

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 3/6/94
Luke 23:43 "It's Never Too Late"

Sing: "At the Cross"

Intro:

There are a lot of people who call themselves "Christian" who do not grasp what it really means. I've found there's one question that helps sift through the semantics.

Several years ago, I visited the home of a man who had visited our church. He said he had a relationship with God, that he thought about spiritual things. Then I asked him the question. When he thought about it, he knew there was something missing.

A couple of years ago, I spent some time with a couple who had expressed interest in church membership. They considered themselves to be "Christian." I posed the same question to them. As they began to answer, they too were startled.

The question? "Do you know for sure that if you died today, you'd go to heaven?" That's an important question! It's THE question.

How would you answer it? Do YOU know for sure?

How can we know for sure? And how can we help others that we love and care for, to know for sure about their eternal destiny? We must go to the cross to find out.

Proposition: Jesus answered this question for us in His second saying from the cross. It's recorded in Luke 23:43.

- I. At the cross, a Man admitted his need for Eternal Life (39-42).
 - A. He recognized the truth about himself.
 1. I am guilty (40).
 2. I deserve punishment (41).
 - B. He recognized the truth about Jesus.
 1. Jesus is sinless (41).
 2. Jesus can save (42).
- II. At the cross, Jesus provided Eternal Life (43).
 - A. Jesus' statement revealed His Control.

"VERILY, I say unto thee, TODAY..."

 1. Over the destiny of the sinner
 2. Over His own destiny
 - B. Jesus' statement revealed His Compassion.

"Verily, I say unto THEE..."
 - C. Jesus' statement revealed His Completion.

"...with Me in PARADISE."

Current Series: "The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross"

When Jesus hung on the cross, He uttered 7 life-changing announcements. Last week we pondered the first, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do (Lk 23:34)." In that prayer, Jesus interceded for all those who put Him on the cross. In it,

He also intervened in their behalf, "Father, don't interfere with the crucifixion. Let it happen." And thirdly, Jesus indicted Himself. When He said, "Father, forgive THEM," the implied understanding was, "and condemn ME." He took our place.

How did the crowd at the cross respond to Jesus' first saying? Oh, friend, what a sight! Luke highlighted several responses in his gospel.

V 35--The people stood beholding. They stared, with hateful defiance. "We will not have this man to rule over us!"

V 35--The rulers derided Him. Can you hear them scoffing, scowling?

V 36--The soldiers mocked Him. They made a game out of their job.

V 39--The first thief railed at Him.

And notice this. The rulers, the soldiers, and the first thief all hurled the same accusation at Jesus. What was it?

V 35 The rulers--"If He be the Christ, let Him save Himself."

V 37 The soldiers--"If thou be the King of the Jews, save Thyself."

V 39 The malefactor--"If thou be the Christ, save Thyself and us."

Save yourself! Why, even the sign nailed to His cross labeled Him as the King (38). What kind of king was this, that would die a criminal's death on a cross? Save yourself! Save yourself!

But Jesus hung in silence.

And as He did, the eyes of the second malefactor fixed on Him. He had never in His life met anyone like this! Then, by the grace of God, something amazing happened to that once-hardened criminal. He obtained eternal life!

How? It all started when...

I. At the cross, a Man admitted his need for Eternal Life (39-42).

Who was that man? There are various legends about him, one that his name was Dumachus. The fact is we know very little about him. That he was excuted on a Roman cross says something. He was a criminal. A vile criminal. He had been a menace to society, so the court system decided he should no longer live. He was sentenced to die by crucifixion.

Yet, while hanging on the cross, something happened in his heart. The Spirit of God was working. We can tell by what he said in v 40. He rebuked the first thief...

V 40 "Dost not thou fear God...?"

He defended Jesus. That's quite a change! Just minutes before, he himself had been mocking Jesus (Mk 15:32 "And they that were crucified with Him reviled Him").

What happened to the second malefactor? What made the difference?

There on the cross, he recognized two life-changing truths.

A. He recognized the truth about himself.

Some people never do this. It's painful to admit the truth about ourselves. So we try to hide the truth, or ignore it. But there on the cross, just hours away from eternity, the second thief admitted two painful truths about himself.

1. *I am guilty (40).*

V 40 "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

V 41 "And WE, indeed, JUSTLY."

What's he saying? "The reason we're here on these crosses today is because we are guilty. We've broken the law--man's law, but ultimately, God's law. We are sinners. We are under the judgment of God." I am guilty.

2. *I deserve punishment (41).*

V 41 "for we receive the DUE REWARD of our deeds."

"We're getting what we deserve! We deserve punishment."

The thief recognized the truth about himself. But that alone did not save him.

B. He recognized the truth about Jesus.

What did he recognize about Jesus? Two things...

1. *Jesus is sinless (41).*

V 41 "But this man hath done nothing amiss."

Jesus had lived a perfect life. He had fulfilled the Law of God. He went to the cross, not because He was guilty, but because we are guilty. He did it for us.

The thief recognized something else about Jesus.

2. *Jesus can save (42).*

V 42 "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom."

What caused the thief to repent? What drove him to turn to Jesus in faith?

What made the difference? Three things.

One, what he saw. When the thief looked into the face of Jesus, he saw love.

Second, what he felt. He felt the heavy load of his guilt and shame. He had wasted his life. Here was a man who was enslaved to his past. The chains of his sin held him fast. He wanted to be free. Though in his final hour, he longed to have the weight removed. Was it possible?

The third reason the thief addressed Jesus was because of what he heard. The words of Jesus rang like church bells in his ears, "Father, forgive them. Father, forgive them." Why, Jesus forgave His murderers! Maybe there's hope for ME!

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into Thy kingdom."

Application: To have eternal life, we must do exactly what the second thief did. First, we must admit the truth about ourselves. We are guilty sinners. We deserve the punishment of a Holy God. And secondly, we must admit the truth about Jesus. He is sinless. And He alone can save.

Objection: "It was too late for the thief, wasn't it? After all, he'd wasted all his life. His sin was too great, wasn't it?"

Lots of people feel like it's too late. Like they've blown it once too many times. That's what makes this story so exhilarating! Let's watch how Jesus responded.

V 43 "Verily I say unto thee, Today..."

At the cross, a man admitted his need for eternal life. And...

II. At the cross, Jesus provided Eternal Life (43).

What an amazing announcement! It reveals 3 things about our Savior...

A. Jesus' statement revealed His Control.

"VERILY, I say unto thee, TODAY..."

That word "verily" is actually the word, "Amen." It denotes absolute certainty. It reminds us that though Jesus was nailed to the cross, He was in absolute control.

In control of what?

1. Over the destiny of the sinner

"TODAY you will be with Me. Your destiny has been changed TODAY!"

How long does it take to be converted? Friends, there as the thief gasped his final breaths, he called out to Jesus. And there, in that moment, his eternal destiny was changed!

Implication: Listen. The story of the repentant thief cuts right through a lot of false, yet popular theology. Let me ask you. Was the thief saved that day on the cross? Yes! Jesus said his destiny was changed. Though he was never baptized, he was saved. Though he never participated in a sacrament, he was saved. Though he never joined a church, he was saved. And Jesus didn't say he'd have to put in some time in purgatory. He said, "TODAY you will be with Me in paradise."

When was he saved? When he repented, and trusted in Jesus.

Key: What gave Jesus the authority to control this man's destiny?

2. Over His own destiny

"Today thou shalt be WITH ME in paradise."

WITH ME. Oh beloved, do you know what was in store for Jesus? In a few moments, His Heavenly Father would turn His back on Him. He would endure the wrath of God, in our place. There on the cross, He would face the blackness of hell. Satan would hurl all His fury at the Son of man. The devil would seek to destroy God's anointed. Would he succeed?

Fix your eyes on those words, "With Me." Jesus knew the unspeakable agony was coming. He was aware of the terror which He would face alone. Yet even in His blackest hour, He was in control of His own destiny. He knew that He would conquer sin, death, and the Evil One.

"Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." Jesus revealed His control.

B. Jesus' statement revealed His Compassion.

"Verily, I say unto THEE..."

To THEE. Sometimes we forget that both thieves appealed to Jesus that day (Jones, 23). Both called out to Him. Both even had a faith of sorts.

What did the first thief say? V 39 "Save Thyself, and us." He asked Jesus to save him, didn't he? But something was missing. He had no remorse for his sin.

The second thief was different. He wanted to be saved, not from his cross, but from his sin.

For which man did Jesus have compassion? The one who repented.

Let the words of Russell Jones sink in (26), "So many who come to Him are like the other thief; they want to avoid crosses, but they are not concerned about their sin. Some who come down the aisles of our churches professing to confess His name have gone no further than the first thief; they want to escape any and all discomfort and pain; they are not particularly interested in Him for His own sake."

The gospel has been greatly distorted by many in our day. More than a few gospel presentations appeal to "felt" needs, and by-pass man's "real" need.

Eg--"Come to Jesus, and He'll make your family life better!" "Add Jesus to your life, and you'll be a better student." "Ask Jesus to come into your heart, and He'll bless your business!"

Those are felt needs. And I remind you that Jesus didn't offer to ease the pain of the nails in the thief's hands. Nor did the thief even ask Him to. At that moment, only one thing mattered. The man's real need--"Where will I spend eternity?"

"Today shalt THOU be with me in paradise."

Do you hear the Compassion of Jesus in those words? This man had wasted his life in sin. Yet Jesus offered him hope beyond this life!

"Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out!"

C. Jesus' statement revealed His Completion.

"...with Me in PARADISE."

Paradise. What did Jesus mean by "paradise"? Jewish rabbis in Jesus' day taught that the unseen world was a succession of spiritual realms. According to them, there were seven heavens, one above the other in ascending glory (Jones, 32). The highest, or seventh, was paradise.

Jesus offered the man paradise. Another man had forfeited paradise. Adam. Adam sinned against God, and was cast from the paradise of God.

The story of the Bible is how God took mankind from paradise lost to paradise regained. Mankind sinned and lost the paradise of Eden. Through Christ, God restores mankind, and offers the paradise of heaven.

When Jesus said, "Today shalt Thou be with me in paradise," He was saying, "I have completed the work the Father gave Me to do. I have redeemed a people who will enjoy the glories of eternity with God."

Oh, friend, Jesus' salvation is complete!

Conclusion:

Are death-bed conversations real? Some are, some aren't. This one was. Jesus' words to the repentant thief remind us that it's never too late.

This past week I had a heart-wrenching conversation. A person said to me, "It's too late for me. I've done too many bad things in my life, and I can't change them. God's going to punish me for what I've done."

As I looked into those glassy eyes, I thought of the cross. I said, "Remember what Jesus did on the cross?" The response, "Yes, I believe in Jesus, but it's too late. I've done too many things."

I said, "That's good that you believe in Jesus. But the real issue is this. Do you believe that what Jesus did on the cross was sufficient? Was it enough to take care of our sins?"

"Well, I think God is making me pay for what I've done."

"If that's the case, then you're saying that what Jesus did was not enough. That on the cross, Jesus took care of most of our sins, but not all of them. But I remind you, that before Jesus died, He announced, 'It is finished.' He was saying this, 'What I've done is enough!'"

I wish I could help that person to grasp this truth. I can only pray.

This morning, I want you to come to grips with this truth. Do you know for sure that your sins are forgiven, that you are clean before God? Do you know for sure that if you died today, you'd go to heaven?

If not, I invite you to repent of your sins, and trust in Christ.