

Main Idea: In Jesus’ second saying from the cross, recorded in Luke 23:43, Jesus promises a dying criminal that he will be with him in paradise that very day. In doing so, Jesus shows us what must happen for any sinner to have eternal life.

- I. We hear the sinner’s request (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 is a King (42)
 3. Jesus can save (42).
- II. We hear the Savior’s promise (43).
 - A. Jesus' statement revealed His control.

“TRULY, I say to you, TODAY...”

 1. Jesus is in charge of the destiny of the sinner.
 2. Jesus is in charge of His own destiny.
 - B. Jesus' statement revealed His compassion.

“TRULY, I say to YOU...”
 - C. Jesus' statement revealed His completion.

“You will be with Me in PARADISE.”

 1. The first Adam lost paradise.
 2. The last Adam restores it!

Make It Personal: Have you asked Jesus to save you?

Our desire is to fill this community with meaningful conversations about what Jesus said on the cross, and why. That’s why, last week we began to distribute the Cross Puzzle, and if you’d like one, you can pick it up after the service.

So many know that Jesus died on a cross, but they don’t know why. But He told us why. With seven sayings, seven words.

Pardon, the first saying. Jesus prays for forgiveness.

Paradise, the second saying. Jesus tells a thief he will join Him in paradise.

Pattern of love, the third saying. Jesus commits the care of His mother to a disciple.

Punishment, the fourth saying. Jesus cries out, “My God, my God...”

Pain, the the fifth saying. Jesus says, “I thirst.”

Payment, the sixth saying. Jesus declares, “It is finished.” The debt is paid in full.

Pronouncement, the seventh saying. “Into Your hands I commit My spirit.”

We’re meditating one by one on these seven words on Sunday mornings in April and May. Last week, on Palm Sunday, we began with *pardon*. Today, for Resurrection Sunday, Jesus talks about *paradise*. Let’s read the account.

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:35-44

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.

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message has been adapted from a sermon preached at WBC as part of a 1994 series on “The Seven Sayings of Jesus from the Cross.”

Many years ago, I went to 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 a very specific question. When he thought about it, he knew there was something missing.

A few years after that conversation, 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! In reality, it's THE question. How would you answer it? Do you know for sure that if you died today you'd go to heaven?

How can we know for sure? And how can we help others that we love and care for, to know for sure about where they will go when they die? Jesus Himself gives the answer, from the cross. Even as He's dying, He's still teaching.

In His second saying from the cross, recorded in Luke 23:43, Jesus promises someone that they will be with Him in paradise. To whom did He give this assurance? Was it His mother? No. His faithful follower, John the apostle? No. Oh, they were certainly on their way to heaven, but that's not the person Jesus addresses.

Who then? Literally, the Bible calls him “an evil doer.” A malefactor (AV). He actually tells a dying criminal (ESV), a thief, that he will be with him in paradise that very day.

This is staggering! How could Jesus tell a wicked man that society determined to be worthy of death that he would, after dying, immediately go to paradise? Good people go to heaven, not wicked people, right?

Oh, how we need to listen carefully to Jesus this morning. Where we will spend eternity is at stake. In this amazing second saying from the cross, Jesus is making it absolutely clear who has eternal life, and who doesn't, who is going to spend eternity with Him in paradise, and who isn't.

Jesus' seven sayings work together. He begins with, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34).” This is our greatest need, for forgiveness. This is why He came, to provide forgiveness. When Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them,” He is interceding for those who put Him on the cross. And who does that include? Certainly, the soldiers, the Jews who demanded His crucifixion, Pilate who refused to stop the injustice. Anyone else? Was anyone else responsible for the murder of the innocent God-man?

Yes. We were. Peter says, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24).” Isaiah says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).”

When Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them,” He was also intervening in behalf of the sinners who were committing this crime, saying, “Father, don't interfere with the crucifixion. Let it happen.”

And He was also, thirdly, indicting Himself. When He said, “Father, forgive THEM,” the implied understanding was, “and condemn ME in their place.” He was choosing to die in the place of sinners.

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

Verse 35 says the people stood beholding, watching, staring, with hateful defiance. They made it clear, “We will not have this man to rule over us!”

The rulers derided Him. Can you hear them scoffing, scowling? “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”

In verse 36, the soldiers mocked Him, offered Him sour wine (which He refused). They made a game out of their job.

In verse 39, the first criminal² railed at Him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Indeed, 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 you are the King of the Jews, save yourself."

V 39 The malefactor--"If you be the Christ, save yourself 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!” they all said.

But Jesus hung in silence.

And as He did, the eyes of the second criminal fixed on Him. He had never in his life met anyone like this. And then, by the gracious working of the Spirit of God, something amazing happened to this once-hardened criminal. He received the gift of eternal life, while hanging on a cross, and not just eternal life, but the *assurance* of it, from Jesus Himself!

Isn't that our greatest need, my friend, our greatest longing? To know for sure that once this life ends, we will spend eternity with our Maker in paradise. And we can have that assurance. In His second saying on the cross, Jesus shows us what must happen for any sinner to have eternal life.

I. We hear the sinner's request (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 executed 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. How do we know? Notice verse 40, “But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’”

So the second criminal rebuked the first criminal. He actually defended Jesus. That's quite a change! Just minutes before, he himself had been mocking Jesus (that's what Mark's account tells us in Mark 15:32, "And they that were crucified with Him reviled Him").

What happened to this second malefactor? There on the cross, he recognized, more than that, he verbalized, he *confessed*, 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 the truth, indeed, *two* painful truths about himself.

² In Matthew's gospel he's called a “thief.”

1. *I am guilty (40)*. Notice verse 40, “But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’”

And notice the first words of verse 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 transgressors, sinners. We are under the judgment of God.”

We are guilty. I am guilty. Furthermore...

2. *I deserve punishment (41)*. He continues in verse 41, “...for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.” As the AV puts it, “for we receive the DUE REWARD of our deeds.”

In other words, “Man, we’re getting what we deserve! We deserve punishment. I know I do, and I admit it.”

So the thief recognized the truth about himself. But that alone did not save him. Is it good to admit that you are sinner? Yes, it’s vital if you want to spend eternity in paradise. But it’s also insufficient. There will be billions of people who do *not* spend eternity in paradise who had admitted to themselves, and others, that they were sinners. But they’re lost, eternally lost.

Why? Because there’s a second, life-changing truth one must admit, and confess. As did this thief on the cross, by the grace of God.

B. He recognized the truth about Jesus. What truth? What did he recognize, and confess verbally, about Jesus? Three essential truths...

1. *Jesus is sinless*. Listen to the criminal’s confession in verse 41, “But this man has done nothing wrong.” In the AV, “But this man hath done nothing amiss.”

Indeed, this man had not. This man was Jesus of Nazareth, and He had lived a perfect life. When you read Luke’s gospel, you quickly discover that He is unique.

When He was born, the angels had announced, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11).”

When He was twelve years old, Mary and Joseph left Him behind in the temple, and after searching for three days, found Him. They were in great distress, and asked Him why He had done this? Do you remember what He said? “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house (Luke 2:49)?”

Yes, His Father’s house. He always did what pleased His Father. His Father sent Him into the world. His Father gave Him a mission to accomplish, “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

And so He preached, and healed, and loved. Perfectly. He fulfilled the mission. He fulfilled the Law of God. Perfectly.

And they nailed Him, the perfect Son of God-in-flesh, to a cross. He endured this, not because He was guilty, but because we are guilty. He did it for us.

The thief recognized something else about Jesus.

2. *Jesus is a King*. Listen to what he says in verse 42, “And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’” Focus on those final three words for a moment. *Into your Kingdom*. Who has a kingdom? A king does.

How did the thief know Jesus was a king? For starters, the sign told him. Verse 38 says, “There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’” And he heard it from the soldiers, too, although in jest, “If you are the King of the Jews, save

yourselves.” Perhaps He had heard it from Jesus Himself, or from someone else who had heard Him, for thousands had heard Him during the past three years, say things like...

Luke 6:20 “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the *kingdom of God*.”

Luke 8:1 “Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the *kingdom of God*.”

Luke 10:9 “The *kingdom of God* has come near to you.”

Luke 12:32 “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the *kingdom*.”

Friends, we have a problem today. Millions of people who are convinced they are going to heaven have believed in a deficient Jesus. They have never acknowledged what this thief acknowledged, what we *must* acknowledge, that Jesus is the King, and that to believe in Him is to place oneself under His authority.

3. *Jesus can save*. Listen again to the request that comes from the lips of this dying man in verse 42, “Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom.”

What caused this 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. Unconditional love. Love for lost sinners, even the worst, even *him*.

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 were like sweet music to his sin-sick soul, “Father, forgive them!” What?! He’s asking His Father to forgive those soldiers who were murdering Him?! Can that be? Forgive *them*? Yes, that’s what He said.

So perhaps...if He would forgive *them*...He might forgive *me*. Yes, indeed.

And so He asks. With simple, childlike faith, He asks. For what? “Lord, *remember me* when You come into Your kingdom.”

Remember me. This is so humbling, and personal. *Remember...me...* Not, take me, as though I deserve You to take me, for I don’t. I am a guilty sinner who deserves what I’m receiving. But what I know to be true of you causes me to boldly, confidently bring this petition to You. You are sinless. You are a King. You can save. And I believe this with all my heart. I believe in You.

Dear friends, to have eternal life, we must do exactly what this second thief did. First, we must admit the truth about ourselves, that we are guilty sinners, that we deserve the punishment of a Holy God. And secondly, we must admit the truth about Jesus. He is sinless. He is the King. And He alone can save.

But you may object, “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. They’ve convinced themselves that they've blown it too many times, that they’re too far gone. Perhaps this is you. And if so, it’s my privilege to share these words with you, from the lips of Jesus’ Himself, His second saying from the cross.

Verse 43, “And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’” At the cross, first, we hear the sinner’s request. Then, the Savior’s promise.

II. We hear the Savior's promise (43).

What a stunning announcement! And it reveals three things about our Savior.

A. Jesus' statement revealed His control. “*Truly*, I say to you, *today* you will be with me in paradise.”

Truly. In the AV, “*verily*.” It’s actually the word, “Amen.” It denotes absolute certainty. It reminds us that though Jesus was nailed to the cross, He was in total control.

In control of what? Of two destinies.

1. Jesus is in charge of the destiny of the sinner. To the repentant thief He says, “**TODAY** you will be with Me. Your destiny has been changed **TODAY!**”

How long does it take to be converted? Friends, there as this thief gasps his final breaths, he calls out to Jesus. And there, in that moment, his eternal destiny is changed!

This is critical to see. What Jesus says to this repentant thief cuts right through a lot of false, yet popular theology. Let me ask you. Where was this thief heading up until this very moment? Not paradise, right? Indeed, he was heading into eternity without God, to a place of torment. Jesus describes that place back in Luke 16:19–31.

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

This is where the thief on the cross was heading...until...this very moment, when he called out to Jesus in repentance and faith. And what happened? Jesus said that the man’s eternal destiny was changed, from a place of torment in isolation, to paradise with Jesus Himself.

Though he had never been baptized, he was saved. Though he had never participated in a sacrament, he was saved. Though he had never joined a church, he was saved. And Jesus didn't say he'd have to put in some time in purgatory either. He simply (and clearly) said, “**TODAY** you will be with Me in paradise.”

Who can make that kind of declaration? Only One person can, the One to whom the Father has given all authority, to His dear Son. Jesus is in charge of the destiny of the sinner.

But there’s more. It’s not just the sinner’s destiny that He controls.

2. *Jesus is in charge of His own destiny.* Hear again His words. “Today you will be *with Me* in paradise.”

Where the thief was going, says Jesus, so was He. To paradise! On this very day!

But not yet. Yes, by the end of this day, He would be in paradise, but to open up access to paradise for this repentant sinner, and for all other repentant sinners, Jesus had a work to do, in those next three eternal hours. This is why He has come to earth, to take the place of hell-bound sinners, to pay their penalty so they can go to paradise.

Oh beloved, do you know what was yet in store for Jesus? What time was it? Notice the very next statement, in verse 44 “It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.”

The sixth hour was high noon, when the sun was at its brightest. But not on this day. On this day, the Son of God was taking upon Himself the sins of every human being who would ever live who would believe on Him. And as the sin-bearer, the Lord Jesus would experience something He’d never known before, alienation from His Father. And the experience was so horrendous that, as it were, the lights went out.

And He will cry out (His fourth saying), “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”, as His Heavenly Father turns His back on His sin-covered Son.

No wonder He then cries out (His fifth saying), “I thirst.” For there He is, enduring the wrath of God, in the place of sinners who deserve that wrath.

There on the cross, He will face the blackness of hell. Satan will hurl all His fury at the Son of man. The devil will seek to destroy God's anointed. Will he succeed?

Fix your eyes on those words, “*With Me.*” Jesus knows the unspeakable agony that’s coming, that far exceeds the physical agony He’s already endured. He is aware of the terror which He will face alone.

Yet even in His darkest hour, He is in control of His own destiny. He knows that He will make an atonement for sin. He will defeat the Evil One and rescue sinners from his domain of darkness. He will cry out in victory (the sixth saying), “It is finished!” And He will entrust His spirit to His Father (the seventh saying). And He will die when He chooses to die, when His work is done.

He knows this, no question about it! He will die in a matter of hours, and His spirit will go immediately to paradise, and so will the spirit of the now-saved-criminal next to Him. And on the third day, He will conquer death itself. He will rise from the dead, as the first-fruit, guaranteeing the future resurrection of the body of this criminal, and of every other person who would ever put their total trust in Him.

And may I repeat? There’s absolutely no question about this outcome in His mind. Today, He says, you will be *with Me* in paradise. Jesus revealed His control.

B. Jesus' statement revealed His compassion. Notice the very personal pronoun in our text. “Truly, I say *to you*, today you will be with me in paradise.”

To YOU. Sometimes we forget that both thieves appealed to Jesus that day.³ Both called out to Him. Both even had a faith of sorts.

What did the first thief say? Notice again verse 39, “Save yourself and us!” He asked Jesus to save him, didn't he? But something was missing. What was it? He had no remorse for his sin, did he? No acknowledgement of guilt. No repentance.

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

³ Observation by Jones, p. 23

For which man did Jesus have compassion? Yes, both. But which one benefitting from the Savior's compassion. The one who repented and believed.

Consider carefully this observation by commentator, Russell Jones, "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."⁴

He's right, isn't he? There's a substitute gospel that's being preached by many in our day, and believed by many. It appeal to felt needs, but neglects our greatest need. People are urged to, "Come to Jesus, and He'll make life better for you! You'll be a better student. You have a better family. You'll have more peace in your heart."

And while much of that's true, those are just symptoms of our greatest problem. May 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 this moment, only one thing mattered to this dying man. His ultimate need. Where will I spend eternity?

And Jesus met that need. "Today you will 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!

"Whoever comes to me," says the Savior, "I will in no wise cast out."

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30)."

But there's more. His control. His compassion. And...

C. Jesus' statement revealed His completion. It's time to think more carefully about that final word. "You will be with Me in PARADISE."

Paradise. What did Jesus mean by 'paradise'? We could go into detail about what the Jewish rabbis taught in the first century, about the speculation of what would happen on the other side of the grave. Some taught that the unseen world was a succession of spiritual realms, that according to them, there were seven heavens, one above the other in ascending glory. The highest, or seventh, was paradise.⁵

But it's really not that complicated. My grandchildren understand what paradise is. The children's story Bible shows what paradise is. It's right there in Genesis 1-2. God created a perfect world, with a perfect garden in the middle of it, and then walked with the first man and woman in it. And we all know what happened.

1. The first Adam lost paradise. He didn't obey God. He essentially tried to be his own god and when his own way. The first Adam forfeited paradise.

And then, into the world, came Jesus Christ, whom the Bible refers to as the last Adam. And why did He come? To die, yes. To conquer the grave, yes. But to what end? It's all about paradise, isn't it? The first Adam lost it. But...

2. The last Adam restores it! The first 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. Through the work of the last Adam, and faith in that work, God restores fallen sinners, and offers them a place in His eternal paradise.

⁴ Russell Jones, p. 26.

⁵ Jones, 32.

This is what I mean by using the word *complete*. When Jesus told the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise,” He was telling this sinner, and all other sinners who will believe on Him, “I know what you’ve done, and I know what you deserve. But I’m on this cross to take what you deserve, so you can receive what I deserve. I have come to rescue a people who will enjoy Me and My Father, both now in this life, and in the glories of paradise forever.”

Oh, dear friend, please know that Jesus' salvation is complete.

This past Wednesday a member of our church asked to see me. Thelma is 101 years old, and her body is shutting down. When asked what she’s looking forward to seeing the most in heaven, she replied without hesitation. “Jesus.” When asked if she had anything she’d like me to share with you, she said, “Tell them, I’ll see again, either here, or in heaven. And if they’re not ready to go, they need to get ready.”

Well said, sister Thelma.

Make It Personal: Have you asked Jesus to save you?

Have you *asked*? It’s so simple.

This morning, we’ve traveled to the cross and heard the sinner’s request, and the Savior’s promise. Are death-bed conversations real? Some aren’t, but some are. This one was. Jesus' words to the repentant thief remind us that it's never too late.

My friend, do you know for sure that you're sins are forgiven, that you are clean before a holy God, clothed in His righteous robe? Do you know for sure that if you died today, you'd go to paradise.

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

Closing Song: #216 “*Christ Arose*” (all three verses)

Gift to the congregation: “The Cross Puzzle” (if you didn’t receive one last week)

Community Group Discussion:

1. In Jesus’ second saying from the cross, He speaks to a criminal. At first this “thief” was attacking Jesus (Matthew 27:44), while moments later, he is defending Jesus. What made the difference?
2. What did the thief admit about himself? In verse 40? In verse 41? Is a person saved the moment he admits the truth about himself? If not, what else is needed?
3. What did the thief recognize to be true of Jesus? In verse 41? In verse 42?
4. How could you use Jesus' statement in verse 43 to respond to individuals who say to you, “You must be baptized in order to be saved.” Or, “Unless you keep the sacraments, you can't go to heaven.”
5. Sometimes we forget that *both* thieves appealed to Jesus that day. Both even had a faith of sorts. Even the first thief asked Jesus to save him (39). But it was a deficient faith. Something was missing. What was it?
6. Suppose a friend said to you, “I have wasted my life. I wish I could change my past, but I can't. Eternity is staring at me, and I am afraid. I have never been religious. Is it too late for me?” How could you use the incident of the repentant thief to help your friend?