

Today You Will Be Me In Paradise

Luke 23:30-43

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

As Jesus languished on the cross, the rulers scoffed at Him, “He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!” The soldiers who nailed Him to the cross also mocked Him by offering Him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” Even one of the criminals hanging on an adjacent cross made fun of Him saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Jesus was, by the way, saving them – purchasing their salvation.

It is then there is the comment which brings about Jesus’ word that we focus upon tonight. One criminal hanging beside Jesus says to the other, “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.” Then he speaks to Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The other two men naked and nailed to crosses on Jesus left and right are receiving that which is the due reward of their deeds, the sentence of condemnation. They had committed crimes which the Roman court had found them guilty, and now their sentenced punishment is taking place – they are crucified to Jesus’ left and right. Scripture says, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” (Deut. 21:22-23) Those who are crucified are under the condemnation of God, they suffer God’s wrath and punishment.

As we consider those who would be sentenced to such kind of capital punishment for their crimes, they these must be the most hardened criminals. The two men crucified are described by Matthew and Mark as robbers or thieves, but they must have done more than stolen from others. It is probable that they killed in the process of stealing. Such were the deeds that earned men this kind of death, the death reserved for the most hardened criminals.

In both Jeremiah and Romans, we hear that evil deeds earn the wrath of God and His punishment. In Jeremiah, we heard: “Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil deeds.” And again, in our Jeremiah text: “I will punish you according to the fruit of your deeds, declares the Lord; I will kindle a fire in her forest, and it shall devour all that is around her.”

God threatens that there will be consequences, punishment for deeds that are evil. In Romans, the same thing is said. Paul says, “Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

Such things deserve death? Death? That’s a harsh punishment! So, what is it that will cause God’s wrath against sin? Such punishment is threatened because such deeds also show that they do not acknowledge God. So, what is it that is directly opposed to God? In Romans, we read: *And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*

Hold it, did you hear what was in that list? Murder is there, but there is more. Covetousness is also on the list. Desiring to deceitfully obtain that which belongs to someone else is a sin deserving of death. Envy is on the list too! Looking at others and hating them because you wish you had what they had is a sin that deserves all the severity of God’s wrath. Gossips make this list as well. Anybody who speaks about others and ruins their reputation, whether what they say is true or false, they too deserve God’s wrath and punishment. Can you believe that disobedience to parents is deserving of death? Those who boast also earn God’s wrath? Yes, all these things, and more – since it is an incomplete list – earn us God’s wrath and punishment.

The world sees some of these things as insignificant. No, some are not the nicest things, but certainly they are not evil enough to earn the electric chair, lethal injection, and most especially, crucifixion. And yet, God's Word declares that is exactly what those sins deserve.

So, we need to listen to what the man on the cross says, "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." He acknowledges that he belongs on that cross, suffering for what he has done – he confesses his sin.

We deserve to be there, either on one side or the other of Christ, nailed to the cross and suffering an agonizing death for our sins. Each and every one of us has sinned against God and deserved His eternal wrath and punishment. Yet, how often do we pooh, pooh our sins? After all, they are not that bad, are they? According to God's Word, they are. According to Jeremiah, we should be punished according to our deeds.

Listen again to the words of the thief. "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." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Do you hear the humility of his prayer? He does not dare to ask Jesus for forgiveness. He does not say anything about the possibility of salvation. He asks only that Jesus would remember him. He knows Jesus as what He is, eternal God, the innocent Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He knows that he does not deserve God's grace or mercy, but He remembers the promise. He remembers that God is a God of promise, promising mercy and forgiveness. And so, He only asks Jesus to remember.

Remember Lord, your promises.

Remember Lord, your mercy.

Remember me, a poor miserable sinner, when you come into your kingdom.

This past Sunday was Reminiscere Sunday. It means, 'Remember, O Lord.' It is fitting that this sermon comes in the week of Reminiscere, for this is the ultimate expression of the repentant cry. We want to be remembered, we do not want to be forgotten into the pits of hell, but remembered by God in His grace, mercy, and peace – even as He promised from of old.

Jesus response is elegant in its simplicity, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." He is saying, "Yes, I will remember you. I am remembering you now. My Father is remembering your sins against me, so that they will not be remembered against you. I am paying the eternal consequences of your sin, even as you are paying the earthly price, so that I may remember you in my kingdom."

There is no hesitation. Jesus knows the man's sin. He is fully aware of them And, His words give Him the ultimate assurance that His sins are forgiven and the doors of paradise are open to Him – today.

There is no reincarnation and having to try harder. There is no purgatory. People do not rest in some sort of suspended animation until Christ returns, waiting to be raised. Today you will be with me in paradise!

As you and I go through life's journey, there are days when death stares you in the face. It may happen when you remember a loved one who has died in the past, or it may be at the death of a friend, or triggered by something else. Whatever the reason, there are times you may wonder, "Have I really been good enough? I know I haven't been perfect, will my sins keep me out of heaven?"

Hear today, the words that Jesus speaks unto the sinner deserving death, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." In these words, Jesus is proclaiming to you that your sins are forgiven by the very sacrifice

He has made for you when nailed to the cross.

It is not about your works. We did not accomplish enough to earn a place in paradise.

But Jesus is accomplished it for us. In a few weeks, we will hear Him say that "it is finished." His last breath breathed, His work of purchasing forgiveness and eternal life will have been accomplished.

Dearly beloved of God, if you want confidence of your place before God, then hear these words Jesus spoke to a hardened criminal in our text today.

As Jesus spoke those words to that man on the cross so many years ago, He means for you to hear them, for they are His assurance to you. He remembers your sins against you no more. He remembers His promise to be your Savior. Live in this confident hope, now and forevermore. Amen.