

"Today You Shall Be With Me in Paradise"

SEVEN STATEMENTS FROM THE CROSS (#2)

Luke 23:39-43

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Introduction:

Over the past several months, we have had an unusually high number of thefts and burglaries here in the Madison area. In fact, according to an article in this week's edition of the *Capital Times*, crime was down in every category last year with the one exception of theft, which was up by 5%. So, several days ago, I went to Madison.com (the online home of the State Journal and the *Capital Times*), and I did a quick search for recent stories concerning what the thieves here in Madison have been up to lately.

- The first result actually came on Friday with a thief stealing a woman's purse on Langdon Street at 2:30 in the morning. Personally, I don't think I'd be anywhere near Langdon Street at 2:30 in the morning, but the woman was unlocking the front door of her home when a man ran up behind her, grabbed her purse, sprayed her with pepper spray, and ran off.
- Several weeks ago, another thief walked into a west side medical clinic and walked out after taking a 42-inch flat screen TV right off the wall. The receptionist chased him down, got a license plate number, and police arrested him a short time later right near our house on the southwest side.
- Those of you on the north side might remember what happened at Pierces' Market several weeks ago when a man got into a scuffle with store security. When Madison police showed up and stepped in, a bottle of mustard fell out of the man's pants. They put the guy in the squad car, and when officers get back to the car, they find a t-bone steak on the floor of the car. They take the guy out of the car and two more t-bone steaks fall out of the man's pants.
- And one of my favorites happened just a few weeks ago off of East Johnson where a man robbed the PDQ on 3rd Street. When the police got there and saw the broken window, they followed the footprints in the fresh snow from the broken window at PDQ right over the back door of a man's apartment. They knocked on the door, and the man basically said, "I did it!"

And so we look around us and we realize that there are thieves everywhere. This morning, though, I would like for us to consider the most famous thief in the history of the world. I am referring, of course, to the Thief on the Cross. We are now in a series of lessons based on the seven statements that Jesus made on the cross, and

last Sunday we started by looking at the first thing Jesus said as He was on the cross. Over and over again, the Lord continued to say, ***"Father, forgive them, for the do not know what they are doing."*** And we learned from the Scriptures that that prayer was answered seven weeks later (on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**) as 3,000 people had a change of heart and were immersed in water for the forgiveness of their sins.

This morning, though, we continue by looking at the fact that Jesus was crucified between two thieves. In fact, the word that Luke uses to refer to these men refers to person who uses violence to rob openly. In other words, we are not talking about two guys who were caught shoplifting, we are not talking about a guy who stuffs a few t-bone steaks down his pants, but we are talking here about men who hurt people. In fact, it appears that there were originally three of them, but the third man was Barabbas, the man who was released instead of Jesus. We know from the Bible that Barabbas was an insurrectionist. Today, we would refer to him as a terrorist. Barabbas was a violent criminal who was caught by the Romans, and his crimes (along with the other three) were so severe that they were all sentenced to death.

With this in mind, I would invite you to look with me at **Luke 23**, as we consider the second statement that Jesus made from the cross. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1649**. In last week's Scripture reading from **Isaiah 53**, we learned that Jesus would be ***"numbered with the transgressors"*** at the time of His death. Let us then please consider the fulfillment of that prophecy in **Luke 23:39-43**...

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" ⁴³ And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

We looked at this passage several years ago (back in January 2007), but this morning I would like for us to look at it again with a special focus on the fact that we are now looking at the second of seven statements from the cross. As we look at this second statement, I would like for us to look (first of all) more carefully at the thief who had a change of heart, I would like for us to then think very carefully about the Lord's reply, and then I would like for us to at least briefly consider the big question that always comes up when we look at this passage.

I. First of all, though, let us please look very carefully at the one we may refer to as the GOOD THIEF.

Just from the Scriptures, we know first of all, for example, that earlier in the day the good thief wasn't so good. In fact, he had joined with the other thief in hurling

insults at the Lord. If we were to look back to Mark's account, this is what we find in **Mark 15:29-32**, ***"Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!' Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him."*** And so earlier in the day, the good thief was involved in hurling abuse at the Lord on the cross. However, by the time we pick up with Luke's account, we discover that something had changed and that the second thief had developed some level of fear for God. In **verse 40**, he turns to the other thief and says, ***"Do you not even fear God...?"*** For some reason, therefore, God became very real to this man. Hanging on the cross, perhaps he finally realized that death was very near, and so instead of hurling insults at the Lord as he had been doing, he has a change of heart and speaks up in the Lord's defense. As the Bible says in **Proverbs 1:7**, ***"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."***

And yet not only does he fear God, but we also learn here in Luke's account that the second thief finally realizes that he deserves the punishment. In other words, he admits and confesses his sin. In **verse 41** (addressing the first thief) he says that, ***"...we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds."*** In other words, it was no longer possible to hide his guilt, but he lays it all out and admits that he deserves the punishment. And then having done this, he turns the conversation to Jesus and says (at the end of **verse 41**), ***"...but this man has done nothing wrong."*** In other words, he saw the Lord as being perfect, as not deserving the punishment. But then in addition to acknowledging that Jesus is innocent, he also acknowledges Jesus as being a King. In **verse 42**, he was saying, ***"Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"*** Notice: Not "if", but ***"...when You come in Your kingdom!"***

I would think that it took a lot of courage to trust in a King who was nailed to a cross. How did he know that Jesus was a King? Well, you may remember that Pilate (as was the custom) had ordered the charges to be written out and nailed above each man. And looking over at the Lord (combining all three gospel accounts), the thief could see the statement, ***"This is Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews."*** Of course, in John's account, the Jews saw this and basically said, ***"No! No! No! You need to say, 'He SAID that He was the King of the Jews.'"*** But Pilate answered (in **John 19:22**), ***"What I have written I have written,"*** the first time he showed a backbone that whole day. Pilate did not realize it, but he had just posted basically an advertisement for the Christian faith. ***"This is Jesus."*** The name Jesus comes from a Hebrew word meaning ***"Jehovah Saves."*** When Pilate identified Jesus as being from Nazareth, he reminded the people of the prophecy that the Savior would be called a ***"Nazarene."*** And yes, He was a King. But then also, the statement was written in three languages—indicating that Jesus had come to save the whole world—Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people; Greek, the common language of business and the people; and Latin, the official language of the Roman government. And so the thief, therefore, understood very clearly that Jesus was a king, that He was the

Savior, that He was from Nazareth—it finally all clicked in his head, and so he said, ***“Remember me when You come in Your kingdom!”***

II. With that, let us please now consider the LORD’S RESPONSE.

In verse 43, the Lord replied to the thief, ***“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”*** If you have the Bible on your phone, or if you have it on your computer at home, you can click on the word ***“Truly,”*** and you will find that it is the word ***“Amen.”*** ***“Amen I say to you...”*** The word ***“Amen”*** is an affirmation that something is true or trustworthy, a statement of agreement, a statement of support. ***“Amen I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”*** The Lord was saying that this is a statement or a promise that the thief could trust.

We notice here (based on the Lord’s response) that the thief would be going to Paradise that very day. He would not need to suffer in Purgatory for a while, he would not go to sleep for hundreds or even thousands of years until the Lord’s Second Coming, but he would be with the Lord that day. His death was about to come in the very near future, and when he died, he would be with the Lord in Paradise.

The word Paradise is actually a Persian word, and it literally refers to an ***“enclosure.”*** Back in the ancient world, the word referred to a private, lavish garden—enclosed with maybe a fence or a wall—the meticulously cared-for garden of a king—and it would have been a great honor for someone to be invited into that private garden. Here in this nation, we know what it means to be invited to the Rose Garden. We know that the Rose Garden is at the White House, and we know that if the President were to invite us for a stroll in the Rose Garden it would be a great honor. In a similar way, ***“Paradise”*** was the name of the king’s garden where the king would meet with his closest friends and advisors, and it was a great honor to be invited into such a garden. Jesus, therefore, says to the thief that this is a true statement—it may seem unbelievable right now, but, ***“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise.”***

I know today we have some nice houses here in Madison. In the paper just this past week, you might remember the story about the largest house now on the tax rolls, built by Doug Schoepp, the owner of Schoepp’s Motors. The house has 15,768 square feet. That’s about ten times the size of our house. The basement alone has more than 7,000 square feet. That’s about the size of our entire yard—front and back. In other words, Mr. Schoepp perhaps has more carpet to vacuum in his basement than I have grass to mow. But even our nicest homes are no match for the amazing privilege of being with our King in His private garden. We look forward to that day. And for the thief, it was something that would happen very soon. Within just a few hours he would be taking a walk with Jesus in the garden of God that has been prepared and reserved for those who are saved. The Lord welcomed and invited this man into Paradise. What an amazing gift! Or, as we call it today, GRACE.

III. At this point, many people in the denominational world take this beautiful story and will then say, “AHA! THIS MAN WAS NOT BAPTIZED, BUT JESUS SAID HE WAS SAVED; THEREFORE, WE DO NOT NEED TO BE BAPTIZED TO GO TO HEAVEN!”

And with that, we are told to follow the example of the thief—just do what he did, **“Dear Lord, save me!”** and you’re in! For just a moment, though, let us please consider this objection to baptism. We have covered this before, so I will not go into any great detail, but I would like to point out two things for us to consider.

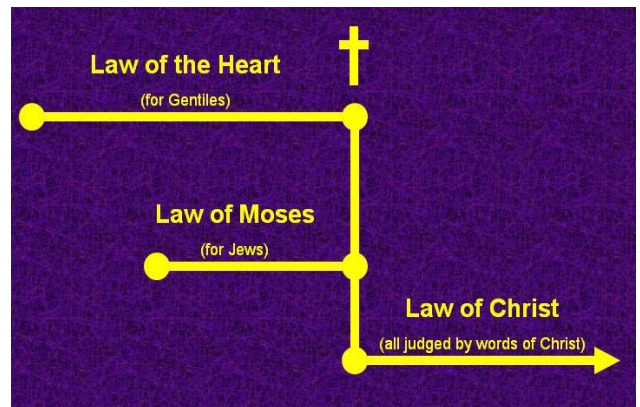
First of all, who says that the thief had never been baptized? This reminds me of those who try to support infant baptism by pointing out that Lydia’s entire household was baptized in **Acts 16**. They say, **“Well, Lydia must have had small children at home, and the Bible says that her entire household was baptized; therefore, we should also baptize babies.”** We need to remember, though, that the Bible never tells us that Lydia had small children at home. And so they are basing their entire argument on a possibility. They are gambling their eternal salvation and the salvation of their children on the chance that Lydia might have had a few little children in her family at the time. In the same way, when someone says, **“The thief was never baptized, therefore I can be saved without being baptized,”** we need to back up a second and ask them how they know he had never been baptized.

Obviously, he was not baptized as he was hanging on the cross, but the Bible does not teach that he had never been baptized. In fact, as we actually look at the Scriptures, there is at least some evidence to the contrary. If you want to write down one passage here, consider **Mark 1:4-5**, where the Bible says that, **“John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.”** Multitudes were being baptized by John and his disciples, and I am certainly not going to risk my eternal salvation on the assumption that the Thief on the Cross was not in that number. We cannot make that argument.

Another possibility is that this man had been a thief, was convicted of his crime, was put in prison, and had been baptized in prison. Right now, we have Bible correspondence course students in 17 different Wisconsin prisons. Several of them have requested baptism, and we are in the process right now of trying to get them in contact with gospel preachers in their area. John the Baptist himself had been in prison. Do you think that John the Baptist might have talked to a few people about Jesus while he was in prison? I know that personally I have studied with many people in prison—sometimes through the glass, sometimes in the prison chapel, and sometimes just in a room sitting at a table with chairs that are bolted down to the floor. This afternoon I have an appointment to study with a man who is locked up in Mendota, and we never know what may come from that study. Let us, then, not base an entire argument on the very weak assumption that this thief had never been baptized. Again, I am not saying that the thief *had* been baptized, but I’m trying to

make the point: Before we base our salvation on the so-called fact that this man had definitely not been baptized, we need to consider the alternatives—especially when so many scriptures open up the possibility that he might have been.

There is something else for us to consider here, and that is: As this conversation took place, this man was living either under the Law of the Heart (if he was a Gentile), or under the Law of Moses (if he was a Jew)—a time when baptism was not even a requirement for salvation. Consider this: Was Abraham ever baptized? What about great men like Joseph (living hundreds of years before the Law of Moses)? What about David and Solomon? What about the great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah? My point is: Many people in the Bible were saved without being baptized!



I am referring to those who lived and were saved before the death of Jesus on the cross. We need to ask ourselves when the Law of Christ went into effect. We refer to the New Testament as a covenant. It is like a will—the Last Will and Testament of Jesus Christ. The writer of **Hebrews** makes this point in **Hebrews 9:15-17**, ***“For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.”*** Remember then: At the time Jesus promised salvation to the thief, the thief was not yet subject to the New Covenant. I will admit, he was about as close as he could get! I mean: He could see the actual blood that was being shed for his forgiveness. Perhaps he was even the very last person to be saved before the New Covenant went into effect, but he was definitely not yet living in the New Testament period.

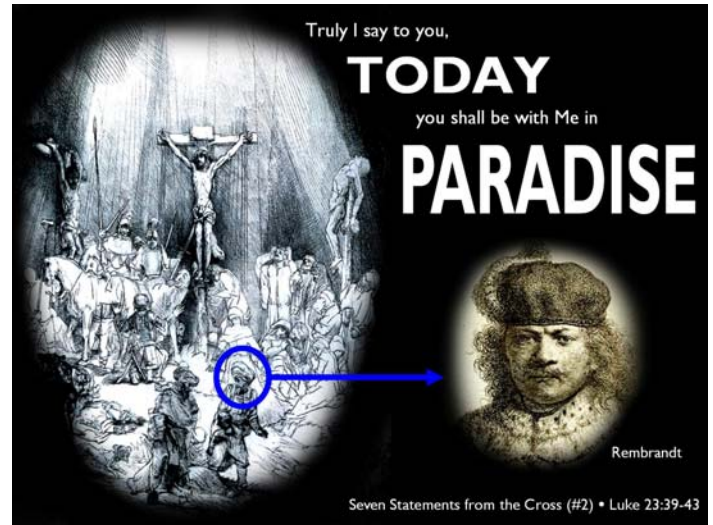
In fact, it was only after Jesus’ death on the cross that the Lord spoke our Scripture reading for this morning (**Matthew 28:18-20**). It was only after the cross that the Lord said, ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned”*** (**Mark 16:15-16**). And so, when people try to appeal to the Thief on the Cross as an excuse not to be baptized (or to prove that baptism is optional), they are trying to put themselves back into a time when the Law of Christ was not yet in effect.

What if I turn in a blank IRS Form 1040 in a few weeks, and what if I put a little Post-It note on it that says, ***“Dear friends: George Washington never paid income taxes; therefore, we will not be paying ours this year. Your friend, Baxter”***? How do you think they would react to that note? It would not be very long until federal agents came knocking at our door! George Washington lived many years before there was ever such a thing as the income tax, and I cannot appeal to him as

an example. In a similar way, when someone uses the Thief on the Cross as a reason to avoid baptism, they are using an example from a time before the New Covenant actually went into effect.

Conclusion:

I don't know if anyone noticed this, but we have been looking this morning at a print, *The Three Crosses*, that was made from an etching by Rembrandt in the mid-1600's. I would encourage you to do some research on this on your own—it comes from a very interesting series where he made some subtle changes to the engraving between each print.... And I don't know if you noticed (perhaps it is not as visible on the wall), but few of the faces have any detail. Few, that is, except for the one man in the foreground who is walking away from the cross. A



number of critics have suggested that this is Rembrandt himself, and the similarities between Rembrandt and the man in the etching are truly remarkable. In his own small way, then, perhaps Rembrandt wanted to say, **“I was there!”** And perhaps he was saying, **“I was in some way responsible for the crucifixion.”**

And I know that we were not really there, but in a sense, we were! And so the question is: How will we react to what was done for us? Instead of using the thief as some kind of excuse, wouldn't it be so much better to use him as a motivation? This man was being executed by the Roman Empire, and yet he had the courage (when everyone else was insulting the Lord) to be one of the Lord's very last and only friends. Think about the joy in heaven that day when Jesus entered Paradise with a thief—with a man who was saved from his sins at the last possible moment. If he had put it off just a few more moments, it might have been too late. And so this morning, if you recognize Jesus as being the Son of God (as the thief did), then the next step (under the Law of Christ) is to repent of your sins and then to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins. If you are ready to reenact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in your life right now (through repentance and baptism), you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song—a song of amazement that this thief could have very easily sung. Let's stand and sing...

SONG: *“I Stand Amazed”*

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org