

Lenten Series: “Live Like Jesus Is Dying.” “Jesus’ Sayings from the Cross”

Sermon #4: “Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

Scriptures: Luke 23:32, 39-43

Source: Rev. Adam Hamilton at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, MO

<http://www.cor.org/worship/sermon-archives/show/sermons/Today-You-Will-Be-With-Me-in-Paradise/>

Opening Video Clip

PP#1: *Image of the procession of Jesus and the two thieves, all carrying crosses.*

[*Monolog*]

It was the look of compassion that changed me. As I hung there on the cross, it was when I looked at Jesus—as He gazed into my eyes—it was His look of compassion that broke through to me.

I hadn’t seen compassion since I was a little boy. My mother died when I was seven, and my father was a drunken ogre. His idea of showing kindness to me was to tell me that I was an idiot and to get away from him, which, after so many years of hearing him say this, I was happy to do.

By the time I was 10 years old, I was already living on the streets, and I learned to harden myself, to not allow people to get to me, to not feel hurt by the actions of others, to not get attached...and I also learned to steal. At first it was little things, from my friends, from the kids in the community. By the time I was 14, I used a knife on a man passing through our town, taking everything he had. I kept getting more and more bold. I started drinking a lot. One time, when I was 20, things got out of hand, and I killed a man. He was not the kind of man anyone cared about, so I told myself I did the world a favor.

For the next 10 years I was the kind of man that wherever I went, people would get out of my way, push their kids in the opposite direction, whisper behind my back. Somehow they knew what I was like.

Finally, my life caught up with me. I was caught stealing again, with a partner, named Levi. And, when the long list of our crimes were read off against us in front of the judge, we were given the death penalty. He said that we were “hopeless causes.”

Early that morning, we carried our crosses, from Jerusalem to Calvary, to the place where the Romans would crucify us. I was determined that they would not see my fear, I was going to show them how tough I was. I was hardened to pain. But on the inside I was terrified!

There was a third with us, Jesus of Nazareth. It was a strange thing to be crucified with Jesus. Of course I’d heard of Him, I never met Him personally, but my friends had gone to hear Him speak, and preach and teach and heal. And some of them came back and said that this man was different than any other rabbi, different than any other teacher, or any other peddler of truth, for He actually cared about people like us. He would actually sit down and eat with my friends! And I had heard from some of the girls, too, that they had found religion by listening to Jesus.

And here He was. The man who told the Jewish people, my people, to love your enemies, to turn the other cheek to those who persecute you, the man who said to forgive, the man who healed the sick, the man who...told it like it was with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, who called them hypocrites, was now the man who was being crucified. That’s where it got Him!

As they prepared to throw us down upon the crosses, I was determined to not let them know how terrified I was. But I couldn’t hold back when they placed the spike against my wrist, and once—but only once—I cried out in pain. I heard Levi shriek, too. And Jesus let a cry, only one.

PP#2: *Close image of Jesus and the two thieves, all on crosses.*

And then there was the crowd. Now, I was bracing myself for this, for I had seen it before. The crowd comes, and they spit on you when you are crucified, a criminal, that is worthy of being disdained by the people. But this crowd was larger than usual, and they had not come because of Levi or me. They were kind of ignoring us, for they were all focused on Jesus. There were the money changers, and the hypocrites who had come to celebrate the Passover Seder, who were hurling insults against a man who had done nothing wrong. And of course there were the religious leaders—the greatest hypocrites of all—as they stood there in smug satisfaction as they were seeing Jesus crucified.

And to be honest, I was so grateful that they weren't hurling their insults at me, that Levi and I, we joined in. We insulted Him, too. I guess I thought it might feel good. Levi said, "See where your teaching of love and forgiveness got you!" "You're an idiot. The strong win. The weak lose."

I called Him a pig...a vile, painful name. He then turned, and looked at me. His gaze pierced my soul. He read me like an open book, He knew everything about me, as if He knew everything I had ever done. And yet, I saw love in His eyes. He looked at me in compassion! He cared!

Levi kept going, more and more insults, "You call yourself the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But I was ashamed. I heard Him cry out, "Father, forgive them." He was talking about us...and them! Something happened inside of me. This, I had never seen from a man before! Something was different.

Levi kept insulting Him, and all of a sudden, I shouted at him, "Levi, shut up! This man doesn't deserve this. We deserve what we're getting, you know that. But this man, what did He do? Shut up!"

I knew this man was from God. And all I could do, I looked at Jesus, and I said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

[Monolog ends.]

PP#3-4: Luke 23:32, 39-43 (CEB)

23:32 They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus.

39 One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted Him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

40 Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to Him, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? 41 We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."

Reader: Luke 23:32, 39-43

23:32 They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus.

39 One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted Him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

40 Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? 41 We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise."

PP#5: “Live Like Jesus Is Dying.” “Jesus’ Sayings from the Cross”

“Jesus replied, ‘I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.’”-Luke 23:43

As we approach Easter, we’re spending some time reflecting on how Jesus hung on the cross the day He was crucified. He were there for six hours, a surprisingly short time for a crucifixion, and while there, we have record of Him speaking seven times. In these times, we see something special about who He is, what is going on with Him dying on the cross, and how it affects us. We see how His followers are to live like Jesus is dying!

The first time, He prayed to His heavenly father to forgive those who crucified Him. Forgiveness! Jesus is about forgiveness, and His death brings forgiveness. His followers are to forgive.

The second time, He places His mother into the care of His disciple John. Jesus cares for the needy. His death helps those who are vulnerable. His followers are to provide for those in need.

Last week, we heard Him cry out that God had forsaken Him. Jesus is a Savior who knows our deepest hurts and pain. His death on the cross shows us how much God loves us. And we are to turn to God when we feel hopeless.

Today, we hear Jesus’ last conversation with another human being. This is the last time Jesus talks to another person. Who is the last person Jesus talks to? A thief, dying on a cross next to Him.

Luk3 23:43, “Jesus replied, ‘I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.’”

PP#6: Image for “A man is known by the company he keeps.”

The proverb goes, “A person is known by the company that person keeps.”

A lot can be known by the company that Jesus keeps. When we look at the Gospels and ask, “Who does Jesus spend time with?”, we see that Jesus most commonly kept company of sinners. He spend a lot of time with His disciples, people that were average people, not necessarily known for being godly. He hung out with women, whom most rabbis would overlook. And we see Him spending lots and lots of time with people that were considered “sinners” by the religious: the tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans.

This made the pious people, those known to be religious, suspicious and upset. Jesus claimed to be a teacher of God, and He did miracles that seemed to demonstrate a God-given power, but He didn’t spend His time with the church, the “in club,” those whom everyone labeled “holy.” They were upset by the company He kept, and therefore, they concluded, He was a fake.

PP#7: Luke 15:1-2 (CEB)

“All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to Him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

For example, Luke says in 15:1-2, “All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to Him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

This charge was brought against Jesus over and over again, if you read in the Gospels. He associated with bad company.

PP#8: Image of “good” people looking down upon “lesser” people.

Now, lost people—nominally religious and non-religious people—usually don't like to hang out with religious people. They feel they have to be careful, watch what they say, pretend to be better. They can't be themselves. They know religious people who make them feel small, what being preached at feels like, or that quiet, condemning being looked up and down.

When Jesus was around sinners, He didn't make them feel small! He made them feel valuable, important, worth His time. He made them feel like they wanted to know more about the God He talked about.

This is what we are meant to be. This is what Jesus said His followers should do, to live this way, too, to treat other people like this.

PP#9: Jesus' personal mission statement:

“The Human One came to seek and save the lost.” -Luke 19:10

Jesus explained this was why He came. In Luke 19:10, He told His followers His personal mission statement, His purpose: “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.”

He was with Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector. Jesus told him, “I'm going to your house to eat with you.” In that culture, to eat with someone meant to go spend time and fellowship with them, to associate and be friends with them. During that meal, Zacchaeus is transformed, and Jesus proclaims that was His purpose!

PP#10: “They also led two other *criminals* to be executed with Jesus.” (Luke 23:32)

“They crucified with Him two *outlaws*....” (Matt. 27:38)

Luke: *kakourgoi* - “do bad work” (criminal)

Matthew and Mark: *lestai* - use violence to hurt and rob (thief/outlaw)

Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost. He spends time with them. He keeps company with them. Even at His death, Jesus keeps company with them. He dies with two thieves. Luke uses the word *kakourgoi*, which literally means “do bad work.” This is translated “criminal” in English. Matthew and Mark use a different word to describe them: *lestai*. It's the word used in the Good Samaritan story, when robbers attacked him, beat him up, left him on the side of the road to die, and took everything he had. *Lestai* use violence to hurt and rob.

Jesus is dying *with them*! And Jesus offers compassion to someone like this. Even while on the cross, in His dying hours, Jesus reaches out to the unchurched, sinners, welcoming them—literally!—with open arms. He invites them to take the next step in salvation. He does not make them feel small. He helps him see that he is loved.

PP#11: “Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

1. Loving the people Jesus loves

Those who follow Jesus are to do the same! We take on Jesus' mission, His purpose in the world. This is what the Church is supposed to be about. When we stop doing this, we stop being the church, we stop doing what Jesus did.

Do people who don't know Jesus feel comfortable around you? Do they feel smaller, or more loved, after talking with you? Are you willing to go associate with them, showing them kindness and love? How about unpleasant people, sinners, people who try to manipulate you, use you. Do approach them like Jesus wants you to?

I am working with a number of inmates from area prisons. One of them is an offender convicted of child molestation. He has served his time, and has been deemed ready to be discharged. They cannot release him, however, until he has a place to go to, to live. He understands that he will need to live under special conditions, with various protocols about whenever he would be in public. He is very willing to comply. But he cannot find a place where he is allowed to live. I sent out a special inquiry to each of the area churches, and to each of their pastors, asking if anyone knew of any way to help this man find a place live in northern Washington County.

How many churches are there in town? Over a dozen, right? Did you know that I did not get *a single response* from any church or pastor? Not even a response!

Now, I know this situation has a lot of emotions around it, rightfully so. But this man is a sinner, and the Church of Jesus had nothing to say to him! Tell me, how would you feel if I brought him here and asked you to take him in and love him? Would you agree to work with him, to pair up with him, to sit with him, so he is never alone? Would you even want him here? Would you come if he were here? We stop being the Church when we don't love sinners as Jesus does.

PP#12: "Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise"

1. Loving the people Jesus loves
2. Which criminal will you be?

After all, we are sinners, too, and Jesus loves us. Luke records the conversations that Jesus has with the men He's crucified with. And he tells it in a way that we place ourselves with them. We see ourselves in them. And in them we see the two options we have when we look at Jesus. One of them—I named him Levi—continues to see Jesus as a failure. He claimed to be the Messiah, but fails. He can't save anyone. He taught love and forgiveness, He forgave those who crucified Him, and where did it get Him? No! It's about power, about control. Levi's problem is that he got caught.

Now, most people today aren't worthy of capital punishment, but most of us struggle with making it all about us, and power, and success. To forgive is weak. To love is soft.

The other guy offers an alternative. He sees his life as hopeless. He's going to die defeated. But maybe, just maybe, one last ditch hope, is this Jesus. He was dying innocent! Maybe He's right. Maybe God does care about cases like him. Maybe there is always, even on the cross, a second chance. Maybe there's more to life than what we can control or take for ourselves. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Which of these two criminals will you be? You see, we are criminals. I haven't killed anyone, or sexually molested a child. But I am still undeserving. On earth there are differences among sins. But before God, they are all equally sin. I have done things, and thought thoughts that I cannot tell you today, because I would be too embarrassed. And I know you do to. We are all like this.

Notice that the thief doesn't say, "Jesus, I trust in you with my whole being. I invite you into my heart. I take you as my personal Lord and Savior. I put my faith in you." He basically says, "You're my only hope! I see God in you. I hope you're who you say you are. I want to be a part of what you are doing." Good enough!

In the Old Testament, when God *remembers* someone, God delivers them. This is a loaded word. In Genesis 8 God remembers Noah in the ark and dries up the land. In Genesis 19, God remembers Abraham and saves Lot in Sodom. In Genesis 30, God remembers Rachel when she is crying and opens her womb. In Exodus 3, God remembers the Israelites trapped in Egypt in slavery, and sends Moses to lead them out. On it goes. When God remembers, it means delivers! The thief asks Jesus to deliver Him. And this is our cry, too. O Jesus, remember me!

PP#13: “Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

1. Loving the people Jesus loves
2. Which criminal will you be?
3. Forever in the King’s Garden!

Jesus responds, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Powerful words! Today! Not waiting until Jesus comes back on final judgement day. Today! When they die, they would be together. Even after death, Jesus associates with those who were sinners!

Whom does Jesus include in His kingdom? Do you think the man understood the doctrine of the Trinity, or the two natures of Jesus, or the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith, was he baptized, or anything else Christians argue about? He just had the faith of a mustard seed. He simply flings his hope onto Jesus.

PP#14: *Image of an ancient Persian garden paradise, the king’s garden, or some perfect garden.*

Jesus didn’t say heaven, but “paradise.” Paradise was a Persian word. It brought the image of a walled garden, particularly the king’s garden. It’s that beautiful, peaceful place: flowers, plants, peacocks, a menagerie, fountains, tranquil, serene. It’s where the king went to be at total peace and safety. When the king wanted to show favor to someone, or give them special status, he would take them into his paradise.

In the Old Testament, the Garden of Eden has this image. It is being at total peace, and being with God. It is being in the king’s garden with the King! But when people sin, we are blocked from the garden. And then here, at the cross, Jesus specifically invites this thief into the garden again! The first person Jesus invites back into paradise is a hardened criminal. And Jesus invites you there, too!

PP#15: “Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

1. Loving the people Jesus loves
2. Which criminal will you be?
3. Forever in the King’s Garden!

One: if we’re not loving the people Jesus would love, we are play acting. We’re not being the church. At the cross we see what God want’s done, what we are to do. Two: we see a picture of God’s mercy and grace. If Jesus has forgiven a thief like this, He will forgive you! Jesus dies to seek and save the lost. And three: We see a picture of the eternal destiny: walking in the king’s garden, with the King, for the rest of our days! This is who Jesus is: the King who invites us to walk with Him in paradise!

PP#16: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

We’re going to close in prayer, silent prayer. I want to invite you to pray the same prayer as the thief on the cross. Whisper it in your hearts. And then ask Jesus what it would look like for you to live in a way that loves sinners like this, too.

Let’s pray.

[Time of silent prayer.]