

Series – At the Cross

#2 The Criminals on the Cross

Matthew 7:13-14, 27:44; Luke 12:4-5, 23:32-43; Revelation 20

INTRO: Diane Komp, a pediatric oncologist from Yale University, describes being gradually converted from atheism to agnosticism to faith in Jesus Christ by witnessing the experiences of children near death.

Kids who had no publisher's incentive to lie or to stretch the truth, who had no predisposed pictures of what the afterlife was like, who'd never seen movies or read books, told her the most amazing things.

And in her book *A Window to Heaven*, Komp describes these encounters. She recalls sitting with a family in their final moments with their 7-year-old daughter, a victim of leukemia. The little girl said, "The angels, the angels, they're so beautiful! Mommy, can you see them? Can you hear them singing? I've never heard such beautiful singing."

Komp says, "The word that most closely describes what I've received from these children is the word "gift." Other children speak of being surrounded by warmth and strength and a love so great that, like those apostles who had met the risen Lord, were filled with confidence that enabled them to face anything.

I also came across some information at the University of Tennessee. During their emergency room work, Dr. Maurice Rawlings and his colleagues interviewed more than 300 people who claimed near-death experiences. What made Rawlings's study distinct is that the interviews were not conducted months or years later but immediately after the experiences had allegedly occurred, while the patients were still too shaken up to gloss over or to embellish what they had experienced.

Nearly 50 percent of them reported encountering images of fire, of tormented and tormenting creatures and other sights hailing from a place very different from heaven. They had caught a glimpse of something that the Bible calls hell.

Dr. Rawlings concludes, "**Just listening to these patients has changed my life. There is life after death, and if I don't know where I'm going, it is not safe to die.**"

Last week I began a sermon series called, **At the Cross**, and we talked about the **Crowd Around the Cross**. **Today I want us to look at The Criminals on the Cross.**

When we think of Calvary, we mostly think of the cross of Christ. But there were three crosses at Calvary.

Let's read about it in Luke 23:32-43.

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

33*When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. **34**Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.*

35*The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."*

36*The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar **37**and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."*

38*There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. **One** of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*

40*But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? **41**We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."*

42*Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

43*Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

(NIV) **Let's Pray**

As I read the gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion, I can't help but be struck by the irony of what was happening. Jesus was accused of blaspheming God, but He, being the Son of God, was blasphemed by them. His tormentors mocked Him as a king—they put a sign over his head that read "King of the Jews"—but the irony is that He really was the King of Kings and Lord of all Creation. He was pronounced innocent five times, but He is executed as guilty. The Creator of heaven and earth, the Author of Life is dying, but He's dying so we might live.

Luke writes: ***"Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left."*** (NIV)

We don't know their names. **Matthew and Mark** tell us that they were robbers—common thieves—sentenced by Pilate to be put to death. If all we knew about them was found in Luke's gospel, we might assume that possibly only one of the criminals never hurled abuse at Jesus, **but when you read** Matthew 27:44, it says: ***"In the same way the rebels (criminals, thieves- PLURAL) who were crucified with Him also heaped insults on Him."*** (NIV)

The same way as what? The same way as the crowd who laughed at Jesus—the crowd that was mocking Jesus and saying blasphemous things against Him.

One thing I don't want you to miss in all of this is that this is the devil's last temptation of Christ when the one thief cries out, "save yourself and us."

This was the old serpent from the Garden of Eden, doing the same thing he had done since the beginning of creation. Trying to thwart God's plan to save us, by trying to get Jesus to come down from the cross. Satan failed in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus had prayed until the drops of sweat became drops of blood as Jesus prayed, ***"not my will but thine be done."***

He had failed when Jesus was beaten and flogged; Satan failed when He carried the cross up Calvary and now one more time he speaks through this thief and he says, "rescue yourself, save yourself and us."

It is the same thing he said to Him in the wilderness, ***"If you are the Son of God, command the stones be made bread, and eat."***

Save yourself. That is the same old attack of the serpent since the Garden of Eden. We read in Genesis 3:15 ***"the seed of the woman shall crush the serpent's head and the serpent will bruise his heel."***

Just so you know, a heel wound is not fatal, but a head wound is. And Jesus response to this last temptation, "No, I will not come down, I will not save Myself!" Why? because if Jesus had saved Himself, He could not have saved us.

Now this interaction between Jesus and these criminals is one of the most wonderful examples of God's grace in all the bible. Here are two men who died alongside Jesus, men who were criminals and deserved to die, men who probably had not given much thought to spiritual things, men who had lived outside the law, men who had lived lives against the Law of God...and yet one of the men at the very end of his life was given an opportunity, to be saved.

What an example of God's grace. That even when a person calls upon the name of Jesus, in his last breath; God's love is so great and His mercy so deep that He would forgive his sins and offer him salvation and eternal life.

This story is also important because it sets the record straight about many false teachings about salvation and life after death.

1. This is a rebuke of the false teaching about Purgatory.

In Roman Catholic doctrine, purgatory is a place or state of suffering inhabited by the souls of sinners who are expiating their sins before going to heaven.

Jesus said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Not you will go to some intermediate place, to pay for your sins, and after you have suffered for a while, you will be allowed into heaven. Jesus says, this very day, you will be with me in paradise.

2. This is a rebuke of the false doctrine of Salvation by Works.

Salvation by works are those people who work hard to be good enough... who hope their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds and they earn heaven.

Here is a man who had nothing to offer. He didn't have an opportunity to do anything for the Lord. He had no opportunity to continue in the faith. He had no opportunity to be baptized in water or baptized in the Spirit. This man never joined a church.

Now, I have no doubt that if this man had the opportunity, he would have done all those things, because I have no doubt that his heart was radically changed.

It is demonstrated in this story that this man's heart and life was changed even while he was dying. God is saying here you are not saved by what you do, you are saved by what Christ has done in His finished work on Calvary.

3. This is a rebuke to man's Pride.

Mankind says, I must have something to do with my salvation. I must contribute something to earn God's favor. But God says I loved you enough to send my son, I called you, I elected you, I saved you, I justified you, I glorified you, and it was all God's doing; you didn't have anything to do with it. The bible says, it's by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not of works lest any man should boast. (comes from pride) Two thieves were crucified, one went to heaven, and one went to hell and Jesus Christ made the difference.

4. This is also a rebuke of the Doctrine of Universalism.

Christian universalism is the view that all human beings will ultimately be saved and restored to a right relationship with God. In other words, everybody is going to go to heaven somehow. Did you know that is one of the most popular beliefs in our culture today? That there is no hell, that there is no judgment, that God loves everybody and because He loves everybody, they are all going to heaven.

When people who believe in life after death are asked, "Where do you think you're going to go?" 76 percent say they're going to heaven, 2 percent to hell, 4 percent to purgatory, 12 percent somewhere else, and 6 percent don't know or refuse to answer.

Jesus said *"...for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* (Matt. 7:13-14, NIV)

God loves everybody, that is why Jesus died, but not everybody at the cross, or on the crosses next to Jesus that day went to heaven.

In fact, we know one man was with Jesus in paradise that very day, and the other was not. So, this is a rejection of universalism.

Salvation is a choice, and it depends on what you do with Jesus Christ. Salvation in one sense is in your hands, God has done everything necessary. Jesus suffered and bled and died on the cross and now the decision is yours. Which side of the cross will you be on?

You know this is also a lesson about the fact that you can grow up around religious things and be very close to Christ and still die and go to hell.

Here are two thieves, both were very close to Christ, perhaps they were so close if their hands had not been nailed to the cross, they could have reached out and touched Him. And they could talk and converse with one another.

And yet, just being close to Christ and even being at His very crucifixion, seeing Him suffer and die, did not mean they were saved. You can go to church, you can be around religious people, you can know the bible, **and still miss Jesus.**

Some of those religious leaders who were there at Calvary knew the scripture backwards and forwards and they missed Jesus. They would not believe that He was the Messiah. Just because you have grown up in a Christian family and attended church most of your life doesn't automatically make you a Christian; it doesn't mean you are going to heaven. You've got to make the decision.

So, what really happened between Jesus and those criminals?

We know that Jesus and these two criminals were crucified a round 9AM. Initially, in their pain, unbelievably, inexcusably, both criminals use what energy they possess to mock Jesus.

But somewhere between 9:00 A.M. and noon, one of the thieves suddenly goes silent. There hasn't been the supernatural darkness—that comes later. There hasn't been an earthquake—that comes when Jesus gives up his Spirit. There hasn't been any resurrection.

The centurion uttering those immortal words, "Truly this man was the Son of God," hasn't happened yet. All those events will occur later. But as the one thief hurls abuse, the other grows silent.

Until finally, in Luke 23:40 it says, ***"But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."*** (Luke 23:40-41, NIV)

Do you know what's happening in that moment? This man's heart is being transformed by the power of God. This man has encountered Christ, and it has changed him in a matter of hours. **What happens is an example of conversion.**

First, he fears God. Salvation begins with an understanding that someday all of us will stand before the living God and give an account. This is what awaits all those who do not receive Christ as their Savior. The book of Revelation, chapter 20 says, ***"And I saw the dead, great and small"—[that means everybody: the high rollers, the up-and-outers and the down-and-outers], "standing before the throne and the books were opened, then another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done."***

No one will be in hell by accident. No one will say, "I don't know how or why I ended up here." No, everything a person says, does, and thinks, will be recorded, because, in the words of Hebrews 9:27: ***"It is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment."***

Everyone will face judgment. It says, ***"And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them."***

In other words, there's no place to hide; there's nowhere to escape. One of the signs that God is working in a person's heart is that they have a sense of

impending judgment; they have awareness that they will give an account to God, and there's fear regarding that judgment.

Many people say, "We shouldn't be afraid of God; we shouldn't fear God." Jesus said in Luke 12:4-5: ***"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. 5But 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."*** (NIV)

In other words, if you say, "I don't really know about Jesus, and I don't really care about Jesus, and I'm not going to submit to Jesus," there's nothing left that can be done to pay the penalty for your sins.

What I find so interesting in Luke 23 is that at this point the thief is not mocking Jesus anymore, he's not looking for Jesus to get him off the cross. That's the way people think who don't want to really serve God; they only want God for what God can do for them.

"God, if you can get me out of this jam...;" "God, if you do this, then I'll serve you...;" "God, if you do this, I'll do that...."

The thief is not looking for someone to get him off the cross. He wants to avoid divine judgment. Ultimately, his problem isn't what's happening to him on earth; it's what will happen to him when he faces God in eternity.

How does he even know that? First, he's most likely Jewish. So, he would have been raised to understand the law of God, and he's violated that law. He knows that his punishment is just, and if this is what men do for breaking the law, **what will God do?**

In that time of hanging on the cross next to Jesus, he understands that the worst that man can do to him—the excruciating pain of death by crucifixion—is only a small sample of what he will get when he faces the living God. And this man is afraid. But it doesn't stop there because it's not enough to be afraid.

Second, he recognizes his sin and Jesus' righteousness.

Verse 41 says, ***“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*** That’s the core of the gospel in one statement! I’m wrong; Jesus is right. I’ve failed; Jesus hasn’t. I’ve sinned, but He’s the sinless Son of God. I deserve to die; Jesus deserves to live. He took our sin; He bore the punishment we deserved. That’s the gospel.

It doesn’t make any difference to the abusive robber. He doesn’t care if Jesus is right or wrong. All he cares about is if Jesus can get him off the cross and out of his predicament, and if Jesus can’t help him, then he’s not interested.

God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus bore our sin on the cross, that we might receive His righteousness.

Third, he put his faith in Christ as his Savior and Lord. A lot of people are willing to follow Jesus if He’ll save them from their sins (it’s kind of like fire insurance). But they don’t really want Jesus as their Lord. **But if Jesus is not Lord of all, then He’s not Lord at all.**

Look at Luke 23:42: ***‘Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (NIV)***

In a word, he’s asking for forgiveness. How’s he ever going to get into the kingdom unless he’s forgiven? And how did this idea of forgiveness ever get into his mind. He’s probably remembering that he heard Jesus pray when they were crucifying him, ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”?***

And just so you know, when he said Jesus, it was the word, ***“Yeshua”*** which means, ***Jehovah Saves***. This was the plea of a broken, repentant sinner asking for God’s grace and forgiveness. We could put it this way: “Save me from the judgment of God. Save me from what I deserve. Forgive me.”

Then the thief asks Jesus, ***“Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** Nobody’s ever survived a crucifixion, so the thief believed that Jesus would die and rise again and then bring in His kingdom.

The thief’s words convey a tremendous message. He’s saying, ***“Jesus, this is not the end of you. You can save me, and you are my Lord and King.”***

This is a living illustration of Romans 10:9. ***“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (NIV)***

The thief believes that Jesus will rise from the dead, and he confesses with his mouth, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” **Jesus says in verse 43, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

Let me speak about paradise for a moment. What is that place and where is it? There is a place for the dead called ***Sheol*** in the Old Testament, or ***Hades*** in the Greek. One-half of it is for the unrighteous dead called ***Gehenna*** in the Greek or ***hell***, the other half was called paradise, or Abraham’s bosom, which was a place for Old Testament saints waiting until the Messiah came. You see a picture of this in Luke 16:19-31 in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

The bible says when Jesus died on the cross that He went into the lower parts of the earth, to Hades as it were, to paradise, and set all the righteous dead free to enter heaven. **That one thief who believed in Jesus, went from the cross on earth, to hell, and on to heaven. Talk about a roller coaster ride.**

When someone believes in his heart that Jesus Christ, the righteous, pure, holy, sinless Son of God, has died for their sin, has been resurrected, and is seated at the right hand of God, and that he is King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and says in that moment, “Jesus, I want to be in your kingdom,” that person experiences salvation.

On each cross was a man who died in a different way toward sin.

I. The Cross of Rejection – Death in Sin

This is the cross of the rejecting thief. He chose to die in his sin. But you say, "How can anyone so close to Christ choose to die in his sin"? With Christ a few feet away and ready to forgive, how could a man die in sin?

If you died now without Christ as your Savior, you would die **in** your sin in the same way as the thief who rejected Jesus.

In fact, all people who die in their sins do so for the same reasons. One reason is unbelief. Unbelief rejects the saving power of Christ. Unbelief also questions the claims of Christ.

Death in sin is also the result of unconcern. The thief was unconcerned about anything except himself.

II. The Cross of Reception - Death to Sin

This is the cross of the thief who did not reject Jesus. He was receptive of Christ in his last moment. He chose to die to sin. How does one die to sin? How is a person forgiven? How is a person saved?

Death to sin comes when a person...Admits...Believes...Confesses...Luke 23:42-43 *"Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom." Jesus said, "today you will join me in paradise."*

This was the thief's public profession of faith. The Bible says that after we have admitted that we are sinners and have believed in Jesus Christ as our Savior that we are to confess with our mouths.

There's the Cross of Rejection - Death in Sin

There's the Cross of Reception - Death to Sin

III. The Cross of Redemption - Death for Sin

This is the cross of Jesus Christ. He chose to die for sin. The cross of Christ represents redemption. Redeem means to "buy back." That's amazing grace. It's God's unmerited favor bestowed upon us because of His love. Jesus buys us back from the penalty of sin, from eternal damnation in a lake of fire. He saves all those who call upon Him. Only Jesus could have died on this cross.

CONCLUSION:

Do you want to go to heaven, or do you want to go to hell when you die? The answer is up to you. We see that Jesus died on a cross between two thieves. You are as close to Jesus as those two criminals on the crosses next to Jesus.

Three men died, one was a **Savior**, one was a **sinner**, and one was a **saint**.

Three crosses that day, in the middle, the cross of the **anointed**, on the one hand the cross of **animosity**, and on the other hand the cross of **acceptance**.

In the middle, the cross of **blessing**, on the one hand the cross of **blasphemy** and on the other hand the cross of **belief**.

In the middle, the cross of the **Christ**, on the one hand the cross of **condemnation** and on the other hand the cross of **conversion**.

In the middle, the cross of **Deity**, on the one hand the cross of **denial**, and on the other hand the cross of **dedication**.

In the middle, the cross of **Glory**, on the one hand the cross of **guilt** and on the other hand the cross of **grace**.

In the middle the cross of **Holiness**, on the one hand the cross of **hell**, and on the other hand the cross of **heaven**.

The cross of **Jesus**, the cross of **jeers**, and the cross of **joy**.

In the middle the cross of **Pardon**, on the one hand the cross of **punishment**, and on the other hand the cross of **paradise**.

One died for sin, one died to sin, and one died in sin; and this was no accident because the bible said in Isaiah, "**He (the Messiah) would be numbered among the transgressors.**" And Jesus was.

In the middle the cross of Redemption, on the one hand the cross of rejection, and on the other hand the cross of repentance. **Which one of the crosses are you on today?**

Imagine what your sin has done to you and people around you, how it's made you feel, how it's made them feel. Jesus bore all that weight, all that ugliness and pain. **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us."** And as Jesus bears that weight,

he also reaches out to the thief on the cross—someone who had blasphemed him with the crowd.

Jesus died bringing a man to eternal life. He died praying for his enemies. And that's how you and I should live.

Two important questions

First, if Jesus' death shows us how to live, and He died bringing people to salvation, with whom are you sharing Christ? I'm not asking if you've ever shared Christ. I'm asking who around you does not know Jesus as Savior, and what are you doing about it?

Do you realize the judgment that people will face without Christ? And have you told them? You say, "The problem is they're just not interested. They're abusive towards me and towards the gospel."

That reminds me a little bit of our story today, where Matthew 27:44 says, ***In the same way the rebels (criminals, thieves- PLURAL) who were crucified with Him also heaped insults on Him.*** (NIV)

They may be disinterested as those two thieves, but your words of grace and your prayer on their behalf can be used by God to change their heart. Or you might say, "I really don't know what to say." How about don't worry because Jesus didn't say very much, but the Holy Spirit was at work. But say something.

Second question, if you've never had your heart transformed by Christ and you're not living in obedience to Him as your Lord and Savior, are you ok with that after this message? Because honestly, you should be scared to death.

Everything I see on the news everyday reminds us of how fragile life is. People are dying every day all around the world for various reasons.

There is a heaven; there is a hell, and only those whose names are written in the Book of Life will go to heaven. Everybody else goes to hell.

I say this because you must recognize at some point the severity of an attitude that says, "I don't care," or "I'll do it later." If the Spirit of God is working in your

heart and you're feeling like there's a battle raging inside you because what I'm saying is true, it's time to do something about it.

Acts 17 says, ***"God commands all men everywhere to repent."*** Today is the day of salvation. Now is the appointed hour. Do you understand the seriousness of sin—that our sin is so serious that Jesus not only suffers the physical horror of crucifixion, but He's also punished for our sin.

He bore your sin that you might receive His righteousness. Have you put your faith in Jesus as the Savior and the King of your life? If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God has raised him from the dead, you'll be saved.

Two men were crucified with Jesus. Only one responded to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was at the cross working, calling people to faith in Christ, and the Holy Spirit is working right here, right now.

Could it be that Jesus is calling you today? Will you respond?