

The Differences Are All That Matter

Luke 23:33, 39-43

Luk 23:33 And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

The scene is Calvary. It was a place of suffering, sorrow and death. It was a place of intense pain and of eternal loss. It was also the place where our Savior purchased eternal life for those who will place their faith in Him. The Bible tells that as Jesus was dying that day, two other men were also being put to death. We do not know much about these men. We do not know their names. We do not know about their pasts. All we know is that they are called “*malefactors*”, which means “*villains or evildoers*”, and “*thieves*”, which means “*Highwaymen or bandits*” and refers to people who “*take the possessions of others through violent means.*” We do know that these two men share some pretty strong similarities. A casual reading of the text tells us that both are *criminals*, both have been *condemned*, and both are being *crucified*.

However, it isn't their similarities that I am interested in today, it is their differences. While these two men are alike in many ways, in other ways they could not have been more different. And it is these differences in these two men that I want to focus in on this morning.

In some ways all of us in this room are like these two men. We all have many similarities. Yet, there are differences between us and it is those differences that seem to make all the difference.

Nowhere is this more true than on a spiritual level. And it is on this level that the differences in man are most crucial. So let's take a few minutes this morning to consider these two dying men. Let's examine their differences, and as we do, I think you will agree with me that **THE DIFFERENCES ARE ALL THAT MATTER.**

I. A Difference in Their Outward Behavior

Luk 23:39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

Luk 23:40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

Luk 23:41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

Luk 23:42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

Luk 23:43 And Jesus said unto him, **Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.**

As we listen to these men speak, in their final hours, it is clear to see that their differences, hinged on a different view of God. It seems that one man learned to fear God, while the other did not!

In the final analysis, *what you think about God determines how you react to Him and to His Word.*

A. The Fear of God's Person

As we look at verses 40 and 41 we see that one man saw his sins and the other did not! One man realized that he and his life had offended a holy God. The other could not have cared less! The difference in them is that one learned the fear of God before he died and the other did not!

All one has to do is look at the state of things in the local church and in society as a whole to see that men have lost all their respect for the person of God.

Crime is rampant in society. 25 million American households per year are touched by violent crime. In our great nation, there is a murder every 23 minutes, a rape every 6 minutes, a robbery every 58 seconds and a burglary every 8 seconds. According to the M.I.T. mathematicians, an American child born in 1976 is more likely to die by murder than an American soldier was to die in combat in World War II.

Even the church has not escaped this devastation! The church is treated like it is any other place in the community. The man of God is not respected. People name the name of Jesus and live like the devil.

Why? Men no longer fear God! For many, God has been reduced to the "man upstairs." He is seen as some kind-hearted old grandfather, or like a magic genie. Just rub His belly and make a wish and He will jump through hoops to make you happy! Nothing could be farther from the truth! Our problem is that we have forgotten the teaching of the Word of God.

Rom 3:11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

Rom 3:12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Rom 3:13 Their throat *is* an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps *is* under their lips:

Rom 3:14 Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness:

Rom 3:15 Their feet *are* swift to shed blood:

Rom 3:16 Destruction and misery *are* in their ways:

Rom 3:17 And the way of peace have they not known:

Rom 3:18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Jer 2:19 Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that *it is* an evil *thing* and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, and that my fear *is* not in thee, saith the Lord GOD of hosts.

Until we learn a proper, biblical perspective concerning God, we will never fear Him as we should, and until we fear Him as we should, we will never be a perfectly right relationship with Him. In fact, learning to fear Him is one of the first steps in coming to know Him!

The Bible warns us:

Mat 10:28 And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

B. The Fear of God's Punishment

Luk 23:40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

I want to draw your attention to the word “*condemnation*” in this verse. It is the Greek word *Krima* which means a decision, the function, or the effect for, or against a crime. This word comes from the root word *Krino*.

krinō

kree'-no

Properly to *distinguish*, that is, *decide* (mentally or judicially); by implication to *try*, *condemn*, *punish*: - avenge, conclude, condemn, damn, decree, determine, esteem, **judge**, go to (sue at the law, ordain, call in question, sentence to, think.

This is the same word that gives us the word “*judgment*”.

One of these men had come to understand that he was facing more than death, but that he had an appointment with God after death. Even though he had never read it **Heb 9:27-28** was real to his soul.

Heb 9:27 And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:

Heb 9:28 So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

And while the one man grasped this truth, the other man did not. You see, the person who does not fear God, will never fear the punishment he faces from God when he leaves this world.

Have you ever wondered why people turn a deaf ear to the word of God and to His warnings? The Bible tells us exactly why they do this:

Psa 10:13 Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God? he hath said in his heart, Thou wilt not require *it*.

The Bible says that it is a work of the heart and actually shows the condition or state of the heart. Man is really quite delusional when it comes to his spiritual condition. And he is really good at persuading himself that his sins are no big deal. In fact this verse shows that he convinces himself that it is no big deal to a Holy God either.

Look at the phrase, “**Thou wilt not require it.**” In the Hebrew it means simply, “Thou wilt not seek.” The idea is that God would not make an investigation into the matter, or would overlook the matter. As a result everything is A-OK with man, and a kind and loving God would never require man to give an account for his actions. “People act as if they were not responsible to their Maker, and as if it were a settled point that He would never call them to account.” There is no fear of God in them.

- Where do you stand in relation to the fear of the person of God and the punishment of God?
- Do you realize that every person who dies in their sins faces a terrible judgment and eternity in Hell?
- Both of these men were wicked, but one learned the fear of God, the other didn't. Which one best describes you right now?

II. A Difference in Their Earthly Decision

While our first thought centered around the fear of God, this thought centers around the Person of Christ. While these men were very different in their approach to God, they are also different in their response to Jesus.

Luk 23:35 And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided *him*, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, **if** he be Christ, the chosen of God.

Luk 23:36 And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar,

Luk 23:37 And saying, **If** thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.

A. One Rejected Him

As the unbelieving thief hung on the cross, he heard the crowd, the rulers and the soldiers question Christ's claim of being the Messiah. Notice they all used the word “*if*”. He also saw the sign they placed over the head of Jesus, that read, “*This is the King of the Jews.*” He knew who Jesus claimed to be. He also knew that all those around him refused to believe in Jesus. So, when he opened his mouth to speak in verse 39, he merely echoed the same word that everyone else was using, “*If.*”

Luk 23:39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, **If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.**

That little word is filled with doubt. It calls into question everything Jesus claimed to be. It denies Him as the Son of God. It denies Him as the only Savior of man. It denies His sinless nature. It denies everything the Bible says about Jesus. When it comes to Jesus, there is no room for the word “*if*”. Either you believe He is all He claims to be, or you are a rejecter of the Jesus! When this man said “*if*” he threw out everything that Jesus claimed to be and he reduced Jesus, in his own mind, to just another criminal dying on a cross. His “*if*” decided his fate! And, as a result of his rejection, he spent his last moments on earth ridiculing the only One Who could save his soul!

What about you? Have you come to the place where you are willing to believe everything the Bible says about Jesus? Or, is your heart filled with “*if's*” concerning Him?

Eph 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God:

Eph 2:9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Joh 3:14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

Joh 3:15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Joh 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Joh 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Joh 3:18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Joh 3:19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

Joh 3:20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

Joh 3:21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

Act 16:30 ... Sirs, what must I do to be saved?

Act 16:31 And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

The sad fact is, some people in this room will go to Hell, because you cannot get around your “*if's*” concerning Jesus! Don't let what you don't understand stop you from coming to Jesus! If you are struggling with the “*ifs*”, I would encourage you to not leave here today with this issue unsettled. There are any number of people in this room that would love the opportunity to sit across the table from you, at a place and time of your choosing, and put those “*ifs*” away forever. Just ask us about those lessons.

B. One Received Him

While the one thief was listening to the crowd, the rulers, and the soldiers, the other was listening to Jesus. While the one heard all the “*if's*”, the other heard the words of our Lord in verse 34.

Luk 23:34 Then said Jesus, **Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.**

It hadn't always been that way! Earlier, this same thief had joined everyone else in mocking the Lord Jesus.

Mat 27:38 Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

Mat 27:39 And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,

Mat 27:40 And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest *it* in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Mat 27:41 Likewise also the chief priests mocking *him*, with the scribes and elders, said,

Mat 27:42 He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.

Mat 27:43 He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

Mat 27:44 The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

But something changed as he watched Jesus on the cross. Who knows what made the difference.

- Maybe it was what Jesus said in verse 34.
- Maybe it was what Jesus did not say.
Isa 53:7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

Whatever it was, his heart was warmed and opened and he looked upon Jesus with new eyes. And as he looked at Jesus that day, he saw Him as:

1. Sinless -

Luk 23:41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

He looked at Jesus and was drawn to the same conclusion reached by Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, Pilate's wife and King Herod. All of these looked at Jesus and declared as one chorus, "*I find no fault in Him!*" This thief saw Jesus as the sinless Son of God. You have to come to that place as well. Only a sinless Savior can take away your sins!

2Co 5:21 For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

2. Savior -

Luk 23:42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

While the other thief was looking for someone to save his skin, this thief was looking for someone to save his soul. The other just wanted to go home, this one wanted to go to Heaven. At this moment in time, no one was willing to call Jesus Lord but this dying thief. Jesus had never looked less like a "*Sovereign Lord*" than He did at that moment. Yet, this man was able to see beyond the moment and he understood that Jesus, alone, was his only

hope for salvation. As soon as he looked in Jesus's direction, by faith, he was eternally saved.

By the way, that is the same place you have to arrive at as well! **Jesus isn't just "a way"**. No! **He is the only way!**

Joh 14:6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Is that what you believe? Nothing else will save your soul! Nothing else will fit you for Heaven! He must be seen as Savior before salvation can come!

3. **Sovereign** –

Luk 23:42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

Somehow, while everyone else doubted, this dying man saw beyond the cross. He saw beyond the tomb. He saw beyond the difficulties and he looked at Jesus Christ knowing He was the Sovereign Lord. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the King of the Jews. At that moment, even though he didn't understand it all, even though he didn't understand exactly how it would all work out, whether Jesus would come down from the cross, or rise from the dead, either way, he knew that Jesus was Lord! The eyes of faith allowed him to see what no other person could see that day. Jesus never looked less like a king than He did at that moment, yet this man believed! Even the disciples and those who loved the Lord Jesus that day could not see what this thief saw! As a result, he was saved!

Regardless of what others are saying about Jesus Christ, in the end, it will all come down to the decision you make concerning Him!

- Have you trusted Him to be your Savior?
- Have you been able to see beyond the jeers of the crowds, the hatred of religion, and the apathy of the world?
- Can you see that there is no other way to Heaven, but through a relationship with Jesus Christ?
- Until you do, you aren't going?

Can you see the difference in the way these two men responded to Jesus Christ?

- One saw Him as a liar to be ridiculed, the other as a Lord to be received.
- One saw Him as a clown, the other saw Him as Christ.
- One saw Him as a foolish sinner, the other as the Father's Son.
- One saw Him as a wretched loser, the other as a Wonderful Lord.
- One saw Him as a pitiful buffoon, the other as a precious benefactor.
- One saw Him as just another sinner, the other saw Him as an awesome Savior.

Which best describes your reaction to the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ?)

III. A Difference in Their Eternal Destiny

Because of the differences in the reaction to God and their response to Jesus, these men also experienced a vast difference in their eternal state.

A. One Experienced a Destiny of Hopelessness

The thief who rejected Jesus is not mentioned again until John 19:32, when the Roman soldiers come by to break his legs. The last thing he felt in this world was the crushing blow of the hammer again his shins. He felt the bones shatter and he was no longer able to push up against the nails in his feet so that he might breathe. It would not have been more than a few short minutes and this man would have entered a Christless, hopeless eternity. There is no doubt that when this man died, he went to Hell. The last thing he experienced here was pain, rejection and sorrow. The first thing he experienced when he left this world was more pain and the endless torments of Hell and of eternal separation from God. His was a hopeless destiny!

Don't let this happen to you! You do not have to die without Jesus and perish in Hell. You can be saved and you can go to Heaven instead of Hell. It all depends on what you do with Jesus Christ!

B. The Other Experienced A Destiny of Hope

Luk 23:43 And Jesus said unto him, **Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.**

The dying thief who looked to Jesus by faith received one of the most wonderful promises ever recorded in the Bible. He was just hoping that when the kingdom was established that Jesus would somehow remember him then. Jesus tells him that this very day they will be together in paradise! There will be no waiting. There will be no soul sleep. There will be no time in purgatory to pay for his sins. There will be nothing but joy, and glory and the presence of the Savior in paradise. He got far more than he asked for!

Let me share a few quick thoughts about this man's salvation.

1. **A Gracious Salvation** - This man was not saved by works or by baptism. He was saved purely through the power of grace through faith alone. Please note that this is the only "death bed" salvation scene recorded in the Bible! Don't count on getting in at the last minute! The time to come to Him is now.

Isa 55:6 Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:
Isa 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

2Co 6:2 (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.)

2. **A Guaranteed Salvation –**

Luk 23:43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Jesus said “*verily*”. This is the translation of the word “*amen*.” Jesus said, “*You have my 'Amen' on it! You will be with me in paradise today!*” This man was in the presence of the Lord in paradise before the soldiers ever pronounced him dead! He is a perfect illustration of “*absent from the body and present with the Lord.*”

3. **A Glorious Salvation –**

Luk 23:43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

The last person this thief spoke with on earth was the Lord Jesus and the first person he saw in paradise was the Lord Jesus! Jesus told him, “*Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*” “*With me*”, what a glorious thought! Here is a man unloved by humanity, unwanted by society, yet cared for by Christ! So it is today, regardless of your background, you are loved by Him my friend.

Rom 5:8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

You can experience this same glorious salvation and the guarantee of Heaven if you will come to Him by faith! Only Jesus offers hope for the lost soul!

In the end, the differences are all that matter! When you reach the end of life all that will matter then is what you did with Jesus Christ. When you boil it all down, the only difference between these men was that they died on different sides of Jesus Christ. The same will be true of you. When you die, you will either be on the right side of Jesus, or you will be on the wrong side of Him.

If you died right now, which would it be?