

HE SAID WHAT?!?!

Title: Part 7 – “Never Too Late”

Date: May 24, 2026

As we continue in this moment of worship and prepare our hearts for God's Word, let's take a minute and make some space for God to work in our lives. One of the practices we often incorporate into our services is a chance to pause and give God all our cares and worries. For some of you this might be the first time you have really done this in a few days so let's pause now and give God EVERYONE and EVERYTHING. Close your eyes and just say that under your breath, “God I give you everyone and everything...” Now as the band plays softly just take a few moments and give God all the things and all the people on your heart. Lovingly detach yourself from the cares of this world.

[PRAYER TIME]

Hey before you grab a seat take a :30 seconds and say “Hi” to some people around you. While everyone here in the house is saying “Hi” to each other I want to say “Hi” if you are joining us online or on our app, thank you for spending some time with us! We consider you a part of our church family so let us know how we can pray for you or serve you—we'd love to walk alongside you in any way that we can.

Hey, before we jump in, I want to take a brief moment on this Memorial Day weekend to honor the men and women who gave their lives in service to our country. Freedom has never been free, and we are standing on the sacrifices of people who gave everything so that we could gather in a room like this without fear. We are grateful for them and for the families who carry their legacy every single day, amen?

If you have a Bible with you or on your phone, meet me in **Luke 23**. If you don't have a Bible, no worries, everything will be on the screens. But I want you to listen to this passage carefully because what Jesus says here is at the core of what makes Christianity different from any other religion. The context is the cross and He speaks these words while pushing Himself up on His nailed hands and feet just to get a breath. That makes these words extremely valuable because each one came at a painful cost. So, Luke 23, starting in verse 32:

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. 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 God's Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked

him. They offered him wine vinegar³⁷ 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 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.**”

It is hard to believe, but we are in week 7 of a collection of messages called **“He Said What?”** where we have been meeting the real Jesus in His own words. And over the past six weeks, we have met a Jesus that challenged some of our caricatures of Him that have been formed from the church and from culture.

In week one, He asked THE question that defines our identity and changes your life forever. Then He revealed how we can know what God is actually like. He went on to diagnose the spiritual comfort that keeps so many of us stuck. In week four, He held grace and holiness in perfect tension. Week five, He looked at anyone who feels unseen and called them beautiful. And then last week He told us the truth: following Him is not safe, but it is good.

If you missed any of these messages I cannot encourage you strongly enough to go back and get caught up on our app or website. Of all the things we can talk about, this is the most important!

AND today we come to the cross. And what Jesus says from the cross, to a man who has nothing to offer, is going to answer a question that I believe someone in this room has been carrying for a very long time. **TODAY** I want to preach a message I am calling:

Never Too Late

On this Memorial Day weekend, we honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for something bigger than themselves. AND today we look at the One who gave the ultimate sacrifice for all of us. But what I want you to notice is what Jesus said with His dying breaths. Because it wasn't a battle cry. It wasn't a curse. It wasn't a complaint. It was an invitation.

AND this invitation answers a question every one of us will ask at one point or another, and honestly, at multiple points in our lives. And the question is NOT “Does God exist?”—most people are at least open to that. It's not “Is the Bible true?”—that's an intellectual

question you can research your way through. The question that we are sometimes afraid to ask out loud is this:

Is it too late for me?

Right? Have I gone too far? Have I done too much? Have I waited too long? Is there a point of no return with God, and have I already crossed it?

I've had that conversation with many people, and for whatever reason, it is mainly men. Sometimes it's a woman who will ask this out loud, but it's often guys who sit down, and they don't start with theology. They start with this: "Pastor, you don't know what I've done." And what they're really asking is, "Is there still room for someone like me?"

And again, I don't want to stereotype this because sometimes it's not the people you'd expect. It's not always the person who just got out of prison or the person coming off a decade of addiction. Sometimes it's the church lady who's been in the seats for 30 years and has been hiding something the entire time. Sometimes it's the teenager who got into something over their head and doesn't know how to get out. AND yes, sometimes, it's the husband who blew up his family and is staring at the wreckage wondering if God even wants to hear from him anymore.

And our culture doesn't help. We live in the world of Cancel Culture, where one mistake can define you forever, right? This used to be true of the small-town church, but now the internet never forgets... and rarely forgives. People get reduced to their worst moment and the comments section becomes the judge and jury. AND we've all seen this, where a screenshot from ten years ago can end a career today. So, come on, it's not surprising that we often project that same merciless standard onto God. "If the world won't let me move past this, why would God?"

But here's the thing about God, He doesn't operate in the comments section! He doesn't treat us like cancel culture! And what happens on this hill called Calvary is all the proof we need!

SO, if that's you today, if you've been carrying that question into this room for the past 7-weeks—OR maybe for years—I need you to pay very close attention to what happens on this hill. But first, write this down, the first big takeaway truth is this:

1. If you're still breathing, it's never too late.

Turn to someone next to you and see if they are still breathing... now tell them, "It's not too late." If you don't get anything else I say today, I pray you let that sink into your soul.

SO, let's set the scene for Luke 23. There are three crosses on a hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha, which means the place of "The Skull." This was the Romans go to site for executions. The text tells us Jesus is on the middle cross and on either side of Him are two criminals. Anyone know who the third cross was supposed to be for? The man the people shouted to set free instead of Jesus, the murder Barabbas.

This matters because the two "criminals," as we read in English, on either side of Jesus were not petty thieves who stole a loaf of bread. These were insurrectionists and violent criminals who tried to lead a revolt against Rome. Rome didn't waste crosses on small offenses. Whatever these men had done, it was bad enough to warrant the most brutal form of execution the ancient world had ever invented.

AND what's interesting is that in Matthews Gospel is says this:

⁴⁴ In the same way the rebels [Rebels plural, right, meaning both the guy on the left and right, the rebels] who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

So, it would appear that BOTH criminals initially mocked Jesus, not just the one we read about in Luke's account. At the beginning of the crucifixion, both men hanging on either side of Jesus were hurling insults at Him. They were joining the crowd, the soldiers, the religious leaders—everyone was mocking Him. "Save yourself! If you're the Messiah, come down from the cross!"

But something changed. Somewhere between the first nail and the last breath, something shifted inside one of those men. We don't know exactly what it was or when it was. Maybe it was watching Jesus pray for the people who were killing Him— "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." Maybe it was watching Him refuse to retaliate, refuse to curse, refuse to use whatever power He had to save Himself. Maybe it was seeing Him in agony care for his mother by entrusting her care to John. Maybe it was seeing the sign above His head, "THE KING OF THE JEWS," and slowly realizing it wasn't sarcasm. It was the truth.

Whatever it was, one of the criminals went from mocking to believing in the span of a few hours. While he was dying on a cross with moments left in his life.

That's why I can say with confidence, "If you're still breathing, it's never too late." It is never too late to turn to Jesus. This man had minutes left to live. He couldn't go to church. He couldn't get baptized. He couldn't read his Bible. He couldn't put a dime in the offering. He couldn't serve on a team in the temple. He couldn't join a group or sign up for a class. He had nothing. Absolutely nothing to offer except a desperate, last-breath request. And according to Scripture, that was enough.

Maybe you're in this room today or watching this on a screen and you feel like you've wasted years. Decades, maybe. You knew about Jesus. You grew up hearing about Him. But you went the other direction. You ran, you chased everything else, AND now you're sitting here thinking, "The window has closed. God was patient with me for a long time, but I pushed it too far."

If that is how you feel I would challenge you to look at that cross. If you still have breath in your lungs the window is not closed YET! This criminal proves it. If a guilty man with minutes left can turn to Jesus and hear "paradise," then you are not too far gone. Your past is not your final sentence! Your failures are not your final chapter! The door is still open!

AND I love how God works in this moment. Because think about what this criminal had been doing just hours earlier. He was MOCKING Jesus. Matthew tells us that. Both criminals joined the crowd in ridiculing Him. So, this isn't a story about a good man who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is a guilty man who was actively hostile toward Jesus earlier that same day. And between the mocking and the dying, something broke open inside him.

That gives me so much hope. Because it means the distance between mocking Jesus and believing in Him can be covered in a single afternoon. It means wherever you were this morning—or last night, or last year, or last decade—is not where you have to be right now. You can be a different person by the end of this service than you were at the beginning of it! This criminal proves that transformation doesn't require time! It just requires **surrender**.

AND hear me, surrender is the key to all of this. Everyone say "surrender." See:

One thief was saved so that no one has to despair, but only one so that no one can presume.

Amen? Don't despair, because one was saved. But don't presume, because only one was. Two men saw the same Jesus. Same cross. Same suffering. Same proximity. One mocked, denied, and died. One mocked, believed, and was saved.

My point, proximity to Jesus does not guarantee a response. Being close to something is not the same as receiving it. You can sit in this church every Sunday for ten years and never actually say yes. Or you can say yes today with your very next breath. The choice is yours.

Surrender is the key BUT, number 2:

2. Grace doesn't require a resume.

Look at what the criminal says in verse 42 again:

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I want you to notice a few things about this request:

First—he calls Him by name. Not "Lord." Not "Master." Not "Rabbi." Just "Jesus." That's intimate, that's personal, right? There's no religious protocol here. No fancy prayer language. No "Heavenly Father, I beseech Thee..." NO! It's just a dying man using the first name of the man dying next to him. That's all he had.

Second—he says, "remember me." Not "save me." Not "heal me." Not "get me off this cross." Remember me. That's the prayer of a man who has given up on rescue. He knows he's dying. He's not asking for a miracle. He's asking for something far more vulnerable, to not be forgotten. To matter to someone. To be known.

Hospice researcher David Kessler has documented that dying people almost universally move toward three needs: **connection**, **meaning**, and **assurance**. And when you look at this criminal's prayer it hits all three of those doesn't it? "Remember me," that's connection. "Your kingdom," that's meaning. And he says "Jesus," that's seeking assurance with a surrendered heart.

The third thing we see, don't miss this, he says "when you come into Your Kingdom." This man is looking at a beaten, bloodied, dying carpenter and calling Him a King. He's looking at a man who has been stripped naked, abandoned by His friends, and nailed to a piece of wood, AND still he sees a Kingdom. Come on, that's faith, amen? That's the kind of faith that sees through the mess to the majesty. Everyone else in the scene sees a criminal being executed. This man sees a King about to be enthroned in glory!

BUT beyond all that, and most important for us today, is that this criminal **had no resume**. As I just mentioned, no church attendance record, no baptism certificate, no theology degree, no tithing history, no quiet time streak, I mean he had never even memorized a Bible verse. His hands were nailed to a cross so he literally couldn't even fold them to pray. He had nothing to offer Jesus!

Nothing except a desperate, honest, request: Jesus, remember me. AND that was enough.

Because grace has never required a resume. Grace doesn't check your references. Grace doesn't ask where you've been or what you've done or how long it took you to get here. Grace asks one question: will you receive it?

And I want to push on this a little because I think a lot of us, even lifelong Christians, still operate like grace has a qualifying round. Like there's a minimum threshold of good behavior you have to meet before God will take you seriously. We don't say it out loud. But we live it. We think we have to clean up before we come to God instead of coming to God so He can clean us up. We think we have to get our act together before we pray instead of praying because our act is a mess. We think we have to earn our way back into His good graces when the whole point of grace is that you can't earn it! That's what makes it grace! That's what makes it AMAZING!

If the thief on the cross teaches us anything it's that the only qualification for grace is the admission that you need it. Amen? Not a resume. Not a track record. Not a reformed life. Just, "Jesus, remember me!"

Come on, that's the prayer of a man who has run completely out of options, out of strategies, out of self-help plans, out of the will to even change, and has nothing left to bring except himself. And Jesus doesn't say "It's too late..." or "You should have come sooner..." or "Let's see if you have earned this..." NO! He says, "Today you will be with me in paradise!"

This is the scandal of the Gospel that has offended religious people for 2,000 years. The guy who shows up at the last minute gets the same grace as the guy who's been faithful for fifty years. AND if that doesn't seem fair, it's NOT, it's grace! Fair is we all fall short of the glory of God and deserve death. Grace is what keeps us alive!

If you're still breathing, it's never too late AND grace doesn't require a resume. That takes us to this:

3. Jesus' last word is always an invitation.

So, what does Jesus say? How does Jesus respond to this man's plea? We've been getting to know Jesus in His own words, He said if you have seen Me you have seen the Father, right? So, how does God respond, what is the heart of God like? Verse 43:

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, **TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.**"

If you are familiar with this story don't let that keep you from the beauty and power of what is happening here on the cross and here in this room today. Let's take His words one at a time.

First, Jesus says **TRULY**. This literally means an oath. A guarantee. A legally binding promise. Jesus isn't saying "maybe" or "we'll see how it goes." He's saying this is a done deal. Signed, sealed, delivered. There is zero uncertainty in this word.

Then He says **TODAY**. Not tomorrow. Not eventually. Not after purgatory. Not after a probationary period. Today. When you are too weak to pull yourself up by your hands and feet to get a breath, when the last molecule of oxygen has been used in your lungs and you die... today! Today what?

YOU WILL BE WITH ME. Church don't miss this! If I lost you come on back because what Jesus just said here is that paradise isn't just a place. It's a Person! Jesus doesn't say, "Today you'll go to heaven." He says, "Today you'll be with ME." The promise isn't a location. It's a presence. The criminal on the cross isn't being sent somewhere. He's being brought to Someone. And that Someone is the same man who is dying next to him. With Me where though?

In **PARADISE**. The Greek word is {Par-odd-ah-sauce} paradeisos. It comes from the old Persian word for a walled garden, a lush, protected, enclosed garden belonging to a king. AND it's the same word used in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—for the Garden of Eden in Genesis.

In other words, Jesus is saying what was lost in the first garden is being restored. The gate that was shut in Genesis 3—when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden—is being reopened. Right now. On this cross. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Today your soul is going home. Back to the garden. Back to the way things were always meant to be."

AND He says all of this while He can barely breathe. Crucifixion kills primarily by asphyxiation. The weight of the body pulls down on the arms, compressing the lungs. To speak, the victim has to push up on the nails in their feet to open the chest cavity enough to get air. Every word Jesus speaks from the cross costs Him excruciating physical pain. And He uses that precious, agonizing breath, not to curse His enemies, not to call down angels, not to defend Himself, but to assure a criminal that paradise is waiting for him today.

Come on, with His dying breath, Jesus is still saving people! With the weight of every sin ever committed pressing down on His body, He is still turning His head toward one more person who needs Him! With no reason to care about anything other than His own agony, He cares about a dying criminal's eternity!

THIS is the Jesus we've been meeting for seven weeks! This is not a distant God who is too busy running the universe to notice your pain! This is not a religious system that

requires you to earn your way in! This is a God who is dying for our sins and still making room for one more sinner! Still opening the door for one more! Still using His last breath to say “YES” to someone everyone else had written off!

That is the heart of God! That is the character of Jesus! And if He said yes to that man on that cross in that moment, then there is nothing in your past, nothing in your present, nothing in your secret, nothing in your shame that can disqualify you from the same invitation! Can you praise Him in the House today for that!

As we wrap up, I want to connect this back to where we started seven weeks ago. Week 1, Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say I am?” That was the question we launched with. And for seven weeks, we've been watching different people encounter Jesus and answer that question in different ways. AND today, a dying criminal answers it. He looks at a man who is being executed, beaten beyond recognition, mocked by the crowd, abandoned by His friends, Had God turn His back on Him, and still, he sees a King with a coming Kingdom. He looks at the most unlikely candidate for a Messiah and says, “That's Him. That's the One.”

Peter answered the question at Caesarea Philippi standing in front of a wall of dead gods. This criminal on the cross answers it hanging on a tree watching Jesus die. Peter had three years of miracles and teaching behind his confession. This man had three hours of watching Jesus suffer. And both answers—the one from the inner circle of Jesus' disciples and the one from the last-minute criminal—both receive the same response from Jesus.

That's our God! He's not checking timestamps. He's checking hearts. Brennan Manning wrote:

“The sinners to whom Jesus directed His messianic ministry were not those who skipped morning devotions or Sunday church. His ministry was to those whom society considered **REAL SINNERS**. They had done nothing to merit salvation. Yet they opened themselves to the gift that was offered them.”

That's this criminal. And maybe that's how you feel today. Written off. Too far gone. Too much history. Too many failures. Too late... But Jesus' last word is never a rejection. It's always an invitation. Today, you can be with Me in paradise. That was His offer to a dying man 2,000 years ago. And it's His offer to you right now.

If you've been tracking with us and you are sitting there saying, “But you don't know what I've done!” You're right. I don't. But Jesus does. He knows every page of your story, every chapter you wish you could tear out, every sentence you've never spoken out loud.

And He said “today” to a criminal who had done worse. Whatever you've done, wherever you've been, however long you've been running—today can be different. Not tomorrow. Not when you get your act together. Not when you feel ready. Today!

If you want to say yes to Jesus, you don't need a class. You don't need a cleaned-up life. You don't need to understand every theological concept. You just need an honest prayer of surrender to His Lordship. And it can be as simple as what the criminal prayed: “Jesus, remember me.”

AND if you already know Jesus, here's my challenge. **Do you live like paradise is certain? Or do you live like you're still auditioning for acceptance?** Because a lot of us live like God is still deciding about us. Like we're on spiritual probation. Like one more mistake might close the deal. But if Jesus assured a dying criminal that paradise was a done deal, then how much more is it settled for you?

Stop performing for acceptance you already have. Stop living afraid. Stop rehearsing your failures in front of a God who has already said, “Neither do I condemn you.” You are not earning paradise. It was given to you the same way it was given to that criminal on the cross—freely, completely, irreversibly. You didn't deserve it. Neither did he. That's the whole point.

SO, this week, I challenge you with my biggest challenge yet. Tell one person what Jesus has done for you. Because there is someone in your life who is carrying the same question that criminal was carrying, “Is it too late for me?” They need to hear your story. They need to hear that grace reached you too. They need to see that the door is still open because you walked through it. Be the evidence that it's never too late! I dare you to be that bold this week! Amen?

Next week, we're going to close this out with one more one-liner from Jesus, AND we saved the best for last! Because it's not just something He said. It's something He said to YOU! Directly! An assignment that should change the way we do everything in our lives, so don't miss it!

Let me pray for you, church.

[PRAYER TIME]