

Bad to the Bone – A Rejecting Thief

4/4/21

Luke 23:39-43

Sunday AM

In 1858, using an obscure statute in Illinois law, Stephen Douglas was sent to the U.S. Senate although Abe Lincoln had won the popular vote. In the moment, a concerned friend asked a dejected Lincoln how he felt, Abe replied, *“Like the boy who stubbed his toe: I’m too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh.”*

Rejection can be a tough pill to swallow can’t it? A sucker punch to the gut. Like when a spouse throws in the towel, or a boss hands out a pink slip – when we don’t make the cut for the team or we get ostracized by a friend or family member. The pain we feel can be devastating leaving us dazed, wounded, abandoned – and oftentimes angry. And depending on how we handle it, rejection will either leave us **bitter** or **better**. More often than not, it also leaves us questioning the goodness/presence of God.

Has this ever happened to you? You prayed for God to show up and He didn’t – at least not in the manner you had hoped. And in your pain/frustration, have you ever blamed God for your plight in life?

Of course, you have... and so have I – b/c we often have a misunderstanding of who God is and how life works in a sinful, fallen world where Satan has been given temporary dominion and where sin and human short-sightedness often rules the day.

And all too often, the disappointment/disillusionment we’ve experienced leads to projecting our anger onto God – so, instead of getting **better**, we turn **bitter**; and we lash out at any/everyone (including God). **I believe such was the case of the man we will look at today.**

Let me set the stage. It’s Friday, April 3rd, AD 33. The Jewish rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, has been arrested, falsely accused, and scourged beyond recognition – then pouring blood w/ each step, Jesus is escorted from the Antonia down the Via Dolorosa (*way of suffering*), outside the city walls to Golgotha to be crucified.

There, the Son of Man was stripped of all decency, laid bare for all to see. Stretched to His limit, and w/ every swing of a hammer, Jesus was viciously pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. I fear we often miss the brutality; yet the Romans had perfected this means of execution to serve as a violent spectacle for all to see and experience.

And on that day, the place was packed. The crowd was present, Jesus’ religious enemies were there to gloat at His demise, the Romans were there to inflict as much pain/humiliation possible – and then there were (2) other men, criminals to be executed on either side.

You need to know that Hollywood has the scene all wrong. The location wasn’t perched on some hill far away for all to see, but just a few feet off the road leading to the entrance to the city so it wasn’t missed.

And the men weren’t crucified high above the earth, but just 2 ft off the ground so that anyone who wanted to hurl an insult or take a violent swipe would have quick access to scorn a victim to his face. Such was the case on April 3rd AD 33 in Jerusalem.

Listen to Dr. Luke’s thorough investigation:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out w/ him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along w/ the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” They divided up his clothes by casting lots. 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.” The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him

wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the King of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there, hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We're punished justly, for we're getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then, he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you, today you will be w/ me in paradise." Luke 23:32-43

Over the past (3) weeks, we've been in an Easter series entitled, ***Bad to the Bone***. In this study, we've been looking at the issues that led these men to turn from God's grace when it was right there in front of them. Today, we're going to look at the thief on the cross who rejected the Savior.

Now, in my estimation, everything we need to know can be found in one verse – **vs. 39**. *One of the criminals who hung there, hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*

I believe there are (2) major issues that led this man astray from the grace/mercy of God, even though it was literally hanging there right beside him.

He Sought ACCEPTANCE from the Wrong Places

Recap – As the (2) criminals hung there w/ Jesus b/w them, the crowd volleyed their venom and viscously attacked the Savior – Luke notes that one of the men joined in on the mob hurling insults – *If you're the Christ save us all!*

Why would he do this? I think he wanted to fit in – he wanted to be *accepted*. In all likelihood, he spent his life looking for love/acceptance in all the wrong places finding instead, rejection/dejection – and it led to a life of destruction. Now, as he's facing death, he joined the mob hoping they'd think he was like them – joined to the world and opposed to God.

Maybe he thought – If I align w/ them against Jesus, they'll let me go or they'll be merciful to me.

BTW – we still see this today in ***Cancel Culture***. Pressure applied to force others to comply if you want to be accepted – ***conform or be rejected***. And almost daily, people are choosing what's opposed to God in order to fit into a godless culture for fear of rejection.

In either case, this thief has aligned himself w/ the mob against Jesus and it ultimately cost him eternity.

Let's back up a sec – as the mob and this thief lashed out at Jesus – Jesus uttered (3) words that I'm sure had never been uttered before or since from a man hanging on a cross – ***"Father... Forgive them!"***

Can you imagine the moment? In spite of the rancor. In spite of the violence/hatred directed at Jesus, Jesus spoke forgiveness – and everyone in the moment was shaken by grace – especially the other criminal – his perspective was changed and his heart was softened by God's grace. ***But not this thief***. He doubled-down. He sank deeper into his dejection/despair, and instead of turning to grace, he retaliated w/ disgrace.

Question – How can a man be so close to the Savior, so close to grace, yet so far from the truth? How can a man reject the love of God in such a time of need?

Let me speak to the idea of rejection for a moment.

While I can't say for sure why this thief was so angry, life experience tells me it was b/c he had felt the sting of rejection in his past. At some point, he felt as if God had abandoned/forgotten him. And now, b/c he bought the lie of the enemy, he was mad at the world and even madder at God for his plight in life.

Rejection has such an effect. It's like a cold slap in the face, a blow/bruise to the ego. It clouds reality and paints life in a negative light. Even worse, in our frustration, we often lose our motivation to continue w/ pretenses, wanting instead to hurt others as we've been hurt – after all, hurting people hurt people! We lash out w/ a sense of justification for any pain we might inflict, satisfied that others are hurting as we are.

This is the power of rejection. It can cause a man to become hardened towards everything in life including God. It can cause a woman to shake her fist in the face of God even w/ eternity hanging in the balance? In this case, whatever it was – our thief was hanging next to Jesus consumed by a dejected soul.

Here's what we know – whatever it was led him to a soured life. He was nasty and out of control. He was so consumed w/ such rage even the Romans didn't want him as a slave. His only value in life was to be used by Rome to show others what happens to a person who defies Rome. And even then, he was defiant to the end – *even though God's grace was literally right beside Him in his greatest hour of need.*

His despondency reminds me of Timothy McVeigh. Do you remember him? He was the man executed for bombing the Murrah Fed. Building in Ok. City.

In his final statement, he quoted the poem *Invictus*, by William Henley. “I thank whatever gods may be; for my unconquerable soul; my head is bloody but not bowed; it matters not how strait the gate; how charged w/ punishment the scroll; I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”

This thief and McVeigh both used their last words to make a point – *no one is going to tell me how to live my life.* They were unremorseful even at death's door.

But there's more. This man's life wasn't just stung by rejection, he also suffered from a misplaced faith.

He Sought **FORGIVENESS** on His Terms

Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!

Can I be blunt? This thief wasn't looking for grace – he was looking to get away. He wasn't repentant, he was actually resistant. He was only willing to believe in Jesus if Jesus would get him out of his mess. IOW, he wanted God on his terms.

This thief didn't want/see Jesus for who He was but only for what he could get from Him. And too often, this is the way we treat Jesus too.

God, if you fix my problem; I'll trust you. If you meet my need, fulfill my dreams, heal my friend, change my spouse, restore my marriage – then I will believe.

But faith doesn't work that way. When we make our faith conditional on God performing for us – that's not faith at all. That's treating God as if He's your Jeannie in a bottle. That's attempting to hold God hostage thru our resistance to grace.

Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter thru it. Matthew 7:13

This man died in his sin while the Savior was right next to him making a once-for-all, satisfactory payment for his sin (and ours) – and he missed it. All b/c he couldn't accept Jesus for who He really was.

Thankfully, at the cross, God gives us an amazing picture of true grace/salvation in the repentant thief. In that moment, when Jesus spoke grace, his life was shattered, his guilt revealed, and his heart was broken before a loving God.

And the result was that by faith, he saw Jesus as His Savior and he trusted Him as His Lord. ***He came to God on God's terms*** – by grace thru faith. He accepted His guilt and trusted that only Jesus could forgive.

Present the Plan of Salvation – Accept/Reject