

The Last Hours
Today You Will Be With Me
Lesson 4 Luke 23.32-43
042025

Introduction

- 1 For the last several weeks we have been in a series entitled The Last Hours of Jesus' life on earth.
 - a We started in the Upper Room and the Last Supper and then went on the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus began to feel the weight of the cross. On Good Friday we considered the verbal insults of Jesus throughout his trials. This morning we have come to his cross.
 - b The passage I would like to share from this morning is found in the 23rd chapter of Luke's gospel. It is the story of the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus and it has within it one of the most beautiful sentences in all of scripture, Jesus words to one of the criminals, **today** you will be with in paradise.
- 2 Throughout the New Testament the word today is not just used as a designation of chronological time, yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is also used to designate a moment in time when a significant spiritual change takes place.
 - a For example the moment Jesus was born into the world. The angels said to the shepherds, **today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11)**. That was a significant moment.
 - b Then there is that moment 30 years later when Jesus begin his ministry to the world.
 - In his hometown synagogue, on the Sabbath, he was given the honor of reading the Scripture. Providentially, it was Isaiah 61 which announced the ministry of the Messiah. It began, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me the preach the good news.
 - After he finished the passage he said, **"today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."**(Luke 4:21). That was a significant moment.
 - c During his ministry those significant "today" moments were offered by Jesus to many people he crossed paths with.
 - While passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, he invited himself into a tax collectors house named Zacchaeus.

- Zacchaeus believed in Jesus and Jesus said to him, **today** *salvation has come to this house (Luke 19:9a)* That was a significant moment for Zacchaeus.

d Jesus was constantly offering people “today moments” all the way to the end. As he hung on the cross, he turned to the criminal next to him and said, **today** *you will be with me in paradise*. Let’s read the whole passage beginning in verse 32 with Jesus being led outside the city of Jerusalem to be crucified.

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Lk 23:32-43)

Two Criminals

- 1 Today you will be with me in paradise. In Scripture “paradise” is one of the words used to describe heaven, the abode of God and the eternal dwelling place of those who believe in Jesus Christ
- 2 So Jesus says to the criminal, today you will be with me in heaven. And under the circumstances the criminal was in, those would be the most wonderful words a person could ever hear.
- 3 But why were they directed to only one criminal and not the other? Jesus says to one, you are going to be with me in paradise and to other he says nothing.

- 4 Why? It seems Luke wants us to ask that question because their circumstances were so similar.
 - a Both are suffering the pain of crucifixion. Both are guilty of capital crime under Roman law.
 - b Both see Jesus and the sign over his head, “King of the Jews” (v38). and both hear his words, “Father forgive them” (v34).
 - c Both of these criminals desperately want to escape death and according to Matthew’s gospel, initially, both of them were mocking Jesus.
- 5 So they are very similar in many ways. But there is one way, that Luke reveals, in which they are drastically different. At some moment near the halfway point of Jesus six hours on the cross, the second criminal had a “today moment” where everything changed. Before we unpack that let’s take a look at the first criminal

The First Criminal

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”(v39)

- 1 The word criminal here refers to more than a petty thief. It is someone who has committed a serious crime.
 - a In Matthew’s gospel the criminals are called “robbers” which is the same term used in the story of the Good Samaritan to describe those who mugged a man and left him for dead alongside the road.
 - b It suffices to say that whatever these criminals had done, their crimes were serious.
- 2 Nonetheless, in spite of his circumstances, the first criminal was shouting at Jesus, *aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!*
 - a His question, “aren’t you the Christ?” was not intended to gather information. He was actually accusing Jesus of being a fraud. And along with that accusation He was, as the text says, hurling other insults at Jesus.
 - The word “insults” is translated from the Greek word *blasphemeo* (blas-fay-meh'-o) which is the word that we get the English word blasphemy from.
 - So he is blaspheming Jesus. He was hurling hatred and spewing venom.

- b But within his venom spewing is even something worse. It's bad enough he is blaspheming Jesus but at the same time he is actually calling on Jesus save him from his predicament. Save yourself **and us**.
 - He doesn't really believe in Jesus nor does he show any remorse or repentance, but he was willing to say anything if it would get him out of his dreadful circumstances.
 - "I'm suffering so why not try God?"
- 3 Both of these guys cried out to Jesus to save them from death. However, the condition of their hearts was radically different. When the first criminal cried out to Jesus to save him ...
 - a He had no brokenness or humility in his heart. He had no repentance over his sin.
 - b He did not see Jesus as a king to be followed. He could only see Jesus as a means by which to escape the cross. In other words, he was attempting to use Jesus rather than humble himself before Jesus.
 - c And how did Jesus respond the criminal who simply wanted to use him? Jesus said absolutely nothing. Scripture doesn't even say Jesus looked at him, let alone acknowledged him.
- 4 If you think about it this guy was like someone who won the lottery.
 - a He was dying ... but next to him was the one person on earth who could relieve him of the fear of death with the promise of salvation.
 - b If there's anybody who should have turned to Jesus it was this guy. But he refused to. In First Corinthians 1 the Apostle Paul tells us why. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).*
- 5 In other words, when it comes to the cross there are two kinds of people in the world There are those who are perishing and those who are being saved.
 - a To those who are perishing, the message of the cross is foolishness. Foolishness is from the Greek word *moronos*, where we get the word *moronic*.
 - These are people who when they hear the message that God created us, we sinned, so God became a man, died on the cross to pay the penalty of sin our sin deserved so we could be forgiven ...they say that's moronic, foolishness.

- That's not for me. That's for the less educated for those who are emotionally weaker and just need something to believe in.
 - If it helps them then fine but to me it's just a myth, a religious fable. The gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing.
- b But the second kind of people are those who are being saved.
- When they hear the message of the cross, it supernaturally becomes the power of God that brings about their forgiveness of sin.
 - When they hear the gospel, the Holy Spirit begins to work in them and they are able to grasp the gospel, believe it and be saved.
- 6 So to the first criminal Jesus' death on the cross was foolishness to reject. To the second it was the power of God to save. So what was then about the second guy that led him to believe in Jesus? There are three things. Let's take a look at them beginning in verse 40.

The Second Criminal

⁴⁰ **But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"** ⁴¹ **We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."** ⁴² **Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."**

- 1 **First, he feared God.** And we know that because this change that he experienced cause him to become shocked that the first criminal had no "fear of God." He said, "don't you fear God?"
- a The fear of God is a term in the Bible that refers to an attitude and belief that God is infinitely greater than me, that he created me, sustains me and that one day I will stand before him and give an account of the life he has given to me.
 - b And, at the very least, you do not relate to a God like that like you would another human being. And you certainly do not hurl insults at Him. Rather, you entrust your life to Him and worship him.
 - c That is what is meant by the phrase the fear of the Lord. It is a right and rational and wholesome respect for the Lord. And the second criminal somehow has acquired it.
- 2 **Secondly, he realizes Jesus is unique.** (4 ways)
- a He realizes Jesus is righteous.
 - He says we are getting what our deeds deserve but this man has done nothing wrong.

- He is not hanging here because of his own wrong and guilt. He is hanging on the cross for some other reason.
- b He realizes that Jesus is a **King** with a kingdom.
 - The sign posted over his Jesus' head on the cross is not sarcasm for him, it's reality. He is a king over a kingdom.
- c He realizes that Jesus was inaugurating his kingdom through his death.
 - He says, to dying Jesus, remember me when you **come into your kingdom**. In other words you're about to ascend your throne. When you do remember me.
 - What kind of king ascends his throne by dying? Only a king who said, my kingdom is not of this world.
 - For three years Jesus had been trying to get the disciples to understand this. This guy gets it in five minutes.
- d Lastly, he understands that King Jesus is unique because he has the power grant eternal life.
 - **Remember me** when you come into your kingdom.
 - In other words, "Remember me so I will live past this moment in your kingdom."

Question: How did the second criminal come to these realizations?

- a It was not because he was particularly insightful. It was because God revealed it to him.
 - Ever Christian I have ever talked to about this all speak of a brief season in their life that led to a moment when everything about Jesus started making sense to them.
 - Before that moment they heard about Jesus, read about him in the Bible, discovered neighbors or friends who were Christians and maybe even started attending a church. But for some reason they just couldn't wrap their head around all of it.
 - But then there is that "today" moment when it all made sense to them and they concluded, Christ died for me. God so loved me that he gave his only Son. It's real, it's for me.

... So the second criminal came to these conclusions not because he was particularly insightful ...

- b Nor was it because he was more religiously predisposed.
- Some people think that just like there are people who are *genetically predisposed* to a certain disease that there are some people who are predisposed to embrace religion. They have the “religious gene.” It’s in their constitution.
 - But that theory falls apart with this guy. When the crosses were first dropped into the ground he was railing at Jesus along with the first criminal. So there was not predisposition to believe. There was no “religious gene.” No, something happened to this guy. And it led him to ...

3 Thirdly, he admitted his guilt.

- a And not only did he admit to his wrong and guilt, he accepted his punishment as punishment deserved. He said, *we are punished justly, we are getting what our deeds deserve.*
- b And when he says this he is not only talking about what he deserves before the court of man, but what he deserves before the court of God. And this is the place that some people have trouble with.
- They say I’m not a lawbreaker. That’s good. But that does not mean haven’t broken God’s law. We have all broken his commandments. We have all put other things before God. At a certain point in life we all rebelled against our parents, lied, coveted and lusted. We have all been unloving and thought more highly of ourselves than we should.
 - I may not be guilty before the court of man but that doesn’t mean I am innocent before the court of heaven.
 - Furthermore, I may not see the depths of my guilt before God, but it has to be significant if the only remedy was Christ’s death on my behalf.
- c At the very least I am self-centered by nature. And even my selfless deeds are sometimes self-centered. We are, as Saint Augustine said, “*incurvatus in se*” or curved in on ourselves ... and even though we are capable of good we still have to fight the curve.
- We’re like the kid I heard about recently whose mother was making pancakes for he and his little brother. The boys began to argue over who was going to get the first pancake.

- The mom recognized the teachable moment and said, “If Jesus was sitting here right now, He would say let my brother have the first pancake.”
 - So the five year-old turned to his little brother and said, "Hey little buddy, guess what ...you get to be Jesus today!"
- d Sure I am a good person, but by what standard? When I compare myself to God’s standard of righteousness ... I fall miserably short. We all do. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).*
- 4 Ironically, this is where the good news of the gospel begins. I fall short and I need God’s forgiveness. That’s why Jesus died. He did not die as an example but as a Redeemer. He did not die as a martyr but as a Substitute to bear the penalty of my sins.
- a We see this earlier in the 23rd chapter of Luke when Jesus is brought before Pilate to be judged and Pilate finds no fault in him.
 - b In spite of the innocent verdict the people still call for his crucifixion and demand, according to their cultural custom, that a convicted murderer named Barabbas, be released and that Jesus be crucified in his place.
 - c So what you have is someone who is guilty being freed through someone who is innocent dying in their place. It is a beautiful illustration of the gospel.
- For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ (2 Cor 5:21).*
- 5 So Jesus turns to this thief and says today you will be with me in paradise. If there’s any story in the Bible that teaches us that God’s forgiveness is by grace alone, through faith alone ... it is this story.
- a There is nothing this guy could do to earn his salvation. When he asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom Jesus did not say,
 - Sorry buddy, you haven’t been to the temple lately, made an offering, helped a widow or given to the poor.
 - And in your current condition it’s obvious you are not going to be able to fulfill those requirements. So I’m sorry, there is nothing I can do for you. You fall short.
 - b No, he said today you will be with me in paradise.
- 6 How? 1) This guy simply admitted his sin, 2) believed Jesus could save him and 3) called out for mercy. And Jesus said ...*Today you will be **with me** in Paradise.*

- a Not today you will be in paradise or today I will send you to paradise or today I will give you two tickets to paradise.
- b No, today you will be **with me** in paradise.
 - What makes heaven so great is not its perfection and all of it's beauty, nor the absence of sin and all it's painful consequences ... it is the presence of Jesus.
 - The pinnacle of Christianity is not the place of heaven but the Person of Heaven. Heaven is not like some supernatural all-inclusive island resort; rather it is a place of the full presence of Jesus Christ.
In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Ps 16:11
- c And that is where the second criminal is to this day ... with Jesus at the right hand of the Father. As Ephesians 2 says, he seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:6).
 - And because he is "in Christ" he is the second criminal no more. He is a forgiven and a child of God.
 - Jesus said to him ... today you will be with me in paradise.

Conclusion

- 1 When I began the message this morning I mentioned that when the word "today" is used in the New Testament it not only refers to chronological time but also for ***a moment in time when something significant changes.*** And it's possible you may be on the precipice of one of those moments this morning. It could be a "today" moment for you.
- 2 It is not uncommon when these "today moments" come about that people often say "tomorrow." Perhaps tomorrow I will consider the claims of Jesus. Perhaps tomorrow I'll get serious about my relationship with Jesus. I've got plenty of time.
- 3 To that notion the book of James says,
How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone (James 4:14).
 - a Then it's gone. That is why 2 Corinthians 6 says
Today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).
 - b That is why Hebrews 3 says
Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (Hebrews 3:7–8a).
- 4 Today it may be that you are hearing his voice speaking to you through his Word. If so, do not brush it aside. Open up your heart. There is no

guarantee that you will be ever again be inclined to make a decision and believe in Christ.

5 You say I want to but I have done some things that I am ashamed of and I just don't know if God would forgive me. We all have.

a We all have vacillated between our moments of moral sunshine and our moments of moral darkness.

b But Jesus remains the same forgiving Savior that he was to the criminal on the cross because ...

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and **today** and forever. Hebrews 13:8*

6 If you would like to believe in Him this morning, please join me in a confession of faith.

Jesus I believe in you, that you died on the cross for my sin, that you rose from the dead for my salvation. I am forgiven child of God, not by anything I have done, only by what you have done. Today, I believe.

Small Group Discussion Questions:

- 1 What stood out to you most from the sermon? Why?
- 2 The sermon mentions several "today moments" in Scripture. Can you share a "today moment" from your own life when you experienced a significant spiritual change?
- 3 How do you relate to the two criminals on the cross? Have you ever found yourself identifying with either of their attitudes towards Jesus?
- 4 The second criminal demonstrated three key things: fear of God, recognition of Jesus' uniqueness, and admission of guilt. How do these elements play a role in our own faith journeys?
- 5 How does the story of the thief on the cross challenge or affirm your understanding of salvation by grace?
- 6 The sermon emphasizes that heaven's greatest joy is being with Jesus. How does this perspective impact your view of eternity and your current relationship with Christ?
- 7 Discuss the urgency of responding to Jesus' invitation today. Why do people often say "tomorrow" when it comes to spiritual matters?