

Grace to the Dying Thief

Purpose

To learn to listen to Jesus' words of grace and hope in our dying

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Luke 23:32-33, 39-43 (NIV)

Luke 23:32-33

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, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

39-43

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? 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, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:32-33, 39-43 (KJV)

Luke 23:32-33

32 And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

33 And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

39-43

39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

May 18	Colossians 1:9-14
May 19	1 Peter 1:17-23
May 20	1 Corinthians 1:26-31
May 21	2 Corinthians 12:1-6
May 22	Acts 7:54-60
May 23	2 Corinthians 5:1-10
May 24	Luke 23:32-33,39-43

Seeing the Need

It was March 28, 2017. I was in the northern end of my district for one of those typical church meetings, discussing with people the kind of pastor they hoped we could appoint there. My breathing was a little wheezy when I started the meeting, and throughout the hour, things just seemed to get worse. I thought I was having a panic attack for some reason. I just couldn't catch my breath.

I cut the meeting short and decided to drive and relax on the way to the next meeting in a town about 40 miles away. I couldn't even get to my car. Someone from the meeting asked if he could take me to the emergency room. By the time I got there, I was pale, and I learned that I had about an inch of space for breathing in my lungs. The medical staff did a wonderful job of pushing oxygen back into my lungs and started me on treatment to

open things up again. Then they transported me to a city about 60 miles away, where I became a guest of the hospital there for about four days. Today I feel better than ever, but before receiving treatment, I was probably about five minutes away from death.

We are all going to die. Most, if not all, of us have experienced the death of someone we know and love. We may have been present with someone at their time of death. Is it scary? It was for me. Going through all of that just wasn't on my calendar. What is the most important thing someone needs as they go through the process of dying? What would clearly be the best gift anyone could offer them?

Today's text may seem like a curious choice for this last Sunday of Easter, because it looks back to a particular event surrounding Jesus' death on the cross. But it was chosen because it strongly illustrates God's grace. It reminds us to listen for and share Jesus' words of grace and hope, especially at life's most difficult moments, even at the point of death.

Demanding Prayers

Come on, Lord! Can't you just do this for me this one time?

Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? I have to confess that I have, but the prayers were not for me. The times when I have made such demands on God were to intervene for someone I love. Whether it was for Cheri, our sons, my mother, or someone else, my mind and heart took over my reason, and I became almost angry that they were suffering.

Cheri had morning sickness during

both pregnancies. It wasn't just nausea; she couldn't keep a sip of water down. It started at the beginning of each pregnancy and continued for seven months. Both times, she ended up in the hospital with IVs and a scared husband.

Do you know why we only have two children? Because I wanted them to have a mother. My prayers during those times were not gentle or "let it be your will" types of prayers. I demanded, I pleaded, and I expected God to do what I wanted. These were probably the poorest seasons of prayer I have ever had, and it was only later, when bouncing baby boys were happy and healthy, that I realized indeed that God had taken care of my lovely wife, in spite of the rude prayers I offered out of desperation.

My faith tells me that God hears and receives all of our prayers, even when we offer them in ways other than the manner Jesus taught us to pray. God can handle it, and in the same way a parent can absorb the tantrums of a child, so God loves us and cares for us, even when we are demanding. It's important, however, to remember that God doesn't work for us. The breath we use to complain to God is first placed in our lungs by the one who cherishes us.

Scripture tells us that "two other criminals" were executed with Jesus (Luke 23:32). It's interesting that the word Luke used is different than the one Matthew and Mark used. Their word is more precisely translated as "thieves" or "robbers" and is the same word used to identify those who beat the man in the story of the good Samaritan. Another interpretation of the word Luke used is "revolutionary."

Barabbas was supposed to be crucified with these two criminals. Barabbas

wasn't just a thief; it was believed he was part of the whole insurrection movement against Rome. He "had been thrown into prison because of a riot and murder" (verse 25). Pilate had wanted to release Jesus, but the crowd demanded the release of Barabbas instead. The chief priests had brought Jesus to Pilate, saying that he had been "misleading our people, opposing the payment of taxes to Caesar, and claiming that he is the Christ, a king" (verse 23).

Luke tells us that "one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (verse 39). In other words, he said, we are all in this together, condemned for the same reasons, and so bring your power and do it now! Arrogant, demanding, and ignorant. Honestly, though, if I were hanging on a cross next to Jesus, I would probably make the same demand. Perhaps we all would.

Death from crucifixion was agonizing. Those subjected to it basically strangled to death because they could not hold themselves up by their legs and allow breath into their lungs. While we tend to look down on this first criminal, it's difficult to say we would not react in the same way, even as people of faith.

"Save yourself. Save us!" A mouth full of demands, with a heart perhaps full of desperation and a pair of lungs unable to sustain him for long. As we peer into this account, let's not walk too nobly by the first criminal, because Scripture says, "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory" (Romans 3:23). Let's take at least a moment and recognize that hanging on that cross is also our own possible demand or plea when we are faced with the reality of death in our own lives.

When have your prayers seemed demanding? What were the circumstances?

Remember Me

When playing board games, adults usually have the ability to look ahead at different moves other players might make and figure out a strategy to thwart their success and maybe punish them a little. Frankly, that's hard to do when you are the daddy and your opponents are your young children.

So, as my children and I played fierce games like Candyland or Hi Ho Cherry-O, when they were young, they would sometimes get themselves into a pickle. I could see it coming, but they never did. Often, when that happened, "we" would quickly amend the rules so that the player could stay in the game and not break down in tears. But when I would accidentally find myself in nearly the same predicament, they would only grin, their eyes twinkling, and force me to face the inevitable. They had no capacity or no desire to remember the good deal they had received, especially when it came to winning the game.

The second criminal on the cross beside Jesus that day offered a peculiar prayer. But first, he berated the other criminal, saying, "We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong" (verse 41). He then focused on Jesus and called him by his name.

That's a rare thing to read in Scripture. In all four of the Gospels, even when the disciples addressed Jesus, it was not in such a familiar way. He was called Rabbi, Teacher, Master, Lord, Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, or the

Christ. But addressing him by his given name was uncommon.

On the cross, however, this criminal staked no claim to the Son of God as his own. He did not know him as Lord or Master or Teacher or Christ. All that was left was for him to address Jesus as Jesus. In that moment, as we eavesdrop, we hear an intimacy and a sense in which all else is stripped away. There was no time left to use formal titles and polite address. The man simply called to Jesus, assuming nothing in terms of what he could claim from this person beside him.

But he asked, and the request recorded as the last words directed to Jesus in his life on earth were, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 42). When you usher in your kingdom, please remember me, Jesus.

The words are stunning in their simple plea. The criminal didn't ask for any special treatment or privilege. He didn't demand front row seats or business class or the better table at a restaurant. He said, "Remember me, Jesus," hoping that with his simple plea, he somehow honored Jesus.

These words have become for us in the Christian faith a cherished prayer. We use them as a form of meditation and in song. I believe that is because the prayer is so simple, with everything stripped away. No pretense, only honest and humble recognition of who was on the cross beside him and who would have the power to remember a criminal being crucified. Today, as we study God's Word, we also remember this person, because he asked Jesus to remember him.

What did the criminal mean? Perhaps he was only asking that when Jesus came into his kingdom, Jesus would think kindly upon his life at least as one who offered respect and recognition of who Jesus was. Some understand his request to mean that he was asking Jesus to count him in when the kingdom was established or that he was striking a deal with Christ for some kind of favoritism.

I want to believe that it was far simpler, far more straightforward than that. “Remember me, Jesus. Let my existence on this earth have been worth at least something, to be in your memory.”

If you were to pray, “Jesus, remember me” today, what would you mean by that?

I Assure You

May 24 is a special day for United Methodists. On this day in 1738, John Wesley went to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. As he was listening to a reading of Martin Luther’s preface to the Letter to the Romans, Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed,” and he experienced the assurance of salvation for his life. He knew that he could trust in Christ and Christ alone to take away his sin.

This event happened after Wesley had spent two years in America and had gone home terribly defeated and depressed over his failure to evangelize. After his Aldersgate experience, Wesley’s preaching seemed to take on a new vitality; and within another short span of time, he began to organize followers into classes and societies and to spread the “spiritual holiness” that identifies The United Methodist Church today.

On this same day, our Focal Passage invites us to hear Jesus’ words “I assure you” (verse 43). Jesus was about three hours from death, but he was not alone. On a cross next to him was a criminal who had made that simple request for Jesus to remember him when the Lord entered into his kingdom.

The word *assure* means “to make secure.” I will make the future secure for you, Jesus told the man. It is in my power to do so. You can move forward with a real sense of trust and hope that what you have heard is absolutely true or will come true for you.

So what did Jesus assure the criminal that day? Phrases like this can be a lot of fun in translating Scripture. The original Greek writing has no commas, and most of the ways things are translated are by the endings of the words or the context of the words. So preachers take this opportunity to change the comma placement and talk about the different ways we might understand what Jesus meant. It’s either “I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” or “I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.”

The first sounds as if, when Jesus died, the criminal joined him in heaven. The second sounds as if Jesus offered a promise for the future. I’ll leave it to you to decide for yourself what is “right,” since we have no way of knowing.

What we do know, however, is that these are words of Jesus’ assurance to the criminal and, by extension, to each of us who will also come with humility and simplicity, not demanding or expecting, but simply requesting this of the Messiah. “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.” That’s the blessing to grasp. Jesus, his last breaths labored

and painful, nonetheless offered such a blessing to a criminal.

It's curious as well that Jesus would use the word *paradise*. The word is not usually used to describe heaven but something closer to the garden of Eden. What we do know is that paradise is a setting of wonderful joy, peace, beauty, and gentleness, which are all aspects of an existence without sin and pain anymore. It would have been the finest blessing and benediction for the criminal.

As we hear Jesus' words of grace and hope to the dying criminal, it's my hope

that you also hear those same words offered to you. As we find ourselves at times in difficult circumstances, or even facing death, we can claim this assurance, this blessed assurance, that Jesus knows us and knows our needs, even today.

How would you describe the assurance you have in your life today concerning the grace of Jesus Christ? How might you grow in that assurance?

Jesus, remember me this day, as I bring my heart and life to you; in Jesus' name. Amen.