

The Second Word

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Preacher: Abigail Holt

[0:00] The passage that I have the pleasure to read from and respond to today is Luke chapter 23, verse 43. It reads, Jesus answered him, truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

And before discussing the verse, I think it's important to just briefly revisit who Jesus is talking to when he says this statement. The context of this passage is that Jesus has been hung on the cross alongside two other thieves, one of whom specifically mocks and hurls insults at Jesus for not saving himself, despite being the all-powerful Messiah.

The other thief, however, recognizing Jesus' innocence, rebukes his insulter and asks that Jesus remember him when he enters the kingdom of God. The verse I read is Jesus' answer.

Today you will be with me in paradise, Jesus says. One of the most mysterious statements in the Bible. Now I choose the word mysterious not in light of the controversy that this passage has accumulated.

By this I refer to the theological discourse seeking to uncover whether Jesus literally meant that the thief in him would enter paradise today, immediately upon death. To be consumed by this specific question in my mind is to miss the larger point that the passage so clearly and beautifully makes, and so I'm going to sidestep it together.

[1:20] I choose the word mysterious also because I spend most of the week really struggling to understand Jesus' answer to the thief. It doesn't make sense to me.

It's exciting, very much so, but it doesn't make sense. And why? Well, because his answer is so incredibly full of grace. And as I've been learning recently, helped by a dear sister of mine, grace is really one of the most mysterious things in the whole Bible.

And it can never really fully and intimately be understood. So after reflecting on and struggling and grappling with this passage over the past few days, it has really helped me to, it really helped illuminate to me just how mysterious this all-encompassing, profoundly powerful, and undeservingly kind this grace really is.

Because in the end, it really comes down to this, that the physical and emotional and spiritual pain that Jesus is enduring during the crucifixion does not stop him from dying in the same way that he lived, which was to seek the lost and save his sheep.

That in that moment, when Jesus is hanging on the cross, paying the penalty for our sin, he still reaches out to his father's children and makes a promise to a dying, repentant thief.

[2:35] And by the absolute grace of God and the power of Christ, Jesus' promise is kept, and the thief's sins are washed away, and his death that day was his entrance into paradise. And so the thief serves as a very important role in this reading because he provides us with a very tangible example of what George preaches every Sunday.

That there's no one on this earth too far gone to be reached by God's mercy and infinite grace. And yet, as much as the repentant thief is a very tangible manifestation of God's love and his grace, I also need to ask whether we actively see ourselves as that thief.

And that is, do we actively live our lives as ones aware of both our desperate need of God's grace and how our God, abundant in his blessings, faithfully and endlessly fulfills that need for us every hour of every day?

Because together we are all that thief. And yet Jesus still extends his hands out to us and says, today you will be with me in paradise. So today you, me, and we, we will be in paradise because of God's grace through which we have the ability to know and call Jesus our Savior because he loves us.

And to speak about grace from a bit of a more personal level, I can include that I grew up with an older brother who was diagnosed with autism at the age of two.

[3:58] And my brother's name is Judah, Judah Emanuel. And for most of my childhood, my relationship with Judah was entirely absent of grace.

I'll admit I was very deeply and very painfully embarrassed of him. And on countless occasions when my brother and I would have a sibling confrontation of titanic proportions, I very clearly remember my parents counseling me to extend some grace towards my brother and to show kindness to him in moments when he least deserved it and to always choose love over division. And to me in that moment, it seemed really impossible to choose such a thing. It felt impossible to choose love and to choose grace. I remember asking myself questions such as, why does my dad always talk about grace?

And why does grace seem, why is grace the solution to what is the last thing that my heart and what my soul wants to give? And so for a long time, I denied myself my parents' counsel and decided to act according to my own emotions, which was neither grace-filled nor loving.

And while we can rest assured in the fact that 10-year-old Abigail is not God, nor is she the source of grace, obviously for 12 years later, here I am still struggling to fully understand this concept.

[5:18] But I understood it a little bit more on those occasions when my brother would enter my room with an earnestness that can really only come from the voice of an autistic child and said, Abigail, I forgive you.

And so now I have glimpses of what that grace looks like. And it looks like me, the thief and the sinner up upon the cross, undeserving of kindness and of love and undeserving especially of grace, and yet simultaneously still receiving it so sufficiently.

So thank you, God, for 2 Corinthians 9, which says, But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me. So thankfully, I have had the experience, as many of us had, the tangible effects of other people's grace, grace from our parents, our siblings, our roommates, and grace from Jesus, who, however, improbably continues to love the world despite that being a very mysterious thing.

And how wonderful, then, the immediacy of Luke 23 sounds when Jesus promises the thief that today he will be in paradise, today with the source of eternal love.

[6:32] It's a very mysterious and puzzling and amazing answer. And so I pray, Father, please do not forget us, but please also let us not forget the divine and manifold mercy of your never-ending grace.

Amen. Thanks. I invite you to stand for a minute of silent prayer. Father, you know how prone we are and how easy it is for us to choose anger, to choose resentment, to choose bitterness, to choose hatred, to choose violence.

Father, you know how easy it is for us to choose to remember hurts, so that we can once again feel bitter or angry. You know, Father, how easy it is when even when we are distracted by something and we forget about our bitterness or anger, then we willfully, Father, choose to return to bitterness and anger.

And, Father, you know how easy it is for us to do that. We ask, Father, that you would pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, that you would make us disciples of Jesus who are gripped by the gospel and learning to live for your glory.

And so, Father, as we are gripped by the gospel, we ask that you help us to choose grace, that you help us to choose forgiveness, that you help us to choose mercy, that you help us, Father, to dwell on these things as we dwell on the mercies that you extend to us in the life and death of Jesus and his mighty resurrection.

[8:21] And this we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen.