



gracefellowship

Series: ~~un~~Worthy: Calling the Outcasts
Date: October 1, 2024

Title: Criminals and Crosses
Passage: Matthew 27:32-44

Communion

Prayer to enter into worship through the Word

After this morning we have one week left in our series. We are looking at eight snapshots in the book of Matthew that show us how Jesus approached those who were looked at as outcasts and seen as unworthy for the Kingdom of God in they eyes of the religious leaders. But the thing Jesus did over and over was move toward the outcasts and lovingly show them grace and compassion. Jesus could see past what everyone else considered to be failures and saw family!

Nothing illustrates that better than the interaction we are going to see today in Matthew 27 and Luke 23. Jesus has been declared innocent three time by Pontius Pilate, but the Sanhedrin stirred up the crowds to call for Jesus to be crucified. We are beginning this morning with Jesus on the way to be crucified.

:: Matthew 27:32-44

³² As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross.

³³ They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). ³⁴ There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

³⁵ When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁶ And sitting down, they kept watch over him there.

³⁷ Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews.

³⁸ Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

³⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads

⁴⁰ and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”

⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him.

42 “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.
43 He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”
44 In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Matthew tells us that two men were crucified with Jesus- one on His left, the other on His right. Then at the end of the passage we find out that these two men are *rebels* and they are heaping insults on Jesus just like the crowds. Jesus has become the target of not only the most brutal form of torture you can imagine, but also the taunts and jeers of everyone who is watching, including the men crucified beside Him.

Luke is going to give us a few more details of what takes place the longer Jesus is on the cross.

:: Luke 23:32-43

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 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 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 tells us that these men who have been crucified with Jesus are criminals. The original wording that was used, “*Lestes*,” indicates they were robbers, probably murders, like the ones Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. You don’t get executed by Rome for stealing things. You will get executed if you are violent and committing murder. It’s even possible these men ambushed Roman soldiers, we don’t know for sure. What we do know is that they had been caught,

imprisoned and sentenced to death. Their lives were over and they were the very definition of an outcast.

Matthew tells us that at first both these men are heaping insults on him and mocking him. But then we find out in Luke one of the men had a change of heart.

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There are two things I want us to think about here:

- 1. What turns a hardened criminal into someone who comes to the defense of Jesus?**
- 2. What is the response of Jesus to this deathbed confession?**

So, what is it that turns this man from mocking Jesus to defending Him? I think the answer is found in Luke when, after they were crucified, Jesus cries out, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Who does that? Who offers forgiveness to the people who drove nails in their hands and feet? Who shows concern for the people who pulverized them with whips? You have the two criminals who are probably lashing out at anyone and everyone- Jesus is just another person they can take their hate out on- and then you have Jesus who is praying for God to forgive his tormentors. I have to imagine the second criminal is so blown away by the witness of Jesus that he has a change of heart.

The thing that turned this man’s heart was grace on display.

So let’s ask ourselves a couple questions:

Are we condemning toward people or forgiving?

- Who is the person or group of people you blame all your ills on?

Is my anger toward people greater than my love?

- Who is the person or group of people you can’t bring yourself to love?

This man comes to Jesus while hanging on a cross and after mocking him and taunting him still finds compassion and forgiveness. He even stands up to his friend, who is mocking endlessly. We don’t know if these guys have any idea who Jesus is prior to this moment, but the first criminal catches on by listening to the chief priests and elders and teachers of the law who are making of fun of Jesus’ claims to be the Messiah. They all keep yelling for Jesus to save Himself and to have God send angels to pull him off the cross if he really is the Messiah. So the

criminal gets in on that line of mocking: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself *and us.*”

But the second criminal says, “Don’t you fear God? ...We are punished justly and are getting what our deeds deserve.” This guy confesses he is sinful. He owns his failures and admits that this is just punishment for all he’s done. But Jesus is innocent, yet He is handing out forgiveness! Who does that?

After his confession of his sin, the man humbles himself and asks Jesus to remember him when He enters His kingdom.

This brings us to the second thing we need to understand: Jesus shows extravagant grace and generosity to this man. When the criminal asks Jesus to remember him when He enters His Kingdom, Jesus doesn’t start asking the guy qualifying questions:

- When is the last time you were in Synagogue?
- Have you been keeping the commandments (it seems like there was something about not murdering and not stealing...how has that been going?)

Jesus simply says, “I tell you, you will be with me in paradise!”

- Some of you hear that and think: Wow! What an amazing, grace-filled Savior! That is generosity and love to the highest degree!
- Others of you hear that and think: That’s not fair! He doesn’t deserve that kind of grace and mercy. He didn’t do anything worth being forgiven.

With that in mind, we need to go back and think of a parable Jesus told earlier in Matthew’s gospel.

:: Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.

² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.

⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’

⁵ So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.

⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

⁷ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

9 “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.

11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

12 ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

13 “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’

14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.

15 Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

16 “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Do you know what I noticed in that story? The vineyard owner pays the workers in reverse order of how he hired them. He comes to the men who worked an hour and handed them a denarius. Then he paid the men in the middle shift a denarius. Then he paid the men he hired in the morning a denarius. What happened as a result? The first men hired are angry- even though they got exactly what was promised to them!

- What do you think would have happened if the vineyard owner paid the morning workers first?
 - o They would have walked away and never even known that the last men hired received the same amount as them! Problem solved.
 - o I think Jesus does this to force the issue by who He pays first. He actually says, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”
- The issue becomes generosity. Jesus wants us to know that His Kingdom isn’t based on fairness, it’s based on generosity that is powered by grace.

The Kingdom of God isn’t based on fairness; it’s based on generosity that is powered by grace.

There are really two ways this text has traditionally been interpreted:

1. Deathbed confessions: There are people who, at the last moments of their life, make a genuine confession for their need for Jesus. The thief on the cross doesn’t have time to join a Life Group, get baptized, have someone disciple him or learn theological terms! But he made it into God’s glory! Some of you have a hard time even with that because we say, “The thief on the cross gets the same experience of glory in heaven in the presence of God that Paul gets? That Peter gets? I’ve been walking with Jesus for years and he is on equal footing with me? How is that fair?”

Here's what you're missing: You've had the blessing of your ongoing relationship with Jesus for these years that the thief missed out on! For those who have been at the table longer- we have gotten extra time with God! And it was all by His grace you were invited in the first place! *Welcome those who come to the party late like brothers and sisters, not competitors.* We all come to Jesus through His grace!

2. Gentiles in the Kingdom: The second way to look at this passage is through the eyes of a first century Jew. Guess who the people in the story who were chosen last but were paid the same amount represent to them? Gentiles! That's you and me, by the way! For a few thousand years the Jews had walked in relationship with God as His chosen people. And now, in Jesus, God is making salvation available to all people. We didn't get the first invitation to the party, but we get the same access to God and benefit of His Kingdom. And it's all by His grace!

The thief on the cross beside Jesus repented, acknowledging his sin- I deserve this cross! But he didn't ask what he had to do to earn salvation, he just placed his faith in Jesus and said, "Remember me when you enter your Kingdom." And the grace of God was extended to him as he was dying on his own cross.

Author, Pastor and musician, Joshua Porter writes,

"If we are worthy of love and God loves us, then the whole grace thing is not so scandalous, not really costly at all. It's just cause and effect: we deserve to be loved, so God does it. Fair is fair. God's love for us would be more or less what we are owed. But if we are unworthy of love and yet cherished to the degree that the all-powerful, perfect, cosmic Creator and ruler of the universe would demonstrate his love in life and death, such a thing scandalizes the imagination."

– Joshua S. Porter

This month our church has a chance to partner with Kairos Prison Ministry and we are aiding men who will be going into a prison to take the gospel of Jesus to hardened criminals. These are men who will have a chance to hear about grace from a God who loves them no matter what they have done. As we end our service today I wanted to help drive home some of what we are talking about by having Tim Cornet come and tell us about this ministry and share something he does to present God's love to inmates so they can have the same chance to meet Jesus the thief on the cross had. Knowing Jesus won't get them out of prison- just like Jesus didn't get the man off the cross- but it will give them a seat at the table along with us and we may gain brothers for eternity who are currently living behind bars. And the beauty of the gospel is that God removes the chains of sin to give us freedom in His Son.

Illustration: Tim Cornet- Who Am I?

Closing: If you don't know Jesus as your Savior today there is no better time than now to invite him to bring you into His Kingdom. His grace is sufficient for you, no

matter what you've done. We have people who would love to pray with you and share more about what a relationship with Jesus looks like. Just like the two men crucified with Jesus, you have two choices in life: reject Jesus and mock Him or embrace Jesus and find life in Him.