

The Suffering King

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Date: 23 November 2025

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[0 : 00] So, good morning, everyone. As you've hopefully figured out by now, this Sunday is a special Sunday in the life of our church, in the church calendar.

This is the last Sunday in the Christian year, and we call it the Feast of Christ the King because we recognize and celebrate that Jesus is King.

And if you're listening to the readings, all of the readings point to that reality. We have the Old Testament reading that shows how the human shepherds and leaders over God's people ultimately failed, and God says that one day He's going to come Himself and shepherd His people, gather them together.

And in the Psalms, we see God's people clinging to that promise, waiting, hoping, the day when all violence will end, when God will finally put things right, and we have but to be still.

I could have sung that for an hour, by the way, just that refrain. I just felt that in my soul. That was so wonderful. And then we see this incredible description in the New Testament reading of Christ the King, the cosmic King, the one through whom all things were made, the one in whom all things hold together.

[1 : 14] But then we come to this gospel reading, and I have to say it is a curious finale. Four readings in a row, all extolling this great king, until we get to the gospel reading.

Luke chapter 23 immediately becomes clear that Jesus is unlike any king this world has ever known, because we see Jesus not with a crown being celebrated and worshipped, but hanging on a cross, suffering and dying.

And even more curious, we see this story, and the details of this story that we're going to focus on are unique to Luke's gospel of two criminals, one on Jesus' right, one on his left.

Now, as we're going to see, one of these criminals is going to gain the great honor and privilege of being the first person welcomed into Jesus' kingdom.

The other is going to completely miss his chance. And the question we're going to contemplate together this morning is why? What's the difference? Both men are criminals, both accused of the same crime, both under the same sentence, both turned to Jesus in their time of need.

[2 : 36] One has his life completely transformed. The other does not. I think this is an important question for those of us who grew up in the modern West, because the vast majority of people in our society either grew up attending church or grew up Christianity adjacent.

When you grow up in a culture like that, like myself, for instance, I grew up in the South, which Flannery O'Connor famously described as Christ-haunted. When you grow up in a Christ-haunted culture, it's easy to assume that you know what Christianity is all about.

It's easy to assume a kind of familiarity with Jesus. Many people don't understand that growing up around Jesus is not the same thing as having a relationship with him.

So there are many people, I think, in our culture, many people who fill our churches on Sunday mornings who assume they have a relationship with Jesus, but who, in fact, do not.

Their lives have never really been changed by him, although they may know quite a bit about him.

The question we're going to ask this morning is, why not? And this passage, I believe, shows us three things we need to see in order to answer that question.

[3 : 50] What's the difference between these two criminals? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for this final Sunday in our church year, and we thank you for the focus.

Help us to understand what it means that you are king, what kind of king you are, and what this could possibly mean, what hope it has to offer criminals like us.

We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen. Amen. So the first issue, the first difference I would suggest between these two criminals has to do with the posture of their heart toward Jesus.

Is Jesus the means to an end, or is Jesus the end itself? The first criminal says, aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us.

But most commentators agree his tone is quite sarcastic. What he's really saying is this, aren't you supposed to be the Messiah? If so, if you're the Messiah, as you say, prove it.

[4 : 57] I've got a great idea how you can prove it. Get me off this cross. That's his approach. Get me down from here. In other words, if you solve this urgent problem in my life, if you meet my felt need, then I will consider believing you as the Messiah.

So for this man, we begin to see right away that Jesus is for him a means to an end. I'll believe in you. I'll put my faith in you as long as it benefits me in some way.

You do this for me, and then I'll consider doing that for you. And before we pile on to this poor man, I think we probably need to reflect and admit that many of us, I think, have done the same thing in our lives, if we're really honest.

At some point in most people's lives, not just Christians, but non-Christians, atheists, right? At most people, at some point in their life, when they're in a time of desperation and need, some major crisis happens, even non-religious people will sometimes in a moment of desperation cry out to God.

God, if you're there, please help me. I need you to do this for me. I need you to keep this bad thing from happening. But the fact is, and I think we know this anecdotally, most people are not changed by that.

[6 : 21] They cry out to God in a moment of need, but they're not changed by that. The reason is because most of the time, what we're really saying when we cry out to God in those moments, what we're really saying is, if you're really worth believing in, God, if you're really worth following, then get me out of this situation or do this for me, and then I'll believe.

Some of us may have even prayed that prayer before. If you do this one thing for me, God, I've never asked you for anything, and if you just do this one thing for me, then I promise I will go to church every week and I will follow you and I will give all my money away and I will do all these things.

If you just do this one thing for me. And the reason I think that most of us have done this, and the reason that I think most people tend to do this is because it's only natural. I mean, if we're honest, most people are not walking around contemplating life's greatest questions.

Most people are not walking around on an average Tuesday considering the claims of Christianity and whether or not they're true. Right? Most people are thinking about the person who just broke up with them and how to get that person back.

You know, most people are thinking about their job stress. The reason they're up at three, four o'clock in the morning. Most people spend their time and energy thinking about how they're going to be able to afford the things that they need in life.

[7 : 38] Most people are worrying and wringing their hands over their health, or the health and well-being of their kids. We're not contemplating these deep existential questions.

It's only natural. It makes sense. We're focusing on the needs right in front of our face most of the time. But see, we need to understand the problem here. The problem is this. Our biggest need as human beings is never the problem right in front of our face.

It feels like it in the moment. Our biggest need is never the need that's right in front of our face. Our biggest need is the salvation and renewal of our souls. But most of the time we live with that need buried way down there in the list of priorities.

The point for us to see here, though, is that when our relationship with Jesus is based on what He can give us or do for us, or the ways in which He will or will not address those immediate felt needs, if our relationship with Jesus is based on that, then if we're really honest, it's not actually about Jesus.

It's about that thing that we want or don't want. It's about that felt need. And whatever that thing is, that is really our God.

[9 : 00] That is really the thing that drives and animates our life. And we're trying to make Jesus a servant of that thing. So for those of us who are Christians, we should really pay attention to this.

Do we want Jesus even if and when He doesn't give us that thing that we cry out for? Or if by not doing that thing we want Him to do, if by not doing it, He's actually doing something far deeper in us that only He understands, do we still want Him?

Will we still trust Him and follow Him? Do we still love Him? Do we still believe He loves us? For some of us, it can take a very long time to learn that Jesus is infinitely more valuable than anything He might give us.

and the second criminal already, I would say, on some maybe pre-conscious level, we're going to come back to this, is beginning to figure that out.

Because if we look at this second criminal's posture toward Jesus, it's completely different. He doesn't even, notice, He doesn't even ask Jesus to get Him down off the cross. He doesn't ask Jesus to solve anything about their crisis.

[10:28] He simply, in a way, says, wherever you are, I want to be. Whatever your kingdom is, remember me.

I want to be there with you. That's His only request. So for Him, we're beginning to see that Jesus is not simply a means to an end. Jesus is the end.

The first criminal says, Jesus, I want you to fix my life. The second criminal says, Jesus, I want you to be my life. And if it means all of this trouble, if it means all of this suffering, if it means I have to deal with that in order to have you, then so be it.

That's a very different posture. So if we're only ever focused on what we can get from Jesus, and we never come to see that having Jesus is everything, is worth everything, then even if we grow up in church, and we grow up all of our lives hearing about Jesus, our hearts can remain far away.

That's the first thing that we see, the first difference between someone who's going to have their life changed by Jesus, and someone who's not. the second difference we see has to do with their response to the wrong that they have done in their own lives, and what we see is this difference.

[11:55] It is not regret over sin, but a willingness to accept responsibility for our sin that opens the door to grace in our lives.

It's not regret, but a willingness to accept responsibility. The first criminal clearly feels regret. The first criminal feels a ton of regret. He regrets the circumstances that he's in.

He regrets the fact that they got caught. He regrets the consequences. He regrets the fact that it's brought all this suffering into his life, and he just wants to escape.

Tons of regret. But look at the second criminal. Verse 40. But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God?

He said. Since you're under the same sentence, we are punished justly for we're getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong. Now that, my friends, is not just regret.

[13:01] There's far more going on here. First of all, he knows and is acknowledging with trepidation that there is a holy God, and he's clearly able to recognize some degree of truth about Jesus.

He rebukes this other criminal for blaspheming against Jesus by mocking him. He recognizes and affirms Jesus' innocence, and he seems to be able to recognize that Jesus is some kind of king with some kind of kingdom, only it's clearly very different.

But I would say the most amazing thing is that this second criminal is willing to fully admit his wrong. Now that is very, very rare.

It's very rare. He is willing to say, we deserve this. We are getting what we deserve. And that kind of admission, that willingness to fully own and accept responsibility, the willingness to admit that you're wrong, that is the beginning of the road to true repentance.

And in the Christian life, repentance is that word that means turning away from your sin and reorienting your heart toward God completely because of his mercy. The beginning of that is what we see here, a willingness to admit this is wrong and I deserve what I'm getting as a result.

[14:36] And I want to pause for a second and just focus on this a little more because it's extremely important. Some people, when they do something wrong, they might go on and on and on about how sorry they are, about how much they regret what they've done.

But sometimes if you pay attention, they will ultimately avoid actually taking responsibility for their actions. They're very sorry, they're full of regret, but they won't actually accept responsibility.

So, imagine someone who gets angry and in their anger they snap and they say something hurtful to their spouse or their friend. which one of these apologies reflects a genuine willingness to accept responsibility?

This is multiple choice. Okay? Okay, the other person's hurt, they're upset, things are tense and awkward and now this person wants to try to make it better so they're going to apologize.

Okay? Which reflects a genuine willingness to accept responsibility? A. Whoa, sorry, I was just kidding. It's not that big of a deal.

[15 : 52] B. Look, I'm sorry but I only said that because of what you said to me. C. I'm sorry, I feel awful, I'm just a terrible person, I'm not worth loving.

D. Sorry, I didn't realize you were so sensitive. D. E. I'll say I'm sorry if you admit that what you did to me was wrong.

F. F. I'm sorry, I'm just under so much stress right now. Which one?

Right? None of the above, right? If you guess none of the above, you get a gold star. Why not?

Right? Well, what do we see here? We see minimizing. We see blame shifting. We see self-pity.

We see a lighter form of gaslighting. We see conditional apology. We see making excuses to justify yourself. Right? What are all of those? They're all tactics to avoid actually having to accept responsibility.

[17 : 13] What does a genuine apology sound like? Right? It doesn't have to be verbose and flowery and extended. What does it do?

It clearly and specifically names the wrong and it accepts responsibility without any conditions or excuses. Now, there might be context and there might be a point to come to that in the conversation.

But a genuinely repentant apology clearly and specifically names the wrong, accepts responsibility, and places no conditions or excuses on that. So, it might sound something like this.

What I did to you was hurtful. I did it out of anger. It was wrong. Please forgive me. I'm really sorry.

Right? It doesn't have to be complicated. I've known people who have been Christians for years who are well-known and highly respected in the church who may even serve in prominent leadership roles and yet they are incapable of actually accepting responsibility when they mess up.

[18 : 25] And I'll tell you this, in the best and most thriving marriages, people think of thriving marriages as marriages that are conflict-free absolutely not. The best, healthiest, most godly marriages, there might be a lot of, you might come into seasons where there's very high conflict season in your life.

That's going to happen in the best marriages. The difference is that healthy, godly, thriving marriages, when the conflict happens, they're able to do the work of repairing and healing and moving forward.

And what makes that possible? It's that both people are willing to admit and take responsibility for their sin. Right? When that's not happening, your ability to repair and heal and move forward is very stunted.

Right? Now you say, well, I thought we were talking about the criminal and now we're talking about relationships and why are we talking about all this now? A couple of reasons. Number one, if we have a hard time doing this in our human relationships, chances are we have a hard time doing it with God.

If you cannot admit you're wrong to your best friend whose feelings you hurt, then what are the chances that you're going to be able to go to your knees before God and confess and admit all of your sin to Him?

[19 : 45] Conversely, I believe the more comfortable we become taking responsibility for our sins and wrongs in our human relationships, or I'm sorry, the more comfortable we become confessing and taking responsibility for our sins before the Lord, the easier it becomes to do this in our relationships with other people.

You know, if you get used to on a daily basis when you're doing morning prayer or coming to meet with a priest for confession or even going down on your knees and confessing your sin thoughtfully and meaningfully on a Sunday service, if that becomes a part of your regular life rhythm, confessing and owning your sin to the Lord, I guarantee you that's going to translate into your human relationships.

Having a relationship with God begins by recognizing that God is a holy God and that ultimately all of the sin that we commit in the world is ultimately committed against Him.

And it begins by a willingness to accept responsibility over our sin, to confess it to the Lord, and then to cry out for mercy and forgiveness knowing that we don't deserve it.

That is the beginning of repentance, that reorientation of our hearts and lives toward God. So here's what we've talked about so far. The difference between these two criminals, number one, posture.

[21 : 06] Is Jesus a means to an end in my life or is He the end? Number two, do we simply feel regret over our sin or are we willing to take responsibility for it and confess it to the Lord?

That's number two. But those have to lead us. We can't stop here because there's one final difference that arguably I think is the most important difference of all between these two criminals. And it's something that we need to understand anytime we talk about practices like confession, repentance, we need to understand this final truth that ultimately, friends, it is not our repentance but God's grace that saves us.

Now listen, repentance is necessary, don't get me wrong, but God's grace is what makes repentance possible. And God's grace is the only reason repentance offers any hope of salvation. And if we forget that, we start thinking that there is some kind of formula that we've been given and that is not at all the kind of God we're dealing with. We need to understand something very important about this second criminal.

[22 : 19] Actually, two things. Number one, this was not a petty thief. It's much more likely given the way this word is translated contextually elsewhere that this man was violent, he was murderous, and he was an insurrectionist.

He was probably part of a group that was trying to overthrow Rome and they had probably done all kinds of horrible things to try to make that happen. So this is the very worst kind of person. He's a violent, murderous insurrectionist.

Number two, this second criminal, this detail is very easy to miss because it's not in Luke's gospel, but it shows up in Matthew's gospel. Moments before this second criminal says what he does in our passage, moments before he says this, the second criminal was mocking Jesus right alongside the first criminal.

It says in Matthew 27, 44, in the same way, the rebels, that's what Matthew refers to the mass, the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults upon him.

So imagine this scene. All the while, these men, all three men are being laid down and nailed to their crosses.

[23 : 37] All the while, the crowds and the religious leaders and the soldiers, they're all mocking and insulting Jesus. Nobody's paying any attention to the other two. They're all mocking and focusing all of their hate on Jesus.

And these other two men, as they're being put on their crosses, are also heaping insults and reviling Jesus. Everyone, even the other criminals, they're all mocking Jesus.

And then as they hang there, they're all mocking Jesus. On his right and his left, everybody's hurling insults in Jesus. And then, all of a sudden, imagine this, all of a sudden, one of them stops and he begins to have an inexplicable change of heart.

And it's like the pieces start to fall into place. Maybe he's seen Jesus or heard Jesus teach. Maybe he's seen him perform miracles. Maybe he's interacted with some of Jesus' disciples.

They're probably all roughly the same age. And all of those pieces that he's been around maybe all of his adult life, it all begins to click. And he begins to grasp something about what's actually happening.

[24 : 49] And what's happening is that grace, you know, is beginning to break into his life. And he doesn't know it yet. But this man is by no means a model for us to follow.

Right? The preacher, Alistair Begg, has a wonderful sermon on this passage. And I'll paraphrase him here as best I can, although I lack the Scottish accent to do it well.

But he sort of has us imagine this criminal, this second criminal, sort of arriving at the gates of heaven. Right? So he arrives and he's looking around and he says, you know, the angel standing at the gate comes up and says, what are you doing here?

The man says, I have no idea. Well, what do you mean you don't know? Guy says, that's what I'm saying. I have no idea. I have no idea how I got here.

Angels are like, all right, we can figure this out. He says, well, well, I mean, obviously, surely you've been baptized, right? Guy says, I have no idea what that means. Okay?

[25 : 59] Well, so, so surely you're clear on the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, right? Guy, I've never heard of that in my life. Well, let's just start with the basics then.

What about your doctrine of scripture? Have you, Guy says, blank expression, I have no idea what you're talking about. Never even heard of a Bible. angel, after asking all these questions, finally just throws his hands up in frustration and says, well, on what basis are you here then?

And the man says, because the man on the middle cross said I could come. I don't know if you've been ever asked that question of, you know, if you were to die today and you were to go and you try to gain entry to heaven and someone were to ask you on what basis should you be allowed to come in, what would you say?

If your answer begins with, because I, you've already gone wrong, right? Because I believe this, because I was baptized, because I did this or did that or stopped doing these things. the only proper answer to that question, because he, because Jesus.

[27 : 32] Think about this for just a moment. The first person to enter paradise through the cross was a violent criminal who had who had no theological understanding, no baptism, never even heard of a Bible, and no opportunity to amend his life.

If that doesn't make us all extremely uncomfortable, then I think we're missing it. And here's the way, I think the longer that you've been a Christian and the longer that you've been in the church, and maybe even for those of us who are pastors and theology professors and Bible scholars, right, who teach this, and we have our ordo salutis, and here's how salvation works, and here's how it all maps out, right, and then you read this story, and you're just kind of like, what?

Now, I'm not saying all that stuff doesn't matter. I'm not saying it's not solid and biblical. I'm not saying that repentance isn't necessary. I'm not saying that we shouldn't baptize all believers, right? I'm not saying any of that, right?

But what this ultimately means is that the reason that any of that has any value is that we are dealing with a promiscuous, unpredictable, scandalous grace, and I think it means that when we do enter into paradise and we look around at who's here, I think we're going to be shocked at who's there, and I think there's going to be a whole lot of that kind of thing going on.

what are you doing here? What are you doing? We'll probably have people look at us and say, what are you doing here? So the season of Advent begins next week, and it's a wonderful time for us to reexamine our relationship with Jesus.

[29 : 29] You know, for those of us who want our lives changed by Jesus, for those of us who don't just want to be Christianity adjacent, right? But those of us who actually want to be changed, Advent is a wonderful time for us to remember some of the things that we've been talking about this morning, to do some self-examination.

First, in my relationship with Jesus, is Jesus a means to an end or is Jesus the end? How does my faithfulness and devotion to him wax and wane depending on whether or not he's living according to my plan for my life?

You know, one of the disciplines we use to remind ourselves of this is the discipline of fasting. And we're encouraging our church beginning on Fridays during Advent to either fast for one meal or fast for the day.

A lot of the church around the world will be doing the same thing. And one of the main points of fasting is to recenter our focus on our ultimate need for Christ.

You know, I love the old quote by the old preacher Charles Spurgeon. He says, nothing teaches us about the preciousness of the creator as much as when we learn the emptiness of everything else.

[30 : 41] And this is an opportunity to remember that. Number two, for those of us who want to reevaluate our relationship with Jesus and grow closer to him, focusing on how do we respond to the sin in our lives?

Do we simply feel regret over the consequences of the trouble? Or is there in us a willingness to accept responsibility for our sin that opens the door to grace?

Beginning in Advent, we're going to have a number of unique opportunities for corporate repentance. As a church, there's also going to be opportunities to come and meet with clergy and do confession if you'd like to do that.

There's an Anglican version of that that we do during these seasons. And you can let us know if you want to do that. But I think that this is particularly important for those of us this year, I think any time you are on the cusp, on the precipice of a new season in your life as a church community, as we are beginning to move into this neighborhood and this building and all the things that we're hoping to see, often in the story of God's people, before times of flourishing and growth and fruitfulness, there are times of hardship and desolation and challenge.

And we're in one of those right now. And it's easy to just kind of shake our fists and be frustrated and focus on the negativity of that. But in reality, this presents a major opportunity for us.

[32 : 06] As we've been saying, even as we're renovating our building, this is an opportunity to renovate our hearts. And that a heart level renovation begins with repentance. It always does.

Repenting, turning to the Lord, confessing, seeking or asking forgiveness, extending forgiveness, doing the work of reconciliation where possible.

this is a time for that. Number three, remembering as we talk about all of these practices, right, it's always important to remember whenever we talk about things like fasting and repentance and all that, it's not ultimately these practices, but God's grace that saves us.

It's important to remember that these practices have no real inherent value in and of themselves. It is the grace of Jesus Christ which gives them value. value. It's only because of Jesus, our suffering king, that they have any value at all.

It's only because we have the kind of king who refused to save himself in order to save us that they matter. Let's pray.

[33 : 14] our Lord and heavenly father, you have shown us what a true king looks like. You have shown us the true king of the world.

And you've shown us the hope that he brings. You've shown us how and at what cost he gathers his people together as their true shepherd. You've shown us why violence will one day come to an end.

We see that on the cross. You who refused to do violence but accepted it upon yourself. We see how you are the one in whom all things hold together, Lord.

We see your glory on the cross. We pray that we would be changed as we approach you. That whether we are long time seasoned Christians, whether we are teenagers who are just beginning to think about this, whether we're here and we've never heard any of this before, we pray that Lord, in the coming weeks, we would all be changed by you.

From the inside out, Lord, not just for our good, but ultimately that we might be a people who glorify you. We pray this in your holy name. Amen. Thank you.