

## A TALE OF TWO THIEVES

**Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 23:32-43**

**October 3, 2021**

Today as we will be celebrating Communion – I want us to journey back to the cross on that Good Friday and see how a hardened criminal came to believe that Jesus Christ was who He said He was – his Messiah and his Deliverer. All four Gospels record the fact that Jesus was crucified between two hardened criminals; however, Luke's Gospel is the only one that gives a full account of what happened. **Luke 23:32-43** records the tale of two thieves that were crucified with Jesus. As we look at these verses, the first thing we need to know is that these two hardened criminals, on both sides of Jesus, were sentenced to death by one of the cruelest forms of death known in all of history. Crucifixion was a public spectacle held in full public view as a warning to others, a deterrent to anyone who would dare rebel against Roman rule. Historians have indicated that these two thieves had travelled with their leader Barabbas, and the original plan was for all three of them to be crucified that day; however, Jesus took Barabbas' place at the center cross. So, at 9:00 am on that Friday morning, all three were led out to the place called the Skull (Calvary), and crucified there with Jesus on the center cross, with one criminal on the His right, and the other on His left and this configuration is important to what happened that day. In that configuration, whenever these two friends conversed with each other, they had to look directly at Jesus who separated them.

Today, I want us to see how these two criminals represent the entire human race. Their reactions to their own sins and death, plus their responses to Jesus, represents the two different responses all humans have to their sins, to their death, what lies beyond death and what they believe about Christ and the significance of Christ's life, death and resurrection to their lives. This important incident which took place on that Good Friday 2000 years ago, reminds us that only those who come to believe Jesus is who He said He is, will be with Him in Paradise. Even though Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice for everyone and shed His precious blood to cleanse us from ALL sin, past, present, and future sin. Only those who believe Christ is the Son of God and claim Christ as Lord of their lives will spend eternity with Him in Heaven.

According to Jesus' teachings – the sobering truth is that those who refuse to believe in Him will spend eternity separated from God and their unsaved loved

ones. Jesus makes this very clear in the parable of the Sheep and Goats recorded for us in **Matthew 25:31-46**. Listen to Jesus' sobering words as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, ***"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'...Then, He will say to those on the left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'...Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*** So, as these two criminals were separated physically before Jesus during their crucifixion, all mankind will also be separated before Jesus and end up in different destinations on the other side of death. So, I believe what Luke records for us at Christ's crucifixion is a wake-up call and warning to us today, plus should also spur us on to reach the lost with the Gospel message before Jesus our King returns to this earth!

Let's begin by taking a look at the first thief – who was joining the crowd and the soldiers in mocking and hurling insults at Jesus, ***"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*** (Luke 23:39). Even in the face of death there was no fear of God within this first criminal that Luke identifies. He is unrepentant, full of anger and hatred, and scorn even towards Jesus, who he has most likely never met, having no idea or revelation of who this God/Man is hanging beside him, and what this God/Man could do for him at his imminent death. This first thief may have heard rumours about a man named Jesus, who was travelling with His disciples throughout the countryside performing miracles, a man who claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God. But how could this Man be the Messiah, the Son of God after all He was dying on the cross right alongside of them like a common criminal. If He can't save Himself, how is He ever going to save us? This first thief was totally inward focussed, only thinking of himself. How many of us have this same motive when it comes to God, bargaining with Him when we are in a desperate situation. ***"God, if you love me, then do this for me, or do that for me."*** And then, if God doesn't come through, we grumble, complain and question God, ***"God if you really love me, why didn't you rescue me from harm, or prevent this cancer, or keep that loved one***

*from dying?” Unfortunately, the motivation for many is like that of the first thief, only concerned about their own selfish desires, not trusting and praising God.*

The first thief could only see Jesus through selfish, self-centered eyes. He didn't have faith in Jesus, and never once thought about what would happen to him at death. The first thief had no eternal perspective and no fear of God! He was like many today, living day-to-day, moment-by-moment, getting the most he can out of this life, with no concern about the next life, even as he faced imminent death. That was the point of Jesus' parable of the Sheep and Goats, many in this world are in it for themselves, with very little concern and care for others, especially for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the one in prison.

Today, many around us are into self-preservation and self-serving, rather than sacrificial service towards others, even within the church. As this first thief looked at Jesus, he was most likely thinking in this way, *“All I want is to get off this cross and get back to my life. I know I did wrong, but it's not my fault. I was just unlucky, a victim of my upbringing. I got a raw deal. I hung out with the wrong crowd and got caught. I deserve another chance!”* Before we judge this first thief, we need to see how much he's like many of us; however, Jesus came to this place of execution to willingly die for this thief and everyone like him, according to **Romans 5:8**, ***“But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** Christ came to us right in the middle of our sins and reaches out to us in love – desiring none to be lost!

Then, as we look at the second thief – you will notice he is in the exact same boat as the first thief. For him this was also the end, death was certain and unavoidable. No one survives a Roman crucifixion! None of the Gospel accounts tell us that this second thief started out the same way, hurling insults at Jesus, but I believe he did at first; however, at some point the second thief received a revelation of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God, and accepted Him as his Saviour. And when he put his faith in Jesus there was a drastic change in his attitude, a 180 degree change in his perspective of this God/Man hanging beside him. We are never told what happened to change this thief's mind so dramatically, but most likely it was in the way that Jesus willingly accepted the cross, laying down His life sacrificially to save others, and having this sense of peace as Jesus accepted His situation, knowing it was His Father's will.

As we survey this crucifixion scene, we need to keep in mind that Jesus was situated between these two thieves, so every time one of the thieves looked over and spoke to his partner in crime, he saw Jesus. He saw how Jesus behaved and reacted, and also heard Jesus speak to His disciple John, to His mother Mary, to God His Father, and especially to those mocking Him, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”*** (Luke 23:34). At some point the light must have come on for the second thief to his sinful life and destination once he dies. Like all of us, this man was deserving of death and eternal damnation in hell for his sins. Nailed to the cross that day, he was doomed for destruction without God in his life, but as he observed and watched Jesus hanging on the cross and heard the words Jesus spoke, this thief must have come to realize that Jesus truly is the Christ, the Messiah, and humbled himself by putting his complete faith and trust into Jesus’ hands. Remarkably, this thief realized that, even in the face of death that salvation has nothing to do with what he could do to earn his salvation, no good works could save him now, nailed to a cross! He couldn’t serve Christ in any way! It was much too late for him. Now, it all depended on God’s gift of mercy and grace. In life he had done nothing to earn his salvation, and now, hanging on this cross, there is nothing he could do for Christ except receive God’s gift of salvation. It was only faith that could save him now! I thank God for these kinds of death bed conversions, but I would never want anyone to choose to wait to the last possible moment and hope for the best!

This dramatic change is recorded for us by Luke in the declaration made by the second thief, ***“Don’t you fear God!”*** The second thief knew that death is what he and his friend deserved, but could see that Jesus was innocent, not deserving the same fate they were given. And despite the imminent death of all three of them, this thief came to the realization that Jesus had the power to save him, not from physical death, but from spiritual death. Unlike the first thief, this second thief understood that at death they would face God and judgment for their lives of sin, so he came to know what it means to fear God, because on the other side of death, he would face God and make an account for the time he was given on this earth by His Creator.

It’s as if this repentant thief was there that day when Jesus said this to His disciples – ***“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell***

***you fear him***” (Luke 12:4-5). One of the sure signs that God is working in a person’s heart is that they have a sense of God’s judgement, they have the awareness that someday they will stand before almighty God and give an account of how they spent their lives in this short time they had been given on this earth. So suddenly, unlike the first thief, this second thief was no longer concerned about getting off the cross; instead, it dawned on him there was Someone who he needed to be much more afraid of than the Roman soldiers. This second thief came to realize he needed to fear almighty God, who had the power, the authority, and the right to throw him into hell, into everlasting punishment for his sinful lifestyle.

So, as all three suffer on the cross that day – the second thief rebukes his friend for his lack of fear of God’s judgment. ***“Don’t you fear God...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”*** (Luke 23:40-41). I believe that the second thief reaches out to his friend because of love and concern for him, wanting his friend to also see the light and gain the revelation that he has received; realizing that his partner in crime also needs to receive God’s gift of salvation before its too late. Because this thief was willing to confront his friend, shows us that God’s mercy was already at work within his heart, his cold hard heart was softened, wanting his friend to be saved along with himself. It was a work of God’s pure grace, grace that was available to both thieves, but only one reached out to the Messiah to receive the gift of salvation and eternal life. In much the same way, once we come to know who Jesus is and receive the gift of salvation, shouldn’t we also have love and concern for those around us? Shouldn’t that compel us to reach out to the lost with the same grace that we have received? That’s what’s called evangelism – concern for the soul of another, not wanting to see anyone perish!

The Bible is very clear on the importance of the fear of the Lord – in leading us first to repentance and then leading us to reach out to the lost. There are many misconceptions among Christians about what it means to fear the Lord. When I was young I thought being fearful of the Lord, in the same way that I was fearful of snakes and tried to avoid them. So, the fear of the Lord is nothing like some phobia we may have such as the fear of public speaking or the fear of heights. To fear the Lord doesn’t mean that you cringe in terror before Him; instead, it means you come to recognize God as your loving Heavenly Father who is for you and not against you. Thereby, having a holy reverence before God, having a wonder and

awe at His amazing love and goodness towards you and all of mankind. When you fear the Lord, it doesn't mean that you turn and run from Him like you would a snake; instead, it causes you to run towards Him and fall on your face before Him in awe of His goodness, greatness, and mercy. And then, on the other hand, if you have a casual nature towards God and talk about Him in disrespect as the "*higher power*" or the "*man upstairs*" you don't know what means to fear the Lord either.

This lesson of the two thieves on the cross remind us that we all need to know what it means to have a healthy fear of the Lord. The Bible says in **Psalm 111:10**, "***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and all who follow his precepts have good understanding.***" And then, we are also told in **Proverbs 1:7**, "***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.***" So, if you want wisdom and knowledge and have a good understanding of God and His ways, you must start with "***the fear of the Lord,***" and that's where the second thief ended up, while the first thief ended up being a fool and dying in his sins and facing eternal damnation. The second thief came to his senses, as the fear of the Lord helped him to realize his current situation as well as his fate the moment he takes his last breath. The fear of the Lord is what leads to repentance, according to **Proverbs 8:13**, "***To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behaviour and perverse speech.***" Maybe for the first time the second thief came to realize how he had disappointed his parents and loved ones, becoming aware of how his sinful behaviour had hurt and affected those around him, so he humbled himself, taking responsibility for his actions and repented.

The second thief demonstrated his recognition of his sin by willingly confessing his sin before Jesus, as he spoke to the other thief. No longer in denial, he brought his evil deeds out of the darkness into the light with these words: "***We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve,***" acknowledging that the cross was justice for both of them. Then he made this amazing statement concerning Jesus: "***But this man has done nothing wrong***" (Luke 23:41). He seemed to understand that while they both deserve death, sinless Jesus didn't and Jesus was dying for him, to set him free from the penalty of sin. Possibly, every time he looked over at his partner in crime, he could see Jesus looking back at him through His swollen eyes and blood soaked face without condemnation or judgement, but with compassion, love, mercy, and grace. Maybe it was Jesus' gaze with those love-filled eyes that melted his heart and led him to put his faith in

the saving power of Jesus of Nazareth as his Messiah. Thinking, “*Who else but the Son of God would have such compassion and love towards a sinner like me and forgive those who are mocking Him!*”

Then this second thief directed these words directly at His Saviour, “***Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom***” (Luke 23:42). As this thief came to the end of himself, he not only came to know who Jesus is, but also what was available to him. So, he asks and places all of his faith in Jesus, whom he somehow knew could not only save him from eternal punishment, but also give him a place in eternity. Unlike the highly educated Pharisees and religious leaders who brought Jesus to Pilate to be crucified, this thief seemed to know that Jesus is the rightful King of a kingdom that is not of this world, as the notice placed by Pilate above Jesus declared: “***THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.***” Despite the fact that Jesus was nailed to a cross and dying just as he was dying, this thief had the understanding that Jesus was the King of an eternal kingdom. So, at this point Jesus was all this thief could put his trust in. His hands were nailed to a wooden cross, he couldn’t do anything with his hands to serve Jesus. His feet were nailed to a wooden beam, he couldn’t walk anywhere to serve Jesus. He had nothing left to give Jesus, except his complete trust and heart. This is proof to us as well, that we can’t work for our salvation, that our good works can’t save us. But isn’t that what Jesus wants more than anything else from His followers – their complete trust and devotion, and their heart in total submission to God!

Somehow this thief became convinced that Jesus is the sinless ONE, therefore death can’t hold Him. So, he put his trust in the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who was laying down His life for sinners like him who desperately needed a saviour. And then knowing the thief’s sinful hard heart had been softened and transformed, Jesus turned and said to him, “***Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise***” (Luke 23:43). I want you to notice here that Jesus’ promise wasn’t for tomorrow or at the end of the world, but it was for TODAY – “**Today you will be with me in paradise.**” This is the essence and nature of salvation – when we accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour, we don’t have to wait until death. We are with Jesus TODAY, at the very moment we come to believe and receive God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, and the promise is that we are never alone and never forsaken by God as we continue to walk out our faith. YES, Heaven will be our reward one day, but believers are kingdom people right now, right at this moment. We are walking talking living testimonies that Jesus is King of our lives and the

King of a coming kingdom until the day we are taken home to glory! We are kingdom people and everyone around us should know by our words and actions!

Tragically – there is no reference to the first thief in Luke’s account of ever having a change of heart. The proud and defiant first thief refused to humble his hard heart and surrender himself to Christ, refusing to put his faith in Jesus as his Messiah and Redeemer, so there is no record of Jesus ever saying to him those glorious words, *“Truly I tell you, today, you will be with me in Paradise.”* Both thieves shared in Jesus’ death, but only one shared in Jesus’ resurrection into glory. Both thieves were offered a choice to receive the joy of paradise with Christ, but only one chose wisely and was raised to eternal life in Heaven. The other thief chose poorly, and at his last breath ended up in eternal torment in hell!

The two different responses of these thieves represent the two different responses made to Christ by every person living on this earth. Thankfully, some will respond to the Gospel message, but unfortunately most will not, but death will eventually come to both, and then they will spend eternity according to the choices they have made while spending this short time on this earth. This is all according to the warning given by the Apostle Paul: ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad”*** (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Here’s the takeaway for us – without the fear of the Lord, we cannot know God! Without the fear of the Lord we are all like the tale of these two thieves, trying to steal our way into heaven without a relationship with the Saviour. However, there is no reason to steal our way into Heaven, when we can choose wisely, and take and accept the gift that has been freely offered to us at the cross through God’s grace. And when we do, then right now, not tomorrow, or some day in the future, but TODAY, we can start enjoying fellowship with our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus, and live the victorious life that He has promised, for all of those who have come to accept Christ as their Messiah!

As these two criminals were separated physically before Jesus during their crucifixion, one day all mankind will also be separated before Jesus and end up in different destinations on the other side of death. This is not only true for unbelievers, but true for believers as well. So, getting back to Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew’s Gospel, the key to understanding this parable is to realize that there is not only a judgment between bad people and good people.

But there is also a judgment between those who profess to belong to the Good Shepherd, Jesus, calling Him Lord. Pastor Ray Stedman is correct when he wrote this about this parable: *“It is important to note that it is a judgment of sheep and goats, not one of sheep and wolves! Jesus is not choosing between the obviously bad and the obviously good. In the judgment of the sheep and the goats Jesus is distinguishing sharply among persons all of whom profess to be Christians and claim to belong to him as members of the family of God. It is the separation of the hypocrites from the real; of the false from the true.”* Sheep and goats sometimes look similar, especially after sheep have been shorn, and often hang out together in the same flock. They even make similar bleating sounds. Even so, the two groups of people in this judgment tend to look the same – they both claim to be followers of Jesus. Both groups said the same thing! Both groups called the Judge, **“Lord.”** However, here’s the difference: *“Sheep”* have a servant’s heart and naturally help those in need, while *“Goats”* have a selfish heart and naturally ignore those in need.

So, what’s the point of Jesus’ parable? Is Jesus telling us here to go out and start feeding the hungry and clothing the naked so you can get into heaven? ABSOLUTELY NOT! That would be earning your salvation, and like the tale of these two thieves, we can’t earn our salvation. There is nothing you or I have done or will ever do that will make us worthy of eternal life, because the Bible says, ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works, so that no one can boast”*** (Ephesians 2:8-9). So, helping those in need doesn’t earn your salvation, but is the evidence of your salvation according to James 2:26, ***“Faith without deeds is dead.”*** So, the point of this tale of two thieves and Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats is that the fear of the Lord is the key to coming to salvation, and then serving the Lord once we are saved. The fear of the Lord is KEY, an essential element of loving God and loving others, in leading us to love, and then keeping us in love!

Like the second thief, I pray that everyone of you will hear His words in your heart, telling you, ***“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*** And that promised paradise, that will last for all eternity, begins in Christ for you and for me right now! TODAY, as we walk out our faith in the fear of the Lord!