

## ***Two Thieves at the Cross***

The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

Luke 23: 32-43

April 2, 2017

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Pastor Stu and I have been sharing a Lenten sermon series called “Faces at the Cross.” Today we will be focused on the faces of the two criminals who were crucified on either side of Christ. One received justice; the other received grace.

In his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey retells Victor Hugo’s story *Les Miserables*, a story of mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

“Sentenced to nineteen years of hard labor for the crime of stealing bread, Jean Valjean gradually hardened into a tough convict. No one could beat him in a fistfight. When his sentence was up, he wandered for days trying to find a place to stay. Finally, a kindly bishop took him in.

In the middle of the night, Jean Valjean got out of that comfortable bed and ran off with the family silver. The next morning three policemen knocked on the bishop’s door with Valjean in tow. They had caught the convict in flight with the stolen silver, and were ready to throw him in jail for life. The bishop responded in a way that no one, especially Jean Valjean, expected.

“So here you are!” the bishop cried to Valjean. “I’m delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They’re silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?”

The bishop assured the police that the silver was his gift to Valjean. After the police left, the bishop gave the candlesticks to his guest, now speechless and trembling. “Do not forget, do not ever forget, that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man.” The power of the bishop’s act, defying every human instinct for revenge, changed Jean Valjean’s life forever.<sup>i</sup>

Police hand out justice. The bishop gave grace.

C.S.Lewis said that Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions is grace. Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form, or of miracles, or of returning from the dead. “The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law – each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.”<sup>ii</sup>

What is grace? I read a very helpful definition in a devotional article in the *Life Focus New Testament* from John Guest.

“Justice is receiving what you deserve.  
 Mercy is *not* receiving what you deserve.  
 Grace is *receiving* what you *do not* deserve.”<sup>iii</sup>

The story of the two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus is a story about justice and about grace. The two transgressors were receiving justice for the crimes they had committed. Whether robbery, or insurrection, or murder, their punishment was crucifixion.

When the day of execution arrived, they were led out of Jerusalem to the place known as the Skull. In Aramaic, the name of the hill was Golgotha; in Latin it was called *Calvaria*, which is where the name Calvary comes from.

The two criminals struggled to carry the heavy crossbeams up the hill called Golgotha. Simon of Cyrene carried the one for Jesus. At the top, soldiers grabbed their arms and fastened them to the crossbeams by putting large nails through the bones of the wrist. After the crossbeam was hoisted up into place, soldiers grabbed the feet of the criminals and nailed their feet through the arches onto the wooden post. The pain was excruciating, and it was nearly impossible to get the pressure off the chest enough to breathe.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, Jesus cried, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" Even as he himself was being executed, Jesus loved enough to pray for others, that they might be forgiven. Not one of them - soldiers, crowds, priests, or thieves - had asked for forgiveness nor said they were sorry, yet Jesus prayed for their forgiveness, anyway. Jesus asked God, on their behalf, for mercy.

The criminals being crucified on either side of Jesus both heard his prayer for forgiveness, but they had opposite reactions.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Jesus: "Aren't you the Messiah? The Christ? Why don't you save yourself? And while you're at it, save us too! Don't waste your breath on forgiveness! Get us down from here!" In his agony and hopelessness, he was filled with rage and hate. Unable to defend himself or to fight back, he lashed out verbally at everyone around him, cursing them and uttering all kinds of blasphemy.

Two thousand years later, people are still lashing out at God.

- "Why do bad things happen to good people?"
- Why didn't God stop the terrorists from destroying the Twin Towers?
- If Jesus loves us, why does he let little children suffer?
- Why did God let my mother, or your wife, or his nephew, die?
- God, can't you *do* something? Can't you heal them?
- Jesus, If you really are the Son of God, then nothing is impossible for you. *Do Something!*"

The thief on the other side of Jesus had quite a different reaction when he heard Jesus' prayer for forgiveness. You can almost see his path to salvation as you review what he said. For starts, he himself must have felt the fear of God, because he rebuked the other criminal, demanding, "*Don't you fear God?*" Don't you realize who this is, and how great and powerful he is? Show some respect! You and I have committed heinous crimes. We have disobeyed God and broken the laws of the land. We are being punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

The phrase "fear God" does not mean a distrust or terror of God, but rather the reverent awe and worshipful response of faith to the God who reveals himself as Creator, Savior and Judge.<sup>iv</sup>

Somehow the second thief had seen and heard enough of Jesus that day to conclude that Jesus was innocent of any crime. His attitude changed as he saw how Jesus acted during his ordeal. Hearing Jesus' prayer asking the Father to forgive his enemies made a tremendous impression on him. Jesus was *not* a deluded imposter or a con-artist. He was who he claimed to be. Jesus did not deserve to be crucified.

Hanging next to Jesus, the thief was convicted of his own sinfulness. He acknowledged his own wrong-doing and accepted the just consequences. Gradually the Holy Spirit was softening his heart, until in faith he said, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" His words were, in essence, a prayer of faith, confessing his sin, repenting toward God, and declaring his faith in who Jesus is, his belief that Jesus does indeed have a kingdom, and his faith in the hope of eternal life.

He asked, "*Remember me when you come into your kingdom.*"

In humility and faith that is all he asks for. "*Remember me.*"

Jesus answers his simple, primitive statement of faith with an answer to his request that goes beyond his greatest hopes.

"Truly I tell you, *today* you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus, even at the very end of his own life, even while hanging on the cross in unimaginable searing pain and asphyxiation, Jesus is still praying for the forgiveness of others and offering hope and salvation to a dying man.

"Truly I tell you, *Today* you will be with me in paradise."

*Paradise* is a Persian word for garden, similar to the Garden of Eden, symbolizing a place of beauty and delight, the place of the righteous dead.<sup>v</sup>

According to classical Reformed theology, which is firmly grounded in scripture, when the body dies, the soul goes immediately to heaven (also known as paradise) to be with Christ. At the Second Coming, when Christ ushers in His Kingdom, the dead in Christ will rise - they will receive new heavenly bodies, be reunited with their souls, and live forever in the New Heaven and New Earth<sup>vi</sup>.

Jesus said to the thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise." The penitent thief will receive grace: an immediate joyful experience of fellowship with Jesus in paradise. *That is why* Christ suffered and died on the cross. Through his death and resurrection, he purchased forgiveness of sins for all who believe. All penitent believers have the assurance that when they die, they shall go to paradise to be with Him there.<sup>vii</sup>

Justice, Mercy and Grace. The world demands justice; God freely gives Grace.

For example, the Gospel of John records the story of the priests who caught a woman in the act of adultery.<sup>viii</sup> They demanded that Jesus give her justice according to the Law of Moses. The Law stated that persons who committed adultery were to be stoned to death. This woman deserved to be punished for her sin. In a surprise move, Jesus showed her mercy – she did *not* receive what she deserved. He said to the priests, "*Let the one who has never sinned be the first to throw a stone at her.*"

Instead, Jesus gave her *grace*: she received what she did *not* deserve – a second chance to get it right. He said, “Go, and sin no more.”

Justice, Mercy and Grace. The world demands justice; God freely gives Grace.

In the parable of the two lost sons<sup>ix</sup>, the prodigal son demanded his half of the inheritance and then squandered it. When he returned home, his elder brother demanded justice – Sell him as a slave until he repays all the money he lost! Instead the father gave his boy mercy: he did not punish him as his deeds deserved. The father also gave him grace. The son was afraid he would receive what he deserved: punishment and retaliation; instead the prodigal received what he did *not* deserve: a hero’s welcome, new clothes, a big party, and the best steaks in town. Grace.

Jean Valjean *deserved* to go to jail for stealing the bishop’s silver. Instead he received mercy, not punishment. He received grace that he did *not* deserve, when the bishop gave him an additional two silver candlesticks and set him free.

Two thieves on crosses – one rejected Jesus and received what he deserved: *justice* – hopeless, final death; and separation from God forever.

The other received what he did not deserve: *grace* – forgiveness from sin and eternal life with Jesus in paradise.

Faces at the Cross; spectators, weeping women, priests and religious authorities, soldiers, criminals and thieves. Some received mercy, some received justice, some received grace.

What about you? Where do you fit in amongst the crowds at the cross? Do you fear and worship God? Are you running from him? Do you have peace through your faith in Jesus? Are you simply looking the other way? Will you receive Justice? Mercy? Or Grace?

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Philip Yancy, “What’s So Amazing About Grace?”, p. 101-102

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p. 45

<sup>iii</sup> *Life Focus New Testament*, March 3, p. 185

<sup>iv</sup> English Standard Version of the Bible, p. 873; footnote to Proverbs 1:7; see also Deut 6:2,24; Ps 34:9,11; Ps 15:4; Gen 20:11

<sup>v</sup> See p. 1044 in the *Expositors Bible Commentary* on Luke; also a footnote in the ESV for Luke 23:43

<sup>vi</sup> *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, by R.C. Sproul

<sup>vii</sup> See Revelation 2:7

<sup>viii</sup> John 8:1-11

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 15:11-32