

# The Criminal on the Cross

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[0:00] It's been a while. As Dave said, I invite you to turn with me to Luke chapter 23. I'm so blessed.

And thank you for trusting me to proclaim God's word week in and week out. And as I return to the ministry of the pulpit, I feel a strong pull towards the things of central importance, towards the very heart of this book, to cut to the heart of the matter.

And at the center of this book, at the center of our faith, indeed, at the very center of human history, stands a cross and an empty tomb.

And I want to take us there today, to Calvary, and look at the heart of the gospel, to the good news of Jesus Christ. And so let us read Luke chapter 23, beginning in verse 32.

Two others who were criminals were led away to be put to death with him, that is Jesus. And when they came to the place that is called the Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

[1:38] And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And I cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching.

But the rulers scoffed at him, saying, He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was also an inscription over him. This is the king of the Jews. 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 rewards 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.

[2:52] This is God's word. Lord, in these next moments, may the words of my mouth, in the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen. It's difficult to imagine, in just a few verses, lower lows, with a surprise twist of glory at the end.

And just a warning, like this passage, this sermon will begin in darkness, so to speak, and move towards light. Here we meet quite a few characters in this passage.

Today we'll zoom in on just three of them. Christ and the two criminals. And to zoom in on them, we have to think about what they're doing here.

Why are these two men here with them? You may have heard of this episode being called The Thief on the Cross. The one who turns. But that's probably not the best way to read it.

[4:10] Both Matthew and Mark use a word that can, in their gospel accounts, that can mean robber. But it can also mean insurrectionist. It's a lot like our word criminal.

There's a lot of, it covers a lot of ground. And here, Luke is using a word to describe them that is on the very hardened end of that spectrum. The Greek dictionaries say, one who commits gross misdeeds and serious crimes.

And that's the kind of person that Rome would be executing, not like a petty criminal. Because crucifixion was an astonishing penalty.

In polite society, Romans didn't like to even use the word crucifixion, preferring to refer to it euphemistically with things like the extreme penalty.

They wouldn't even want to say the word. It was so intense and astonishing. And we know that Jesus had taken the place of Barabbas.

[5:18] A murderer, someone who had murdered people during an insurrection. That's the kind of person that would have been crucified. And these two men would be here for similar crimes, perhaps even as Barabbas' accomplices.

In fact, it might be quite likely. And so, the prophecy of Isaiah, some 700 years prior, truly was fulfilled.

He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Here He is raised up with them. That's the scene that we're presented here.

It is dark and it is bleak, and it is us. Because we see in these two criminals a parable of humanity. No, no one in this room is a criminal deserving capital punishment. I hope. But let's not think that this doesn't apply to us.

[6:26] All of God's word is given to all of God's people for our upbuilding and our instruction and our correction. And this passage, even though we, most of us, aren't criminals, isn't just for us, it is about us.

And at least three different ways. In verse 41, one of the criminals admits that they are justly condemned.

And just like them, we stand justly condemned. And just like them, we have no hope, no strength to save ourselves.

And just like them, salvation is offered to us freely by the one on the center cross.

And each, here's the thing, each of those, each of those truths about us is hard to swallow.

[7:32] It's hard to take in and really agree with, isn't it? Perhaps one of them is hardest for you. Different people might have a harder time with one or the other.

Many can't come to terms with the Bible's teaching that the whole world stands justly condemned for sin. Even you. Even me.

Even your sweet grandmother. What did she do, right? Others have difficulty accepting that they're powerless to overcome that verdict. That their kindness, that their goodness, that their altruism doesn't tip the scales in their favor.

That their good doesn't outweigh their bad. And still others can't fathom that Jesus could be the answer. Either because they've just done too much.

How could I possibly be forgiven? Even I. Or they can't believe that it's all true. That he really rise from the grave.

[8:36] Or they can't believe that salvation comes the way we see it here. Could it really be that simple and easy? Could it? So some can't believe the bad news or won't believe the bad news.

And some can't believe the good news of the cross. Let's consider each in turn. You might not yourself resonate with every one of the objections.

But you absolutely know people who do. It seems to me that the most widespread reason that people don't flock to Jesus is that we don't see a need for him for a savior.

Maybe we speed a little while we're driving. Maybe we let our anger get out of hand every once in a while. Maybe we are selfish from time to time. But we aren't murderers.

We aren't insurrectionists. We don't feel like verse 41 justly condemned before God. I'm pretty alright. Most of us don't feel like that thief.

[9:52] Sure, there are some truly, truly evil people out there. But they're out there. They deserve the condemnation. Most of us, sure, we're not perfect, but who is?

The wages of our sin? Is that death? Because that's what the Bible says. The Bible is clear. all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

No one actually really argues about that point. The point that really gets us is that the wages of sin is death. And not just I'm going to get old and die one day.

It's talking about damnation, the second death. Really, the wages of my sins, I mean, like, not that bad. Last spring, we asked basically this same question.

Why don't we feel the weight of sin the way that the Bible portrays it? Why don't we feel justly condemned as the scriptures testify?

[11:00] Why do we think of our sin as a small and a trifling thing? it's because we don't have eyes truly to see the glory of God.

Last spring, we looked at three different places in scripture. The giving of the Ten Commandments, Isaiah's vision of the throne room of heaven, and Peter coming to realize who Jesus actually was. I'll just read one of those in Exodus chapter 19 and 20, the giving of the Ten Commandments. Oftentimes we read the list of the Ten Commandments and kind of separate it from the rest of the story.

We kind of go back and dip into it. The giving of the law is extraordinary. Exodus chapter 19 reads, The Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe you forever.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled.

[12:19] Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire.

The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder. Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off and said to Moses, you speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us lest we die.

We won't read the whole account, but it was a similar story with Isaiah. He's ushered in a vision to the throne room of heaven. He sees through a thick haze and fog, the glory of the living God and said, woe is me for I am lost.

For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. And the same is true with Peter.

[13:54] when he recognized that Jesus commanded even the seas. Luke chapter 5 we read, but when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

God's holiness isn't some boring thing. Holy is practically a synonym for boring in American English. No. God's holiness is a consuming fire. Israel, Isaiah, Peter, none of them had to be reminded of their sinfulness, of their shortcomings when they saw him.

none of them had to be reminded to consider their sins. They see the glory of God and instantly they know.

We cannot stand in the presence of the fire of his holiness. The splendor of this king scorches away all our hiding places.

[15:09] Before his majesty, none can stand. The very angels shield their eyes. His glory is a firestorm. He tells the Israelites to keep their distance, not to keep them from polluting him, but so that they are not consumed by the fire of his majesty.

Your God is glorious. You cannot stand in his presence. Your eyes cannot even bear the sight of him. at the foot of a mountain, no one feels tall, even if you're taller than the guy standing next to you.

Before the ocean's crashing waves, none of us are strong, even if you're a strong man. And to a far greater extent, before the living God who made that ocean and that mountain with his very words, and by the power of his will, before the living God, the Alpha, the Omega, the High and Exalted One, the Fountain of all life, whose word upholds the fabric of the universe, the voice of whose herald creates earthquakes, all have sinned.

And no matter how small that sin, it's against this God, this God. And so if our eyes are opened, we say with Isaiah, woe is me, I am undone.

The angels in Isaiah's vision, they don't dare look at the glory of God. Tell them that your sins against the Lord are trifles.

[17:16] Our sin seems small, seems inconsequential, only because we're not looking. And before a staggeringly holy God, no sinner feels superior

to another, not when our eyes are open.

God is not so, why aren't we looking? Why don't we feel justly condemned? Why don't we sense the need for a savior?

Scriptures are clear again on that issue as well. The wrath of God, Romans chapter 1, is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and righteousness, not the really, really visible stuff, all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men who, by their unrighteousness, suppress the truth. We don't see because we shield our own eyes, or we turn away, or we distract ourselves. Just like addicts, right? The thing that keeps us from seeing our guilt is, in fact, our guilt, whether by lies or equivocation, or simply by ignoring it, we blind ourselves to this truth, because we want to.

So, no, you and I have not committed capital offenses against the state, like these criminals have. We've done it against the one whose words formed the galaxies, which is a greater crime by far.

[18:57] And those same dynamics play into the thinking of those who can't believe that second truth, right? That second thing that we really have no strength to fix this situation.

Those criminals had no power to rescue themselves, and neither do we. the scriptures tell us that we can't make amends with God on our own.

Most of the Old Testament laws had to get back to God by his own doing. We can't make amends with God on our own. Just like these criminals, we are justly condemned, and just like these criminals, we are powerless to save ourselves from that judgment.

It might not feel that way, though, to me. it feels like my good outweighs my bad, the most part. And perhaps you feel that way, too. But, parents, you know that your children are far more able to break stuff than to fix it, to ruin than to help.

And adults are no different. our greatest efforts that we think are deeds of extraordinary uprightness to our credit aren't.

[20:27] In 1741, just 60 miles from here, Jonathan Edwards preached what is likely the most famous sermon ever preached on American soil, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.

Despite the sermon title, is actually gloriously filled with grace. Just like this passage. That sermon was one of the sparks that lit the first great awakening.

He addressed exactly this question, does our good outweigh our bad? Here's how he put it. good outweigh to God.

Your wickedness makes you, as it were, heavy as lead, and to tend downward with great weight and pressure towards hell. And if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, your good, does your good outweigh your bad, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell than a spider's web would have to stop a falling boulder.

We only think that our good outweighs our bad for the same reason. We don't think we're condemned. We don't see clearly.

[22:02] We don't see the magnitude of sin, and we greatly overestimate how great we are. And we participate actively in the not seeing.

But truly, we are like the two men on the crosses around Jesus. Help us to save ourselves. Let's not be deceived.

The scriptures say in James chapter two. Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of it all.

For he who said do not commit adultery also said do not murder. If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

What that's saying is the issue at hand is not how much insurrection you've done against God. The issue at hand is are you an insurrectionist against the one whose will upholds space and time?

[23:09] And the answer for all is yes. Yes. so many people have difficulty relating to this passage because they can't possibly come to believe the bad news of it.

That we're condemned justly and that we're powerless to do anything about it. But others have trouble believing the good news.

See, some people don't have any trouble recognizing that they are guilty before a holy God. Yet they have no strength to save themselves. Some people don't need to be told that they're condemned.

Just like the thief in verse 41. He knows. He knows. Whether they have a better attuned conscience or they have a better memory to recall it all or they have sinned in some particularly prominent ways.

Some people know all this already. And for them, what's hard to believe is that even they could be forgiven.

[24:30] Even they could be forgiven. but in this passage Jesus speaks two times and both are offers of outrageous grace, aren't they?

First we see in verse 34 Jesus praying for the forgiveness, for forgiveness towards those who are actively torturing him to death.

father forgive them for they know not what they do. What grace is that? And we see Jesus give hope, the hope of salvation to a notorious criminal who himself admitted he deserved his fate.

Verses 42 and 43, 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.

This is really the thing that should shock us. Not the guilty part. This is the thing that should shock us. If we see, truly see the weight of our guilt before and indeed at so holy a God.

[25:58] and see truly see how powerless we are to save ourselves, how feeble our good works are, how could we be forgiven?

And not only that, how could it be this easy? If our sins are so great, shouldn't our salvation require something more from us than remember me when you come into your kingdom?

him. But if everything we've heard today is true, how could it be any other way?

We're not just condemned, we are so condemned. Our sin is of infinite consequence because it is against an infinite God. And we are not just weak, we are completely powerless.

How can we overcome infinity? Salvation, therefore, if it comes, can't depend on me in any way.

[27:05] I have nothing to offer. Because even if there was the instruction manual to get yourself saved, instructions to climb out of our pit, my pit, your pit, won't help.

There's no way to climb to the moon. It's not a thing that I can do ever, no matter how great the instructions are. What we need is entirely beyond this.

What we need is rescue, pure and simple. And that's exactly why Jesus came. Amidst the shouts and the jeers to save himself, he chose to stay so he could save us instead.

Because even this is why he came. This is why he came. Because even before Jesus was born, when the angel announced his birth to Joseph, the angel announced it with these words, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. That's why he came.

[28:33] And so the apostles declared Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That's why he came.

If ever sinners like you and like me were to be saved, it cannot be by our own hand. We make bigger messes than we can clean up.

We are more guilty than we could ever merit. We need a savior and here he is. Here he is, friends. Jesus Christ, unstained by sin, in his perfect, obedient life, offered up to the Father the complete obedience that we owe.

And because he had no guilt of his own to bear, he could bear our guilt on that cross, on our behalf. He brought your sin and mine and all who have called on him for mercy.

[29:41] God the Spirit joins us to him through faith. The death he died, he died for us and for our sins, paying those wages for them all to the satisfaction of divine justice and to the praise of divine wisdom and glory and grace.

And so the question is, how do we get that deal? How do we become beneficiaries of this great grace? How does it come to us? Again and again, the scriptures say, repent and believe.

And that's just what this thief does. He repents, that is, he clearly recognizes and denounces his own sin. He turns, as it were, against himself.

In verses 40 and 41, he says, 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. He doesn't run from his sin. He calls it what it is. And he says, I am justly condemned. I am a wicked man. This is the heart of repentance right here.

[31:13] And he believes. Knowing he is condemned and powerless, he casts himself on the mercy of Christ. He said, verse 42, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

That's what's needed. That's what you can do. That's all you can do. And this same promise will be yours.

That you will be with Christ in paradise. You have to believe all the things we've said today. because you won't do any of that unless you believe that you're guilty before God.

Why bother? You won't do that unless you know that you can't earn your way back because then, no, I'm going to rest on my own laurels. I'm not going to rest on Christ.

And you won't do that unless you know that Jesus is willing and able to forgive you because of his cross and his empty tomb. and friends, all of it is true.

[32:22] So won't you call on him? Won't you cry to him for mercy? The scriptures are clear. He will not cast you out even if you're like this guy. Most of you in here I think are better by our standards than this guy whose name we don't know.

Won't you this moment trust the Lord so that he may forgive you and make you his own and teach you his ways and bring heaven towards earth in the redemption of your soul and begin a new work of his own holiness in you.

Won't you? This is the most important thing you can ever do with your life. Cast it on Christ.

And this is the most important place you can ever point your friends and your loved ones to the place of infinite gain. There's wonderful hope in here isn't there?

Hope that even the most hardened heart can see the light. That even the worst kind of criminal can receive pardon.

[33:38] That even the most persistently resistant might finally finally come to repentance. So do not give up hope for your loved ones who aren't interested in Christ.

While they breathe there is still hope even like this criminal to the very, very, very end. But you, if you have not yet placed your life in his nails scarred hands, don't bank on having that deathbed conversion, the wise will know you aren't guaranteed that opportunity.

You might not be conscious on your deathbed. You may not have a deathbed, a sudden accident or something of the like. We are guaranteed only this moment.

be reconciled to God while you still can. It looks like repenting and believing.

It looks like saying, I am a condemned sinner and I have nothing that I can do of my own accord to save myself. Casting yourself on this Christ who came to rescue sinners by his death and resurrection and entrusting yourself to him.

[35:04] The scriptures say, all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. And because of us, because of him.

As we close, I am afraid that when we read these words of Jesus in verse 43, that we'll miss the most important part.

That we'll miss the highest blessing, the chief idea, the glory of this passage, the glory of the cross itself. You see, the best part of verse 43 is not today, you will be with me in paradise.

The best part isn't today, you will be with me in paradise. The best part of this whole passage and of our lives is the part where Jesus says today, you will be with me in paradise.

paradise. See, paradise isn't the thing. Not really. It's only paradise because he is there.

[36:40] The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the lamp is the lamb. God is the prize.

Where we're at with him is not as important as we're with him. Look at what he has shown himself to be, the conqueror of sin and death and the grave, the one who would subject himself to die for his enemies and make them his own.

He is the prize. He is all in all. Yes, we'll go to paradise. Yes, the streets will be paved with gold, but who cares about that because all of it comes from him.

He is the one. Here is the great display of love. there is no greater love than this.  
And he undertook it voluntarily. Behold your Savior's love. He is the prize.  
[38:01] Great and powerful, loving to the uttermost. Paradise, paradise.  
It's paradise because he's there.

He is the prize. And you can have him at no cost. Glory be to Christ.  
Let's pray. Oh, Lord, there is none like you. I pray, Lord, that anyone here who has not looked  
clearly on themselves and seen their need for a Savior would look and see that you by your spirit  
would open their eyes.

And then that they would look and see that your spirit would open their eyes to the massive  
unequaled love of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And cast their selves on him, crying out for mercy and finding him everlasting life. For their good  
and for your glory.

[39:27] And Lord, would you make us messengers of this wonderful offer?  
And Lord, would you glorify yourself in the whole world as you bring  
fallen sinners to yourself?

There will be no end, oh Lord, of our praises to you. Not because of what we can do, not because of  
the strength of our praises, but because of the strength of your redeeming love.

how great are you, oh Lord. We praise you now in the name of Jesus Christ, our King.

Amen. Amen. Let's stand and respond to God's Word.

Let's Word. Amen.