

What We Can Learn from Thieves on a Cross

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43

November 24, 2019

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Can you imagine someone wearing a necklace with an electric chair pendent? A murderer is strapped to the electric chair with electrodes attached to his body. Inconceivable, right? No one would wear such an offensive piece of jewelry, right?

Or can you imagine someone placing a painting in their home of a gurney with an hardened criminal strapped to it? A man in a white coat leans towards him with a syringe the contents of which will render him lifeless. Again inconceivable, right? No one would place such an offensive painting in their home.

Forms of execution are not art for us. They do not depict what is redemptive. They do not command respect or inspire devotion.

The same was true of a cross in the day of Jesus. It was not jewelry. It was not art. Crucifixion was common and shameful, a harsh reminder of the penalty for wrongdoing. The Roman government conveyed its message clearly: you had better stay in line, or this could happen to you. The challenge for Luke, then, was to present the crucifixion of Jesus as an unfolding of the work of God, something that was redemptive, an event that did command respect and inspire devotion. Luke and the other gospel writers met this challenge, and the necklaces we wear and the art we hang in our homes are proof.

Modern scholarship is certain that Mark was the first gospel to be written. It is not placed first in the New Testament for a reason, but it was the first written. Those who compiled the books of the Bible believed that Matthew was a better bridge from the Old Testament message to the New Testament message, so they placed it first instead of Mark. Today scholars believe Luke had access to Mark when Luke wrote his own account of the life and death of Jesus. When you place Luke and Mark side-by-side, you see that Luke's account of the

crucifixion is very similar to Mark's account. However, it is different in several ways, and we have to assume Luke had a reason for the changes he made. For example, Luke omits the name Golgotha, simply calling the place of the crucifixion The Skull. Luke omits the wine mixed with myrrh. He omits Mark's note about the third hour, the passersby shaking their heads, and a few other details.

Some items, on the other hand, Luke added to the story. They are uniquely Lukan. This is the one I find particularly interesting. Luke is the only gospel writer to record the conversation between Jesus and the two thieves who were also being crucified that day. I have to wonder why Luke included this. Did he see something in that conversation he thought was important? Did Luke believe we could learn something from thieves on a cross? I think so.

Neither Luke nor the other gospel writers name the two thieves. Tradition does. The one to speak first, the one who derided Jesus, is given the name Gestas. The second, the one known today as the penitent thief, is given the name Dismas, known in the Catholic Church as St. Dismas. My translation uses the more generic word "criminals" to describe these two men. We have commonly called them thieves, and they likely were. They probably belonged to one of the many roaming, marauding bands of thieves. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan. He fell among thieves, was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. These two criminals likely belonged to a similar band of thieves.

"Are you not the Messiah?" the first thief asked Jesus. Then he added, "Save yourself and us!"

Let me unpackage some of this. Luke uses a word here that tells us a lot about this first thief. My translation says that he "kept deriding" Jesus. The Greek word that is translated "deriding" is *blasphemeo*. We get the word "blasphemy" from it. He *kept* deriding Jesus. Over and over he said, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" The word "deriding" actually seems to be a bit mild to me. Maybe "slander" is a more appropriate word. Perhaps "mocked" or "ridiculed." The first thief just joined in with the crowds that had gathered. They scoffed at Jesus saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" He sided with the soldiers who also mocked

Jesus. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Everybody else was doing it, so he cynically joined in.

In my mind, I see a lot of angry laughing and spiteful knee slapping, men passing around skins of wine, hatred filling the air.

"That'll teach 'em. Thieves. Trouble makers. You should have stayed in line!"

What we can learn from the first thief on the cross? Cynicism is no way to relate to God. Cynicism is not productive. It is not redemptive.

A psychiatrist, Dr. Neel Burton, offers an interesting insight into cynics. He says that cynics are the first to suffer from their own cynicism. They miss out on important things like friendship and love, things that make life enjoyable. He says that cynicism predisposes us to pessimism and then to depression. "Their cynicism," he writes, "seems self-fulfilling: by always assuming the worst about everyone, they tend to bring it out, and not least, perhaps, in themselves." (*Psychology Today*, "Are You Too Cynical?" September 7, 2018)

Because of his cynicism, do you see what the first thief missed? He actually asked for salvation, but he didn't really mean it. Save yourself and us, he said, but it was derision, slander, an expression of his cynicism. How tragic! He was dying next to Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, and he missed out on salvation. He chose to die in bitter cynicism a few feet away from the One who could have saved him.

"Do you not fear God," the second thief rebuked him, "since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" He then added something important. He reminded the first thief, "We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Notice he knew Jesus' name. These are the most important words that man ever spoke: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." I don't know if you've ever noticed, but those two words "remember me" are important throughout the Old Testament. When

Joseph was in prison, he predicted that his fellow prisoner, Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, would be released in three days. "Remember me when it is well with you," Joseph requested. Hannah prayed to God, "Remember me." So did Nehemiah, Job, the psalmist, and Jeremiah. Remember me.

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

Paradise was originally a garden. The word came to be used of the Garden of Eden, literally the Garden of Delight. Eventually it described the place of the blessed dead. In a hot, arid climate, the blessed dead enjoyed a lush garden with streams and verdant vegetation. Paradise.

What we can learn from the second thief on the cross? Contrition is an appropriate way to relate to God. Contrition is always productive. Contrition before God is always redemptive.

Because of his contrition, he received what the first thief did not. He too asked for salvation, remember me, and he meant it. From a deep place in his soul, he meant it. Despite the shameful circumstances, he meant it. He too was dying next to Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, and he found what he needed most. He chose to die in utter contrition a few feet away from the One who could save him. That made all the difference.

Two thieves. Each dying upon a cross. Luke saw two different lessons there. So he alone preserved this conversation for us. Thank you, Luke! One man joined the crowds and scoffed at Jesus. The other man saw an unfolding of the work of God, something that was redemptive, an event that commanded respect and inspired devotion. So he responded differently. He responded with contrition. These thieves dying upon a cross are trying to teach us something. Which will you listen to?

Closing Prayer

Help us to mean it, Lord. When we pray "remember me," may it come from a deep place in our soul. Amen.