

The Power to Pardon

"Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with 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.' And 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 the Christ of God, 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 Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are 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 the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:32)

As you look around the scene of the crucifixion, with which of the characters do you most readily identify? As you look into their faces is there anything that reminds you of yourself? For some of you, that answer might be Peter. You make statements and promises of loyalty, only to have them fall short. You may be wrestling with guilt and frustration asking yourself the question: Can God ever forgive me for falling short again? Perhaps, you identify with Pilate. Think about Pilate, the key word there is, "Almost," isn't it? He "almost" released the Son of God. He "almost" did the right thing. Maybe your life is wrapped up in the word, "Almost." You "almost" became a Christian. You "almost" lived a faithful life. You "almost" lived a disciplined existence.

Maybe you identify with Mary. I think there are a lot of Marys, both male and female, faithful, loyal, true, sometimes sad or sometimes confused. Or, perhaps somebody identifies with John. You're there too, but you're timid, you're quiet, you're afraid. Outside of this place, there's really nobody who knows that you're Jesus' disciple.

As you look over the whole cast of characters around the crucifixion, with whom do you identify. Amid all those characters, I suggest to you that there is one with whom each of us who are in Christ can identify. He's the focus of our study. You're not going to like this, but all of us Christians identify with the crucified crook. Like him, you hang on the cross beside Jesus. Like him, you've looked in faith and made the most unimaginable request possible. And like him, you have received what Paul called the "indescribable gift" of salvation.

What does the scene about the crucified thief tell us? What does it show us? Just two basic things, but they are the two most important lessons a human being could ever learn. **The immeasurable value of a person** and **the immeasurable depth of God's love**. It's a beautiful story, in many ways it's a mysterious story. For generations, the story of the crucified crook has been a controversy for some

about how one accepts God's grace today, about how one becomes a Christian. Folks, it's not recorded for that purpose. This whole thing occurred before there were any Christians, before God ever established his church. The reason the story has made its way down through history is to show us as graphically as any other page in Bible, those two powerful lessons: The immeasurable value of a person and the immeasurable depth of God's love.

Seven statements Jesus made on the cross summarized his whole life and mission like tabs or an index page in a large notebook. You turn and find a volume of material behind each little tab.

1. The immeasurable value of a person.

We see Jesus treating that crucified crook the way he's been treating people through his ministry all along. Those people are helpless and look to him in faith. For example, he displayed the same care and grace much earlier when he came down from giving the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew tells us in his gospel, chapter 8, that he was huddled around a group of people talking when all of a sudden that group scattered like roaches that had just seen a ray of light. Somebody yells out at the top of their lungs, "Leper." Sure enough there he was a huddled mass of humanity, a walking wound, a festering sore, maybe no arm, maybe no nose. I'll tell you for a fact, he had nothing, except for one final, desperate prayer. The leper looked up and said, "Master, if you would, you can make me clean."

See, that leper had exactly what the crucified thief had nothing except a desperate prayer. Do you remember what Jesus did to that leper? Jesus reached out and touched him. He put his hands on one of those open, bleeding sores. Now you've got to see Peter and John over in the bushes looking out saying, "Oh no, Master, Master, don't, don't touch him!" Why did he? Could Jesus not have healed the leper without touching him? Sure he could. Why did he do it? He was teaching us the immeasurable value of a person.

Folks, a human being has value because he or she is human. Now the world doesn't buy that. The world teaches us that we have value based upon how we look, what we can do or what we've got in our bank account. Now you take those things and mesh them together and you have the world's value system. God says, "No, you're valuable just because you are made in My very image, unique in all Creation."

Jesus taught the same thing to the adulterous woman in John 8. Do you remember her story? She had no grounds on which to stand. She had been caught in the act of adultery. She had no defense. We'd say she was guilty as sin. But when her eyes met the eyes of Jesus, she didn't see the hatred and the bitterness that she had seen in those other eyes. She looked at him with a plea in her eyes, and he spared her life.

On and on the stories go in the gospel, the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus up in that tree and the blind Bartimaeus. So, it shouldn't surprise us when we see what happened to this man who died beside the Christ. It's interesting that we don't know much about this thief, do we? We don't know his name, his home town, what he did for a living or what he knew about Jesus. Some have speculated that he was a patriot, one of those Jewish zealots who was trying to drive the Roman army out of the land. To tell you the truth, I doubt that. I doubt that because if that were true, surely Luke would have told us. And if not Luke, some other historian somewhere would have mentioned that.

No, I think we've got to face the fact that this man hanging beside Jesus was just a crook. He was just a thief. In fact, judging from the severity of his sentence, he was the worst of the worst. He was a habitual criminal and to die on a Roman cross for thievery, that really was pretty severe. There is no telling how many other atrocities he may have committed. Somebody says, "Well, if he were that bad, what is it that Jesus is trying to teach us?"

2. The immeasurable depth of God's love

Let's let our minds wander back to that cross on that hill they called "Golgotha," or the place of the skull. It was barren, it looked like a skull. It was a place where many skulls had fallen. Now imagine that you are in the crowd at the bottom of the hill looking up at those three silhouetted crosses. You go a little closer to see the face of the one that they call the criminal, the one who would eventually ask for forgiveness.

As we look up at him, his face is gray, ashen, and weary from no telling how much time he had been in jail and prison. His eyes are sunken and desperation has destroyed any sense of joy at all in his life. He has all but given up. "Let's get it over with," he's thinking, "Let's just get it over with." So he's hanging on that cross, and there are only a few grains of sand in his hourglass left.

But then he looks over at this man who is crucified next to him. The man in the middle, the man over whose head is nailed a placard that says: *The King of the Jews*. We don't know if this crook had ever seen Jesus before, maybe he had. Maybe he had seen a miracle, maybe he had seen Jesus love the unlovable, maybe he had seen our Lord treat the scum of the earth like the salt of the earth, maybe he had heard one of his teachings, or, maybe all he knew about Jesus was what he was looking at right now, a crucified carpenter whose lungs were gasping for air and whose skin was torn and bleeding. But as he gazed at the man beside him, there was something about this man that was riveting to this thief. Why was this fellow so serene? Why was he so amazingly quiet while everybody else is ridiculing? Why doesn't he scream out for pain like everybody else does who is on the cross? Then something amazing began to happen.

This crook, this thief began to forget about himself. The intensity of his pain is momentarily dulled, the sting of the nails is momentarily forgotten and he finds himself unable to take his eyes off this man. He senses an emotion that he hasn't felt in "who knows when." He finds himself concerned about the Messiah. He catches himself caring about this man. A calloused crook, it's been so long since he cared about anything. It feels strange, but the feeling is there.

There's an interruption. There's a foghorn-like voice that breaks his train of thought. It comes from the other crook, the fellow who's crucified on the other side. The voice is bitter and it's ugly. You see, somebody else has also been looking at Jesus. This criminal has not been looking at our Lord through the eyes of compassion and concern. He's been looking through the cracked lens of cynicism.

Isn't it an amazing thing how two people can be so close to Jesus, have virtually the same circumstances, and yet have two totally different perspectives? Have you ever been amazed by how one of them can come out absolutely committed to following the Lord and the other just totally reject him and yet their circumstances virtually the same? I've never fully understood that, but here's a classic example of it. One felt compelled to request the impossible by faith, and the other just wanted to join in with the jeers of the crowd. "If you're the Christ, save yourself, Oh, while you're at it, save us, too!" It was just another verbal spear. Then there's silence again.

I wonder if that critical thief didn't really expect the other fellow to join in. Misery does love company. But instead, the most remarkable thing happens. That other crook does just the opposite. I don't know how many people heard what he said to Jesus. I'm talking about those on the ground, the soldiers, Mary and the others. But I will guarantee you anyone who heard it was in awe. "Don't you fear God?" the thief says? "Since you are under the same sentence, we are punished justly. We are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong. Then he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Can't you see the soldier glancing up, Mary wiping away a tear and staring into the face of that thief? Why I can see the angels in heaven gasping. "When was the last time this fellow ever spoke up for anybody?"

But here he is, performing perhaps the most noble act recorded in Scripture when nobody else would come to God's defense, when almost everyone else turned their back, when even the angels were weeping and the demons from hell were dancing in the light because they thought they had killed the Son of God. It took a crook, it took a rejected low-life crook to stand on behalf of God and in so doing, in the very sunset of his existence, he salvaged everything about his life.

Peter, the one who would never forsake Him, was nowhere to be found. Pilate, the authoritative one, had washed his hands a long time ago. The crowd had turned fickle, the disciples had run, but a crook without even knowing it shares with us the three things that you must know and believe deep in your

heart of hearts if you are ready to come to Christ. What do I need to know to become a Christian? What do I need to understand? Folks, you never quit understanding, it's hard. Where do you draw that line?

The book of Acts shows multiple examples of those who came to Christ and what bare necessities they understood. But, it is capsulated right here as clearly as any place I've ever seen.

1. **He came to the conclusion that he was filthy.** He looked over and said, "You know I deserve what I am getting." He didn't just say he was a sinner. He's saying, "I'm a mega-sinner. I deserve to hang on this cross. I deserve to die," gasping for breath.
2. **He came to a conclusion that Jesus was absolutely pure.** He said, "But this man has done nothing wrong." The crook said, "I am guilty. God's innocent. I'm wrong, He's right. I'm lost, but He's the Savior." The crook said about he and his friend there, his buddy on the other side, "We're here because we deserve it, but he does not."
3. **Jesus has the power to incorporate us into a kingdom that transcends this life.** That thief knew that there were just a few grains left in his hour glass and knowing he was dying, he looked over and said, "Master, will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?"

By now Jesus had turned his head toward this thief and I can't help but wonder if even in his pain, Jesus had managed a slight smile as he seized this lost, lone sheep, broken, bruised and bleeding limping into the fold. That sheep looked up at the shepherd and said, "Can I come in? I don't deserve to, but can I come in? Master, would you remember me when you come into your kingdom?" The good shepherd looked at the sheep and said, "Come on in. Today, you're going to be with me in Paradise." **The immeasurable value of a human, the immeasurable depth of God's love.**

The words of the song *Beneath the Cross of Jesus* summarize this lesson "Upon that cross of Jesus, mine eye at times can see the very dying form of One Who suffered there for me; And from my smitten heart, with tears two wonders I confess: The wonders of his glorious love and my own worthlessness" except we are not worthless in the eyes of the saving God. Amazing Grace Lesson #1252 Steve Flatt March 3, 1996