

Lesson 13

The Thief on the Cross

Introduction

To take more than one has been owed or given is generally across the world seen as a moral crime. There is something in our design that recognizes the damage that can be done by thievery.. The first moral crime ever committed can be traced back to the idea of taking more than what is given—biting that one fruit that wasn't meant to be bitten. If there is ever any doubt about the impact that a single act of theft can do, one need only look to the Garden. In any context, thieves can't be trusted and they degrade the whole social order. To be sure, to succumb to the combination of pride, greed and lust that give birth to an act of thievery requires a certain degree of desperation and depravity.

The Romans were extremely unforgiving when it came to thieves. Hence why we see two thieves crucified next to Christ. The scene on the Hill of Calvary gives us a strong insight into who we are relative to Christ and how we ought to respond to his sacrifice on the cross.

Next to Jesus, we have two broken sinners—thieves. Each of these people began by mocking him, but it seems that one had a change of heart. This penitent thief provides for us an example of how even with barely anything left, we can still be pulled out of the ashes by Jesus. Think of the heart that it takes to go from mocking one minute to a sincere plea for forgiveness in the next. The broken heart of the thief on the cross who was saved is on full display in Luke 23.39-43.

Nothing Left to Give and Totally on Display

The back story of the thief on the cross is unknown to us in scripture. We don't know if he has always been a thief, or if he was once an honest laborer who lost his job. We do know that it's likely that the thief stole *for a reason*. We have to remember the thief was a person, with his own unique story and motivations. The thief likely would have had a bevy of justifications for himself for stealing things.

Yet, he was caught by the Romans. Thievery was highly unacceptable in Roman society as it represented a direct threat to the entire system. As an example, they typically crucified them in a public display of their power. As a flip side to the coin of the Roman display of power, this thief would have been experiencing a public display of his own weakness.

Thieves don't come in the broad daylight, or out in the open. Rather, they typically do their thievery in the shadows. There was no more hiding in the shadows for the thief. Like Jesus, his entire self was spread out before the crowd, arms wide open—vulnerable.

Typically, people, in order to preserve their own egos, self-image or public perception—tend to do what we can to cover our weaknesses and failings. This was literally impossible for the thief on the cross, by the very nature of the method of execution. The thief on the cross could not hide anything at this point.

He was;

- Guilty before man and God.
- Vulnerable and helpless, unable to do anything, negotiate or bargain.

- Debased and in shame, with seemingly with no chance for redemption.

Yet, it seems like even though he clearly had no status or pretense left, he and his fellow thief seemed both to begin to mock Jesus.

And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

—Matthew 27.44

Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

—Mark 15.32

A Change of Heart?

Despite the mocking, it seems that over the course of the events of the crucifixion, one of the thieves comes to a realization—Jesus is not to be mocked. Not at all. In fact, he is exactly who he always said that he was—the Son of God.

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other responded, and rebuking him, said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our crimes; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!”

Luke 23.39-43

What changed his heart to go from mocking to reverence?

Could it have been Jesus’ demeanor throughout the last moments of his life on earth? Perhaps it was his tone and the way he looked at the crowds.

Could it have been the words that came forth from Jesus as he hung there on the cross? Perhaps something clicked in the thief’s mind when he heard those words—“Father forgive them, they know not what they do.”

Could it have been that he had witnessed from afar Jesus’ life and ministry? Perhaps he had seen the lives of some of his followers and how they had so drastically changed. Maybe he wished that he could have changed, too. It seems too late for him, but it absolutely was not.

We see in this thief perfectly a visible sign of complete repentance and surrender to Christ;

- He takes responsibility for his own sins, v. 40-41a
- He proclaims Christ’s innocence, rather than lamenting his own condition, v. 41b
- He exalts Christ as Lord by acknowledging that the kingdom belongs to him, v.42

This process of a changing heart is exemplary for us as we turn our lives over to God, and is a vital part of our coming to God initially to enter into his kingdom and continually to walk in step with the Holy Spirit.

We Are Thieves

The story of the two thieves is included in the New Testament as a compare and contrast lesson for us to examine our own attitudes. It is a visual parable as well as an actual historical event. On the Hill of Calvary, when we come to the three crosses there we see Jesus right in the middle of two examples that we can choose to align ourselves with.

We can relate to both thieves in that at one time or another we had made a mockery of Jesus. Many of us would like to believe that we would not be in the crowd yelling “crucify,” had we been present. Many of us still may like to picture ourselves standing boldly with Jesus, rather than fleeing like his disciples. Many others may imagine that we would not mock Jesus while hanging next to him on a cross.

Our sins testify otherwise. When we acknowledge what sin is, and how imperfect we are, the reality of the situation clearly comes into view. Christ alone is the True One, the Faithful One, the Just One. We are no greater than the thieves that hung next to him.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Romans 3.23

If our God truly is our Creator and the supreme authority of creation, then we have stolen from him at any moment we have strayed from his will. Our hands, our hearts, our minds, our tongues and every earthly possession we have are the work of the hand of the Lord. Yet still, we are thieves. The sooner we acknowledge this, the sooner we can transition from being the “mocking thief” to the “mourning thief” to the “no longer thief” in Paradise with our Lord.

To Give Us a Second Chance

Remember, Jesus hung there on the cross with the weight of the sins of the whole world on his shoulders. This was physically manifested in numerous instances of physical humiliation, blunt force trauma, lashes, thorns, dehydration and unimaginable pain. Knowing fully that this had to be done because of people that took more than they were owed, Jesus turns to the thief who had just begged for mercy from God and said;

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23.43

We can't even begin to grasp the depths of strength and mercy that it must have taken Christ to say these words in between heaving breaths, lifting himself up in order to take in air. Take a minute and imagine the tone of compassion of Jesus through exasperated and pained voice. The natural question when we picture ourselves hanging there next to Jesus is this....

Why?

Why would Jesus give his life for thieves like us? The answer is in the words of Christ himself—“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15.13) Jesus meant every word

of this teaching. Christ is the outstretched hand of God to every one of us who would mock him even if we were hanging next to him, suffering in our brokenness. Even if we were the only one, he would not withhold his mercy from anyone who sought it. Why? The answer is pure love.

Take a minute and ponder what the thief likely did not have/could not do.

- He was likely not a rich man... He likely did not give generously to the temple.
- He was likely not a very morally upstanding or righteous man. He could not do enough good to outweigh all of his crimes.
- He was likely not highly religiously educated and full of knowledge of the Bible.
- He did not have time nor occasion to do anything major for Christ.

The thief on the cross was the lowest of the low as far as society was concerned. He had nothing left to give. Yet, he chose to spend some of his final breaths defending and exalting the name of Jesus. What a powerful example for us to examine and to see what it is that Jesus honors in a person. This is exactly the point of the cross—that we could see the overwhelming love that our God has for us, that he would visit us in our brokenness and take on the fate of a criminal just to give each of us a second chance.

For Thought and Reflection

1. Why did Romans punish thieves so harshly?
2. What does it take to succumb to the temptation to steal?
3. What are some of the personal, societal and spiritual effects of thievery?
4. Why did the two thieves mock Jesus?
5. What do you think would have impacted the repentant thief on the cross the most in order to change his heart?

6. What did it take for the penitent thief to say what he did to the other thief and to Jesus?

7. What can we learn from the example of the two thieves?

8. Why did Jesus go to the cross? What do we learn about God there on the Hill of Calvary?

9. What did the thief give to Jesus in order to be saved?

10. What does Jesus look for in regard to whom he allows to enter his paradise?