

YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE!

“Christ’s Word of Saving Mercy” – Luke 23: 39-43 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

As I have thought about the immensities and eternal significance of the cross of Jesus Christ, I came across a quote from one of my favorite authors, F. W. Boreham. He wrote that the cross of Christ is the climax of immensities, the center of infinities, and the conflux of eternities.” To say that in plain English, there is nothing in all of history as significant as the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. In correspondence with my son, Nathaniel in Phoenix, and telling him about this series, he wrote me back, including some incredible words he wrote in last year’s Good Friday service at Church on Mill in Tempe, Arizona. He wrote, “The very course of eternity and the entire universe is changed by the death of Jesus Christ, God in flesh. The death, burial and resurrection of Christ is the decisive hinge on which reality and all eternity turn—but it is even greater still! The impacts of Jesus’ death on the cross bleed through generations, across continents and cultures, reaching the hearts of sinners like you and me. The cross of Jesus changes everything—yes, in a cosmic and eternal way—but, Jesus’ death also changes everything for you and me in the deepest and most personal way. It means that you and I can be forgiven for our sins. All of our guilt and offensive ways, everything that separates us from a holy God, were dealt with on the cross. Jesus’ death makes it possible for us to be united, reconciled to God... What can we offer You, Lord Jesus in response but our gratitude, our worship, our love, and our lives in service to you? You deserve it all, Lord, all that we have, all that we are. Lord, help us to forgive others as You have forgiven us. Amen.” Beloved, I believe our text today, with Jesus word of saving grace to the repentant thief builds on Jesus’ first word of forgiveness that Jesus prayed over and over as He was being crucified—“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Thus, the repentance of one thief stands eternally as the answer to Jesus first prayer from the cross. In truth, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “Forgiveness is the final form of love.” Both the first word from the cross and the second word from the cross are centered in this final form of love as Jesus died for us and left us His design, desire, and command to “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2: 5)

Recently, I have been reading a book published by Discovery House in 2012, that publishes, “Our Daily Bread.” This wonderful book is entitled “It Is Well With My Soul: Meditations For Those Living With Illness, Pain, And The Challenges Of Aging.” The author is Shelly Beach. I recommend this book to any of you who are struggling with chronic pain and illness. Shelly Beach lives with chronic pain from brain lesions near her brain stem, with chronic symptoms that mimic multiple sclerosis, as well as other neurological oddities such as Guillain-Barre Syndrome. The intensity of her daily pain makes her words even more potent and meaningful.

On page 128, Shelly writes, “Forgiveness and gratitude shape our relationships. Our ability to forgive flows from our gratitude for the abundant forgiveness we’ve received. Gratitude gives us the grace to resolve emotional conflict and signals a heart tethered to God. A spirit of gratitude must be fed by our awareness of what we’ve been given and who we are. When we don’t allow gratitude and forgiveness to guide us through hurt, loss, and conflict, we become trapped in a self-centered victim mentality.~~~Our ingratitude in hurtful circumstances and lack of forgiveness for frustrating people indicates, at the core, dissatisfaction with God: we’re depending upon others to meet needs that are ultimately met in God alone. Even our “prickly” relationships are a gift from God because they’re an opportunity to draw closer to Him as we learn to express His grace toward others.~~~~~We are not entitled to the self-righteous attitudes we so often justify. As sons and daughters of the Most High, we are prisoners of grace, compelled by gratitude to forgive.”

As we come to this second word of saving mercy by Jesus as He was dying on the cross, we must remember that the two murderous thieves both had to have heard Him say more than once, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Both Matthew and Mark tell us that both thieves were initially both equally engaged in mocking Jesus originally. Matthew 27: 44 declares, “And the robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him in the same way...as the scribes and the elders mocked Him.” Mark 15: 32, which Pastor Larry read, states, “Those who were crucified with Him also reviled Him.” The setting for this second saying of Jesus from the cross is couched in an awful time of passers-by, Jewish leaders and the robbers being crucified, all included in one period of joining together in mocking our Lord. So think about what you do when you are mocked? How do you respond when you are mocked, reviled and when with wagging heads, folk mock you and cast the same in your teeth? That’s the setting for this second saying from the cross. As I have studied this amazing word of Jesus, I see many lessons we all need to learn from this amazing conversation between Jesus and one of the thieves with whom He was crucified. I feel constrained to preach on the whole setting of Jesus crucified between two thieves. I see seven astounding lessons that are still forever true, which Christ inaugurated at Calvary with the repentant thief.

THE TRIAL OF OUR SUFFERINGS CAN OPEN OUR HEARTS TO JESUS IF WE SEE OURSELVES AS DESERVING OF JUDGMENT. (I.)

Initially, both the murderous thieves responded the same way to Christ. They joined with the mocking crowd. But the scene quickly changed. Strangely, most of the world responds to suffering as the thief who never stopped mocking. The scene teaches us two responses to our own personal suffering and how we relate to the Lord in our own suffering. **First, we can join the mocking thief and rail against**

the Lord. Notice verse 39. “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ, Messiah? Save yourself and us!” Our response to the Lord can often be—“Get me out of my mess.” Both thieves wanted out of the mess their awful sins had gotten them into. Both of them were equally guilty of murderous thievery. The two thieves were both criminals by their own choice. Both the men were suffering death because of their own crimes. Both of them wanted desperately to be saved from death. Amazingly, all of us face a similar situation to the two crucified thieves. There has been in the past, there is presently, and there will be more suffering in our lives. Strangely, none of us can legitimately say, “I do not deserve suffering.” Yet think with me of most of us in America. We have grown up hearing about Jesus. Millions have seen the movie Jesus, or The Passion of the Christ or The Son of God. America has had many witnesses of Calvary in church, in movies, at home, on television and on the radio. Everyone in America wants to be saved from death one way or another.

But how do we and how do most Americans face personal suffering? Here is where our paths often divide. The mocking thief seems to have been destitute of spiritual understanding to know he was suffering due to his own evil deeds, his own sin. If he did know it was because of his own sin, it was not worth him considering it for very long. All he wanted was down from the cross. Mockingly he called for Jesus to save Himself and His two crucified partners. His conscience was seared about right, wrong, good, evil, praise and blame. Millions of people only pray or talk to God when they want out of a jam, a financial crunch, a dire sickness, a bad job, or a rotten marriage. The mocking thief was not broken about his sin, or guilty or repentant or humble. To him, Jesus was only a last possible escape from death, to get him down from the cross. He could only see Jesus as a possible way to escape the cross. He didn't see Him as a King to be followed or someone before whom he should repent or change or worship. **There's a second response.** The repentant thief was not drawn in by the other thief's railing and blasphemy of Jesus. If we are to learn from him, we must learn to stand our ground for Jesus and not be sucked into mocking or railing on the Lord, The second thief spoke in verses 40, 41, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man had done nothing wrong.” Do we respond this way to suffering? How many of us know that what we deserve is hell forever? How many of us admit we are sinners who can only cry out for God's mercy in our times of suffering and desperation? How many of us acknowledge that God owes us nothing, and that our goodness at its best is only as filthy rags? Our approach to our own suffering begins a great divide. And don't forget that it is only the goodness of God that leads us to repentance. (Romans 2: 4) A second lesson:

THE TESTIMONY OF CHRIST CAN LEAD US TO REPENTANCE. (II.)

Both thieves saw and heard the same testimony of Christ. One changed and one remained the mocking thief. Both men heard the mockers give them information about Jesus. Notice where the testimony of Christ can come from. I have listened to dead drunk men witness of Christ in the bar, when I have responded to desperate wives calling me to go bring a husband home from a bar here in town. In this case, the mockers are testifying of Jesus. The chief priests and scribes and Pharisees and rulers of the Jews as well as the passers-by were scoffing at Jesus, saying, v. 35, “He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ, Messiah of God, His chosen One. The two thieves also heard the soldiers mocking Jesus and saying, v. 37, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” These were mocking testimonies that still were true. Jesus was the Savior of others. He was laying down His own life, choosing not to save Himself, but to atone for our sins. He was Messiah, the Christ, God’s Chosen One. He was the promised King of the Jews. To add to the testimony was Pilate’s words that galled the rulers of the Jews. He had an inscription written over the head of Jesus, v. 38, “This is the King of the Jews.”

John tells the story in a fuller manner in John 19: 18-22, “Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” Whether Pilate put up this inscription to mock the Jews, to mock Jesus, or both, or whether he was feeling remorse, we cannot be sure. But one thing is certain, the testimony of Jesus was strong that day at Calvary. And to add to the testimony in this greatest of all dramas, Jesus was repeatedly saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” The testimony of Christ is everywhere—both from those who love Jesus and those who mock Him. He has not left Himself without witness. The testimony of Christ is continually calling each of us for a verdict, “What will we do with Jesus?” 3rdly,

THE TURNING WE DO FROM OUR OWN SIN CAN OPEN THE FLOOD-GATES OF CHRIST’S MERCY. (III.)

What turning or repentance did the thief do. (1) First of all, this repentant thief didn’t keep on mocking Jesus. He stopped short of getting caught up in continuing to mock the Lord. Repentance begins with stopping what we are doing wrong, as this repentant no longer continued saying in effect, “If You are so great, why don’t you do something for Yourself and us and taking yourself and us down from these crosses?” Beloved, we can easily get deceived by the talking and scoffing and mocking of the world. (2) Secondly, this repentant thief feared God and rebuked his crucified fellow-criminal. Notice v. 40,

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” Facing death had made God real to him. Soon he would have to face his Maker, his Creator. It was late to bow in submission, but it wasn’t too late. (3) Thirdly, just follow the text. This repentant thief confessed his sin in front of the other thief as well as before Jesus. He said in verse 41, “And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.” He was admitting his sin and guilt, without excuse before the Lord. (4) This repentant thief went beyond admitting his guilt and sin. He went further to accept that his judgment was what he deserved. He said, “And we indeed justly.” He admitted to wrong and guilt, but he also accepted his own punishment as well deserved. (5) Fifthly, this thief testified of Christ’s righteousness. He confessed, v. 41, “But this man has done nothing wrong.” What a testimony this thief was making! This repentant thief Jesus gave mercy. 4thly,

THE TRANSIENCE OF OUR EARTHLY LIFE CAN OPEN OUR EYES TO WHO JESUS IS AS WE CRY OUT TO HIM FOR MERCY. (IV.)

This repentant thief went further than confessing his own sin. The goodness of God led him to repentance and now acknowledging that Jesus was the Lord, the King, really, not just a king by mockery, but the only King. Notice verse 42, “And he said, “Jesus, (he called the Lord by His saving Name) Jesus, remember me when you come in/into your kingdom. What a tremendous, but unlikely time to realize who Jesus was. Jesus was this thief’s suffering King, bearing his sin as well as yours and mine. For repentant, believing eyes, Jesus, who was dying in weakness, had an eternal, incredible, glorious power even on the cross. This power this repentant thief saw, the power of love that made Jesus King over all His mockers and tormentors. The thief’s eyes were opened. Are yours today? One day soon, Jesus will vindicate His Kingship and His Kingdom as every knee will bow and every tongue will confess He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. This facing of death and the transience of life opened the door for this repentant thief to cry for mercy, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” Then the floodgates of Jesus’ mercy opened as Jesus gave His second saying from the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” There’s a fifth lesson:

THE TRUTH OF CHRIST’S PROMISE TO US CAN BECOME OUR PERSONAL POSSESSION. (V.)

Beloved, what that thief heard, we may hear. I read in verse 43, “And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I say to you,” Stop right there with me. What a preface to saying, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” This is translated many ways, as “Verily, verily, or truly, truly, or I tell you the truth. It is a fact that Jesus used this prefix phrase 76 times to say, “Listen carefully to what I am saying. No one else speaks this way in the Word of God. Jesus as He was dying was speaking with astonishing, forgiving, divine authority, making a solemn, eternal announcement. When Jesus says verily, truly, it’s done. As Jesus was

hanging on the cross, paying our penalty for sin, He made a promise to this dying, repentant thief. By the grace of God and the power of Christ, that promise was true and kept. That repentant thief's sins were washed away that very day by the blood of Jesus. As the repentant thief died that day, crucified as a repentant, believing sinner, his death in union with Christ who gave him mercy opened up his entrance into Paradise. 6thly,

THE TIMELINESS OF CHRIST'S MERCY CAN STILL BE OURS TODAY AND FOREVER. (VI.) Notice v. 43, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Remember Jesus was numbered with the transgressors—fulfilling the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53: 12. Today, beloved, transgressors can still find mercy and reach Paradise. That day, with the first Gospel tract written by Pilate, in three languages, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," this repentant thief found God's mercy to be full and free. Both thieves cried "Save me, but only one was saved, because in repentance, he came to fear God, admit his wrong and sin, accept God's justice, acknowledge the goodness and power of King Jesus, and plead for His mercy, "Jesus, remember when you come into your kingdom." Like that glorious song, this thief cried it first, "And when I come to die, give me Jesus." Jesus provides opportunities for all people to trust Him and be saved. Even as He hung on the cross, there was an opportunity for both murderous thieves to trust Him! The greatest tragedy in the world is when people do not take advantage of their opportunities to trust Christ as Savior. The tragedy that day at Calvary was that one thief did not repent, believe and receive Jesus. There is a word of caution here. Don't put off trusting the Lord. Don't use the possibility of a last minute salvation to gamble your life on the altar of the immediate. This thief is not an example of putting off the call to salvation until the last moment. He was not saved at the last opportunity he had. I agree with Warren Wiersbe who said, "He was saved at the first opportunity he had. The Bible is full of todays—Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your heart. 7thly,

THE THIEF'S SUPPLICATION CAN BE OURS AND RESULT IN OUR OWN AMAZING SALVATION AND BEING WITH JESUS IN PARADISE.

(VII.) Notice verse 43, "Today you will be with me in Paradise. What is and where is this Paradise? This word Paradise is found in two other places in the New Testament. In II Corinthians 12: 3, Paul wrote, "I know a man in Christ, who 14 years ago was caught up into the 3rd heaven—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know: God knows and he heard things which are unlawful to be uttered." Paradise is the abode of God where He has prepared a place for those who know and love Him, a place utterly indescribable as Paul tells us in I Cor. 2: 9. The other place Paradise is found is in

Rev. 2: 7 where Jesus says to the church at Ephesus, “To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.” After Christ died, it was His body only that was buried in the borrowed tomb. Jesus’ spirit and soul was not in that tomb. There would not even be a delay for that repentant thief. Today the Spirit of Jesus and that renewed spirit of the thief were in union in Paradise. What a comfort and solace when we leave this world behind. Absent from the body, present with the Lord! “Truly today you will be with me in Paradise.” Jesus is waiting for you. He isn’t willing that any should perish. What a salvation! Salvation by grace through faith, for eternity, personal salvation in Christ alone, gloriously with Him. Jesus is speaking to you!