

A GIFT FROM THE CROSS

Luke 23:35–43

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Luke 23:35–43 (NIV)

“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.’”

Our Scripture today speaks to us about the Gift of the Cross. Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had taught the story about the man who went from Jerusalem down to Jericho and fell among thieves and robbers. They beset on him and wounded him and, as he lay there, a priest and a Levite passed by on the other side of the road. The Good Samaritan came to him, medicated his wounds, and brought him to an inn, where he could be brought back to life.

The Early Church Fathers took that story as an allegory relating to Christ. They said, “You and I are the man or the woman on our way from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem represented our state before we go through sin. It is representative of the city of God. We are going down from the city of God to Jericho, the city of man. On the way, the devil sets upon us because he’s come to

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kill and to rob and to steal. He leaves us beside life's road, half-dead, half-alive. That is to say, our spirits are dead because we've sinned and have been tricked by the enemy but there's still that in us which is alive, namely, our body. The prophets and the priests of the Old Testament come to us and they're not able to help us so they pass by. But the Good Samaritan, representing Jesus, comes to us and pours His life into our wounds and makes us well."

I don't know if that is a fair way of interpreting the story of the Good Samaritan. But I do know that what we have read from the Scripture today represents the truth that on the cross, Jesus is indeed the Good Samaritan. He is on His way to save all who will from their sins. He is bearing in His body the sin of the world. Yet on that mission, the world's most important mission, He has time for the one individual who is by the side of the road, who is wounded and hurt and in need of help and salvation. His mission is not so great that He does not have time for the individual and the personal need.

I would suggest to you that there is a transference of that to our own lives. That we can, at times, be so caught up with big things—big ideas, big plans and big purposes—that we fail to focus on people that are in our present path, whom the Lord has sent us to care for and minister to and encourage.

I once preached a message on the theme, "Is Your Vision Small Enough?" I did it on the basis that often we are looking for a big vision and for some great plan that God either has for us or for His Church. But all along, the Lord not only wants us to concentrate on the large picture, the telescopic picture. But wants us to concentrate on the microscopic picture—the individual, personal need. The thing we need to do today, that often we postpone because we're waiting to get to do tomorrow. We postpone doing what is small so that, hopefully, we can someday do what is great. Jesus, taking upon Himself the sins of the world, takes time for the individual.

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My daughter is in this service. I didn't receive her advance permission to share this, so she is permitted to kill me after the service if she would like. But a marvelous illustration of this: Last weekend, Evangeline got a speeding ticket. She got a ticket and I suggested she go to drivers' school, because it helps on insurance. Jewel had just gotten a ticket a few days before. I didn't want two tickets on the record. It would drive the insurance crazy. (I just want to say—I don't get tickets. I'm one of those careful drivers!) I told Evangeline, "You'd better get it done early. You know how things pile up at the last minute. Don't let it go till the last minute. Something might come up." But the last minute was this Saturday, and Evangeline had taken the responsibility to housesit for some friends who are in Europe. They have two beautiful children, seven and eight. Friday night, late, Evangeline says to me, "I've got to take that class tomorrow. But I haven't been able to get anyone to be with Steve and Stephanie for the day. Steve's got Little League tomorrow, Little League pictures and a Little League game. I wondered if you could help." I was looking forward to sleeping in yesterday. I got up early and had the delightful opportunity of spending the day with Steve and Stephanie. They are really neat kids.

I got to thinking after I'd finished that day with them, "It's been a while since I spent a whole day or a good part of the day with a seven and eight-year-old because my kids are grown now." I'm thinking about how many times, as a pastor, I've encouraged people—get involved in children's ministry! That's one of the most important things we do as a church, is reach children. We need to reach the children of this community for Christ. Get involved with children. That's the big picture. Ministry to children. But it's wonderful just to have touch with one child or two children.

Having that experience made me realize it's so possible to get into this big network of things, that we fail to touch base with the one. From this pulpit, we talk about reaching our community

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for the Lord. You're not going to reach this community for the Lord, you're going to reach one person or two people or five people or maybe twenty people. It's all of us together that will reach the community. But it's the small vision that's needed, the taking time for the one along the way. That's what Jesus does in His experience on the cross. He could be totally into saving the world. He is into that. But He's also into saving the one.

In the salvation of this thief, or this malefactor or criminal, we see a tremendous illustration of what salvation is all about. If you ever want to gain a clear picture of what salvation is then study this Scripture. There are four aspects to salvation that are found here. Jesus is dying on the cross, and reaches out to save an individual. What is salvation? It's one of our most basic Christian terms. Four things are involved.

I. One is that salvation begins with an open acknowledgement of guilt.

An open acknowledgment of wrongdoing. The thief on the cross does this: He admits his guilt. He says to his friend, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve" (Luke 23:41). If you read all the Gospels together, you'll find that Matthew and Mark tell us that both the criminals on the cross reviled and insulted Jesus. When we put what they say together with what Luke says, what emerges is a picture that early on—in the first few hours of the cross—these two persons, one at each side, were dying like they had lived—full of cursing and blasphemy and coarse language and bitterness. But it is to Luke we are indebted for the knowledge that, as the hours go by, one of them watching how Christ is handling His experience comes to realize that this man on the center cross is different from all others. He has a change of heart and he quits railing at Jesus and admits his responsibility. He does not blame his sin on society. He doesn't say, "I can't help what I've done, because if you'd grown up in the

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environment I grew up in, you'd be this way too." He doesn't blame his parents or his lack of parents. He simply says, "I'll take responsibility. I belong here. I've done wrong."

I don't think we ever get into the kingdom of God or we ever make progress until we're ready to take responsibility for our sins and our failures. Whether or not people have had a hand in shaping our lives, as most certainly they probably have, at the same time, we have responsibility for where we are in life. Salvation really begins when we become honest with God and say, "Lord, there are problems in my life that are so big I can't deal with them. I have sinned against You and I have sinned against others. I'm at fault." That's the first step in the salvation process. We really never get anywhere till we get there first of all.

When we begin to realize who we really are and how far we are from God, it seems like such a distance from where we are to where God is. We feel our own unworthiness keenly. How do you get from here to there?

I think back to when I was a freshman in college. I was taking a gym class. I have never been too coordinated athletically. One of the things we were supposed to do as part of our grade was to climb a rope, which hung from the ceiling of the gym, which was higher than this ceiling. As the semester had gone along, I looked at this rope that was hanging off to the side of the gym and knew that, sooner or later, I was going to be asked to climb it. I'd tried a few times and got nowhere. It just seemed like the more I looked at it, the higher the ceiling became and the more impossible it seemed. So the big moment came, finally, when one by one in the class, the coach had his stopwatch out and he was timing us. I go over to that rope and grabbed it with all of my might and started trying to pull myself up. I couldn't get my feet off the ground. As hard as I tried. After 60 seconds went by, the coach looked at me in disgust and dismissed me from the effort. I supposed I could be taught to climb it, I don't know. But I sort of doubt it. That's one of

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the unattainables in my life. Besides, who wants to climb a rope to the top of the ceiling? It was just too far up there.

I think that's sometimes the way we feel spiritually. God's there and I'm here. I'll never get there.

I was in England this summer at the city of Bath—from which we get the English word “bath”—because the Roman baths were there. I'd heard about this cathedral in Bath, England. Sculpted into this stone, on each side of the main entrance to the cathedral, is a ladder. At the very top of the ladder are apostles, prophets, holy men, God the Father, Christ the Son, and then there are people on the ladder representing the ascent, the spiritual pilgrimage to heaven. It looked like, on various stages on the ladder, there were people—first of all, everybody's struggling in the climb—as I looked closer, there were a few people that were not climbing straight up. They are in the process of falling off. They were upside down, getting ready to crash. It's kind of a hard journey to get from the bottom up to the top.

As I looked at that, I thought of what a friend of mine had said, who looked at that same thing several years ago. He said, “The whole problem with the theology of the sculpture is that he got it all wrong in terms of how we get to God. It's not a matter of laboriously climbing a ladder and never getting up there because it's too hard to get up and we fall off. The way it should have been represented was: God from heaven drops a bucket down and we get in it and He pulls us on up. That's grace. We never get in the bucket until we start being honest with God and say, ‘God, I need Your help. I'm guilty.’”

That passes into the second step of salvation in this passage. That is:

II. An open confession of Christ's innocence.

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There's an open confession of our guilt or need, then there's an open confession of Christ's innocence. This man, this criminal on the cross says of Jesus, "This man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). He knows nothing about the civil and the religious case that had been against Jesus. But he knows, as he watches Him and as he sees Him handling death, there is no violence in His lips, there is no coarseness in His speech. There is a dignity, a majesty, and a holiness in His dying. This man has done nothing wrong. He confesses Christ's innocence. The last few weeks in the press and in the news media we have seen a lot advertised about what's wrong with the church. I'd like to just take a moment to hitchhike on this man's confession of Jesus and talk about what's right with the church. What is right with the church is that the church has Jesus. And Jesus is the right director. He is the sinless one. We may find fault in people. We may find fault in Christian leaders. But there is no fault or failure in Jesus. There is perfect consistency. His actions match His words. He can always be counted upon to be true and constant. We follow that Lord. We don't follow a human personality. We don't follow a program. We don't follow a method of ministry. We are centered on Jesus. This man has done nothing wrong.

I would like to add to that that Jesus has not only done nothing wrong—that's a negative confession, it's true. There are some people who may never have done a whole lot wrong, but they haven't done a whole lot right, either. This man has not only done nothing wrong, He has done everything right. Confession of His innocence and holiness and worthiness. That's what being a Christian is, coming to Christ and saying of Him what the Father says of Him—that He is God's beloved Son.

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III. The third part of this salvation which the dying thief experiences is not only an open acknowledgement of his guilt and an open acknowledgement of Christ's innocence, but thirdly, he has an open acknowledgement or open declaration of faith in Jesus.

His faith is epitomized in this statement, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). I submit to you that that's a great statement of faith. The three elements of faith are in that statement.

A. First of all, he's expressing faith that the spirit does not die with the body. This man on the cross, in the waning hours of his life, tortured to death, gasping for breath, nailed, open wounds and bleeding. It's at that moment, at the extremity of his existence, that he's saying, "This is not the end. The spirit will not die with my body. There's something after this. Jesus! Remember me when we get beyond this. Remember me when You come into Your kingdom." I say that's a tremendous statement of faith. A lot of people don't believe anything's out there. You just live once and that's it. Someone has expressed life as a 60-yard dash with a brick wall for a finish line. You run like crazy and smack! At the end, you hit it and that's it. There's nothing out there. There's nothing beyond. This man has a faith that reaches beyond. He believes the spirit does not die with the body.

B. The second element of his faith is that he believed that Jesus had a kingdom. "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom." I would say to you that, to have faith in Jesus at that moment was to have great faith. Because, for all intents and purposes, Jesus had been stripped of everything He had. His followers were gone. His reputation was besmirched. Even the clothes He wore were being gambled for by soldiers. He had nothing. This man says He has a kingdom. There was a title over Jesus' head, which read, "This is the king of the Jews." It was in three languages—Roman, Greek and Latin. We look at that today and say, "That was an appropriate

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title.” But that’s never the way Pilate meant it. Pilate meant it as an anti-Semitic joke. By that title, he meant to say to the Jews looking for a king, “If you guys ever get a king, this is what he’ll be like. He’ll be a condemned criminal on a cross, powerless to resist Roman rule.” It was a joke. The title was a joke.

Yet this man looked at Jesus and said, “You’ve got a kingdom.” And I submit to you there’s a tremendous amount of faith in that. There are all kinds of people whom we work with and live with to whom Jesus is nothing more than simply a good man and doesn’t have anything beyond that to offer. We have confession of faith that is different—He has a kingdom.

It was John Calvin who said of this man, this dying thief, “How clear was the vision of the eyes, which could see in death, life. In ruins, majesty. In slavery, royalty. I doubt if ever, since the world began, there’s been such a bright example of faith.”

C. He believed that the spirit did not die with the body. He believed that Jesus had a kingdom and he believed that Jesus could bestow favor. “Remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” He believed that Jesus could bestow favor and could help him. Jesus would be pleased to do that.

Here we see this man receiving his salvation that comes strictly as a gift of God, which salvation really is. He did not have time to reform. He did not have time to make restitution. He did not have time to mature. He did not have time to take the sacraments, to be baptized in water, to take communion. But he was saved, fully saved, fully remembered by Christ. Because salvation is not some sort of thing that stretches out and we’re on the threat of whether we’re going to pass the course or not. Jesus instantly reaches out to us and gives us the gift of life.

Martin Luther said of this man, “This request was for Christ—the request to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom—was for Christ a comfort like that supplied to him by the

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angel in the garden. God would not allow His Son to be destitute of subjects. And now His church survived through this one man. Where the faith of St. Peter broke off, the faith of the penitent thief began.”

An open acknowledgment of our guilt, an open confession of Christ’s innocence, an open declaration of faith in Jesus...

IV. A fourth element in salvation is open acceptance by us of Jesus.

When we’ve done our part, the Lord does His part. He says to the man, “I tell you the truth. Today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). This is the only request that was made of Christ while He hung on the cross. And it was a request that He was pleased to grant: “Today, you will be with Me in paradise.” Christ fully acknowledges His own authority. Jesus does not say to the man, “Look! I’m just a man like yourself. Don’t look to Me. I can’t help you.” Jesus does not say, “I don’t know any more what’s out there than you do.” Jesus lets the man lay on Himself the weight of his sin, the weight of his soul, the weight of his eternity, the weight of his burden, and Jesus accepts that weight and that burden, acknowledges it and says to the man, “You’ll be with me after this.”

Salvation is His gift from the cross to any who call upon Him. That’s why this thief is such a model for all of us. The Scriptures say all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It is when we do, like him, acknowledge our guilt, acknowledge Christ’s innocence and who He really is, and make an open declaration of our faith that Jesus then turns around and makes an open declaration of His acceptance of us. We become a member of His kingdom.

If you’re here today and you’ve not received His gift from the cross, I pray that, in this service, you will open your heart to Jesus Christ to receive that gift from Him.

Closing Prayer

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Our Father, as we bow our hearts in prayer before You, we want to thank You for the gift You are bringing. The gift You bring to us is more important than the trust deed we may hold on a piece of property. It's more important than a stock certificate or a bank passbook. It's more important than even our marriage or our family. It's more important than any single thing or multiplicity of things in life. It's Your salvation, more important than all. What would it profit us if we gained the whole world and lose our own life? Here, before us, is this man on the cross who was losing his life but looked to You for help and found life given to him. We're in that same place today, Lord. We've received life from You. I pray for any here who do not know You personally as their Lord and Savior. Even as we pray now, that their own heart and life would be open to acknowledge You as Lord and to confess You as Savior.

While your heads are still bowed, could I simply ask if you're here today and you have not received Jesus Christ into your life as your Lord and Savior, if you're now ready to do that? The Holy Spirit is ministering Jesus to you and inviting you to receive him. If you would like to receive Him today as your Lord and Savior, reach out to Him and have Him accept you, could I see your hand?

Lord, You know each heart and You know if any should have raised their hands that didn't. Your Spirit will always strive with us. I thank You that You're striving today and that today is the day of salvation. All of us, Lord, who have followed You for any time at all can take a moment and give You thanks. Even though we have had time to mature, even though we've had time to take communion and be baptized in water, even though we have had times to, in some cases, make restitution for sins we did before we followed You, even in spite of all that we've done, our salvation still doesn't rest in our own merit or strength or power or righteousness. It comes from

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You. We treasure that gift which You have given to us. We pray with earnest hearts. Remember us when You come into Your kingdom. Through our Lord. Amen.