

THE TWO THIEVES

LUKE 23:32-43

INTRO: *Have you ever been offended by the truth? The message of what Jesus did this week – Holy Week – and why He did it offends many people. William Willimon, a Methodist bishop, is a gifted speaker and writer. He tells about a time he attended a funeral service for a man named Joe. A rustic, red-necked, fire and brimstone preacher officiated at Joe’s service. “It’s too late for Joe,” the preacher yelled. “But it ain’t too late for you! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day of decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!” Willimon says that it was one of the harshest, crudest, most non-comforting funeral messages he had ever heard. On the way home from the service, he said to his wife, “I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap and inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that!” His wife readily agreed that it was tacky and callous. “Of course,” she added, “the worst part of all is that it was true.”*

The message about Jesus correctly understood can offend you, but it’s the truth. The cross of Jesus – once you correctly understand why He died - can offend you, but it’s the truth. We’ve been considering different people who turn up prominently during what Christians call Holy Week – Palm Sunday (today) through Easter (next Sunday). That week is also often referred to as the passion of Christ because it tells the story of Jesus from his triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem (today), to the Last Supper with his disciples (Thursday), to the crucifixion (Friday) and then to His resurrection from the dead (next Sunday). Therefore, these people we’re looking at we call, simply, “passion personalities.” Today, I want to reflect with you on the two men who were crucified with Jesus. Let’s read about them. **READ, p. 1046.**

We can only imagine the scene that we just read about. Probably Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* comes closest to giving us a visual picture of how horrible it must have been. Jesus has been nailed to a cross after suffering a terrible beating by Roman soldiers. He is slowly but surely dying. The smell of death is heavy in the air. The scene is full of excruciating pain, violent hatred and monumental evil. But that isn’t all. There’s also the presence of amazing love, profound hope and remarkable beauty. In a scene that reeks of death, there is so much about life.

Why, again, are these two men hanging on their own crosses next to Jesus? The Bible says they were crooks. Probably, they were crucified with Jesus as yet another way to humiliate Him and His followers. Maybe the Romans thought having Jesus associated with common criminals in His death was somehow ironically funny. But the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, predicted such a scene 700 years before it actually happened. He says about the coming Messiah, “...he exposed himself to death. He was counted among the rebels. He bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels.” (Isaiah 53:12 NLT) As I think about

these two men and their conversation with Jesus on that awful day, three simple truths come to mind. First, there's...

A REMINDER THAT MANY REJECT JESUS.

The scene at the cross was profoundly ugly. The Jewish leaders were mocking Jesus as He died. So were the Romans soldiers. And one of these two men being crucified next to Jesus joined in on the scorn and derision. "One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, 'So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!'" (Luke 23:39 NLT) You wonder what he saw in Jesus as he hung on a cross next to Him. Apparently, all he saw was a broken, defeated man who claimed to be someone He wasn't. A fake. A phony. A fraud. Someone just too good to be true.

Who do you see when you look at Jesus? It's sad but true that many people still reject Jesus as effectively as did the first thief. Rejection doesn't have to be bitter, hostile or ugly to be rejection. In fact, most people who reject Jesus today are quite nice and civil about their rejection. They don't say mean things about Jesus. They give Him credit for being a good man who got a raw deal. They wince when they hear a description of the physical suffering endured during a crucifixion. They might well feel sorry for Jesus. The fact remains, however, that they really don't take Jesus very seriously. Their rejection is basically manifested through indifference to Jesus. Make no mistake. If you are indifferent to Jesus, it's rejection all the same.

There are many ways to reject Jesus. First, many people reject Jesus by rejecting His claim to exclusivity. Jesus made it very clear that He believed a relationship with Him was the only way to ever have a relationship with God. Jesus is the One who said, "... 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.'" (John 14:6 NLT) You want to admire and respect Jesus as a great religious leader, but you simply can't accept that every person must go through Jesus to get to heaven or to find God. It sounds so intolerant, restricted and unbelievably narrow. But that's central to how Jesus understands Himself. When you reject Jesus' exclusivity, you reject Jesus.

Second, many people reject Jesus by rejecting the idea that Jesus died on the cross to pay for their sins. You can feel deep compassion for Jesus' suffering and you can be outraged by the injustice He suffered, but still think it absurd that this was God's plan to save you from hell. Beside you find such a notion offensive. You say to yourself, "I'm so morally hopeless, that someone had to die in my place? Give me a break. I don't think so!" Such a concept contradicts your deeply held assumption that if you can just do more good things than bad things in life, God will have no choice but to welcome you at heaven's gate when you die. When you reject the reason why Jesus died, you reject Jesus.

Third, many people reject Jesus by minimizing what Jesus did at the cross. The one thief is an example of this kind of rejection. He offers up a kind of taunt hoping that Jesus can do something incredible to get him off. “Jesus, just do some kind of super miracle and get me out of here, will ya?!” he seems to say. Apparently, Jesus’ sole purpose was to get this man rescued from very uncomfortable circumstances. When you see Jesus simply as a way to get to heaven and avoid hell, you demonstrate this same kind of rejection. You want all the blessings of a relationship with Jesus – sins forgiven, peace provided, power to overcome life’s obstacles, eternal life in heaven – but you have no desire to become like Jesus in your character or serve the interests of His Kingdom. That would require radical change and you don’t really want to change. Instead, you want a God who overlooks your sin and exists to meet your needs.

Frankly, many so-called Christians are guilty of this kind of rejection – minimizing what Jesus did at the cross. You want Jesus as your Savior, but you don’t submit to Him as your Lord. You want to feel spiritual, but you don’t find out how He has gifted you and actually serve Him in some way. You want Him to bless you financially, but you don’t tithe. You want meaningful relationships with other followers of Jesus, but you don’t join a Sunday School class or a small group. You think the Bible is God’s Word, but you don’t read it. You want everyone to go to heaven, but you don’t pray for anyone by name or build a relationship with a lost person. I love that old hymn, “Just as I am without one plea....” It’s the only way to come to Jesus – just as I am. But it’s easy for me to forget that Jesus didn’t die on the cross so I can just stay the way I am. He wants me to become like Him and find ways to serve His Kingdom. That’s why He died. That’s what the cross is all about. If I’m finding ways to “stiff-arm” Jesus in terms of what He wants to do in me or through me, I am rejecting Him. The first thief is a reminder that many people still reject Jesus. Secondly, there’s here...

A REMINDER OF HOW ALL MUST COME TO JESUS.

That’s the second thief. What did he see when he looked at Jesus? He saw Jesus in a very different way than his accomplice. Here’s a man – Jesus -- suffering horrendous physical pain but offering up a prayer of forgiveness for those tormenting Him. Intuitively, this second thief knew he was witnessing something extraordinary, incredible and unique. He knew that he wanted to identify with this stranger who was dying right next to him.

Unlike the other thief, this one took Jesus seriously. How can we tell? First, he admits he’s a sinner. He knows he’s absolutely and forever unworthy of God’s mercy. He says, “... ‘We deserve this, but not him—he did nothing to deserve this.’” (Luke 23:41 MSG) No excuses. No self-defense. No one else is blamed for how his life turned out but him. Secondly, he approaches Jesus in faith. He says, “... ‘Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom.’” (Luke 23:42 MSG) Simple. Sincere. Straightforward. If you are ever going to come to

Jesus, here's a picture of how you come. You come without excuses or self-justification, but you come by faith and in faith.

What kind of person hung there next to Jesus on that day? This wasn't a respected person. This was a convicted criminal who had forfeited whatever pity other human beings might bestow on him. He was beyond any help this world had to offer. He was near death himself. So, what's the lesson to be learned? No one is too hopeless or too helpless for the power of God. No one is too sinful for God's grace to find, save and change. Here's a man who had no opportunity to get baptized, memorize Bible verses, sing hymns or praise songs, join a local church, tithe his income or feed the poor. All he could do was look at Jesus in faith and believe. And that was enough. Glory to God, it was more than enough! No matter who you are or what you have done, Jesus will never throw you away if you come to Him in faith. I love that saying, "There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still." This man lived out the truth of that saying.

But this is a reminder that cuts both ways. You come to Jesus like this second thief or you don't come at all. At the cross, everyone is the same – rich, poor, educated, uneducated, moral, immoral, male, female, red, yellow, black and white. Each one is a lost sinner in need of a Savior. Some folk are too decent to be desperate for God's grace. Some are too respectable to be repentant. These two thieves remind us that you and I have only two options. You either approach Jesus with the same heart attitude of that second thief or you reject him like that first one. If you're already decent and respectable, don't bother coming. But if you're desperate and repentant, then come in faith! Here's a third and final reminder in our story of the two thieves. There is here...

A REMINDER THAT REAL LIFE BEGINS IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS.

What happens when you look at Jesus the way that the second thief did? Does your life become instantly problem-free, pain-free, heartache-free or crisis-free? No. The thief remained on the cross and he died; nevertheless, his life was forever changed. Followers of Jesus are not people without problems, pain and struggle. Instead, we're the folk who keep on bringing our sins, our hurts, our struggles and our pain to Jesus in the hope of finding meaning and purpose. That's what Jesus did for the dying thief. And like that thief, God will bring forgiveness to your sin, joy to your sorrow, peace to your pain, hope to your despair, salvation to your "lostness" and life to your death.

The second thief said, "... 'Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom.'" (Luke 23:42 MSG) What did he mean? It's impossible to know exactly what was going through that poor man's mind at that moment. But, fortunately, Jesus' answer allows no uncertainty. "... 'I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:43 NLT) That day – that very day – not some day in the future by and by. On that day, he would share an abundance of life with Jesus. That word "paradise" is an interesting one. Originally, it referred to an inner,

walled garden in the palace of a Mid-eastern king. It was a private, intimate, beautiful space. It was the place where the king took his closest friends and confidants to share thoughts, ideas, and plans. When Jesus used that word, he was saying a lot. He was saying eternal life is a place but it's also a place that offers intimate, close companionship with Jesus forever.

Here's one of the great, profound truths in the Bible. Knowing God is life and without a relationship with Him there is no real life. Since Jesus is God, to know Jesus is to have the life of God. The Bible says, "And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment." (John 3:36 NLT) "God has also said that he gave us eternal life and that this life comes to us from his Son. And so, if we have God's Son, we have this life. But if we don't have the Son, we don't have this life." (1 John 5:11-12 CEV) So when does eternal life really begin? It's not the moment you die physically. It's the moment you put your trust in Jesus. By faith, you see Jesus up there on the cross dying in your place and you say, "He did that for me. He took my place. Because He died for my sins, I don't have to die for them myself." That experience of eternal life grows and expands as you go through everything this side of heaven. Some of those experiences are good and some are not so good. But God is faithful to give us glimpses of what's ahead – a stab of joy here, a glimpse of wonder there, a surge of peace here, a taste of grace there, and – in and through it all – a sustaining, supporting love that can only be found in Jesus. The thief died before he could really begin to experience eternal life in this life. But you can and I can.

ILLUS: *Air Force Colonel Rick Husband was the commander of Columbia – the space shuttle that so tragically broke up on re-entry back on Feb. 1, 2003 – killing Rick and the other six astronauts aboard. Rick Husband was a committed follower of Jesus. He was a quiet, unassuming man who was, nevertheless, quite vocal about his faith. He didn't miss an opportunity to give glory to God. For instance, when Mission Control said it was a beautiful day for the launch of Columbia earlier in January, Rick responded with, "The Lord has given us a perfect day." A suit technician reports that on the day of the launch after all the astronauts had suited up and were walking toward the room where they would meet the press, Rick stopped the crew and prayed for them. Another technician said that in all of his years of getting astronauts suited up, he'd never heard of a commander praying for and with his crew before a launch.*

The spouses of the astronauts each got to pick a song for the crew to wake up to on the mornings they were in space. Rick's wife selected Steve Green's song, "God of Wonders." After Mission Control played the song, Rick said, "Good morning. Thank you. We can really appreciate the lyrics of that song up here. We can look out the window and see that God truly is a God of wonders." Rick also sent several e-mails beamed back to Earth on how overwhelming it was to see God's vast creation from space. He wrote that as he peddled his stationary bike aboard Columbia and looked out the window at God's incredible creation,

tears filled his eyes. One of the most impressive things about Rick Husband was his commitment to convey his faith to his two children. They were both preteens at the time of Columbia's flight. Before his launch in January, Rick made 34 video devotionals – 17 for his daughter and 17 for his son – one for each day he was to be gone. So each day his daughter and son had a devotional time with Dad by video.

Did being a strong believer in Jesus spare Col. Rick Husband tragedy? Did it exempt his family from the awful grief and heartbreak of losing a husband and a father prematurely? No. Believing in Jesus isn't about escaping life or its sorrows. It's about discovering real life come what may. That's what the first thief never understood. That's what the second thief discovered. Let me ask you this: when did Rick Husband receive eternal life? Was it on that awful, fateful day when his spacecraft disintegrated way up high in Earth's atmosphere? No, that was the day he entered heaven. He'd already received eternal life the moment that he – like that second thief – saw with the eyes of faith Jesus hanging on a cross for him and he put his trust in Jesus. That's the same moment, my friend, when eternal life began – of will begin - for you.

CONCL: Who was it that accompanied Jesus into all the glories of heaven on that day – the day of the crucifixion? Was it a great man of God like Moses? Was it a martyr like Stephen? Was it a faithful and fearless spiritual leader like the apostle Paul? No, not at all. The man Jesus took with Him into heaven on that day – that day above all days - was a convicted criminal – a sinner, a loser – a man who had lived a worthless, unproductive, ruined and failed life. I like to think that Jesus took with Him a specimen of all the others He would bring. It's as if He walked right into the throne room of heaven and said, "Father, I bring a sinner with Me. He's a sample of all the rest!"