

Sermon outline and notes:

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Luke 23:34, 43 (read 33-43) “Words of Forgiveness & Hope from the Cross”

Intro. The last words spoken by someone before they die are usually important. Speaking can be difficult in the last hours, and last words are carefully chosen. Even so, the last words of Jesus, spoken from the cross, are significant indeed. Here in Luke’s Gospel we have three sayings of Christ from the cross that are found only in his gospel. He knew these sayings were significant, and wanted these words preserved.

As we approach Easter, I wanted to share a brief series of messages on the seven last sayings of Christ from the cross. I will share the first two sayings today, and reflect on the wonderful words of love & hope that He spoke from the cross.

Think of the people gathered at the cross. The religious leaders were there. Though they had just instigated the crucifixion of an innocent man, they were smug in their self-righteousness. They didn’t think they even needed forgiveness. The curious bystanders were there. They had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, and happened upon this scene. They came to offer the Passover lamb, and they were clueless as to fact that the true Lamb of God was shedding His blood & dying for them on the cross. The Roman soldiers were there. They were not near Jerusalem to worship the one true God, but were there to carry out an execution. These men were ungodly, and indifferent to the suffering of three more Jews.

What kinds of people are gathered here today? Could we have some who are self-righteous, who view themselves as good people, not even needing a Savior? Most of us have come to worship. We know we have sinned. We know we need God, & the forgiveness He offers. Perhaps some here today, or watching by television, are more like the Roman soldiers. They don’t have much use for religion, or the things of God. You probably know someone like that. People are indeed different, but one thing we all have in common is this: If Jesus carries His coming we are all going to die. Then what? Well based on these first two sayings of Jesus from the cross, I want to show you how you can be prepared for both life & death. First, I want you to know that:

I. JESUS INTERCEDES FOR OUR FORGIVENESS

Jesus said in v.34, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” Some suggest that He spoke these words even as the soldiers were nailing him to the cross. If not then, He certainly spoke these words shortly after the cross was raised up. In these words we see that Jesus is our great High Priest. He not only offers Himself as the supreme sacrifice for sin, but as a Priest, He intercedes on behalf of sins. By offering this prayer Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isa. 53:12 “Yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Jesus is indeed the friend of sinners.

Now let’s take a closer look at this intercessory prayer of Jesus. First, consider with me:

A. The Substance of His Request - There is one primary request. Jesus asks the Father in heaven to “forgive them.” He means exactly that. We must not water down the meaning. The word (*aphiemi*) literally means “to send away.” It is the picture of God removing our sins from

us, and sending them far away.

What a contrast between Jesus and his tormentors. They were angry & vengeful, but He was not even angry, though He was suffering indescribable agonies. They hurled words of abuse. Jesus spoke words of love & forgiveness. He was simply practicing what He had preached in Luke 6:27-28, “Love your enemies,... bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.”

Stephen followed our Lord’s example when he was being stoned as the first Christian martyr. He prayed, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” He was in essence asking God to forgive them. What mercy, love, & grace!

Surely one application that we should make is the fact that the followers of Christ are to be a forgiving people. He who insisted so strongly that His followers must forgive every debtor, and that they must even love their enemies, exemplified this virtue Himself.

B. The Basis of His Request – Christ prayed for their forgiveness for at least 2 reasons, one of which was stated in our text. First, He prayed for their forgiveness, “for they do not know what they do.” This certainly included the Roman soldiers. They didn’t realize what they were doing. They were just following orders. They knew little of the Jewish Scriptures, including the very prophecies that they were fulfilling. If they had known that Jesus was the Son of God, they would not have crucified Him. Some of the bystanders who mocked Him were just blindly following others. But even the enemies of Jesus were so blinded by their hatred & emotions that they didn’t know what they were doing. So the prayer of forgiveness could have even included them. Yet none were so entirely blind or ignorant that they had no sin. So even though none of these reasons provide an excuse *deserving* of forgiveness, they did move the compassionate heart of Jesus to *ask* for forgiveness on their behalf.

The second basis for His request is the fact that at that very moment, Christ was suffering & dying on the cross to make forgiveness possible. His impending death would fully pay the penalty of sin. He knew that “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).

So Jesus has already done everything that needs to be done to provide forgiveness of your sins. And if you are not yet a Christian, He continues His work of intercession, praying that you will receive the forgiveness that He offers. If some ungodly Roman soldiers could be forgiven, who had just *crucified* Jesus, I’m sure you can be forgiven, not matter what you have done.

So in the first saying of Jesus from the cross, we see that Jesus offers forgiveness to all. In His next saying we are going to see that another word of hope. In v.43 we’re going to see that:

II. JESUS OFFERS PARADISE TO ALL

Let’s get the background of what happened. Two thieves who were crucified with Him. One had just reviled Jesus, like so many were doing in the crowd that day. But as the other thief was nearing death, he defended Jesus, and rebuked the other thief for reviling Jesus. He said in v.41, “this Man has done nothing wrong.” In addition to Pilate, his wife, & Judas, we have one more witness to the fact that Jesus did not die for any sin He had committed. He was the innocent Son of God who died for the sins of others. Then he turned to Jesus and asked in v.42, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

All of heaven must have come to a hush to hear how Jesus would respond. We see His reply in v.43, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” What wonderful words of hope to a dying, sinful man! These were words that caused the angels of heaven to

rejoice! Now let's consider first of all:

A. The Meaning of Paradise – Again, Jesus said, “today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Jesus did not simply promise that he would be remembered in a future Messianic kingdom, but He promised far more. He promised “paradise.” That word was borrowed from the Persian language. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament that same word was used over and over to refer to the Garden of Eden. But as we move into the New Testament, we move from the earthly analogy to the heavenly reality of an eternal paradise. So when Jesus spoke of paradise, he spoke of heaven. It is as simple as that. The fact that “heaven” and “Paradise” are simply different words that indicate the same place is clear from 2 Cor. 12:4, where it says “he was caught up into Paradise.” In the book of Revelation paradise is definitely another term for heaven. For example, Rev. 2:7 refers to “the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.” Man lost the paradise of Eden when he fell into sin, and Christ promises a better paradise.

One reason why heaven will be a true paradise is because of what we read here in v.43. Jesus promises “you will be *with Me* in Paradise” [emphasis added]. Paul likewise said to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). What I look forward to most of all about heaven is to be with Jesus!

Let's suppose you have a loved one you haven't seen in a long, long time. You get the word they have been found and arrangement has been made to meet them in the White House. You go to the White House and walk into the East Room. When you walk in, there's your loved one you haven't seen in years! What are you going to do? Are you going to walk in and say, “O, my, what a beautiful chandelier that is.” Or, “My, my, what a beautiful arrangement of flowers that is over there.” I don't think you'll do that. I have a feeling you'll go over to that loved one and say, “It's so wonderful to see you again,” and you are going to give them a big hug.

Well, our heavenly paradise will be beautiful. I hear of streets of gold, gates of pearl, walls of jasper, & a beautiful river of life? But the sweetest thing about heaven to me is that Jesus is going to be there.¹

Is a heavenly paradise your destiny? Of course the Bible speaks of a place that is the extreme opposite of paradise, a place where there will be weeping & gnashing of teeth. Where will you go when you die? Don't you want to go to paradise? Surely you do. So let's see next:

B. The Means of Entering Paradise – The thief was assured that He would go to a heavenly paradise. Here in this text he shows us the way by his own actions. He could not get there by good works, for he had none. He could not get there by being baptized, or joining a church. He did not have that opportunity. He could not earn paradise by donating money for God's work. He had none. How, then, can we go to paradise? First:

1. Confess Your Sins – This thief acknowledged his sin & guilt. In v.41 he said that he & the other thief had been crucified justly, “for we receive the due reward of our deeds.” He realized that it was his sin that had nailed him to the cross. In fact, the charge against him was nailed over his head for all to see. He acknowledged that he was getting what he deserved. He did not blame others, but took responsibility for his own actions. Matthew tells us that these men were robbers (*lestes*, Mt. 27:38). The word “robber” means “one who robs with violence.” That is, these men were not just petty thieves; they were armed robbers, who would kill if necessary. Jesus used that same word in Luke 22:52 when He said, “Have you come out, as against a

¹ Told by Jerry Vines.

robber, with swords and clubs?” Armed robbers need to be arrested by armed officers. So this thief knew he was a very sinful man. He had run with the wrong crowd, and did some very bad things. He may have even murdered someone. Yet the reason why this thief could be saved was because he acknowledged & confessed his sin & guilt.

This is one of the first steps in salvation. The thing that keeps many out of heaven is not their sin, but their failure to acknowledge their sin, and seek forgiveness from the only One who can forgive sin! The self-righteous Pharisees at the cross were not saved, because they did not confess or acknowledge their sin. But if you are going to be saved and forgiven, you must be like the second thief, and acknowledge your guilt, and need of forgiveness.

Once you confess your sins & need of forgiveness, then the second step is to:

2. Trust in Jesus – This man who was offered Paradise clearly expressed faith in Jesus. However, he did not believe in Jesus at first. When you compare the Gospel accounts, you realize that at first both robbers scoffed. They blasphemed the Holy One. They repeated the words and sentiments of the rulers (see Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32). But during the six hours that they were on the cross, a tremendous transformation took place. He went from unbelief to faith. Perhaps one cause of his change of attitude was the fact that he was getting closer to death. He was loosing his life’s blood. His breathing became more labored. You may not be afraid of death now, but let the chilly fingers of death begin to lay hold of you, and you will become more concerned. But I also believe that there must have been something about Jesus, and the events surrounding His death, that cause him to repent & change his mind. What could it have been?

I’m sure he was touched by the words of Jesus in v.34, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” He was stunned by a prayer like that. He had never heard a man pray like that. He noticed that He did not defend Himself, and revile back when He was reviled. Instead, He suffered silently. He manifested a heart of peace as He faced death. The thief also saw the inscription that was nailed over the head of Jesus. We see it in v.38, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” He heard some from the crowd mockingly say, “If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him” (Matthew 27:42). But now, instead of agreeing with their unbelief, he began to see Jesus in a different light. He came to believe that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, whom God sent to reign on the throne of David. He heard some in the crowd admit, “he saved others....” Soon, a glimmer of hope rose in his heart. He began to believe that Jesus could save him! As a result, he turned to Jesus & said, “Lord,² remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” That was an expression of his faith. Outwardly, Jesus never looked less like a king than He did at this moment. His throne was a cross, His diadem was a crown of thorns, His court was a mob of mockers. Yet this dying thief, seeing with the eyes of faith, recognized this One as being, not just a king, but the Messiah, the King of Kings.

Let me tell you how else his faith was great. He must have believed that Jesus would overcome death. Otherwise, how would Jesus be able to remember him in a future kingdom? He also must have believed that some day He come back to claim His earthly kingdom. Notice that he used the words “*come* into Your kingdom” [emphasis added].

This thief on the cross was probably a Jew. He must have known the story of Joseph. When Joseph was in an Egyptian prison, he favorably interpreted a dream for Pharaoh’s chief butler. He predicted that he would be delivered from prison, & restored to his old job. Then Joseph said in Genesis 40:14, “But remember me when it is well with you, and please show

² Some of our best Greek manuscripts indicate that in v.42 he called Him "Jesus" rather than "Lord." "Jesus" means, "the LORD saves." He believed that Jesus was true to the meaning of His name.

kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house.” Likewise, this thief asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus would be delivered from the grave, and enter into His kingdom. He hoped that Jesus would show kindness to him, and deliver him some day from the grave.

This thief is the classic illustration of Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” He did not deserve salvation and he could not earn it. All he had was God’s grace, and his faith. Luke adds this story to demonstrate that salvation is not in the merit of man. It is in the mercy of God. It is not in the goodness of man. It is in the grace of God. If you are going to go to paradise some day, you have to acknowledge that you are a sinner, and you can’t save yourself. Trust in Jesus. He can save you!

Next, notice with me:

C. The Assurance of Paradise – In v.43 that Jesus began by saying, “Assuredly....” The word “assuredly” is the Greek word *amen*. It is a word of affirmation, a word that guarantees the truth of what is being said. The only way that thief had of being sure he was going to heaven was because Jesus said that he would. His salvation was secure, guaranteed by the Word of Jesus Christ.

Wednesday night I shared the gospel with Matt Rowsey. When I finished, I asked him, “Where will you go when you die some day?” He thought for a moment, and said, “Heaven.” On what basis did he have that hope? Surely it was because Jesus died for his sins, and promised eternal life. And when Jesus makes a promise, you can be sure that it will come to pass.

May I say to you that the only way you and I can know for sure that we are going to heaven is what God says in His word. 1 John 5:13 says, “These things I have written unto you, that you might know that you have eternal life.” We can know for sure, because our salvation rests upon the sure Word of God.

Finally, I offer one more word of hope. Here in the words of Jesus we also see:

D. The Moment We Will Enter Paradise – This is indicated in our text. Jesus said, “*today* you will be with Me in Paradise” [emphasis added]. The man had asked for a blessing that he assumed would be in the remote future. Instead, he receives a promise pertaining to that very day. He hears Jesus say that wonderful word, “Today.”

I take you back in time now to the hill of Calvary, of which we have been speaking. Jesus has died. The sun is starting to go down in the west. The repentant thief is writhing in mortal agony; the wild shouts of the fierce mob are growing faint. The soldiers come; his legs are broken to hasten death. Before long, there hangs a relaxed corpse. Where is his spirit? That very day he went to paradise, where one pierced hand took another pierced hand and Jesus welcomed him to paradise. A new face appeared before the throne of God. Another sinner was redeemed from earth! There in the paradise of God he will never again sin, never again experience pain, and never again die!

This promise that paradise begins the very day you die means there is no purgatory or soul-sleep when you die. The moment you die, you go to be with the Lord in a heavenly paradise. There you will be in the presence of our Savior.

Conclusion: Just like those thieves, you are going to die. It could be today. For most of us, it will likely be years from now. But when you die, you are going to spend eternity with one of those

thieves. One went to paradise. The other went to hell. The difference is how they responded to Jesus. You understand that the thief who was lost did not go to hell primarily for what he did. The other thief committed the same crimes. In the final analysis He went to hell because of what he *did not do*. He did not confess his sins, & place his faith in Jesus as Savior.

Today, we have heard the first two sayings of Jesus from the cross. We heard that Jesus has a compassionate heart of love for sinners. He's praying for you that you would receive the forgiveness that He offers. Man lost paradise because he ate from a forbidden tree. Paradise can be regained because Jesus died for us on a cross made from a tree. The Cross is indeed the "tree of life." You can be sure of going to a heavenly paradise some day by honestly confessing your sins to God, and trusting in His Son Jesus as Savior. Just as the thief turned to Jesus & called upon Him to save him, even so call upon the Lord in prayer, and He will save you today!

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); James Merritt (notes & excerpts from his sermon on v.43); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on Luke 23:39-46 dated 11/02/97; Warren W. Wiersbe, "*Be*" Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Luke* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).