

The story of this repentant criminal is one that testifies to two things: the faith of the criminal and the forgiveness of Christ. It is a story that applies to us because of God's all-encompassing Grace, and because of our own likeness to this condemned man.

This was a criminal, traditionally a thief, or maybe more accurately a revolutionary, lawfully sentenced to death. Even *he* admitted his sins, that he belonged on a cross with the other criminal at Calvary, that he deserved to die. And yet his plea for Jesus to remember him in His Kingdom is a faithful prayer of hope. This man may have heard Jesus speak, or seen Him heal the sick. Being another Jew, he may even have been a childhood friend of Jesus. Or, he may never have met him before he was hung on a cross beside him at Golgatha. But whatever the case, however he knew and experienced Jesus in his life, he had faith that Christ could save him, that He offered hope for a life beyond this one. And Jesus responded to the man's faith with the *incredible* statement: "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

As Max Lucado puts it, "the only thing more outlandish than the request [for eternal life] is that it was granted." It is not surprising that the criminal begged for salvation. But his plea was not to the Jewish people who had sentenced him, nor to the Roman government that was executing him, but to another condemned man who he recognized as the Savior.

He was not praying to be let off the cross, but simply to be remembered. And he received his Heavenly reward because of two traits: honesty and faith.

Our requirement for Salvation is pretty simple: we just have to recognize Christ as our Savior and *ask* to be forgiven of our sins. But to ask for forgiveness is to recognize that you have done something wrong. The criminal on the cross was *absolutely honest* with himself, with the other criminal, and with God. While the other man mocked Jesus and told him to save himself,

the repentant man owned up to his sins and asked just to be remembered. So now that we understand the criminal and his request, we can look at Christ and his promise. Because fortunately for the crucified man and for us, Christ is predisposed to forgive.

In fact, the first words of Christ from the cross were: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus prayed a prayer of forgiveness for the people who were killing *Him*, the son of God. If anyone can be seen as less deserving of forgiveness, even than the thief on the cross, it is those who had Jesus crucified. And yet he asks God to let them off the hook, offers them Grace they don't deserve, the same way he offered the criminal Grace he didn't deserve.

To use a pun, Jesus didn't leave the man hanging. The man cried a repentant prayer to be remembered in Heaven. And not only did Jesus not leave him hanging figuratively and immediately answered his cry, but he literally did not *leave him* hanging on the cross. He uttered forgiveness, a promise that the man would be with him in Paradise.

And that's an offer that is extended to you and me. We just have to take a leaf out of the criminal's book and do a couple of things.

First, we have to recognize the Power of Christ. It is not because of who we are or anything that we have done that we are Saved. It is only because of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. And it is not because Jesus was a good man and lived well that we follow him as Christians. Rather, it is that as God's Son, he was sent to share God's grace, love and power with us, and He has the power to forgive us and transform our lives, to the point that there is hope even for a thief and a murder sentenced to die.

Secondly, we have to have absolute trust in Christ. The criminal had faith in Jesus that not even the disciples achieved before the resurrection. Three days after Jesus promised

salvation to the thief, he appeared in disguise to the disciples and asked them about his own death. They responded “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.” They *hoped*, but they did not believe. Faith isn’t an intellectual decision, or living according to a certain moral standard. It is trusting God completely, living in relationship with Him in companionship and worship. The criminal certainly found that. A friend among the other men on the crosses, a Savior to trust and worship even at the end of his Earthly life.

Billy and I joke around about preachers that tell the same story again and again, but I’m going to tell my favorite story of faith. You may have heard this if I didn’t put you to sleep last time I got to preach, so forgive me if I’m repetitive.

I went to Ecuador last summer with a mission team, and part of our time was spent at an orphanage three hours outside of Quito, in the small city of Shell, basically in the jungle. The woman who started the orphanage, “La Casa de Fe”- the “House of Faith”, is named Patti Sue Arnold. She has at latest count thirty-three children in a small two-building facility smaller probably than a lot of the people in this room’s homes. She does not receive any support from the local government or from ours. She does have quite a few contacts and faithful private supporters who help her feed, clothe, educate, and otherwise care for this pile of children that range from just a few weeks old to elementary school. But truth be told, at the beginning of each month, she has no idea how much money she is going to receive, or where it is going to come from.

In fact, while we were there working with her, one of our team members was discussing with her the purchase of a larger property where she will someday have a bigger, newer facility in which to house her kids- her Paradise. She had about ten days left to come up with her next

payment of about \$10,000 for the property. "Where in the world is that going to come from?" our team member asked. "I don't know," Patti Sue replied. "But it'll come."

Do you have that kind of faith? I can only pray that I do. That kind of absolute acceptance of the mercy of God that allows a condemned man a place in Paradise, and that allows the mother of 33 a friend to help her bear her burdens.

And I won't leave you hanging either. The exact amount that Patti Sue so desperately needed, but calmly anticipated... it was pledged to her the next day, while we were still there.

That's one of the things that's so amazing about both having faith and of Christ's promise: the immediacy of our reward. Jesus didn't tell the thief "I'll sleep on it," or "I'll write you from Heaven." He didn't say "Tomorrow you'll be forgiven." He told the man "*Today* you will be with me in Paradise." It's easy to overlook that first word in Jesus' reply. Obviously, neither Jesus nor the criminal had long to wait before they saw each other again. But while Jesus promised him that he would be in Paradise "*today*", I believe that He says that to us as well.

We live in a world of sin. Among and alike the condemned. We can point to the man crucified next to Jesus as a sinner. But that's the pot calling the kettle black. All of us fall short of the Glory of God. But we have hope, and that's Jesus. Despite our shortcomings, our sins, we can cry out to God. We can make an honest assessment of ourselves, and an acceptance of Jesus and we are promised the same eternal life granted to *both* the men that died that day. The biblical account of the thief ends on Calvary, but his story keeps going. I know that when we reach the pearly gates we'll get to meet a man who knows more about God's Prevenient Grace than *anyone*. Like him, we just ask for forgiveness and it is granted. We'll experience

eternal life down the road, at the end of our earthly life, but we experience communion with Christ immediately.

We are a forgiven people. And because of that, we are in Paradise *Today*.

Glory to God, Amen.