

## The Two Thieves Crucified With Christ

Luke 23:38-43, Lent Evening VI

April 1, 2009

Beloved of the Lord.....This evening let us consider this truth: those who long for more always receive less, yet those who are content with what little God gives, receive more than they could possibly imagine. Luther's motto was, "For what God gives I thank indeed; What He withholds I do not need." The two thieves of our lesson were crucified because they were not content in their heart with what they had. Not only did they covet, but they stole what did not belong to them. The bitter fruit of their sin was death by crucifixion, a kind of torment. At the opposite end of the spectrum there was Christ, numbered with the transgressors though He knew no sin. Jesus did not come to the earth to take from anyone, but to give Himself, His life a ransom for many. He endured the torments of the cross for the very thieves who mocked Him. He died for the sins of the world saying, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." These words of eternal life brought about a change in the heart of one thief so that at the tail end of his life, He wanted nothing more than God's mercy. "Lord remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." Jesus answered "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." When we hear and know this love of Jesus, we have the one thing needful and we long for nothing more.

I. What it means to be a thief. In the sight of man a thief is anyone who steals the possessions of another man. In the sight of God however, a thief is anyone who longs in their heart for something God has forbidden. In the history of mankind, Adam and Eve were the first thieves. Satan placed before their heart the temptation to be as God. Adam and Eve became thieves the moment their heart coveted God's power and glory. Do not overlook the fact that though they had paradise, though they knew only the perfect love of God, they sinfully longed for more. Yet the moment they wanted more, they lost everything they had. Our lesson is this: the heart that covets more than paradise, loses paradise. In Christ we have all we need.

While all men are thieves at heart, God works to turn the hearts of thieves to their Savior. By His Word of grace we have been washed clean of our covetous sins in the blood of the Lamb. He has taught our hearts the reconciliation and peace God now has with man, through Jesus Christ our Lord. By His stripes we are healed and Psalm 147 says, "He health the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds." Through faith in

Christ then paradise is restored. In many ways we are then much like Adam and Eve before the fall in that we know the love of Christ by faith. But we can fall. If Satan dangles before our hearts these things we want and desire, whether it be food or clothing, meat or drink, house or home, wife or children.....and we want them so badly that we throw away the one thing needful, Christ and His forgiveness of sins, we fall away. For "no servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

Now let us be clear here. It is not that a Christian never covets. He does: we do. We sinfully covet one thing or another, daily. But we are truly sorry for such sins and we have no desire to continue in them. We daily repent and turn to Christ in faith. But it is a struggle. "The good that I would I do not, but the evil I would not, that I do." But what we must not do is this: permit these sinful desires to safely live and abide in our hearts. Forgiveness of sins is never permission to sin. Its like Luther said, we cannot keep a bird from landing on our head, but we can keep him from building a nest. "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead." Where there is faith in the redeeming blood of Christ, there is at the same time the will and desire to never sin again. While we know our bodies are ever servants of sin, by faith we hate and loathe our own sin and we desire only to do good. "I delight in the law of God after the inward man." Therefore while we cannot stop our sinful hearts from longing for that which God has forbidden, we can daily war against the sins of our flesh by repentance and faith. You might say the full cycle of repentance is to die in the knowledge of our sins, and rise again from the dead in the knowledge of our Savior. As we see Christ being crucified and dying on the cross for our sins, we see here is the death of my sins and the burial of them. When Christ rises from the grave to life God's grace alone is upon us so that we too rise from the grave! Faith in Christ is a new life through Christ.

II. Christ is the Savior of thieves. Sadly the greater part of this world even now lies in the deadness of sin. Those who continually long for more, ultimately receive far less. Such was the case of the impenitent thief on the cross. Consider that he too heard the words of Jesus, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do". Jesus shed his holy blood for both

thieves, and God is not willing that any perish but that all come to repentance. Yet this thief to the bitter end refused to confess his sins and instead mocked his Savior, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us!" His heart never knew repentance and faith, nor did he ever desire to amend his sinful ways. "He that believeth not shall be damned."

Things were different however for the other thief. He too heard the Gospel but he believed. When the one thief mocked Christ, "the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." He did as all Christians do. We confess our sins and iniquities. "We justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment, but we are heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them." God's Spirit not only moves us to repent, but also to believe in this Man called Christ who has done nothing amiss. We know Him to be the Lord our Savior.

"Lord remember me when thou comest into Thy kingdom." This too is our prayer, the prayer of faith. While we do indeed die like a thief in the knowledge of our sins, and like a thief descend into the grave, Jesus from the cross speaks to us the words of eternal life, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." When we hear such words, when we ponder His sacrifice, when we know by faith He was moved of His own self to lay down His life for the sheep, our hearts do indeed long to be there with Jesus. If only we could be close to Him, even to hang there next to Him would be a blessing. Imagine the joy that surged through the heart of that thief at that great moment "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise!" Suddenly the gates of paradise were wide open through the blood of His own Savior. Jesus lay down His life for the sheep! Can you imagine how greatly this thief now looked forward to death! By faith he knew Jesus was already waiting them for him!

Beloved of the Lord, that thief even now is forever with the Lord in heaven, and Jesus even now is waiting there for you. Though paradise was once lost by our own sin, through Christ paradise is restored. Indeed in the very heart of Christ not only is there forgiveness for all your sins of coveteousness and theft, but the heart of Christ longs for you to be there with Him in heaven, in paradise. May our hearts therefore long and covet for nothing more than this, to be there with our Savior above in paradise. While we then live on earth let us be content with what little we have and long for nothing more. By faith we have the one thing needful, we have Christ. Every time we hear His Gospel in Church, or receive His body and blood

in the Sacrament, or remember that He washed us clean of all sins in our baptism long ago, Jesus is saying from the cross to you, "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." May we therefore amend our sinful ways, and freely give all things for Him who gave all for us. Amen.

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