**The Thieves: Salvation Is Free**

**Luke 23:32-47**

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We’re going to be looking at Luke 23 today. Luke 23 is going to give us a very personal story about these two thieves. He’s the only gospel writer that gives us insight into what is happening with these two thieves. The other gospel writers tell us that they’re present, but not much about them. And so we learn so much from them about the freeness of the gift of salvation. Jesus now is right at the moment of being placed upon the cross, and we read this really personal and powerful story.

***32*** *Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.* ***33*** *And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.* ***34*** *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments.* ***35*** *And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ 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 railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? 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 justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”* ***42*** *And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* ***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

***44*** *It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land, until the ninth hour,* ***45*** *while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.* ***46*** *Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.* ***47*** *Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!”*

May God encourage us through His Word, today!

The detail of Jesus being crucified between two thieves is not a minor matter. Before the foundation of the world, God predetermined and planned in His infinite wisdom, every detail of His Son’s death. This includes the detail of Jesus’ crucifixion between two wicked criminals. Through this detail, the Father is communicating to us that His Holy Son is associating with sinful man. He is associating Himself with our shame and our condemnation. And this association by this pure, spotless Lamb of God with sinful humanity is necessary if Jesus is to be our Savior. So, God includes this detail. It’s so important!

You see, if God’s perfect Son had remained distant from us, if He had said, “I’m not going to take on the stench, the vileness of associating with this people,” then He could have never drawn us near to God. He could not have given us forgiveness. If He had not drawn near to us and in His nearness associated with our own vileness, our own wickedness, our own disobedience, our own sin, there would be no hope of forgiveness. But thankfully, God, in His loving kindness and His grace, sent His Son. His Son volunteered to come down and be associated with us and to represent us. He volunteered to enroll in this human race that is so filled with sin. Remember that the Holy Spirit prophesied of this 700 years before Jesus would be born. The prophet Isaiah says that the Messiah would be

**Isaiah 53:12** numbered with the transgressors;

This is such a remarkable prophecy that prior to Jesus’ trial before Pilate and before the religious leaders, He’s going to tell His disciples of the Father’s plan, using that very verse, Isaiah 53:12. He says to His disciples

**Luke 22:37** “For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.”

He knows where He is headed. He knows the association that is going to be made. He knows the shame that He’s going to take on as He associates with us. And yet, we ask the question, what Father would arrange for His Son to die upon a cross? It’s a curse. It’s a shameful death in and of itself. But even more, to have Him not just alone upon a cross, but to be numbered with transgressors. What kind of father would ordain that for His Son? We also ask, what Father would ordain for His Son in dying upon a cross and being numbered with transgressors, having really wicked people surrounding Him as though He were one of them, then to receive insults and scorn from these criminals? So it’s bad enough to be associated with them and have everybody else say, “Yes, He’s one of them.” But then to have even them turn on Him and say, “Yes, you’re even worse than us. We are mocking You. We are placing ridicule upon You.” He endured the physical pain, the emotional trauma, the greatest of all the pains of taking on the sins of the world, the curse of God upon His own self. It’s outrageous that the Father would make such a plan! It’s outrageous! And yet, this is the Father’s predetermined plan.

In all this, let’s keep in mind that Jesus could have called ten thousand angels to release Him at any point, from the shame of this. In all this, Jesus could have spoken a single word and the Roman soldiers would have been rendered impotent and powerless. In all this, Jesus could have revealed His glory as shame upon shame upon shame was heaped upon Him. He could have said, “Okay, I’m tired of all of you thinking of me this way.” Boom! In a moment, He could have expressed the brilliance of His purity, the brilliance of His glory. But He withheld all that. He remained there on the cross. He remained in the midst of that shame. He remained as numbered among transgressors. He placed Himself voluntarily in the middle of that scorn, that contempt, that disgrace. All of that which is truly due to sin was placed upon the sinless One.

When the Holy One, the sinless Son of God, took on human flesh, He identified Himself, He bound Himself with sinners. I want you to think with me of four incidents in the life of Christ where He identified Himself with sinners, where He enrolled as one of us so that not just humanity would be placed upon Him, but the shame and the guilt of humanity would be placed upon Him.

Incident #1: Jesus’ birth.

Remember that the eternal Son of God stepped away from glory. It was glory which He had known for all of eternity. He took upon Himself the nature of man. He, the Creator, took the form of creature. Further, when the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, he said

**Matthew 1:21** “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

In other words, this is the people with whom Jesus is going to identify, and it’s a sinful people. It’s a disobedient people. It’s a hard-hearted people. They were called “his people.”

**Matthew 1:22-23** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

This means God identifying with us, being one of us, enrolling with us. So from the very beginning of eternity past, the plan was for this sovereign Lord to identify with sinful creatures. He does not remain separate from us. He doesn’t distance Himself from our shame. But rather, He comes alongside. He becomes part of it. What staggering condescension! It’s staggering! Who would volunteer for that? Only the sinless Son of God. He was numbered with the transgressors.

Incident #2: Jesus’ baptism.

John the Baptist is the forerunner to Jesus. He is announcing the coming of the Messiah. And what is John’s primary ministry? Well, it’s to call people to repentance. So when he baptizes people, it’s people coming and saying, “I’m sinful before the Lord. I need to get my heart right before the Lord in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, to receive this King.” So when they’re baptized, they’re recognizing, “I am turning my life around. I’m turning it away from selfishness. I’m turning it away from sin and I’m turning it toward God. I want my life to be devoted to God.” That was the meaning of John’s baptism. Yet the sinless Son of God comes to John to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. John knows that he is not worthy to tie Jesus’ sandals, let alone baptize Him. So he wants to prevent Jesus from receiving baptism from him. When Jesus approached him for baptism, John said

**Matthew 3:14** “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

“I’m the sinner. You’re the righteous One. I need to be baptized by You. How is it that You come to me?” John asks Him.

**Matthew 3:15** But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

In other words, He doesn’t allow John to prevent Him. He says, “This is absolutely necessary. If all righteousness is to be fulfilled, I have to identify with sinful man. I have to identify through this baptism with repentance. I know I don’t need to repent of My own sin, but this people needs to repent. And if I’m going to be identified and participate with this people, I need to participate in this baptism.” John had said earlier

**John 1:29-31** “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”

How does He take away the sin of the world? It’s by identifying with sinful people. It’s by taking our sin upon Himself, becoming one of us. John was born earlier in time, but really, John says that Jesus “pre-existed me. He is the eternal one.” You see, Jesus was numbered with transgressors so as to be representative for us.

Incident #3: Jesus’ dinners.

It seems like Jesus is always intentionally, publicly eating meals with the worst of sinners. Again, this runs contrary to what we naturally do. We naturally distance ourselves from disreputable people because if we place ourselves too close to disreputable people, then their reputation becomes ours. People think that we’re like that. And so we say, “I want to be at the house of honored, reputable people so then people think I’m part of that group.” But Jesus did the opposite. He was constantly going to places where people who experienced the shame of public condemnation had this cloud over their lives.

In Mark 2, Jesus reclines at the tables of many tax collectors and sinners. In Luke 7, Jesus allows a sinful woman…she’s an immoral woman. She’s known to be immoral. And He allows her to come up really close to Him. She was so close that she anoints His head with oil and then she cries and her tears wash Jesus’ feet, and she dries Jesus’ feet with her hair. The religious leaders say, “He must not know who she is” because no one does that in polite society. I think of Luke 19 where Jesus tells this wee little guy by the name of Zacchaeus, “Come down from the tree. I’m going to your house today.” The religious leaders are all grumbling. It’s a big scandal! They all say that He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. What kind of person must He be?

Why did Jesus allow His pure reputation, His pure name, to be identified with the most shameful sinners in polite society? The answer is because the purpose of His coming was to represent us. The purpose of His coming was to come alongside of us. Our stink had to fall on Him or He couldn’t be our Savior.And he was numbered with the transgressors all his life.

Incident #4: Jesus’ crucifixion.

So from the beginning, all the way through to this point in His life, He has been numbered among transgressors. But now this prophecy from Isaiah is truly fulfilled. In His death, He’s going to be numbered among transgressors.

We pick up our story this morning after Jesus has been betrayed by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane, after Jesus has been denied by Peter three times, after Jesus has been illegally tried by the religious leaders at Caiaphas’ house in the early hours at 3:00 in the morning, after Jesus has been tried by Governor Pilate early in the morning around 6:00. Five times Pilate says, “This man is innocent.” Our story occurs after Jesus has been mocked and beaten by Roman soldiers, after Jesus has had a crown of thorns placed upon His head, after the crowd has shouted for Barabbas’ release and for Jesus to be crucified. “Crucify Him!” This story takes place after Jesus has been lacerated by a cat of nine tails. It’s a process that is so destructive as to leave a person almost looking unhuman. This is after Jesus has been stripped of His clothes and is naked while nailed to a cross and hung up as a curse for sin. Our story takes place after then being nailed to the cross, Jesus continues to receive ridicule, scorn, shame. “Ha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross!” (Matthew 27:40) All this has happened since 3:00 that very morning. It’s now around 11:00 in the morning on a day that we call Good Friday.

The Gospels don’t tell us much about these two criminals that are being executed by Rome for serious offenses. Matthew and Mark use the term “robbers.” It’s interesting because it’s the term that John is going to use to describe Barabbas. We know he was an insurrectionist. He was a terrorist. So these guys may have been part of Barabbas’ murderous gang, part of this insurrection. They may have all been caught together and tried together and then sentenced together. We’re not sure, but certainly these guys are guilty of far greater crimes than petty theft. Please understand that this is serious crime. They have blood on their hands. One of them will even admit later that both of them have committed crimes that would justify Rome’s ill treatment of them, of executing them on a cross. That’s a pretty amazing confession!

Imagine with me this morning the personal journey of the thief who eventually would call upon the name of the Lord. Let’s think about that story for a moment.All night, you await the dawn of light with fear and trembling. Your stomach is just churning all night as you know what is going to happen in the morning. You’ve seen people crucified and it is terrible! Your gut aches from the thought of having nails pierce your hands and feet. That morning, you hear the soldiers come for you, and they drag you out of your prison cell. You are brought into the open air and you see one of your fellow terrorists there. You also expect to meet Barabbas. But instead of Barabbas, you see another standing there. You wonder first, “Where is Barabbas? I thought this was our day. And who is this guy? Who is this Stranger standing in front of me? What has He done to deserve this?”

The soldiers roughly place on you a heavy wooden beam for you to carry through the streets of Jerusalem, outside the city, through the gate, and up a hill called Golgotha. You feel its roughness. You feel its burden. You feel its sharp splinters as you walk forward with it on your back, and you curse. You curse the guards. You curse the crowds. You curse God. A similar beam is placed upon the Stranger’s bleeding back. You take the sight of Him in, and you are aghast at what you see. He is so battered and beaten and bleeding that He doesn’t even look human anymore. He has a crown of thorns pressed deeply upon His head. You wonder, “What is that all about?” You’ve never seen that before. You hear the jeers, the jeers from the religious leaders, the jeers from the Roman guards, the jeers from the crowds. And if you would confess it, you find some pleasure in the scorn that is placed upon Him because all the scorn placed upon Him seems to shift the focus away from you and from your shame, from your guilt. And so, there’s some kind of pleasure you take in others jeering this stranger.

You observe that this Stranger is a really strong man, and yet you see Him stumble under the weight of His cross. You are not surprised, because you see the blood oozing, indeed flowing from His wounds onto the stone pavement beneath His feet. You wonder almost aloud, “How much blood has He already lost?” Another man is yanked from the crowd and made to carry the beam for the Stranger through the streets outside the city, and up the hill. This is a very strange sight. You don’t know what it means.

Amidst the many jeers, you see another sight that you’ve never witnessed before at a crucifixion. You see crowds of people with tears streaming down their faces. They’re weeping, and they’re weeping for this One. They love Him! How could He be so loved and hated at the same time? This Stranger looks upon those mostly women who are weeping and He says to them,

**Luke 23:28-31** “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

You take this in and you wonder, “What does this mean?” You feel just a jolt inside of you. You know that He is talking about some future day of judgment. You’re struck by His words, even as you don’t understand them. Who says something like that on the way to their death? Who says, “Don’t weep for me, but weep for yourselves”? Who speaks of the future righteousness of God?

You see the soldiers as they lay this Stranger on the ground. You watch them strip Him of His clothes. With heavy thuds, they nail His feet and His hands secure to the beam. He suffers in agony. He groans, and yet His spirit is strangely calm. You see them fasten a great placard over His head.You know it is Rome’s way of identifying the crimes that the executed are guilty of. And you’ve been wondering, “What has this man done?” So you strain to see, and when He is raised, what you see causes even greater puzzlement. You see that it just says, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” You think back about growing up in your Jewish home. Your mom had taught you about a coming Messiah. She taught you some Scriptures. But surely this is not Him! The Stranger and His cross are lifted up and with a thud, dropped into the hole and secured to that place.

You now are slammed to the ground. You fight and fight. You curse and curse, but to no effect. Your hands and feet feel searing, burning, crazy pain as nails are driven into your hands and feet. And then you are lifted up. Oh, the shock of your body as your cross is set in its place!

You hear more scorn as people are now feet away from this One, this Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. They’re feet from Him, and yet they seem to grow darker and more outraged in their hatred of Him. You listen as they mock Him and you hear your fellow criminal join in this mockery. You decide that there’s just a bit of relief from the shame, relief from the guilt, relief from the feeling of being the worst human on earth, by mocking Him. And you want to be part of this crowd. It makes you feel a little bit less worthless and a little more free.

An hour of suffering ticks by and you see the Roman soldiers dividing His clothes amongst them and gambling for them. You hear Jesus speak His first words from the cross. He’s addressing God as His Father! You’ve never heard anybody pray this way before.

***34*** *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

Who does that? You’ve been cursing these guards. You’ve been cursing the crowd. You’ve been cursing everyone from the time that you woke up that morning. And you hear this one say

***34*** *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

Suddenly, there is a bright light that flashes into your soul and you see what you’ve never seen before. You realize who this One is!You realize this one *is* the King. This one *is* the Messiah. This one *is* the one that your mom talked about as she explained the Scriptures to you as a little one. He is the King of Israel. He is the One who has been promised by all the prophets. He is the One who is able to forgive sins.He is the Lamb of God who could take away the sins of the world! Even as you are pinned to your cross, hope fills your soul. For the first time in your whole life, you feel hope. You feel perhaps that the future will be brighter than it is today.

The mockery of Jesus continues. The religious leaders walk up to Jesus, and again with this demonic, murderous hatred, they taunt Him before His face.

***35*** *And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”*

You watch then as the Roman soldiers take their turn.

***37*** *and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”*

“You’re supposed to be so powerful. You’re supposed to be so mighty. Rescue your own skin!” Then you hear your criminal friend on the other side joining in the taunts.

***39*** *One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

Suddenly, there is a conviction of the earlier guilt of your mockery of this One whom you now know to be the sinless Son of God. Of all the sins you have committed, and they are horrendous, this one seems to stand out with great conviction. You feel the fear of God just rushing through your body as you realize that in just a few hours, you will stand before God to give an account of that. You will give an account of mocking His Son, mocking the Messiah, mocking the King who is going to enter into His kingdom! You suffered when you defied Caesar. What is going to happen when you defy the King of Glory?! You turn to your friend in compassion, but with a rebuke.

***40*** *But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?*

You realize that just a few moments earlier, you didn’t fear God. The other criminal is in the same place as you were. But God has awakened your soul. You hope that your word might shake him from his slumber. You realize that you don’t want to sound self-righteous before this fellow criminal.

***41*** *And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”*

“I’m with you. I’m like you. I’ve sinned just like you have. But this man whom you are mocking has done nothing wrong. He’s righteous. He’s the sinless Son of God.” You know that this one in the middle, this Jesus, owes you nothing. You know that your sins deserve eternal punishment. You know that you’ve earlier taunted Him and made His pain at this hour even greater. You now know that He is the King sent from God.You know that this cross will not be the end for Him; that this King will enter His kingdom as He perishes from the cross. You know that He has the authority to open the doors or to shut them, from heaven itself. You know He is merciful. You’ve heard Him utter, “Father, forgive them.” And you know you need mercy. You need forgiveness. With your last breath you need forgiveness from the shame and guilt of your own sin. You lower your eyes. You can’t even look at this one who is sinless, who is pure, whom you have sinned against. You love that name, Jesus. It means “Yahweh saves.” It is your hope. It’s a hope that is now shining in your heart. Even with the conviction of sin, there is hope there. You call out

***42*** *And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

“I know where You’re going. I know what Your future is. And I know there’s no hope for my future if You don’t remember me. So this day, would You remember me?” Jesus looks at you. Your eyes now look up into His face. In all your adult life, no one has ever looked at you the way Jesus is looking at you. There is such love, such compassion, such mercy, such acceptance. He looks at you like an older brother would look at his dearest younger brother.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly I say to you,*

He didn’t need to say that. You would believe anything He would say, but He wanted you to know that this is absolute truth.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

“I’m going to take you by the hand. I’m going to walk you through the gate, and you’ll be with Me in My Father’s house.”

Well, there is so much to learn from this story, isn’t there? There’s so much that we can’t cover even a short part of it. But I want us to think about four specific lessons that we learn from these thieves.

**Lesson #1: God’s condemnation of sinners is just.**

Our world seems to have great difficulty with the justice of God and especially of His condemnation of sin. But from this story, we learn that God is just in condemning sin. This penitent thief understood that. He understood that he had committed sins that were worthy of the most atrocious death that the Roman government could lay upon him. But worse, he knew that he was going to stand before God and there was a fear of God that rose up in his soul. If this is the way Rome, that is corrupt, treated those who would make treasonous acts, how much more this pure, holy, infinite Creator God dealt with traitors against Him.

Satan’s first lie to mankind is that we don’t need a Savior. “We’re going to be fine. Don’t worry! God is merciful. You’ve never done really anything that would excite His anger.” And take note of the other thief. He didn’t fear God’s eternal punishment for sin. Now, he was a really bad guy. I don’t doubt from a human standpoint if there is anyone here today that we could place right alongside of him in reference to human sin, human crimes, human shame, human guilt. But here he was, and he didn’t feel like there was anything to fear even hours from his death, even hours before facing God. Perhaps he thought, “I may not have obeyed all of God’s commandments, but I have a good heart. I’ve tried to do right.” Or perhaps he thought, “You know, I have done some bad things in my life, but I know other people who have done so much worse!”

How deceitful is Satan? How powerful is his deceit, to fall under his spell, to think that we who have clearly disobeyed God’s law, a law that God says is immoveable and immutable. It’s a law that God says, “I won’t allow the guilty to go unpunished.” And yet somehow, Satan gets to us and says, “You don’t have to worry about that. That’s for other people.” If Satan is able to deceive this man to think that he is going to be fine when he stands before God, what do you think he can do with us? From a human standpoint, Satan has more human “righteousness” to work with in us than he does with this guy. Beloved, we must not allow our pride to convince us that our sins are not that terrible and that we really have nothing to fear. I urge you to take time to consider the cross of Jesus. Jesus’ death is necessary *because* our sins are so severe. The horror and agony and pain and suffering of Christ proves the justice of God. Consider what awful judgment God brings upon all sin! If He brought this upon His Son when His Son was bearing our sins for us, what will He bring upon us when we bear our own sins before Him? Do we tremble before the Lord? We must, or we will never be saved!

I believe that the fear of God is a proof of the grace of God. If we ever come to the point of fearing God, instead of turning away from it like it’s some enemy to avoid and thinking, “somehow I have to get that out of my mind. Somehow I have to get distracted from the fear of God,” we need to press into it. The fear of God is evidence of the grace of God. If we never come to fear God and tremble before Him about our own sin, we will never ever receive salvation. We’ll never receive the life of God in our soul. So here are some applications.

1. Run to Jesus for mercy! Confess your need of a Savior.

Let’s ask God to open up our hearts to see the awfulness of our own sin. We have an easy time of seeing the awfulness of other people’s sin, don’t we? That’s our pride. We think we’re so discerning. But we are so blind to our own sin and its awfulness and its ugliness.

Secondly, and I believe this is so important for the church, we who have been made alive in Christ.

2. Live with others like you know that you are the worst of sinners.

I believe that Satan robs so much of the glory of God in His church family when the church family looks around and says, “Look at that person. Look at this person.” We begin slandering and we begin talking about them. We feel superior. And we feel superior mostly because other people don’t know our inner thoughts. They don’t know our secret sins. If we only simply lived first with God and then with one another with the truth that “I am the worst of sinners,” how the church of Jesus would be filled with love. The church of Jesus would be filled with softness. The church of Jesus would be filled with a blessing.

**Lesson #2: God’s salvation is free.**

This is sort of just the bottom line, the foundation of the gospel. It is free. It’s absolutely free! Jesus does all the work to bring us salvation. Jesus pays the infinite price so that we can receive eternal life. Think of this penitent thief for a moment. He couldn’t walk in the paths of righteousness. His feet were nailed. He couldn’t do anything with his hands to serve God. His hands were nailed to the cross. He had no opportunity. And yet, being unable to do anything to assist Jesus in his own salvation, he looked to Jesus wholly. And that’s the issue. God’s salvation is 100% free. Here’s what Revelation 22 says.

**Revelation 22:17** The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

It’s just coming to Christ, like this penitent thief. He just came to Christ. It’s without cost. We are thieves upon a cross, unable to do anything to merit God’s forgiveness, to merit a smile from the Lord. Our best works are polluted. That’s what the Scripture says.

**Isaiah 64:6 (NIV)** All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

How many of us? All of us. How many of our righteous acts? All of them. We’re unable to stop the freight train of our own sin just sweeping us away from God. And so when we seek to add our human righteousness to the righteousness of Jesus, we say, “I know I need Jesus, but here, Jesus, you pay the bill, but let me pay the sales tax. You pay the bill, but let me get the tip.” And what happens when we seek that kind of exchange in order to gain God’s acceptance? I’ll tell you what happens. Our addition is corrupting! All our righteousness are like filthy rags. Here’s the pure, spotless merit of Jesus. I place my act of righteousness next to that and say, “Okay, God. Will you take now the whole and accept me into heaven?” But God says, “What you just added has corrupted it. It’s no longer pure. And I’m not going to accept anyone who is not absolutely pure. That’s why you need to take your hands off and all you need to do is come. Come without price. Come without cost. Come freely to the grace of God. Because there is nothing, zero, that you could do that would do anything but corrupt the work of Jesus. All your righteousness is like filthy, rotten, stinking rags.”

**Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

So here’s the application. Let’s stop trying to gain God’s approval through our works. And let’s start clinging to Jesus as our Righteousness and our Hope. Our works come as a result of the life of God that is freely ours. It is freely given to us in Christ. It’s a result of His new life that is inside of us. Our works are never ever, ever applied to somehow gaining more love from God and more acceptance. Let’s stop trying and let us enter into Christ. Just cling onto Him!

**Lesson #3: God’s electing love is effective.**

There are some folks that read this story and they’re shocked that the unrepentant thief remained unrepentant. They think, “How can you die right next to Christ and be dying, and still not repent?” That’s the surprise for many when they read this story. How could that person remain hard-hearted? Do you know the real surprise? How could a person repent? After living a whole life of hard-heartedness, after living a life of blindness, how could they ever see the glory of God? This person had the least experience of seeing Jesus’ power and glory. He didn’t see Jesus do miracles. He didn’t watch Him feed 5,000 people. He didn’t see Him heal the blind man. He didn’t see Him raise Lazarus from the dead. What did he Jesus do? He saw Him die. He saw Him bloodied. He saw Him so weak that He couldn’t carry His cross. He saw Him mocked by religious leaders, mocked by Roman soldiers, mocked by the other criminal.

What happened? How do you explain his faith? How do you explain the fact that he saw in Jesus that Jesus is the sinless Son of God; that He is the Messiah, the King who would go to His kingdom and who would be the one who had the keys of that kingdom? The door to whom Jesus opened would be open to him, but the door to whom Jesus shut would be forever shut. How did he see that? I can only explain it as a miracle of God’s sovereign grace. It’s the same as the Apostle Paul. He is on this road to Damascus. He hates Jesus. He hates the Messiah. He hates the people who follow the Messiah. He wants to kill them. That’s his mindset. What happens? God stops him. And this guy who was blind to see God’s glory in the face of Jesus, suddenly was like, “I see!” Everything changes when God’s grace enters in to make him see what he was previously darkened to.

Beloved, it’s important for us to see our salvation as wholly a work of grace. This man didn’t look at the other thief and say, “Hey, I’m the one who has faith. I’m a lot better than you and that’s why I’m going to heaven. Na-na-na-na-na!” He just said, “Remember me. I can’t even ask for any more than that. I don’t deserve any more than that. I only ask that you would remember me and perhaps have some mercy so that I won’t suffer as much.” He heard Jesus say, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.”

Why did one thief repent and the other remain unchanged? How can we explain the contrasting responses? Was it that this criminal was more noble? Was this criminal more spiritually soft? Was this criminal more wise? I tell you, no. We will never find the explanation. The gospels don’t give it in the man. We’ll only find the explanation in the sovereign grace of God. God says

**Romans 9:15-18** “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy…So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Our salvation depends wholly upon God! There are three applications.

1. Do not give up on anyone.

God, in His grace, opened this sinner’s heart. He opened this sinner’s heart, I believe, in this story, to tell everyone who has a son, a daughter, a mom, a dad, a brother, a sister, a really close friend, who it seems like this is the last person on earth who would ever soften their heart to God. They are violently opposed to God. Don’t give up on them. It takes a miracle? Yes! God does this miracle. Pray, pray, pray! Look for opportunities to tell the gospel and to point people to Christ. Don’t give up on anyone. If God, in sovereign grace, could open the heart of this hardened criminal, this lifelong criminal, surely He is able to open the heart of that loved one who is rebelling in a real hard way against God right now. Let’s wait on the Lord, friends.

2. Give praise to God for our salvation every day.

Know that there is nothing in you that commends. If I reject God, it’s wholly on me. I’m totally responsible. It’s because I’m willful. It’s because I’m hard-hearted. But if I open my heart to God, it’s only because of His work. We need God’s refreshed work every day. It’s a work of grace.

3. Receive God’s grace with humility.

Every day, let’s humble ourselves before the Lord. He opposes the proud, the self-willed, the self-righteous, the self-sufficient, the self-confident. But He gives grace to the humble.

**Lesson #4: God’s heaven is guaranteed to all who believe.**

It’s guaranteed! That’s a great thing! This is our hope. This is our certainty. The sinless Son of God, the King of Glory guarantees it! Jesus doesn’t say, “When I get into my kingdom, I’ll look for a way for you to go along with some of the dogs and get some crumbs.” He guarantees that this thief will enter with Him into the feast, into this Garden, into this Paradise of God.

I love the little word that Jesus uses at the beginning of verse 23, “Truly.” He wants to assure this person who had never had hope in any part of his life that he’d ever be accepted by God, that this is absolute. He is able to save to the uttermost! (Hebrews 7:25) There is no doubt about His rescue. Remember that Jesus made this promise in the hour of His own human frailty, in the hour in which He stumbled under the weight of a beam. And yet, He assured this man. He said, “Listen, I am the Son of God.” He knows He is going to be resurrected in power and in glory.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

The hymn writer said:

The dying thief rejoiced to see

That fountain in his day,

And there may I, though vile as he,

Wash all my sins away.

He saw that this bleeding Messiah was bleeding for him, to wash his sins away, to offer forgiveness. He rejoiced to see that fountain in his day. And there may I though vile as he, wash all my sins away. Isn’t that amazing? That’s amazing! What a precious truth! Whatever the weight of your sin, Jesus is able to carry it. Whatever the condemnation you deserve, Jesus offers the promise of a home with Him in heaven.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

This day! It’s not in the distant future, but it’s on this day. This is the hope of every believer. For everyone who is in Christ, we know that when we die, we don’t really die. Instantly, we’re in the presence of God with Jesus. The promise that is given to this sinner, this thief, is the promise given to every person who is in Christ. The only condition that we must meet in order to gain from Jesus’ death and resurrection is biblical faith. We must believe!

Biblical faith is a faith that has a fear of God. We see our sin as utterly sinful. Biblical faith is a faith that confesses Jesus as righteous. He is innocent. He’s done nothing wrong. Biblical faith believes in Him to be different from every other person. It believes in Him to be the Messiah who died on our behalf. Biblical faith is a complete casting the care of our life into the hands of Jesus. “Would you remember me, Jesus? I don’t have a Plan B. I’m only trusting in You.” Biblical faith is a very personal request to Jesus to rescue you.

Let me ask you: Do you have biblical faith? It’s the most important question. Have you ever come to conviction of your own sin and recognized, “My sin is so utterly sinful, it would separate me from God forever and ever.” Have you ever come to the truth that Jesus is God’s Son? He’s the eternal one. He’s the righteous one. He is unique above every other person. Have you ever come to a place where you say, “I need to cast complete trust upon Jesus. I don’t want to have any Plan B. Jesus is my only plan for rescue.” Have you ever come to where you’ve made a personal call and say, “Jesus, would you remember me? Would you forgive me? Would you save me? Would you rescue me from my sin?” If not, then there is no guarantee of heaven. In fact, there’s the guarantee of the opposite.

So I urge you to do what this thief did. Look at this thief. It’s so simple. Call out upon the Lord personally. If you’ve never called out upon Jesus, right now where you sit, just say, “Jesus, I know I’ve sinned against you and I know I’m in trouble if I were to stand before God with my sins. I know that You’re righteous. I know that You’re the Messiah. I know that You’re the king of Glory. I know all authority has been given to You. I’m going to trust You with my soul. I have no other plan except for You. You’re my only hope. Jesus, would You remember me? Would You rescue me? Would You save me? Would You forgive me?” And then hear the promise of God upon your life. Never lose the assurance of that promise.

*“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

That is our future. That is our hope. That is our joy!