

# Like a Thief in the Light

By James Rouse



**Bible Text:**

Luke 23:33-43

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Pastor Ty has begun his time of sabbatical, we continue to pray for his time of rest and refreshment as well as a fruitful time of study and growth for himself and his family. And as we, as elders, started talking about taking on the responsibility of preaching the word and looked at the calendar and realized that Father's Day would fall during the sabbatical, I thought, boy, I feel sorry for whichever one gets assigned that day and here we are. So, but because it is Father's Day, I will take an opportunity to mention a few things. First, on a personal note, it is with great joy that we have our son Peter back with us from the Navy. He is on leave for this week, and he will be departing this weekend for his permanent assignment in Lemoore, CA. But it's great to have the whole family here with us, and what a Father's Day treat that is. And I can certainly testify to the words that Charles read from Proverbs that a man who has wise and righteous sons truly rejoices, and I am such a man, and I am grateful for that. I also will take the opportunity to share an anecdote that I heard about this time last year speaking of how we treat Father's Day and Mother's Day in the churches, and it was said that on Mother's Day, we spend a lot of time, we focus, and rightly so, on praising the moms and the wives among us and honoring them in all that they do and the role that they have, and sort of chiding the fathers to step up to the responsibilities that God has given us as dads, so that we can in fact, honor those moms and wives and our families. And then on Father's Day, we turn it around and we focus on chiding the fathers and dads so that they can step up and honor the wives and mothers around us, and that does sort of sometimes have that feel, doesn't it? But we really do want to honor the fathers here today. God has created the family, he has given us the role of parents and and specifically as fathers, in fact, he calls himself father and asked us to call on him as Father. And so we do want to honor the fathers here this morning. I think about my own father. I've learned so much from him but perhaps the most important lesson I learned is one he said, he taught without a single word, and that's marked by the fact that just 10 days ago he recognized 66 years of marriage with my mom, and that is the kind of faithfulness that's just a glimpse of the faithfulness of our heavenly Father. And so we are grateful. If you have had a father who's been faithful, praise God for that. And if you ever had a father who perhaps has forgotten you or abandoned you, know that your heavenly Father will never forsake you or forget you. And that is the truth of today.

So we do want to honor the fathers. If all who are here today who are fathers, including expectant fathers, if there are any, will you please stand so that we can honor you and

thank you. It is a wonderful and great calling to which God has called us. So thank you for that. [applause] And please remain standing. I would like to, well, you're all sitting down. I'll go ahead. You can sit down, but I do want to pray for these fathers, especially the young fathers, those of us whose arrows are mid-flight, so to speak, we still have an influence, we can still encourage the next generation, but those who have those younger children, it's a difficult road and so they need our prayer. Let's lift up the the fathers here to the Lord Father.

*Our Father, God, we do thank You and praise You that You have created the family and You have called Your people to be faithful to You, and that includes being fathers and mothers. We pray especially for the fathers here this morning that You would grant them a special blessing, that they would be faithful to Your word and that in doing so, they would raise up the next generation of faithful saints. We thank You that the the gift of family is so precious. It is so attacked all around us and we ask You to protect these families, these fathers, and bless them as they go about to serve You and glorify You in what they do. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Okay, well, thank you and that brings us now to our message, our text for this morning is Luke 23. We'll be looking at the story of the the prodigal son, not the prodigal son, I already messed up. We're looking at a story of the thief on the cross. The thief on the cross is a very common figure for us. Many of us know the story. It's a story that has offered great comfort and hope to many who may have thought they were lost, beyond hope, those who might have felt that it's too late or they have sinned too greatly, and yet here we have a picture of God's grace extending even to the very end of this man's life. And the message, though, comes with both a promise and a warning. The promise is, of course, is that it is never too late to turn to the Lord and to be saved, but it's also a warning that we never presume upon God's grace. Every moment, every day is a gift from God, and the next moment is not promised to us. So as J.C. Ryle had said, "I grant you, one thief was converted in his last hours that no man might despair, but I warn you, only one was converted that no man might presume. So let us not presume upon the grace of the Lord, but rejoice in his marvelous grace."

We will be reading Luke 23, beginning in verse 33 where Luke writes,

33 When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. 34 But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. 35 And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" 38 Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." 39 One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" 40 But the other answered,

and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" 43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our Father, we thank You for Your word. We thank You for the truth that we see here and we praise You because You are a God of grace; you will save even the lowliest sinner who truly repents and truly believes. Father, I pray that as we go to look into Your word here, that your message would go forth boldly and clearly that it would accomplish what You will and it would bring glory to Your name. We ask this all in Jesus name. Amen.*

Okay, for this message I have leaned upon Charles Spurgeon. He gave a sermon, actually two sermons, on this very passage and so there are places in which my words could not measure up so I wanted to share what he has said. I tell you that first to offer proper credit where it is due but also to say that if there is any preacher since the day of the apostles worth leaning upon, it is the Prince of Preachers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. So as you hear him, I pray that his words will have the same impact today that they did nearly 150 years ago when they were first spoken.

And the title for the message this morning is "Like a Thief in the Light." Obviously that's a play on the term, like a thief in the night, which first came to us from Scripture. It was used to describe how Jesus would return and his second coming would be unexpected, like a thief in the night. But in common language it's been used to say anything that happens in dark or in secret, and that's how it's used, but today we will see the interactions of a thief not at night, not in the dark, but in the light, and not just in the light of day, the physical light, but he is confronted by the light of the world and how he responds to the light of the world, and it's a picture for us of how we must respond to that same light as shown to us in Scripture.

Now, as I read the passage you heard that there were two thieves crucified along with Jesus. When we refer to the thief on the cross, of course, we're typically speaking of the one repentant thief or penitent thief. So as we talk about the thief, singular, that's the one we'll be talking about but sometimes we'll look at the two of them together. And I want to convey to you that right out of the beginning that every one of us is represented in these two thieves. Every person you meet, everyone in this room, is either identified with one or the other of these two men, and that's what we will see today, and the only difference that separates them, the only difference is how they respond to Jesus. So as we look through this, let us keep that in mind. If we are going to receive the type of promise that the thief on the cross received, if we would go to be with Jesus in Paradise, we must see ourselves as that thief, and that begins with understanding our position as a criminal and we'll talk about that.

So this morning, we will look at how we identify with this particular thief in three parts. The first will be his condition, and then we'll look at his confession, and then finally, we'll conclude with the promise of Christ that was given to him.

So let's begin with his condition. Now he was a criminal and a thief. Okay, Spurgeon said of this, "Whatever this thief was, he is a picture of what you are." This may be a little uncomfortable for a few minutes, so just settle in, okay? He is referred to by Luke, both of these are referred to as criminals. The word there, the Greek word for criminal is a Greek word "kakourgos," and it's a compound word made up of two parts meaning "evil and works." So this is someone who was a wrongdoer or literally a worker of evil. It's often translated as "criminal" or in the King James the Latin inspired "malefactor" which means the same thing, "worker of evil." That's what these men were called. These were not petty criminals. These were not one-time offenders. They were almost certainly violent in their actions. For them to have received this sentence would mean that they were truly the worst of the worst, evil men. They were so identified with their criminal activity that that's the definition, that they were criminals. They weren't people who happened to commit crimes, they were criminals. That's the essence of who they were. But if Luke calls him a criminal, why do we call him the thief on the cross? Well, that we can see from looking at the other gospels, in this case, Matthew referred to the two men on either side, Matthew used the term that says the word "lestes," which is the Greek word for "robber or thief," and it has a sense of plundering and pillaging, not some dashing romantic figure of Hollywood like Cary Grant or George Clooney who comes in and just, you know, politely takes things from people. No, these are people who were violent. These were people who stole what was not theirs and had no regard for others, even the lives of others.

Now let me ask you: this morning, do you object to being called a criminal and a thief? If I walked up to you on the street and said, "You're a criminal, you're a thief," how would you respond? Most people not well, right? But that's what the word of God calls us. The word of God is very clear about this. Read or listen to the words of Romans 3, beginning in verse 10. "as it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away." At this point you're thinking, "Okay, we all just sort of didn't quite measure up, right?" Paul doesn't end there, he continues on by saying, "They have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are an open grave, their tongues practice deceit, the poison of vipers is on their lips, their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness, their feet are swift to shed blood, ruin and misery mark their ways and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes." He's not talking about just the worst criminals in our world, he starts by saying "there is no one righteous, not even one." He is talking about every one of us apart from Christ.

What's interesting, I find in my observation is, if you talk about, if you're going to say someone is a sinner, or someone is a wrongdoer, there are certain things that have sort of lost their power these days, right? The morality of the day makes it such that if you were to label someone with a label based on biblical sexual morality, they

would probably embrace it. You have people who massage the information that they share to try to get a certain outcome that they're looking for. In the world of politics, lying is almost a resume-builder. And you have people who express concern about murder when what they call murder when it refers to the food that we eat, but don't recognize the murder that happens in the child in the womb. So there are all these things where we've sort of lost some of the sting, but try calling someone a thief, it's amazing that that one hits home. People say, "I'm not a thief. I work for everything I had." It almost draws up a sense of defense from people when you refer to them as a thief. They don't want to hear that.

Well, the reality is we are thieves, every one of us, and I don't just mean that you haven't stolen something. I mean, I could say, "Well, you know, you went back to Costco and got that second sample, you know, that wasn't, that was more than you were supposed to be entitled to." Right? No, I don't mean just that you've taken physical property from another human being, ultimately when we talk about being a thief, we are all thieves of God's glory. We take that glory for ourselves. We refuse to grant him the glory that is due him. We are indeed thieves, and God takes this very seriously. We see this throughout Scripture, right, all the way from Lucifer before the garden through Nebuchadnezzar to Herod, every time that man or a created being tries to take the glory that is due to God, he deals with it very seriously. So when we talk about being thieves, understand we are thieves of God's glory first and foremost, and every time we pursue idolatry. And again, I don't just mean graven images. I mean the idols of the heart, the things that we worship in place of the true and living God, when we take those things and make them our gods, we are stealing from God's glory and refusing to give it to him. That is the position we find ourselves in much like this thief.

So he's a criminal and a thief, but there's the second thing to notice about him, he's under a death sentence. He knows the time and place and means of his death. It was issued by the Roman authorities and his end was near. Most of us do not know the time or the place or the means of our own death but I tell you today, unless the Lord comes during our lifetime, our death is no less certain than this thief. It's only a matter of how many hours there are between now and that time. So we have to recognize that, we have to understand that he is under that death sentence, just as we are, and unlike him, he received his sentence from the Roman authorities, our sentence comes from a righteous and holy God who has told us that if we sin, when he spoke to Adam in the garden in Genesis 2, he said, "When you eat of that fruit, when you disobey the law of God, you will surely die." Now Adam ate of the fruit. He didn't drop over dead immediately, but two things happened. 1) he died spiritually. He was separated from God; that fellowship that he had with God was broken and needed to be repaired. And. In the physical realm, he started the process of dying and that's true of every one of us. Every day, especially those of us who are probably on the other side of that hill, as they say, we feel it more and more everyday, but as our bodies and our minds and our intellect starts to decay and fade, we are reminded we are not immortal in this life. We too are under a death sentence, just as this criminal was.

The third thing I want you to notice about his condition is that he was an enemy of God. Now this is where reading the different gospel accounts together really help us to get the full picture, because in Matthew's account he tells us that the robbers who had been crucified with him were also insulting him with the same words. So just as the crowds and the rulers and authorities were all mocking Jesus, railing against him, insulting him, so too Matthew tells us that the thieves, the robbers, plural, were also insulting him. So putting these pictures together, we can infer that at the beginning of the day, as they were lifted up on their crosses, both thieves were insulting the Lord and it was only the one who repented and turned, but at the beginning he was truly an enemy just as the rest. And again, in the same way, we were all enemies of God. The Scripture is very clear about that. And if you have not truly repented of your sin and turn to Christ, then you are an enemy of God this very day and I urge you and plead with you to see what this thief and how he responded and how you too can respond.

But consider Paul's statement, Colossians 1:21, "you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds." Or Romans 5:10, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." The Bible is clear: we were enemies of God. Romans 3:23 tells us that, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Now, proper exegesis tells us, exegesis means just drawing out the meaning, understanding what the words in our Scripture mean, when you look at that word for sin that appears in Romans 3:23 and elsewhere in the Scripture, the historical context, it has the meaning of "missing the mark." You've probably heard this before. It means to miss the mark. Okay, well, if you're like me, that doesn't sound as bad as it should, right? It makes me think of the biathlon. You know, the biathlon? It's one of our favorite events in the Winter Olympics. Right, you have these athletes that are just exerting themselves and cross country skiing and they're going around the track and going around the course and they're just heart rates going, and then they have to stop and slow down, settle themselves and fire at a target 50 feet away, aiming for a target that's just about four inches across. And it is amazing to watch them do this, right? They hit it almost every time, every single time. Bing, Bing, Bing. And then the one time they miss, maybe they're in the first or second ring outside, that's a big deal and that's an opening, and now the next person is going to be able to get in and win the competition. Well, when I hear miss the mark, I think of that guy that was on his first or second ring. "Boy, I was close. Just missed it. Better luck next time." That is not what Scripture is telling us. This is not about just missing by a few millimeters. It's more like what Romans 3 tells us, that we have all sinned, we have all come not just a little bit short but we are enemies of God, and this man himself was truly an enemy of God.

So if you have a hard time with this, it may be hard for you to hear. I've already called you a criminal, I've called you a thief, and I've called you an enemy of God who's under a death sentence. This may be hard for you to hear and for many of us, you may feel like, "I've lived rightly." Maybe you grew up in the church. Maybe you've heard the gospel. Maybe you do what you can to try to live according to what God has said, and you don't think of yourself, you don't feel the weight of that sense of being an enemy of God. But I do want to borrow again from Spurgeon here, where he says, speaking of people in

this state, people who have been around the things of God, but maybe never fully understood, grasped the severity of their sin. He says, "Dwell upon this fact, if you please, and note its practical bearing upon the cases of many around us. There are many among my hearers who have been instructed from their childhood, who have been admonished and warned and entreated and invited, and yet they have not come to Christ while this man without any of these advantages, nevertheless believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and found eternal life. Oh, you that have lived under the sound of the gospel from your childhood, the thief does not comfort you, he accuses you. What are you doing to abide so long in unbelief? Will you never believe the testimony of divine love? What more shall I say to you? What more can anyone say to you?" If you are here this morning and you have lived with the blessing of the gospel and yet never fully grasped your need for salvation, you never grasped your sin and your rebellion against God and need for Savior, then, like Spurgeon, I implore you to examine your heart and go to him, go to him and acknowledge your sin.

Another thing that is very interesting about this is, as these men were railing against Jesus and especially the second one, the one that did not end up repenting, as they railed against him, they also called on him to save them. Do you see that? Are you going to mock and criticize someone and then expect something from them? Now, in human terms, is anyone going to do what you ask after you've spent some time railing against them? Of course not. But Matthew Henry in his commentary says this, "There are some that have the impudence to rail at Christ, and yet the confidence to expect to be saved by him, nay, and to conclude that if he do not save them, he is not to be looked upon as the Savior." What a perfect summary. That's 400 years ago he wrote that. What a perfect summary of today. We have people who rail against God, rail against his laws, want nothing to do with him, and yet expect that they deserve a place in his heaven? And then to top it off, the fact that he does not receive them after they have rejected, thoroughly rejected and despised him, they use that as a justification for why they don't believe him to be God at all. May we not have that same heart. May we be the ones who understand how fully we have fallen, how fully we need his salvation.

The last thing about his condition I want to share is, he was unable to help himself. He was on this cross. He could not move. He could not do any good works. He could not be baptized. He could not do anything that would make him more fit to meet his Creator as he was just about to do. Nothing in himself could he do. He was entirely lost. And I tell you, if you have any illusion that you can do enough good deeds to tilt the scales when you face eternity so that you will be saved because of what you have done, or think that the good that you've done outweighs the bad, then I must tell you, you are sorely mistaken. Isaiah 64:6 tells us that, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment." Outside of Christ, anything we do, no matter how seemingly good, no matter how praised by men, no matter how it feels selfless, are like a filthy garment if they are not done in and for the glory of Christ. So we are as helpless to save ourselves as he was when he was nailed to that cross, unable to even move, he could not accomplish anything for himself. But as Spurgeon notes, he had one member, he had one body part, if you will, that was free and that was his tongue, and he used his tongue well to praise his Lord and defend his Savior.

And that takes us to our second point which is his confession. So the thief's confession. We've seen his condition. He was a thief. He was a criminal. He's under a death sentence, okay, just as we are, but now we move into his confession. Now, the word "confession" does not appear in this text. Okay, so I'm using this because although it doesn't appear, the statements from this thief are I would say the clearest and most comprehensive confession we see in all of Scripture.

Now the word "confession," the Greek word that's translated "confession" in our New Testaments is "homologeo," another compound word made up of the roots which mean "the same and to say." So it means to agree or literally to say the same thing. Scripture calls us to confess and when it calls us to confess, what it's saying is we need to say the same thing that God says. We need to say the same thing God says about ourselves, the same thing God says about our sin, the same thing God says about himself. That's what it means to confess.

So let's start with his confession of his own sin. Hey, if you're like me and you hear the word "confess," our natural modern usage tends to make us think in the terms of "admit or acknowledge fault," right? Of course, the Bible uses it this way, we confess our sins. Or if you like a good mystery, you're waiting for that dramatic moment at the end when the guilty party is confronted and confesses to the crime, right? So a confession in our thinking often means just acknowledging guilt or sin. And to be sure, the Bible uses it that way and we read in James 5:16 that we are to confess our sins to one another, and 1 John 1:9, says if we confess our sins, he, that is God, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Now that is a wonderful, comforting verse. I've quoted it to myself and to other so many times. What a beautiful picture that when we confess our sins, when we genuinely and humbly repent and turn to the Lord, he will forgive not only those specific sins that we've confessed, but he will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. What a joy we have to know from the Scripture that that is how God views us in our sin. But what's interesting about that verse and to be honest, I've always so focused on that verse, I sometimes lose the verses around it. So I want to read that again, but this time I want to read the verse immediately before and immediately after. So 1 John 1 beginning in verse 8. "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." Do you see that? In both verse 8 and verse 10, it talks about what happens if we say we do not have sin. In verse 8, we're deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. In verse 10 we are saying something different from what God says and we are making out him to be a liar. So when we talk about confessing, yes, it's an admission of guilt, it's an admission of sin, but ultimately it is agreeing with God and how God views sin, that's how we need to view sin and that's what he's telling us in 1 John.

So this thief we'll see, he did confess his sin and he did it as clearly as he could. We see this, he rebuked his fellow thief. The other man was railing against Jesus and in Luke's

account, we read that he rebuked him. He said, "Do you not even fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation and we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Matthew Henry again comments by reminding us that true penitence, those who are truly repentant, acknowledge the justice of God in all the punishments of their sin. God has done right, but we have done wickedly. This man understood that where he was was the righteous judgment, not just of the Roman authorities, this is the righteous judgment of God.

J. C. Ryle says, "See for another thing what a right sense of sin the thief had. He says to his companion, 'We receive the due reward of our deeds.' He acknowledges his own ungodliness and the justice of his punishment. He makes no attempt to justify himself or excuse his wickedness. He speaks like a man humble and self-abased by the remembrance of past iniquities. This is what all God's children feel, they are ready to allow that they are poor hell-deserving sinners." And Calvin encourages us, "And therefore, if we truly repent of our crimes, let us learn to confess them willingly and without hypocrisy whenever it is necessary, and not to refuse the disgrace which we have deserved." This doesn't mean we have to go and confess to every person you see; we don't need to wear our sins on our sleeves. Okay, we have people out there who talk so much about their past sins, it almost starts to sound like nostalgia for the old days. We don't need to be dwelling on the sins themselves, but we need to always remember how lost we were and that God has taken us from that point into his fellowship, into his family. So we need to remember that.

Now I want us to see that the way this thief, he completely owned that sin. He didn't try to excuse it. He didn't try to diminish it. He didn't even try to shift the blame as all of mankind has been doing ever since Adam in the garden. Right, you remember the story. God came to Adam, "What have you done?" What did Adam say? "Well, the woman that You gave me, she gave me the fruit and I ate." From the very beginning, mankind has tried to shift blame. This thief did none of that. He completely owned his own sin, did not diminish it, did not shift the blame. And I implore you to view your sin the same way that he did.

And I want to say this morning too, that not only is that the necessary first step of coming to Christ, but, perhaps paradoxically, it is also an important step to happiness in your daily life and daily walk with him. What do I mean by that? Well, how often are we in circumstances and we think, "Well, how did this happen to me?" Right? How often do we recognize or do we feel that, "Oh, someone put me in this circumstance"? The thief did not do that. He recognized that his circumstance was entirely of his own making. And so how often when we're complaining and grumbling about our own circumstances, are those circumstances of our own making? Now to be sure, this is not true in all cases. There are times when faithful saints of God, God allows them to experience times of challenge, times of difficulty, even when, or perhaps specifically because they are faithfully serving him in a wicked world. There is no question about that. But there are also many times when we bring these circumstances on ourselves and we do that by acting contrary to God's word.

Now this is true not only of, say, the debtor who has spent unwisely and put himself into a situation where he is in debt and unable to pay, and he's miserable as a result. That's a little more obvious. But it's also true when we see the personal relationships around us, maybe we see difficulty and challenges. When you see that, is it always the other person's fault? We have to remember, as I've been so blessed to have been taught by people here in this very church, we have to remember that when you look at all the conflicts in your life, there's only one common denominator and you know who that is, it's yourself, right? When we see all these difficulties, are we looking inward to say, "What have I done to bring about this circumstance?" Or are we constantly blaming others and shifting the guilt and the burden?

If we acknowledge our sin and walk humbly before our brothers and before God, we will have peace with God and man and that's what this thief did as he confessed his sin. But there's another sense, the second part of this is his confession of Christ, and this is a slightly different use of the word "confession." Again, remember "confess" means "to agree with; to say the same thing," but in this case it's using the same thing to positively affirm. If before we were talking about the negative admission of guilt, now we're talking about positively affirming that which God says. And you can think about this as the word "confession," you think about the Westminster Confession of Faith, you think about the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith or any of the other historical confessions. These are times where we have come together, the church has come together and tried to say, "This is what we agree that we see Scripture saying." So in this sense, to confess is a positive statement.

And once again, the thief is very clear in his confession, his positive statement of Christ. This is a sense that's used in Romans 10:9 where it says, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." If you confess, if you speak and say and really mean it, by the way, it's not the words that come out of your mouth that are magic, it's the expression of the heart. If you confess, if you agree with God that Jesus is Lord, if you agree that he is the second person of the Godhead, that he is the rightful Lord of your life, then you will be saved. That's what that verse means. So confessing Jesus is Lord is agreeing with all that God says of who Jesus is, and that is exactly what this thief did.

So the first thing he said once he confronted his fellow thief was, "This man has done nothing wrong." Now what's interesting about this, this is a remarkable statement. Okay, it may not sound all that significant, but it is remarkable. First of all, note that he's affirming Jesus' innocence. Now think about a court of law. Okay, when someone is accused of a crime and a trial happens and we go through the process, our system, and I think this is correct, does not say this person is innocent, it says this person is not guilty. It means that there is not enough evidence, or the evidence does not show that this person committed this crime, so therefore he's not guilty. He's not guilty of this specific instance of this crime but no jury in the world can say this man is innocent because it's not true. You may be not guilty of a given specific crime, but that does not mean you're innocent. And in fact, there's only one who is innocent, there's only one who is righteous, and when

the thief said, "This man has done nothing wrong," he didn't just mean, "He didn't steal like we did," he's affirming that Jesus is the righteous Son of God. He may not have fully understood what that meant, but he was speaking the words of truth about who Jesus is.

And this is, again, remarkable because at that moment while Jesus was hanging on the cross, think about what's happened. The official pronouncement of Rome said that this man Jesus, the Scriptures prophesied he would be numbered among the sinners. He was hung in the middle as if he was the most prominent. Most of our paintings picture the middle cross as the highest. We don't know that for sure, but it does seem to be all the focus was pointed to him. He was presented by the authorities as the worst criminal, sinner rebel, whatever you might say, and deserving of death. And yet this man, he understood that Jesus was, in fact, innocent.

And again to borrow from Spurgeon, he says recollect, too, that at that moment when the thief believed in Christ, all the disciples had forsaken him and fled. John might be lingering at a little distance, and holy women may have stood farther off, but no one was present bravely to champion the dying Christ. Judas had sold him. Peter had denied him, and the rest had forsaken him, and it was then that the dying thief called him Lord and said, "Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." I call that splendid faith. Why some of you do not believe though you are surrounded with Christian friends, though you are urged on by the testimony of those whom you regard with love. But this man all alone comes out and calls Jesus his Lord. No one else was confessing Christ at that moment. No revival was around him with enthusiastic crowds. He was all by himself as a confessor of his Lord.

He was clear. He understood that Jesus was innocent. And what's interesting, did you catch that, depending on which version you're reading from, in verse 42 some of your translations might say, might read, "and he said unto him, Jesus, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." That's in the King James and related versions. Other manuscripts do not have the word "Lord," and so it may just say, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The important thing here is not the individual word because there is no question that this thief viewed Jesus as the Lord. He called him a king right there, he said, "When You come into Your kingdom." He knew that Jesus was coming into a kingdom and was a rightful king. He knew that Jesus had authority in that kingdom and that's why he made the appeal asking to be remembered.

His own eyes and human reason could not have revealed this to him. This was only God revealing. We remember what Jesus said to Peter when he confessed Jesus as Lord. Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father who is in heaven." And so might he have said to this thief, flesh and blood did not reveal to him that Jesus was a king but the Father revealed it through him.

So his appeal, he asks to be remembered. It's reminiscent of perhaps Joseph. You know the story of Joseph. He is in the dungeon in Pharaoh's dungeon and he's there with the cup-bearer, and he says to the cup-bearer, "Remember me when you are restored to

Pharaoh's household." Well, the cup-bearer was restored, but he did not remember Joseph. But Jesus will remember, he remembers his own. When he comes into the royal throne, he remembers those who are his.

This also is reminiscent of the Roman Centurion. Remember the story of the Centurion who meets Jesus on the road, and he appeals to Jesus and says, "My servant is sick," and Jesus says, "Okay, let's go. Let's go." And the Centurion says, "No, I'm not worthy to have You in my home. Just say the word and I know he will be healed." And Jesus gave him one of the greatest commendations in all of Scripture when he said, "In all of Israel, I have never seen such faith."

That humble appeal, just to be remembered, this is not like the disciples or their mother who came and said, "Let me sit on Your right hand and let me sit on Your left." No, his appeal was just, "Remember me." This is the appeal of the prodigal returning to his father and saying, "I am not worthy to be called your son. Make me a servant." And the father lavished his grace and restored him. But the heart of the prodigal was, "I am content just to be a servant in the house of my father." That should be our attitude. That's the attitude of this thief when he looked at Christ. And, you know, one of the things that Spurgeon talks about, what was it that caused him to turn? And he speculates, this is a bit of speculation but he says perhaps, of course it was seeing Jesus, it was seeing how he responded, how he carried his cross, seeing how he prayed for those even as they were killing him, you know, how he showed such care for the women who were there attending him, perhaps just even looking, the look on his face of serenity and knowing that he was doing the will of the Father. But Spurgeon said there's something else interesting. He said perhaps he looked up at the inscription over the cross. Remember, we read it what it said, "This is the King of the Jews." Now he was probably a Jew himself and he thought he may have thought, "Huh? This is the King of the Jews." And he may have brought to mind some of the verses about what the Messiah would be. And then he goes on to say he probably heard the people railing. What did they say? They say, "He saved others, save yourself." And maybe the thief said, "Huh? He saved others. Why would he, perhaps he can save me." And so even the taunts, even the words of God's enemies may be used to promote truth in the people whom God has marked out for salvation.

So as we think about what we see in the world, as we think about loving people and sharing with them, nothing can stop God's will to save his own. Nothing can keep those whom he is called from the salvation that is appointed unto them. So no matter what the world says, we still follow the Lord, and we still confess him. So as we think about that and we think about his confession, okay, he has been clear confessing his sin and he has also been clear confessing that Jesus is Lord, and he makes a humble plea, "Remember me. Just please remember me when you come into your kingdom." And that brings us to our third point because Jesus responds to him with an incredible promise. So Christ's promise to this thief is something that we can see. If we think of ourselves like the thief, if we recognize that we are criminals, enemies of God, if we humbly confess our sin, and if we confess him as Christ, then he has said, "You will be with Me in Paradise."

Now the promise that Jesus said, the verse in our text, is, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." Now, through the centuries, much has been written about the specific meaning of this verse. What did "today" mean? Was it literally today? Where was Jesus between Friday's cross and Sunday's empty tomb? What is Paradise? Is that heaven? Is that an intermediate state? What's going on here? Did Jesus just say, "Today I'm telling you that you will be with me in Paradise," a promise that was a future promise but he's only speaking it? There are a lot of questions, right? Well, time and prudence will not allow me to go into those questions this morning. Okay, there are plenty of commentaries you can read if you'd like to see what the theologians over the years have said, but I want us not to focus on the words today or the word "Paradise." The words I want us to focus on are, "You will be with Me." That is what matters. That is the promise. That's the promise Jesus gave to this thief, "You will be with Me."

J. C. Ryle said, "I cannot describe what kind of a place Paradise is, but I ask no brighter view of it than this, that Christ is there. All other things in the picture which imagination draws of Paradise, are nothing in comparison of this. How he is there and in what way he is there, I know not. Let me only see Christ in Paradise when my eyes close in death and that suffices me." Calvin likewise said, "We ought not to enter into curious and subtle arguments about the place of paradise. Let us rest satisfied with knowing that those who are ingrafted by faith into the body of Christ are partakers of that life and thus enjoy after death a blessed and joyful rest until the perfect glory of the heavenly life is fully manifested in the coming of Christ." So we can debate what it means, but ultimately we know he is with us. We are with him.

This Easter, I saw a video that was shared online. Some of you may have seen it, some of you may have even shared it. It was an excerpt from a sermon by Alistair Begg, and it was actually a sermon from 2019 where he was preaching about the power and message of the cross, and this excerpt, you can find it online. I encourage you go find it, listen to the original. It's so much better, if only to hear his wonderful Scottish accent, which I am not going to try to replicate, even though I may slip into it because it's just so, so beautiful. But he gave this message when he was talking about the cross and he was speaking about why the cross, why this message is so important, how it defeats, you know, it gives us hope and yet also humbles us to recognize that that arrogant pride that we have, we need to not continue it and think that we are deserving of anything.

So this is Alistair speaking, he says, "Without the preaching of the cross, without preaching the cross to ourselves all day and every day, we will very, very quickly revert to faith plus works as the ground of our salvation." So to go to the old Fort Lauderdale question, if you were to die tonight and you were getting entry into heaven, what would you say? If you answer this in the first person, we've immediately gone wrong. "Because I, because I believed, because I have faith, because I am this, because I am continuing." Loved ones, the only proper answer is in the third person, "Because He, because He." Think about the thief on the cross. I can't wait to find that fellow one day to ask him, "How did that shake out for you because you are cussing the guy out with your friend, you've never been in a Bible study, you never got baptized. You don't know a thing about

church membership. And yet you made it. How did you make it?" That's what the angel must have said.

And then he goes into a slightly imaginative retelling of imagining the thief arriving at the gates of heaven and the angel says to him, "What are you doing here?" I don't know. "What do you mean you don't know?" I don't know. "Excuse me, let me get my supervisor," and he goes off and he brings a supervisor angel in and he says, "So just a few questions for you, first of all are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?" Guy says, I've never heard of it in my life. "And what about the doctrine of Scripture?" This guy is just staring. And eventually in frustration, the supervisor says, "On what basis are you here?" And he said, "The man on the middle cross said I can come." That is the only answer. Tat is the only answer, and if I don't preach the gospel to myself all day and every day, then I will find myself beginning to trust myself, trust my experience, which is part of my fallenness as a man. If I take my eyes off the cross, I can then give only lip service to its efficacy while at the same time living as if my salvation depends on me. And as soon as you go there, it will lead you either to abject despair or a horrible kind of arrogance. It is only the cross of Christ that deals with both the dreadful depths of despair and the pretentious arrogance of the pride of man that says, "You know, I can figure this out and I'm doing wonderfully well." No, because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

That's why Luther says most of your Christian life is outside of you, in the sense that we know that we're not saved by good works, we're not saved as a result of our professions, but we're saved as a result of what Christ has achieved. Did you catch that? I think we'd all affirm, "Oh, we're not saved by good works. We understand that." But we're really not even saved by our confessions. We're saved by the completed work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We confess that because we agree with God about what has already happened but we are saved because he has completed the work on the cross.

So, my friends, are you in Christ today? Do you have that assurance that you, too, will one day be with Jesus? Or do you doubt or despair? Are you unsure if Jesus would save even you? Have you violated God's law? So did this thief. Have you rejected Jesus? So did he, at least initially. And yet while you still draw breath, there is hope. But you must be like this thief. We must be humble. We must be repentant. We must be desiring only to be with Jesus. And if you are, you may know that as the hymn says, "The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives." Not some future day. Not some opportunity to earn your way. Not some chance, not a second chance to do better. No, we receive in that moment, we receive salvation from Christ.

In a moment, we'll be singing our closing hymn, "There is a fountain," and in that hymn we'll sing the verse that I want you to reflect on these words.

"The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in His day;  
And there have I, though vile as he,  
Washed all my sins away."

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you are vile as he? And do you believe that you can wash your sins away through his blood? Do you only look to his blood to cleanse you from your sins, to earn what you could not do for yourself? And if you do and if you would repent, and if you would confess both your own sin and confess Jesus as Lord, you will be saved. That is the promise of the gospel. That is what the thief on the cross is telling us this very day.

And if you have repented of your sins, if you have confessed Jesus, if you are a believer and you're truly seeking to love and serve the Lord in all the days of your life, what can you receive from this passage? Well, first, we should never take the cross for granted, right? We need to always seek to walk humbly with our God. We should remember the price it cost the Son of God to purchase your redemption. In the words of a Stuart Townend song called "The Power of the Cross," he says this,

"Oh, to see my name  
Written in the wounds,  
For through Your suffering I am free.  
Death is crushed to death,  
Life is mine to live,  
Won through Your selfless love.

This, the power of the cross:  
Son of God, slain for us.  
What a love! What a cost!  
We stand forgiven at the cross."

So true. What a love but at what cost and that's the great love of our Lord.

So we have to remember that cost, we have to take the sense of recognizing what it cost Jesus to purchase our salvation, and if we do, if we recognize that, if we recognize that, "I deserve nothing but the wrath of God, but I am a sinner saved by grace," how can I remain prideful? How can I lord it over others, right? How can I live as if anything that I have or what I am is anything but a gift from God? If I see the cross rightly, if I see my sin rightly, and if I see Jesus rightly, all of that will fade away as we trust him.

Spurgeon again said, describing slightly less humorous telling of the arrival of the thief, but he pictures the thief approaching the gates with Jesus. You know, in a literal sense, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise," imagines them coming together and he says, "Here I would have you notice the condescension of our Lord's choice, the comrade of the Lord of glory for whom the cherub turns aside his sword of fire is no great one but a newly converted malefactor. And why? I think the Savior took him with Him as a specimen of what He meant to do. He seemed to say to all the heavenly powers, 'I bring a sinner with Me and he is a sample of the rest.'" He is that sample. He is, you know, Jesus is the firstfruits and he is bringing with him a redeemed, newly redeemed sinner, a criminal, and that criminal is a sample of all of the rest of us that come with him.

We are trophies of his grace and we must remember, as Edwards said, the only thing we contribute to our salvation is the sin that made it necessary. If we remember that, then we will honor and praise God. So how do we live out this amazing love? Well, once again, I have to close with words from Spurgeon. This is a very challenging passage but I think it really, for me it spoke to what we need to do and how we think about even our daily lives. Spurgeon said, "Why is it that our Lord does not thus take all of us to Paradise at once? It is because there is something for us to do on earth. My brethren, are you doing it? Are you doing it? Some good people are still on earth but why? But why? What is the use of them? I cannot make it out. If they are indeed the Lord's people, what are they here for? They get up in the morning and eat their breakfast and in due course eat their dinner and their supper and go to bed and sleep, at a proper hour they get up the next morning and do the same as on the previous day. Is this living for Jesus? Is this life? It does not come to much. Can this be the life of God in man? Oh, Christian people, do justify your Lord in keeping you waiting here. How can you justify Him but by serving Him to the utmost of your power. The Lord help you to do so. Why, you owe as much to Him as the dying thief. I know I owe a great deal more. What a mercy it is to have been converted while you were yet a boy, to be brought to the Savior while you were yet a girl! What a debt of obligation young Christians owe to the Lord! And if this poor thief crammed a life full of testimony into a few minutes, ought not you and I, who are spared, for years after conversion, to perform good service for our Lord? Come, let us wake up if we have been asleep! Let us begin to live if we have been half dead. May the Spirit of God make something of us yet: so that we may go as industrious servants from the labors of the vineyard to the pleasures of the Paradise! To our once crucified Lord be glory for ever and ever! Amen."

Amen, how about that? That is what we have. We must remember our lowly estate. We must remember what God has saved us from, how God raised us from the dead through the marvelous work of his Son, and then let us spend all of our days praising him and seeking to bring as many as the Lord will allow with us as we join him in Paradise.

Let's go to him in prayer.

*Our Father, we thank You for the truth of Your word. We praise You that You are a loving God, that You have given us this picture of the love of Christ, the love of Your Son, the saving work that You have accomplished. And Lord, may all of us here today receive that and recognize what we need to do to repent and turn to You. If there are those who have not yet repented, we pray that You would work in their hearts so as to convert them even on this day, that today would be the day of salvation. And for those who are Yours, may we remember, reflect on what You have done for us, what it cost, and then may we live in such a way that we bring honor to You and serve You all the days of our lives. We thank You and we pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.*