

THE WORD OF PARDON  
LUKE 23:39-43

In the month before President Trump left office he issued a number of pardons, as is his prerogative guaranteed by the US Constitution. The pardons drawing the most attention were given out to friends who were swept up in the Mueller probe, which occurred early in his administration. Those pardoned included Roger Stone and Paul Manafort and Steve Bannon.

These pardons are hardly the most controversial in the history of presidential pardons. Some regard Gerald Ford's pardon of President Nixon as the most controversial pardon. But others point to President Clinton's pardon of Marc Rich. He was a billionaire financier who fled the country to avoid tax evasion and fraud charges. His wife contributed \$450,000 to the Clinton Presidential Library. She also gave \$100,000 to Hillary Clinton's New York Senate bid.

*The New York Times* called this pardon "a shocking abuse of presidential power." President Clinton felt that it was necessary to defend his pardon decision. At one point he said, "**The word 'pardon' is somehow almost a misnomer. You're not saying those people didn't commit the offense. You're saying they paid. They paid in full.**" (CNN, 1/25/2001)

If that was the standard that the criminal in our story had to meet to receive a pardon from God, he fell far short. He had not paid his debt to society or to God. He deserved to die. He deserved to go to hell.

This individual has come most commonly to be known to us as "the thief on the cross." That description is not really accurate. The original word used in our passage to describe these two bad guys means "criminals, individuals who have committed serious crimes." The Greek word used to describe this criminal in the other gospels can be translated as "thief" or "robber." But it can also be translated as "insurrectionist" or "rebel." We know that this guy not just a thief because the Jews had their own courts and legal systems that dealt with common criminals, and death was not the penalty for theft. The Romans didn't care about common thieves. They did have an interest in insurrectionists and men who tried to kill their soldiers.

This insurrectionist and his partner on the other cross, together with Barabbas, who had been freed earlier that morning in exchange for Jesus, were probably Zealots. The Zealots were a radical Jewish religious group in the first century who hated the Romans. One of Jesus' disciples is called Simon the Zealot. The first century Jewish historian Josephus gave us details about them.

These Zealots looked at the world situation of their day, and they didn't like what they saw. The Romans were just too wealthy and too powerful. They controlled world trade. They were infidels, and, worst of all, these Gentiles controlled their country. They even stationed their military troops in their holy land. They had an outpost on one corner of the Jewish temple.

The Zealots were the Jewish Al-Qaida or ISIS of their day. They were terrorists. If explosives had been available to them, some of them would probably have been suicide bombers. Thirty years later a splinter group of the Zealots would gain control of Judea, killing many of the Jewish leaders as well as some of the Romans. But eventually the Roman armies would come and put down the rebellion and destroy Jerusalem and tear down the temple, as Jesus had predicted just a few days before the events of our story.

Earlier in the chapter we are told that Barabbas had been involved in insurrection and murder. Probably these two criminals were involved with him in that crime. The cross which Jesus now occupied had originally been intended for Barabbas. Now, ironically, it was occupied by the true King of the Jews who had come to set His people free and to establish His kingdom.

The other gospels tell us that both criminals initially joined in with the other hecklers in taunting Jesus. Verse 39 in our passage says that the other criminal continued with his attacks: **“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’”** In his limited perspective, if Jesus was really someone special with extraordinary powers, He should get himself down off of the cross and then do something about His fellow criminals. Of course, the important kind of salvation which Jesus was seeking to accomplish required Him to die.

The man with a change of heart in our story responded to the first criminal, as recorded in vv. 40 & 41: **“But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’”**

What accounts for the change in this terrorist? Ultimately it was the work of God in his life. But it appears that the Lord used the things which the man saw and heard about Jesus. We don't know if he had any previous knowledge about Jesus. But we know that on this day he heard religious leaders and a crowd and Roman soldiers making fun of a claim that this rabbi made that He was King of the Jews. He heard the Jewish leaders refer to Him as the Christ, the Anointed One of God. On the plaque which the Romans nailed to His cross this Jesus was labelled “the King of the Jews.”

On one hand it did not look like Jesus was able to save anybody. He was dying. But this criminal saw Jesus forgive His executioners. That was pretty strange. He also saw Jesus patiently endure the mocking of the soldiers and the two criminals and the religious leaders. He saw Jesus patiently endure the sufferings of crucifixion. His response in the midst of all of this was not normal. It was supernatural.

Facing his own death this terrorist had a natural fear for what lay beyond this life. He had a fear of God. He sensed an innocence and a holiness in this Jesus, which stirred his own conscience. That stirred conscience reminded him of his own evil deeds. Probably those deeds included killing people.

If I had been given the assignment to convert this terrorist, I would have been inclined to write the divine script differently. I would have arranged for some display of supernatural power, some cosmic display of Jesus' power to convince this guy that Jesus was the real deal. But it did not happen, at least not until later in the day. What the Lord used in this man's life was Jesus' patient endurance of suffering.

There is a valuable lesson in that for us. None of us like suffering. We prefer supernatural intervention in the midst of our challenges. But there is an opportunity in the midst of suffering to influence others for Christ, if we will patiently endure it. Patient endurance of suffering is not normal. It is the evidence of God's presence with us.

The criminal's acknowledgment of wrongdoing in v. 41 was a significant admission. It was an acknowledgment not only that he had broken Roman law but also God's law. I take it that he was admitting that he was a sinner and that he was deserving of Rome's judgment and God's judgment.

In spite of that, perhaps because of that, he turned and made a request of Jesus in v. 42: **"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** This radical Jew knew the Hebrew Bible. He, like the Pharisees, believed in the resurrection of the dead. He believed that the Messiah would come and establish His kingdom on the earth. Up until now this criminal had been trying to facilitate that coming kingdom by fighting against the Romans.

But now this man was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and that at some time in the future He would return to earth and establish that kingdom. His request was that when that happened, Jesus, the Messiah, might somehow extend mercy to him to allow him to be part of that kingdom.

At this moment the criminal has more theological insight than any of the apostles. The apostles were confused and distraught. They could make no sense of this crucifixion of their Master. The criminal had more insight than the priests who were Sadducees and who refused to believe in the resurrection from the dead. John Calvin comments on this verse, saying, **"How clear was the vision of the eye which doth see in death life, in ruin majesty, in shame glory, in defeat victory, in slavery royalty. I question if ever since the world began there has been so bright an example of faith."**

At this point Jesus made a promise to the criminal that went further than anything he could have hoped for. In v. 43 Jesus said to him, **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."** "Today you will be with me in paradise." How could this terrorist, this murderer, have hoped for such an outcome?

The original word here for “paradise” appears two other times in the New Testament. Originally it was a Persian word. It referred to a beautiful, cultivated garden. The Bible doesn’t tell us much about this paradise, this place where followers of Jesus go when they die. It does tell us more about the kingdom which Christ will set up on the earth and about the new heavens and the new earth that will be established in the future. It is clear, however, that paradise is a wonderful place and that Jesus is there.

This welcoming of the sinner into paradise by Jesus tells us very important theological truths. It tells us **first** that our entrance into paradise is not dependent upon our good works. Mohammed Ali, the famous theologian--- and boxer--- once expressed the thinking of so many people in our society when he told a journalist, “**One day we’re all going to die, and God’s going to judge us, [our] good and bad deeds. [If the] bad outweighs the good, you go to hell; if the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven.**” (*Reader’s Digest*, December 2001)

The bad on this criminal’s scale far outweighed the good. He was about to die. He had no more opportunity to go out and do good works. Yet this terrorist received the word of pardon from Jesus.

**Second**, if anybody ever deserved to experience purging from sin in purgatory, it was this man. He was a murderer and a rebel. He himself acknowledged that he deserved to die for his crimes. Yet Jesus says that he will be with Him in paradise, not in purgatory, on that very day. That should raise doubts in our minds about the Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

**Third**, this guy did not get baptized. I am a Baptist minister. I believe in water baptism. But baptism does not make one right with God. It is faith alone in Christ that does that. Water baptism is simply a public testimony that we have become followers of Jesus. This guy made it to paradise without baptism.

**Fourth**, this rebel did not go forward in church. He did not respond to an altar call. He did not even raise his hand. Clearly these things are also not essential to being made right with God. The human responsibility is simply faith in Christ.

**Fifth**, this guy did not really say the sinner’s prayer. If Jesus had been a little better schooled in proper evangelism techniques, don’t you think that He would have had some kind of “pray along prayer?” This terrorist’s confession of faith does not sound like anything that I have ever seen in an evangelistic tract. Have you ever come across an evangelistic tract that had a “pray along prayer” with the line “remember me when You come in Your kingdom?”

Prayers can be useful in helping people express their faith in Jesus, but the point is that it is not words which save anyone. It is not words or a prayer that saved this man. It was the faith that God brought about in this man’s life which expressed itself in these words. It was faith alone in Jesus.

There on the crosses on either side of Jesus were the criminals who picture all of humanity. Both of those criminals were sinners. They were rebels against God. They deserved to die. They were guilty. They were helpless. One continued to mock Jesus and to refuse to place faith in Him. The other received a pardon. That was the one who turned in faith to Christ, who was in the process of paying the penalty for the sins of mankind.

And so it is with us. All of us are sinners. We are rebels before a holy God. By nature we do not want to submit the control of our lives to someone else. But some of us, like that one criminal, have turned in faith to Christ and have received the word of pardon.

In 1829 a man by the name of George Wilson was involved in robbing a train in Pennsylvania. During the course of the robbery someone was killed. Because a mail car was involved, Wilson was tried in federal court. There he was convicted and sentenced to hang. For some reason President Andrew Jackson granted him a pardon. One day the wardens brought George Wilson the pardon. But instead of getting a warm reaction of joy and relief from the condemned man, the prison officials were greeted with a hard stubbornness and a refusal to take the pardon.

The officials were dumbfounded. They did not know what to do. So they sent the matter back to court. Eventually the question was appealed to the US Supreme Court. In 1833 Chief Justice John Marshall in the majority opinion ruled, **“A pardon is a paper, the value of which depends upon its acceptance by the person implicated. It is hardly to be supposed that one under sentence of death would refuse to accept a pardon, but if it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged!”** So it was that George Wilson went to the gallows and was hanged, even though a pardon had been granted to him.

So it is that God has provided a pardon for all of us. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, died on the cross on that first Good Friday to pay the penalty for our sins. But in order for that pardon to do us any good, we must receive it. We must first recognize that we are sinners before a holy God, that we are deserving of God’s judgment. Then our responsibility is to turn in faith to Christ, believing that He is God and that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and rose again on Easter Sunday. If we will trust in Him, we can be assured, just as that terrorist was, that we will be with Christ in paradise when we die.

Most of us here today have made that decision. We can look forward to being with Christ in paradise. The challenge to us is to show that same graciousness and willingness to pardon others that Jesus showed to us. Too often we Christians can be like the Pharisees who were quick to condemn those who did not meet their standards.

Consider this second illustration, also from early American history, also set in Pennsylvania. During the Revolutionary War there was a Pennsylvania pastor by the name of Peter Miller. Miller was an educated man. He came to know some of the founding fathers of the country. Thomas Jefferson asked Pastor Miller to translate the

Declaration of Independence into the seven other languages which Miller knew. Pastor Miller was loved by almost everyone in his town of Ephrata. But there was one man who lived near the church who was always giving this pastor grief. His name was Michael Witman. Witman was mostly upset that Pastor Miller had changed his church affiliation. On one occasion after that Witman struck Miller in the face. On another occasion he spit in his face.

Toward the end of the war it was discovered that this man was working secretly for the British. He was arrested and convicted of treason and sentenced to hang. The military trial took place in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. When Pastor Miller found out about the trial and conviction, he took off on foot to visit General Washington and to ask him to spare the guy's life. **"I'm sorry,"** Washington answered him, **"but I cannot grant your request for your friend."**

**"Friend!"** Miller cried. **"Why, that man is the worst enemy I have in the world!"** **"What?"** The general responded. **"Have you walked sixty miles to save the life of an enemy? That, in my judgment, puts the matter in a different light. I will grant him a pardon for your sake."**

The pardon was written out and signed by General Washington, and Miller left at once on foot to the place fifteen miles away where the execution was scheduled to take place that afternoon. He arrived just as the man was being carried to the scaffold, and when he saw Miller hurrying toward the place, remarked, **"There is old Peter Miller. He has walked all the way from Ephrata to have his revenge gratified today by seeing me hung."** But scarcely had he spoken the words when Miller pushed his way through to the condemned man and handed him the pardon that saved his life. He accepted it, and his life was spared. (*Peter Miller and Michael Witman: A Revolutionary Episode*, Hiram Erb Steinmetz, Lancaster County Historical Society)

Peter Miller understood the pardoning grace of God. He had experienced it himself. He recognized his need to extend it to others. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." May God help us to show the same pardoning grace to others which He has shown to us.