

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“I Tell You the Truth . . . Today You Will be With Me in Paradise”

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“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:39-43).

There were two of them: thieves on either side of Jesus. Roman justice was severe. Both were condemned to death. Both were nailed to crosses. Both were helpless. Both were dying. Both were waiting for death, and for whatever else might come after death.

And at the beginning, it seems both were railing at Jesus. Matthew 27:44 says, “the robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him.” Both joined in the hate that was being dumped on Jesus – by the chief priests, the scribes, soldiers, even by people passing by on the road.

As the hours passed, however, something changed – for one of them. They started out the same; they did not end that way. One wasn’t yelling at Jesus anymore. He was noticing . . . noticing how different Jesus was from himself and the other criminal, how different Jesus was from the crowd gathered at Golgotha, how different Jesus was from anyone he ever met.

Verse 39 of the text says the other thief joined the crowd again and started mocking and taunting Jesus: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” What a guy! Even while he himself is dying, he is calloused and hard, unchanging, and fearless, and he takes a few parting shots at Jesus.

Jesus has nothing to say to that one. But the other criminal does. “Do you not fear God” he asks, “since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” This one knows the nails through his hands were pounded with the hammer of justice. He knows the burn in his collapsing lungs was ignited by the demands of the law. He does not blame others or play the victim. He takes ownership of his evil and confesses his guilt.

They started out as two of a kind. By the end, nobody could be more different. One remained hardened and stubborn in his guilt and unbelief. The other had come to faith in Jesus. It probably wasn’t a well-educated faith. Just a simple trust in Jesus. But it was enough. He repented and turned to Jesus. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42). In his most hopeless hour, this criminal looked to Jesus for hope.

During Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, Jesus spoke very little to those who were interrogating him. He didn’t have much to say to Pilate. He said not a word to Herod nor did He respond to the taunts of those who were mocking him at Golgotha. But now he speaks to the repentant thief and makes a wonderful promise: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Let’s parse it out: “Truly” he says. This is for certain. This is without a doubt. There’s no question about it. “I say to you”. This thief had heard the words of condemnation from Pilate or some other Roman authority. The crowd had been jeering at him too. But now this is the voice of Jesus, the One whose Word created the heavens and the earth. The One who has all authority in heaven and on earth. Truly, I say to you, “today. . .” (not someday, not some time in some distant future, today) . . . you *will* (not might, not if you’re lucky, or *if* you pass the cut). No, today you will be with me in paradise. Paradise: not purgatory. Paradise, not born again into this broken world in some other person or life form. Paradise, where all things are the way God intends them; nothing and no one is out of sorts.

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

The promises you and I make often come with conditions. “If you get the A in chemistry, then we will go to the water park.” Or, “Perhaps we’ll drive down and to try to see you one of these days.” Or, “Someday I’ll make the appointment with the therapist.”

This promise of Jesus had no if/then clause, nor was it preceded by a “perhaps” or a “someday.” It wasn’t next month, or even tomorrow. It was today. “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

It’s a promise not just of time, but of companionship. “With me” Jesus says. Realize this criminal may never have had a lot of good people in his life. And now, in the waning hours of his life, he saw people at their very worst. As the passersby spit on him and shook their heads in disgust, scorning him with their words and their glares. Imagine how isolated and alone and hopeless he must have felt. That was part of the punishment of crucifixion. It was physically tormenting, but it was also the most shameful way to die, hanging naked along the busiest street as a deterrence to crime, but so that others could also heap their insults on the condemned. But as much as this criminal wanted to escape the people around him, there was something that drew him to the man being crucified on his left. Something that made Him different. For example, instead of cursing his tormentors, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them.”

And Jesus assures this criminal that whatever it was he did to get himself crucified, it wasn’t enough to cut himself off from the love of God. “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” With me, not over there somewhere at a safe distance from me. With me, face to face. Jesus’ forgiveness is so complete that it allows us to stand without fear in the near presence of Holy God.

Can you imagine the impact of this promise? This man goes from a hopeless circumstance to the assurance of salvation! His future moves from the prospect of perishing under God’s wrath, to the promise of eternal life in God’s kingdom! What did he do to deserve this? What do any of us do? Nothing! Nothing is mentioned. Nothing is noted. We are saved by grace alone. The man deserved condemnation but received forgiveness and redemption. He deserved perdition but he received paradise.

We too have done evil and, as the good thief said, are “under the same sentence of condemnation.” By ourselves, we have no hope, nothing to look forward to. Like the criminal we cannot save ourselves. We’re stuck, nailed down tight, waiting for death and whatever comes after it for criminals.

But Christ has come and identified Himself with sinners like us. “Friend of sinners” they called him. As the prophet foretold, “He was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53). And through repentance and forgiveness, through baptism and faith, we’ve been made one with Christ in his death and his life. We too will inherit paradise. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but we *will* be with him in paradise. He’s the only person on this earth who never backpedaled on His promises.

Therefore, you will be with the Son who loved you enough to leave heaven and be with you on earth. You’ll be with the Son who loved you enough to live under the law though He was above the law. You’ll be with the Son who loved you enough to die for you, so that you might be with him.

Jesus left no room for doubt about whether that thief would be in heaven. Through his Word, he leaves no room for doubt whether you will be in heaven. “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mk. 16:16).

It says nothing about good works saving us. Therefore, we can know with a certainty, “we shall be saved.” If it depended on us and our works, we could never be sure. We could never know whether we’ve done enough to tip the scales in our favor. But because it’s all grace, because it’s God’s doing and not ours, because it’s the death of Jesus and the promise of Jesus, we can know with a certainty that we will also be with Him in paradise.

So, when you come before the throne of judgment, if given the chance to speak, don’t point to any good works you have done. Don’t even point to the faith you have. Plead the promise of God in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Like the good thief, look to Jesus and Him alone for life and salvation.

Finally, the story of this thief also teaches us it’s never too late . . . never too late for all those who, all their years, have had nothing to do with Jesus. They may have heard of Him, but they are not followers. They may have known of things He said, but they are not His disciples. Like the other criminal, maybe they’ve been cold and fearless all their lives and have rejected again and again the opportunities that come around to receive the promises of Jesus. But it’s never too late. If anything, the good thief knew what much later Yogi Berra expressed so well: It ain’t over till it’s over.

The charges against him were grim and the hour late, yet he neither presumed nor despaired. Rather, he literally turned to Jesus for hope, and discovered the astonishing power of forgiveness, and the depths of divine love and mercy. He received the best promise ever: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Amen.