

**Theme: Ironies of the Passion: “Don’t You Fear God?”**

**Luke 23:39-43 (EHV)**

<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” <sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong.” <sup>42</sup> Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” <sup>43</sup> Jesus said to him, “Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”

During this season of Lent we have been looking at various *Ironies of the Passion*. Things that were said or done in connection with Jesus’ suffering and death that were “ironic.” The definition we’ve been using for “irony” has been this: “a result that is the opposite of what might be expected.” We’ve actually got a couple of phrases in our short sermon text for today that would qualify according to that definition as “ironic.” One of those phrases are the words of the second thief who was crucified next to Jesus: **“Don’t you fear God?”**

These words are ironic—shocking, even—and definitely “a result that is the complete opposite of what might be expected.” This man, and the other man crucified with Jesus, are called **“criminals”** by Luke in our text. Now, we don’t know exactly what their crimes were, but the Greek word that is used here to describe them imply not only stealing but also violence, maybe even murder. The word in Greek can be translated “*criminal, evildoer, villain*” (Friberg Greek Lexicon). These men appear to be habitual offenders. They deserved the death penalty. If either of these men had feared God, they wouldn’t have lived the way they did and they wouldn’t be hanging here about to die on the cross! In fact, not only did these men clearly not fear God or His Laws, by their criminal behavior they showed that they didn’t fear man’s laws either!

What was not surprising or ironic in the slightest were the words of the first criminal. He clearly did not fear God or believe in the One who was being crucified right next to him for this man’s crimes and all of his sins. **One of the criminals hanging there was blaspheming him, saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (v. 39).** In fact, Matthew and Mark tell us that both of these criminals initially mocked Jesus in this way. They were echoing the mocking words of the chief priests and religious leaders and the soldiers. Even those who passed by Jesus were mocking Him with similar words. **Matthew 27** tells us, **People who passed by kept insulting him, shaking their heads, <sup>40</sup> and saying, “You who were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” (Matthew 27:39-40).** In the verses that lead up to our sermon text we read, **The rulers were ridiculing him, saying, “He saved others. Let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, the Chosen One!” <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also made fun of him. Coming up to him, they offered him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (Luke 23:35-37 EHV).**

Do you notice the great irony here? Jesus was, in fact, the Christ—the Messiah—the Chosen One of God, the Son of God Himself, and yes, He certainly had the power to come down from the cross and save Himself. But the reason He didn’t proved that He was who He said He was: The Savior of the world. The reason He didn’t come down from the cross was to save sinners like those men who were dying with Him. To save the religious leaders who were mocking Him. To save the soldiers and people passing by who were making fun of Him. To save you and me who need saving from our sins too.

That’s when something more than ironic happened. Something truly miraculous happened. The second criminal in our text says, **“Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong” (v. 40-41).** Where did that question come from? Where did this realization come

from for this criminal? Where did this change of heart come from? What's truly miraculous and shocking is that this isn't everything that this criminal confessed. He goes on to say in our text these incredible words of faith and trust in Jesus, **Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom" (v. 42).**

He trusted in Jesus to take him to heaven when this horrible experience was over. How did he come to know his Savior? You can point to the fact that most Jews were raised with religious instruction and that Jesus was the most famous man in Israel during the three years of His ministry. This man probably heard about some of what Jesus was teaching. He heard Jesus speak to the people on the way to Calvary and even ask God to forgive the soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. Yet up until this moment, it doesn't seem like any of it had sunk in. But now, as he was hanging from a cross, the Holy Spirit worked through the Gospel he had heard in the synagogue, in the stories about Jesus, and in the words and actions of Christ that this criminal had heard and seen as he walked with Jesus to the cross. Through that Gospel, the Holy Spirit reached into his heart and gave him faith right there on his own cross.

God has done the very same thing for you and me. Now does that seem like kind of a forced comparison? When we look at this man dying because of robbery and violence and maybe even murder, do we see ourselves? Do you see yourself in this account of the criminal on the cross next to Jesus? Do I see myself there? Or do we think "I'm really not the kind of sinner he was!"? The truth is, we are. We are all sinners from birth. And God does not grade our sins on a "curve," or "rank" some sins as being "not so bad." No, His standard is perfection, and in His eyes a sin is a sin. The Bible tells us that **"The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23)**. God doesn't just mean *physical* death in that verse. He means *eternal* death!

So, even if we've managed to keep from murdering anyone, we've all hated someone. We've done things that hurt others, sometimes very deeply. Even though we may never have stolen anything, have we ever been lazy at work? Have we ever been envious of what other people have? Have we ever resented the fact that God was more generous to other people than He was to us? To God, those sins of the heart are just as evil as the sins people act out. According to God's Law we are just as guilty as these men were, and we deserve the death and the hell that they deserved. When we look at our sins and our sinful hearts we should be saying the same thing that the second criminal said, **"Don't you fear God?" "[We] are under the same condemnation? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done, but this man has done nothing wrong" (v. 40-41).**

**"But this man has done nothing wrong" (v. 41).** Here is the "Good News!" Just like that criminal on the cross Jesus is right here with us. Jesus has **"done nothing wrong"** and has kept every single one of God's holy Laws perfectly--every act, every word, even every thought—perfect! And He did it for us so that His righteousness would cover over us and our many sins. Like that criminal we can turn and see Jesus on that cross for us! He has been every bit as generous and gracious to us as He was to that criminal. Jesus paid for all our hatred and murder, for all our lust, greed and robbery, for all our jealousy and gossip, for all our addictions and shame—for all of our sin. His blood washed it all away.

Jesus promises us what He promised that criminal who reached out to Him in faith: **Jesus said to him, "Amen [which means, "truly," or "Yes!"] I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise" (v. 43).** Talk about miraculous irony! This "result is the complete opposite of what might be expected"—for the criminal on the cross, and for us! **"With Jesus!?" "In paradise (heaven)?"** Praise God!

The same Holy Spirit worked through that same Gospel to give us the same faith in our Savior as this dying criminal had. No one who knew this criminal would have expected him to make this confession. No one who truly understands how sinful our hearts are would expect us to either. But God does miracles. By His grace He takes sinners like us and turns us from **"criminals"** against His Law to His own dear children. Like that criminal on the cross turn and look to Jesus on His cross and trust in Him, now and always. He and He alone is the reason we—yes even we!—will be **"with Him in paradise."** Amen.