

Sermon to the saints at Westboro Baptist Church, July 31, 2016 –

Today, let us examine the story of the thief on the cross, which is found at Luke Chapter 23, verses 39-43:

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

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

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

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

43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

There are a couple of words in this account that may not be fully understood by some of you, so let's get our arms around them.

A "malefactor" is a criminal or a person who violates the law; a person who does harm or evil, especially towards another. This world is full of malefactors; we dwell amongst them. In this event, at least two malefactors were being crucified simultaneously with Christ.

The verb “rail” means to deride, to utter a bitter complaint or vehement denunciation. One of these malefactors was railing on and towards Christ, saying if you’re really Christ, save yourself and the rest of us hanging on these crosses. I find it remarkable that even at his dying moment this doomed man was lashing out towards Jesus. What in the world had Jesus done to him?

This incident is well-known throughout the so-called “Christian” world, although I suspect the general knowledge of this story is much less these days than when I was a youngster. The Luke narrative that I started with is somewhat supplemented at Matthew Chapter 27 as follows:

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

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.

⁴¹ Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,

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.

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

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

From this Matthew account is where we learn these condemned men were “thieves.” Verse 44 also suggests there was more than two thieves, or the one thief that

later repented started off mocking and deriding Christ. Also, we get a better idea of what that phrase “wagging their heads” in verse 39 means from Isaiah 37:22: **This is the word which the LORD hath spoken concerning him; The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee.**

We also see from this Matthew version that the audience watching the death of Christ was filled with very important people. You see where the “chief priests” were there mocking him? And do you also note the “scribes” and “elders” were on hand? Those three groups – chief priests, scribes and elders – encompassed the movers and shakers of that society; the religious leaders, the media, the thought-shapers and the older, influential members of that community. And we also see that these influential folks were not just standing idly by; they were taking the lead in the mocking and scoffing of Christ.

There are many other things to learn from this tale, much of which has likely not yet occurred to us, but would include:

1. Christ's power to save sinners –

Probably the prominent lesson to learn here is that Christ is mighty to save. Looking carefully at the penitent thief himself, it is hard to imagine a man's case that could be more hopeless and desperate. He was a criminal, guilty of major crimes, given that he

had been sentenced to be crucified. The death penalty is generally not imposed for petty crimes. He was a dying man. He hung there, nailed to a cross, from which he was never to come down alive. He no longer had any power to stir hand or foot, and his hours were numbered. The grave was ready for this man and there was but a step between him and death.

If ever there was a poor soul apparently hovering on the brink of hell, it was the soul of this thief. If ever there was a case that seemed lost, gone and beyond recovery, it was his. And added to all that, it appears from Matthew 27:44 that just moments earlier this very thief may have been mocking Christ (“cast the same in his teeth”), unless there were more than two thieves on site.

But what did this man do under these dire circumstances. He turned to the Lord in prayer, right then and there. He asked Jesus to remember him when He came into his kingdom. He asked that his soul might be cared for, his sins pardoned, and that he be thought of in another world. This clearly was a man who knew the Lord and knew of the great kingdom to come.

Now, against that backdrop, most would consider this man beyond hope and too wicked to be saved. Many would have thought it was too late, the door was shut, and there was no room for mercy. But none of that mattered one whit. The account tells us that Christ straightaway responded and assured this thief that he was one of God’s sheep

and he would be in paradise with his savior that very day. He was plucked as a brand from the fire. (Zechariah 3:2).

This is a strong proof of God's power to save; he was a mighty deliverer then and there. Keep in mind the apparent condition of the Savior at this moment. In other words, don't just look at the condition of the thief, but the condition of Christ at this instant. When he seemed most weak, racked with pain and his body dying, he conferred on this sinner eternal life. The thought here is: If Christ is able to save near-dead sinners when he himself, while in human form, is on the verge of death, it is axiomatic he holds that saving power in all other times and occasions.

And is this event not more proof that the Lord's people are saved through faith, and not works? **For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.** (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Do we not also see here that young faith is sufficient? From what we read, this man's faith was less than a day old and possibly mere moments in duration, if he was the same thief who had just then mocked Christ. Here, we must visit the vineyard story in Matthew Chapter 20:

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.

2 And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

³ And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

⁴ And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way.

⁵ Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise.

⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?

⁷ They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.

⁸ So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.

⁹ And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny.

¹⁰ But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny.

¹¹ And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house,

¹² Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.

¹³ But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?

¹⁴ Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

¹⁵ Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

¹⁶ So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

2. Some are saved in the very hour of death; or, late in the game –

This is a potent truth that never ought to be overlooked, and we dare not leave it unnoticed. There is a glaring reality that screams out at you from this account. One thief was eternally saved literally in the closing moments of his life. The other thief remained hardened and impenitent. That was the real thing. As they say, “it is what it is.” We must be content to take that fact as we find it, and see what it is meant to teach us.

We have no right to say this obdurate thief was a worse man than his companion. There is nothing to prove that. Both plainly were wicked men who were receiving the due reward of their deeds. Both hung on the side of Jesus. Both heard him pray for his murderers. Both saw Christ suffer patiently. But while one repented, the other remained unmoved. While one was converted in his last moments, the other died a bad man as he had lived. While one was taken to paradise, the other went to his own place, the place of the devil and his angels. These things are written for our learning. There is both warning and comfort in these verses.

We learn that some may repent and be converted on their death-beds, but not all and, likely, not most.

We learn that two may have the same opportunities, may be placed in the same positions, see and hear the same things, yet only one will take advantage of them,

repent, believe and be saved. We know the stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, David and Saul, and so on.

And most of all, we see here that repentance and faith are the gifts of God and are not in man's own power. We thus see the folly of wresting the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, suggesting the lesson there is wisdom in waiting until the 11th hour to repent and believe.

Let me close this point with this passage from Romans Chapter 11, beginning at verse 20 through the end of that chapter:

20 Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear:

21 For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.

22 Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.

23 And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again.

24 For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

25 For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

²⁶ And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:

²⁷ For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

²⁸ As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes.

²⁹ For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.

³⁰ For as ye in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief:

³¹ Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy.

³² For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.

³³ O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!

³⁴ For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?

³⁵ Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?

³⁶ For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

3. The Holy Spirit always leads saved souls in one way, i.e. the same way –

Though often overlooked by those considering this story, there is abundant evidence this dying thief gave of the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. The Spirit always works in one way, and that is so whether he converts a man in an hour, as he did the penitent thief, or whether by slow degrees, and he does most others; the steps by which he leads souls to heaven are always the same.

See initially how strong this man's faith was. He called the dying Jesus, Lord! He declared his belief that Jesus would have a kingdom. He believed that Jesus was able to give him eternal life and glory. He maintained the innocence of Jesus of all the charges brought against him. This man Jesus, said the thief, has "done nothing amiss." Others likely thought the Lord was innocent, but none said so openly under these extreme circumstances but this poor dying man.

And look at the circumstances under which this dying thief made these open professions. It happened when the whole nation had denied Christ, shouting, crucify him! It happened when that government had tried and condemned Christ to death and even his own disciples had forsaken him and fled. It happened when Christ was in the throes of his own death.

Christ's disciples had seen many miracles and marvelous works. They witnessed the blind receiving their sight, the dumb made to speak, the lame made to walk. They had seen thousands fed with a few loaves and fishes. They had seen their Master walking on the water as on dry land. Some had a foretaste of glory in the mount of transfiguration. The dying thief saw none of these things. Instead, he only saw his Lord in agony, suffering in weakness and pain, rejected, despised and blasphemed. But he had a strong faith.

Next, see for another thing, what a right sense of sin the thief had. He said to his companion "we receive the due reward of our deeds." He acknowledges his own

ungodliness and the justice of his punishment. He makes no attempt to justify himself. He speaks like a man humbled and self-abased by the recalling of his past iniquities. This is what all God's children feel. They can say with their hearts as well as with their lips **Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.** (Isaiah 6:5).

And see for another thing, what brotherly love the thief showed to his associate; he tried to stop his railing and blaspheming, and bring him to a better mind. "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" he asks. Grace shakes a man out of his selfishness and makes him feel for the souls of others. When the Samaritan woman was converted, she left her water pot **and went her way into the city, and saith to the men, Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ? Then they went out of the city, and came unto him.** (John 4:28-30). What we may have here is the ultimate preaching opportunity or protest; it's as though this rescued thief was on the cross holding a "repent or perish" sign or a "fear God" sign!

So, in a word, you see the penitent thief as a finished work of the Holy Ghost. Every part of the believer's character may be found in him. Short as his life was after conversion, he found time to leave abundant evidence that he was a child of God. Don't think that because this thief was saved at the end of his life men can be saved without leaving any evidence of the Spirit's work.

4. When they die, believers in Christ are with Christ, instante –

Jesus told the dying thief truly “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise”; not tomorrow, not next week, but this very day! A similar notion is found at Philippians 1:23 where Paul says he had a **desire to depart, and to be with Christ**, suggesting the very moment Paul departed he would instantaneously be with Christ. That word “*instante*” that I used in his heading means “immediately” or “at once” and I think that old Latin word from the 17th Century well captures the thought here.

This straight forward concept brings great comfort; the abode of dead saints, their joys, their feelings, their happiness, all seems met by this simple expression – they are with Christ. The state of departed believers cannot be fully understood here on this earth. It is a high and deep subject such as our mortal minds cannot fully grasp or fathom. But we know that this interim state between death and the resurrection is **far better** (Philippians 1:23) than our current condition, it being a blessed place of rest from labor, sorrow, pain and sin. In that state, we are with Christ, for Christ clearly tells the thief “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” And we know **in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.** (Psalm 16:11). “Fullness of joy” and “pleasures for evermore” sounds like a pretty good deal to me; certainly far better than anything the suffering saint experiences in this lifetime.

I love you.

Amen!