

Written Copy: Luke 23:39-43 “Today, You Will Be With Me in Paradise?”

Palm Sunday (Sunday of the Passion)

Sunday, April 10th, 2022

Text: Luke 23:39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The text's intent

All mankind has turned away from the King who rode into Jerusalem to God's Lamb of sacrifice. His disciples are in hiding. The people who welcomed Him gaze upon the sight of His bloody suffering and dying without any sorrow or emotion. The Sanhedrin, the Roman Soldiers, the sign Pilate affixed to His cross, and one of the thieves all mock, scorn, and speak evil of Him even as He petitions the Father to forgive all who sent Him to the cross. And we know that the Father always hears the Son's petitions and prayer. But the other criminal, at the sight of Jesus' innocent suffering and dying is moved in his own heart to confess his own sins, and appeal to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. Through the power of faith the truth that Jesus came to reveal, that He is the King of Kings who brings His reign and rule to all mankind through His innocent sacrifice is revealed to this criminal. He asks for undeserved mercy that Jesus simply "remember him" when He assumes His reign and rule over all things. Jesus responds granting Him through faith what His statement of absolution and what His suffering and dying earns for all, a place with Him in eternal paradise.

Focus Statement:

Jesus on the cross, as soon as the drive the nails and suspend Him in the air, petitions the Father to forgive them, them being all those who sent Him to be crucified. This included the Jews, the Romans, as well as all mankind whose sins are the reason the King of Kings rode into Jerusalem to be the Lamb of Sacrifice. That forgiveness He is earning on the cross is universal for all people, but it gets applied specifically by faith to the thief who is moved to confess his sin in the light of Jesus innocent suffering in his place. By the faith granted to him also comes the application of that universal atonement. Just as with the thief so to for all who believe. To them is given the gift of eternal paradise.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Some Christians wonder how it can be that this thief on the cross goes to be with Jesus in paradise without first be baptized or formally confessing his faith. And how is it that "Today" he will be with Jesus in Paradise, if Paradise is Eternal Life? And who is it that Jesus is petitioning the Father for forgiveness?

What the hearer should do as a result:

See the reaction of the unbelieving world as that of the crowd, the Sanhedrin, and the soldiers who without faith cannot see what Jesus has done. See the gift of absolution given and strengthened as they contemplate by faith Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. Await the mystery of Paradise granted to the thief and us "today" as we leave the world of time behind and enter into eternity with Jesus in His real presence.

Subject Sentence: Faith delivers universal atonement and Paradise

Introduction: Problems with the Text

As we read through the Gospel Lesson was there anything that made you pause, or gave you any spiritual consternation? If you've ever had discussions with Christians who don't share our beliefs about baptism having the power to save, and being a necessity in the Christian life, perhaps they have brought to your attention these verses with the criminal hanging on the cross with Jesus. Here is a man who was not baptized, nor for that matter ever set his foot inside a worship service. And yet Jesus is welcoming him into eternal paradise. Citing these verses, they make the argument since he didn't have to worry about these things, then why should I? If a criminal who is justly deserving of the death penalty can get in, surely I, who am not a criminal sentenced to death as he was, can be welcomed in too. Surely, I don't need baptism to be saved. Surely, I don't need to sacrifice my Sunday morning sitting through a boring worship service to be a member of God's kingdom when I could be out enjoying my well-deserved day off.

Well that's one problem. The other problem Christians have with these verses is what Jesus promises this unbaptized criminal, **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”** We teach that when we die our soul goes to be with Jesus in His presence while our bodies are buried in the ground to decay until that day in the future when Jesus returns in all His glory: Resurrection Day. On that day we teach, believe, and confess, that we will, with glorified bodies and souls, enjoy eternal Paradise. So how is it that Jesus can say to this criminal that he will enjoy that “today”?

Well there is an easy answer: Jesus is God, and He can do whatever He wants. He can make an exception for the criminal. But if that's the case how can those unbaptized un-churched people be sure that He'll make an exception for them? Making an exception means that's not how things normally go. And if salvation and eternal life is given through exceptions, then how can you be sure He will make an exception for you? There are better answers to the problems to be found in our text and in Scripture.

The Solution Concerning the Unbaptized Criminal

Luke 23:33-34a ³³ **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.** ³⁴ **And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

Let's start with Jesus first word from the cross, a prayerful petition lifted to the Father even as they had nailed Him to that cross and lifted Him up in the air. The pain in His hands and feet would've been excruciating. Hanging as He was, in order to draw a breath; He would need to push His body up in order to expand His lungs. He had already lost a lot of blood and was thirsty. His leg muscles would soon be prone to cramping and fatigue as they worked to push His body up. And as He pushed up His back stripped raw with open sores would rub against the unfinished splintery wood from which the cross was made. The combined pain is beyond my ability to fully imagine. Crucifixion brought a slow and painful death as the leg muscles could no longer push the body up to take in breath and the

crucified died of asphyxiation. The point here is that every word Jesus saw fit to say from the cross cost His body dearly and should be seen by us as being very important.

Jesus says, “forgive them”. Forgive who? Well the first answer should be those who just nailed Him to the cross and lifted Him up. But who exactly are the ones that “**know not what they do**”? That would include all who played a part in His being unjustly charged of a crime He did not commit and being sentenced to death. That would include the Sanhedrin who wanted Him to die because He declared the truth about who He was: The Son of God who they will one day see coming again from the right hand of the Father. It would include Pilate who was supposed to be the arbitrator of justice, convicting the guilty and releasing the innocent, yet failed with Jesus. When Jesus offered to explain the truth of who He was and why He came Pilate refused to hear it. It would include the Roman soldiers who enthusiastically did their part whipping Him and torturing Him. It would include all those who stood by gazing at Him upon the cross with morbid fascination. It would include all those Jews and Gentiles who mocked Him and derided Him even as He was suffering in their place. But what about all of humanity that doesn’t believe in Him? What about we who do? It is because of all of our sin that it was necessary for Him to suffer and die. As you and I continue to disobey God do we forget about the suffering that our disobedience caused Jesus? Are we not also those who **know not what they do**”?

We are, and all humanity is too. Jesus’ first word from the cross is the pronouncement of universal atonement for all humankind. It is a prayerful petition lifted to the Father, who always listens to His much loved and obedient Son. Jesus not only asked for forgiveness for all of humanity, He will go on to earn it for them all through His suffering, death, and resurrection. Because of this there is no reason that any person should spend eternity suffering in hell.

Yet we are told many will eternally suffer even though Jesus paid for their sins. Why is that? **John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.** Because just like the Jews, the Romans, and even the one criminal on the cross who spent his precious breath speaking evil of Jesus, many today refuse to believe in Him as the only Son of God who suffered and gave His life for them. That universal atonement, that Gospel statement that says “In Christ you are forgiven of all your sins” must be delivered to each personally by faith. And in your life and mine that gift of faith was given in our baptism and renewed and strengthened through the Gospel Message preached, read, and sung, and given to us in the Lord’s Supper.

Well and good, but what about the unbaptized and unchurched criminal? He saw Jesus' innocent suffering and death firsthand. And He was moved to see and compare his own sentence of death, which he earned and deserved. He was convicted of who he really was, a poor miserable sinner. Hanging there on the cross he not only voiced his sinfulness but admonished the other criminal for failing to recognize his. Then with faith that came from Jesus first word from the cross, that Gospel proclamation petitioning the Father to forgive him, he turned to Jesus begging for His mercy and grace. And he received that wonderful forgiveness and pardon personally into his soul through the very words of Christ that spoke to him. He received forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life by being in the very presence of Christ, who gave to him the same gifts of forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life that you and I received from the very presence of His Spirit in the waters of our baptism.

The Solution to "Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise"

Luke 23:32-33 ⁴² **And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** ⁴³ **And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."**

So then, what about Jesus' statement "**Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise**"? A better way for us to understand what people in those days meant by "God's Kingdom" is to think of God's reign and rule. This criminal had faith in Christ because Jesus' Spirit had come to reign and rule in his heart and mind. Jesus has already done more than "remember him", He delivered that kingdom to him personally. And with that gift of faith the criminal has received all that comes with it: including eternal life just as you and I have.

So what is Paradise? Paradise is being in the real presence of Jesus. We have a foretaste of it now through the Word and Sacraments as we are welcomed into the Real Presence of Christ. We will have that Paradise in an even greater fashion when our souls leave our body in death and go to be in the Real Presence of Jesus in Heaven. But the most complete fulfillment of this will be when we get to live body and soul in the Real Presence of our Savior in Life Everlasting. That complete fulfillment most accurately reflects the word that is translated into English as "Paradise". It comes from a word the Jewish exiles picked up from the Babylonians during captivity. They used it to describe a beautiful garden where one could find relaxation, plenty of food, and enjoyment. That fits very well with what we are told in Scripture that Eternal Life will be: a return to the Garden of Eden, heaven and earth, plants and animals, and humankind restored to their original perfection.

But that arrives on the Last Day, and that Last Day has not come upon us yet. So how is it that Jesus could tell the criminal that he would be there today? Was He only referencing the criminal's soul being with Him in heaven to await the Last Day? Perhaps. But consider too that when our soul leaves the body to be with Jesus, we leave the world of time behind. Time is an earthly construct that does not apply in heaven. The Bible touches on this in **2 Peter 3:8 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.** For our ascended Lord at the right hand of the Father time as we mark it here on earth has no meaning. As we live out our lives here on earth day by day marching toward that Last Day, our loved ones whose souls have departed to be with Jesus are not experiencing the same thing. They are not marking the weeks and the days and the hours as we are. We have no concept of what being outside of time would be like. But if death means time has no meaning for us, could it be that when our soul leaves our body it will be just like being transported to that Last Day? It's called the Last Day because when it arrives there will be no more days as there have been on this earth. Time as we know it will end. No matter whether we die beforehand, or are alive when Jesus returns, all souls will meet on that day, Resurrection Day, when Christ will make us all ready body and soul to live forever in that Eternal Paradise.

Conclusion

So as we consider the criminal and his receiving the gift of grace outside of baptism, these verses really don't speak against our faith in baptism as a means of grace. In your baptism you received that grace through the faith given when Christ's Spirit brought His Real Presence to you through baptismal waters. The criminal received that same gift of grace by the faith given when Christ reached out and made personal contact with Him through His Real Presence and words on the cross. And what about **Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise**? If Paradise is defined as being in the presence of Jesus, you and I through His Real Presence in Word and Sacrament have a foretaste of that Paradise here today. That's a pretty good reason to take an hour or two out of your Sunday morning to come to worship, as well as join us for all the Holy Week Services on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. Through them your Lord and Savior strengthens your faith so that you too will stand before Him on that Last Day ready to enter the Garden of Eternal Paradise. And when your soul does depart from your body to go to be with Jesus, will it be like being transported to our Last Day entrance into that Eternal Garden? I can't say for sure. I haven't been there yet. But Jesus has. I trust in His promise that he made to that criminal, which He also made to me, and is making to you. Paradise is real and it's yours by His gift of grace through faith. Amen.