection or political agitation in Roman provinces. Crucifixion was preceded by scourging. When the victim was affixed to the cross, he was stripped and mocked. The pain was extreme. After the victim died, the body was often left on the cross to decay and become food for scavengers" (L Ryken).

We can be sure that the criminals executed alongside Jesus were not petty thieves, but were probably very dangerous rebels and insurrectionists against the occupying government, what we today would call terrorists, using violence and destruction to achieve their radical political objectives. Crucifixion was reserved for only the most dangerous of criminals and insurrectionists.

Our text for today tells us that even the most violent of terrorists are candidates for God's transforming grace. As he does throughout his gospel, Luke gives the repenting criminal the position of "exhibit A," as a "how much more" argument. If this criminal can become a child of God, how much more reason do we have to believe that any so called "hopeless case" can become a follower of Christ the King.

The criminal on the cross is an example of genuine, life and destiny changing conversion. Matthew tells us in his gospel account that both of these criminals crucified alongside Jesus "heaped insults on him" (27:44). He was a lost, condemned sinner, just like his cohort in crime. Although one of these criminals remained imbedded in his sinful rebellion, something began to happen in the mind and heart of the other criminal. As a direct answer to the prayer of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (34), one began to admit his need.

In his rebuke to the other criminal, the repenting criminal noted that the other was bereft of any fear of God. Perhaps simply by seeing Jesus' response to his crucifixion he realized he was in the presence of holy God. In God's holy presence we are made to realize our sinfulness before him. He realized he had violated God's law and that the sins of his criminal past were actually sins against God as well as against humanity. Because he was probably a terrorist, an insurrectionist against the Romans, he at one time had justified himself in his own mind, rationalizing that his acts of terrorism were justified by the occupation of an unjust government. How easy it is for all of us to take on a victim mentality, whereby we see everyone else as the culprit and we're the victims!

But the repenting criminal came to realize that his suffering was the just punishment of society for his crimes, and also admitted his sinfulness and his desperate need for God. His reaction before the crucified Jesus was in marked contrast to the unrepentant criminal. The unrepentant continued his blasphemous railing against Jesus. He was contemptuous of Jesus for not living up to his messianic claims. He thought that anyone who claimed to be a savior should be useful for his immediate rescue. The unrepentant expected Jesus to do something "relevant" for the revolution against the hated Romans and to free him and the other convicts from their suffering and death.

The unrepentant criminal asked Jesus to get him "down" from the cross and he had no intention of looking to salvation through the cross. He had nothing but contempt for Christ because Christ was either unable or unwilling to deliver him from his immediate suffering and to be a "relevant, useful" savior. He demanded deliverance from his present ills and anything else was irrelevant.

When grace works in our hearts we begin to see our need for God and our unworthiness of him and his love. We realize that God is not indebted to us to give us a life of ease and freedom from suffering. In fact, we realize that we

deserve nothing *but* suffering and separation from God. And the travesty of some “gospel” preaching in the world today is its offer to the world of consumers the promise of heaven to come as well as the good life right now, with no thought of the cross. This false “gospel” has instilled in the minds of its “customers” the idea that God’s purpose is to serve us and to satisfy our minds, to give all the solutions to our “relevant, felt needs” and to make us feel good about ourselves, enabling us to achieve our determined goals. This was the attitude of the angry unrepentant.

In my years of pastoral ministry I have seen the unrepentant carry bitterness against God with them to the grave. Some of these were fed lies from “Bible-preaching” pulpits that promised that God would be “relevant” and would deliver them from suffering and make them successful. Upon their death the sometimes testimony of these embittered souls is often, “God never did anything for me!”

The repentant criminal in all likelihood had no background in the Scriptures, yet he knew he was unprepared to meet God and knew that doubtless he would have to give an account to him. Just as he had to pay his debt to society, which he had incurred through a life of crime and political terrorism, so he knew he would have to pay a debt to holy God for the ways he had violated his higher law. He rebuked the other criminal for his lack of fear of God, in the face of death and in light of the fact that he too was a guilty criminal and sinner and also would give an account to God.

As one has noted, the setting of the three crosses served to show the accessibility of the gospel of grace. Jesus was positioned on his cross between these two criminals, and neither had an advantage or disadvantage. Both had equal access to Jesus, to call upon him for salvation. In the wisdom of God he makes himself known to all who will seek him. Both of these criminals could see the notice that Pilate ordered to be fastened to the cross, “This is the King of the Jews.” And they had heard the truth proclaimed by the chief priests and teachers of the law that was meant to be a mockery: “He saved others: he cannot save himself” (Mk. 15:31).

One of these criminals began to understand the heart of the gospel. The King of the Jews was not to be a political or military deliverer from the Romans, offering an immediate “salvation” and deliverance from temporal suffering. Rather, the Messiah of God would be one who would suffer for the people and die in the place deserved by his sinful people. In fact because he came to save others, he could not save himself. This was a profound truth that the one criminal began to understand. He came to believe in the Christ of the cross.

This condemned, dying criminal/terrorist called upon Jesus, saying, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (42). For God to remember is for him to act in our behalf. He had no claim upon Jesus, no merit or life of good deeds to his credit. This self-righteousness was the factor that kept the religious

opponents of Jesus from God's grace. They thought they had a claim upon God, that they had earned the right to salvation. Jesus had offended and angered them when he claimed to be the only way to God and that their claims upon God were delusional, misled and misleading.

As the theologian of the Reformation, John Calvin, stated it, this dying criminal is a "rare and memorable example of faith," even though he had never been to the school of faith. His understanding of Jesus as the crucified Savior "penetrates more deeply than all the Apostles and other disciples, upon whom the Lord Himself had spent so much effort to teach them." For all who come to Christ this same faith as the criminal's is necessary; and that is simply to call upon Jesus to have mercy on us, i.e. that he not give us what we deserve, and then we call upon his grace to save us, i.e. what we so desperately need but could never deserve.

As the great English poet and hymn writer William Cowper (1731-1800) expressed it,

"There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

"The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day,
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away."

Both of these dying criminals were calling on Jesus, but for different things. The unrepentant, cursing criminal asked Jesus to get him *down from* the cross, to save his neck (39). The repenting criminal asked Jesus to let him *into* the kingdom and to lift him *up from* the cross into heaven (42). The cry "save me!" can have radically different meanings. And even today, in response to the message of Christ, many want Jesus to save them from their suffering and from hell but have no intentions of following Jesus as Lord. But for this repentant criminal and all who are truly converted, to pray for salvation is to surrender to King Jesus as Lord, no strings attached.

The conversion of the criminal shows us is that God's grace is freely given to all, including those saved at the "eleventh hour." But it is no argument that we can wait until the "eleventh hour" to follow Jesus. We can't use the timing of the criminal's conversion as an example to follow any more than we would use his pre-conversion life of crime as an example to follow! But he did in fact become a disciple of Jesus, choosing to follow him into his kingdom and committed.

Jesus gave to the repenting, believing criminal his promise of eternal life: “I tell you the truth,” Jesus averred (literally, “amen, amen!). Jesus gave his certain promise, leaving no room for doubt. We who place our trust in Jesus have received his “amen,” his promise of eternal life. And Paradise is the immediate dwelling of all who have gone to be with Christ. This is the glorious yet temporal dwelling of the departed people of God, which we refer to also as heaven. Yet the new heaven and earth will be this created and fallen universe transformed and redeemed for eternity.

Notice that this criminal, this terrorist, was taken that very day to be with Christ in paradise. Even for him there was no need for a purgatory! God’s amazing grace transforms sinners and fits us for heaven at the 11th hour. And we who remain on earth are still being readied, prepared for eternity in heaven. It takes most of us a little longer to get ready! The converted criminal was transformed, while on the cross, into a friend of Jesus. His life in Christ, so brief on earth, was a remarkable expression of what every life in Christ should be—dead to self, a cruciform life, dead to the things of this world and totally focused on Christ.

I used to preach about this “thief on the cross” as an encouragement to those who were at the end of their mortal life and perhaps thought it was too late for them to trust Christ. But this example tells us that it’s never too late. It’s never too late also for me to become more like Jesus and thus better readied for heaven. I suppose that if the converted criminal had a thought of regret, it was that so much of his life was wasted in futility and that all he had to give was this final testimony of grace.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a well-known British journalist, and for most of his life had been an agnostic and a cynic about the Christian message. But in his later life he was radically transformed into a follower of Jesus. The title of his autobiography, which expressed regret coming to faith so late in life was titled, “*Chronicles of Wasted Time*.” The criminal on the cross gave his last breath to Christ before entering Paradise. I, apart from grace, would be hopelessly lost. But I’ve been rescued by Christ the King and want to give my final last breathing moments and days to live for him who died for me. I don’t have any time to waste.