

**THIEF WHO GOES INTO PARADISE**  
**Sermon Series: "The Offence of the Cross"**  
**Fourth Sunday Lent --Luke 23: 32-43**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

Did you hear about the prison van that collided with the cement truck? Police report that 16 HARDENED criminals escaped! There were two hardened criminals on either side of Jesus at Calvary; one to the Master's right and one to the Master's left. One went into paradise that day and one went into hell. What was the difference? Actually, the two might have been insurrectionists rather than mere criminals; they might have been Zealots who were harassing and killing the hated Romans. But we know they were deemed threats to Rome because crucifixion was reserved for those who undermined the absolute authority of Rome. Or they were slaves who had rebelled and risen against their masters. Or they were an innocent man like Jesus, accused of being the King of the Jews, and so had to die. Jesus died on a cross as an insurrectionist thief, brigand and highwayman, an attempt to diminish who He is and what HE came to accomplish. The final insult and indignity. The final offence of the cross. The Romans always denigrated their perceived opponents so...

We are examining the offence of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why would God send His Son to die such a horrible death? Why is the cross such an offensive image of graphic violence? How does the cross itself push our own pain buttons on the inside of our own souls and so offend? How does it offend because some who are redeemed by the grace of the cross we may deem to be unworthy? The cross may be a stumbling block for some. The cross may be an "offence" as the Bible says. It may stop people from embracing the cross and receiving the full forgiveness of a merciful Savior. May it not be so for us today...

As I say, two others were led away with Jesus to be put to death. To Calvary and Golgotha they went, to the place of suffering and shame, pain and excruciating death. Doubtless, the criminals were whining and complaining, begging and pleading for their lives. Not Jesus. He said, *"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."* (Luke 23: 34) Forgiveness came from the Savior's lips, even as forgiveness poured out through the Savior's blood. This divine aberration of speaking forgiveness surely must have caught the attention of those present; the criminals and the Romans; the crowd come to mock and taunt. Who is this man who forgives instead of condemns? The rulers of the Jews who had conspired in Jesus' death were all there. They could not even let Him die in peace – *"He saved others, let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, the Chosen One!"* (v. 35) They were relishing their temporary victory with a little too much glee. The Romans also taunted and mocked Him – *"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"* (v. 37) One of the criminals also rebuked Jesus; we will consider him next week. But the one to the other side of Jesus cried out in his pain: *"Do you not fear God, since you are under the sentence of condemnation? We indeed justly...but this man has done nothing wrong."* (vs. 39-40) Then the criminal says: *"Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power."* (v. 42) Jesus, still speaking forgiveness from the cross, says, *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."* (v. 43) So the one criminal goes into paradise with Jesus that very day; the other criminal goes into hell. You know, both are suffering and in extreme pain.

As a Pastor I always say that when we are really going through it, when we are going through physical pain, or emotional pain, or turmoil in our life, or extreme stress, whatever the extreme pain of body, mind or spirit may be, it is then we have a choice. We may flee to Jesus. Or we may turn away. The one criminal ran to Jesus. But the other criminal ran away. Today, you might be struggling with some unresolved pain in your life. Will you run to Jesus today?

There are some people who would be deeply offended that this no good, no account, murderous, highwayman and insurrectionist got a last minute reprieve by the love of God. There's the whole story in the Bible of the workers who are hired at the beginning of the day versus those hired at the very end of the day and everyone is paid exactly the same wage. (Matthew 20: 1-16) Offensive! Someone who has been a good Christian their whole life gets the same reward as someone who makes a deathbed confession. Offensive! God has mercy on whom God has mercy. Offensive! Actually, as a Pastor I really like this. Some person who has never darkened the door of a church, never done anything of worth with their life, in their sleep as they are slipping away, Jesus comes to them, and they say, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He has mercy and forgiveness for them at the very last second and they are in paradise that day. I don't know. I'm not the judge of the quick and the dead, thank God. Never judge someone; never think you know where they will wind up in eternity; never think as a family member that your loved one has gone to hell. In the quiet of a coma Jesus may have come to them and they may run to Him and His cross, embracing it for all eternity. Never underestimate the grace of a loving Savior! Who even speaks forgiveness out of the pain of His cross! The opposite may also be so. I remember a man in a former church who was in the choir every Sunday of his life and in his 80's he found a reason to be offended and would have nothing to do with his church family or worship or Jesus. I am sorry to say, but the saints always persevere to the end. I reached out to him; I brought him communion; I prayed with him. He never reconciled with his church. He couldn't let it go. But I still hold out hope in a merciful God. But this may be offensive to you. One who gets into heaven at the very last second; one who goes into hell after a whole life of service. Offensive, the cross may be.

There is the great story of what I call "The bus from hell" by C.S. Lewis that is in his book, "The Great Divorce". A bus is loaded up with people from hell and they take an excursion to heaven. They get off the bus and are looking around at the people there and immediately they become deeply, deeply offended. Why is THAT guy here? He was a no good, malcontent with anger issues. And that guy? I hated him in my life; he was a liar, a cheat and gossip. And this other guy? Wasn't he a murderer and a highwayman and an insurrectionist who hung on a cross next to Jesus? I am offended, deeply, deeply offended by who is here in heaven. And, O by the way, I am also deeply offended by who is NOT HERE. I don't see people who I deem to be good people and who I think ought to merit by their own good works entry into heaven. I am deeply, deeply offended by this grace and mercy and forgiveness that flows from the cross of Jesus at Calvary. They are so offended they get on the bus and willingly go back to hell, so offended are they by Jesus. There were two criminals on either side of Jesus at Calvary. One who went to paradise and one who went to hell. Which one are we? Amen & Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*