

**"The Three Men"
(Luke 23:32-43)
Pastor Woohyun Jung
November 26, 2017**

(Luke 23:32-43)

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the King of the Jews. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Core Issue: Jesus Christ is God's Messiah and His death conquered sin and death. In love and grace, He calls us to enter into a relationship with Him who is the greatest gift of all. This is what it means to be a Christian.

Opposing Value: We often approach God with our own agenda and expectations. If we forget who He is, God will easily become nothing but a means for us to get something else.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon church. It's always good to see you. If you're visiting us for the first time, we're so thankful to have you. I pray that you'll experience the fullness of God's love through your time with us. Well, if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to **Luke 23:32-43**. If you don't have one, you can pick up one of the red Bibles in front of you and it should be on page 858.

Luke is one of the four Gospel books in the Bible – and all four of them exist to tell the readers of two essential things: namely, **the identity and mission of Jesus Christ**. These books are designed to answer the questions: "*Who is Jesus Christ and why did He come?*" **It's absolutely important to remember this because we'll miss everything if we simply approach with our own set of questions.** For example, the Bible is not written to tell you if you should go to this school or that, marry this person or not, take this job offer or not, or move to this neighborhood or not. There's no doubt that you'll gain wisdom to better discern and make your decisions but it's not primarily written for that purpose. But often times we read the Bible with a lot of expectations. And when you feel that the Bible didn't speak to your specific situation, you walk away frustrated, thinking that "Christianity isn't for me."

Let's take the Dummies book series as an example. If you are familiar with them, they are written to help you learn **something**: guitar theory for dummies, Spanish for dummies, or basketball for dummies. In contrast, biographies exist to tell the readers about **someone**: Abraham Lincoln or Hitler. Now, the former is read in order **to satisfy the needs and questions of the reader**. It's very reader-focused in its nature. But the latter is read in order **to look into someone's life and perhaps gain wisdom for our own lives as well**. We don't read a biography with an agenda of satisfying our own specific needs. It would be foolish for us to be upset because the biography of Steve Jobs is not teaching us how to use the Mac products or how to be rich and famous. **In the same way, the Gospels are fundamentally written to teach us who Jesus is – they're Jesus' biography**. So with that in mind, as we read our passage, I want all of us to keep these two questions in mind: "*Who is Jesus Christ and why did He come?*" Let me read it for us – Luke 23:32-43.

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the King of the Jews. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

I want to spend the rest of our time together looking at these three men – and lead us to uncover this life transformative truth that Luke wanted us to see.

1) JESUS – HIS IDENTITY AND MISSION

The first person I want us to look at is Jesus. Verse 33 tells us that He was crucified. Other than this, Luke doesn't record anything of the physical torment that Jesus or these two criminals went through on the cross. **Of course, other historical documents tell us that crucifixion was the most horrendous, disgusting, and distasteful way to die.** But Luke doesn't draw our attention to that. Isn't it interesting? To Luke, that wasn't the most important thing. **Instead, he draws the readers' attention to understanding the person of Jesus.** That's why what Jesus says next in verse 34 is absolutely mind-boggling to me. It would be absolutely understandable if He cursed the people who wrongly framed Him. But that's not what He does. Nor does He plead for His innocence. Rather, He says this: "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**" Jesus asks God to forgive those who mocked, betrayed, and crucified Him. Many of us know what it feels to be wrongly accused – it doesn't just make you helpless; it makes you angry. And this is why it's just so hard to believe that Jesus really meant what He prayed. It doesn't make sense. But this essentially is the reason why Luke recorded this here – he wanted to raise this curiosity in the readers: "Who is this person? Something is different about Him."

Luke, then, points us to what the people were saying about Jesus. In verse 35, the people just stood there and watched probably in horror or apathy. Then there were the religious rulers who sneered and said, "*He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.*" You could almost hear the sarcasm in their words. The Roman soldiers were no different. In verse 37, they mocked Jesus and said, "*If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.*" **All of them were essentially saying, "Jesus, if you are truly who you say you are, then prove it by saving yourself!"** They wanted Jesus to prove His *identity* with His *abilities*. So, then who was this Jesus?

What do we know about Him? Unfortunately, it's hard to see a complete picture of who Jesus is just from this passage, but we do in Luke 9:18 and ironically, what these rulers and soldiers said to mock Jesus was the very description that Jesus used to describe His identity.

This is what Luke 9:18 says, "*Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.'* 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'God's Messiah.'" And Jesus affirmed it.

Now, what does it mean to be the Messiah? "Messiah" is a Hebrew word which literally means "**the chosen One.**" **The Messiah was the promised King from the Davidic line who would one day come to reign over Israel forever.** As the chosen King, **He would bring justice to His enemies and establish a kingdom that cannot be shaken.** So the Israelites began to look for someone who would come to defeat the Romans to bring glory and power back to Israel. In other words, **they anticipated a political king** whose mission would be to physically liberate Israel from foreign occupation so that they will be free to serve God without fear of other nations, just like Moses or David. So it's very much understandable why these religious rulers were astonished and angry to hear that Jesus was claiming to be God's Messiah. He was about to die. They probably thought to themselves, "How can the promised King die? It doesn't matter how strong, wise, or rich you may be; if you're dead, it means nothing. A dead king is no king at all."

Now, if what they were claiming was true, we must ask ourselves, "**Was Jesus unable to save Himself?**" Was it that He had no power to save Himself? **It can't be.** When we read the first half of Luke, Jesus proves Himself over and over again that He had power and authority over sickness, nature, demons, and even death. If He wanted, He could've brought Himself down from the cross. **Then why did He remain there? Why did Jesus die on the cross?**

Jesus explains this in Luke 9:22. He said, "*The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*" **Jesus makes it clear: the very reason why He came to earth was to die – this was His mission.** Jesus is not on the cross because God's plan stopped working. Jesus is not on the cross because something went wrong that God didn't foresee. **He's on the cross because that was God's plan. This was God's way of saving us.**

In order to make sense of this, we must begin at the very beginning. You see, when God created the world, everything was perfect. But in our sin, we chose to rebel against God. We desired to take God's rightful throne for ourselves. We wanted to be in control. We wanted to call the shots. And most importantly, we didn't want to be restricted and bound by God. And we see this rebellious heart in action as it becomes the central motivation for all the sins we commit. **The result was that we were now deserving of God's wrath.** This is true because God is perfectly holy. He hates sin. And because we've all sinned and rebelled against God, His rage and wrath is aimed directly at you and me.

Some of you may say, "That sounds harsh; if God is so loving, why doesn't He just forgive us?" It's a fair question but you don't realize that **forgiveness is costly.** Let's say that you spent a fortune to buy an iPhone X for yourself; and your friend accidentally dropped it and it literally shattered. Now you have three choices: *you tell him to pay for it or you pay for it or you live without a phone.* In all three cases, even if you forgave your friend in your heart, someone is paying the price. **In other words, just because you forgive someone doesn't make the wrong go away.** It's not that simple. Pastor Tim Keller explains it this way: "God's grace and forgiveness, while free to the recipient, are always costly for the giver. From the earliest parts of the Bible, it was understood that God could not forgive without sacrifice."

No one who is seriously wronged can 'just forgive' the perpetrator, but when you forgive, that means you absorb the loss and the debt. You bear it yourself." **And the gospel tells us that God absorbed that cost for us.**

This is why the gospel is called good news. Listen to 1 John 4:10, "*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*" Friends, none of us can pay the price – not with our money, status, fame, or good works. Nothing would've been enough. But this verse tells us that because of His love for us, God provided a solution: His one and only Son, Jesus Christ who would take our place. **Jesus is the King who died for you and me not because He pities us but because He loves us.**

Friends, I want to ask you, "Who is Jesus to you?" Think about this for a moment. Is He just a prophet; a teacher; a good man; or a miracle worker? Just someone who lived two thousand years ago? **Or do you truly believe that He is the King who died for you so that you can have life and life to the full?** Christian brothers and sisters, **is He truly the Savior and Lord over your life?** I'm not sure how you think about Jesus, but the Bible makes it clear that this is who He is. **If you believe this, you must make a decision.** This is what C.S. Lewis said, "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." You must respond to Jesus – and that's exactly what these two criminals did as they both faced death.

2) THE FIRST CRIMINAL – CONDITIONAL SUBMISSION

When we read our passage, it's clear that the first man just went with the flow. Just like others, he also mocked Jesus in verse 39, "*Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*" He was basically saying, "Jesus, if You can get me out, I'll give my life to You." **For him, submission to Jesus was completely conditional.** He couldn't care less if Jesus was truly innocent or not. The only thing that he cared about was saving himself. Sure, he might have even believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But, it was only a matter of convenience to him: he was ready to take anybody as a king if he can get him off the cross. **Jesus was nothing but a means to get what he desperately wanted.**

Now, we can easily judge this man and say, "He's so selfish!" But the truth is that many of us could fall into this trap as well. Think with me. **Was there ever in your life something that you desperately desired – something that you wanted so badly that it consumed everything about you?** Maybe you were desperate for this specific job. You were greatly yearning to be loved – to find someone to marry. You longed for your loved one to get healed. You deeply desired for a baby. You wished that this financial mess you were in would somehow get resolved. You were hoping that your spouse or children would just change. So you prayed. "Jesus, *if* You really love me, make this happen." "*If* You make this happen, I'll know that You love me." Or "*If* You make this happen, I'll love You unconditionally. I'll give You everything." How many of you prayed this way? I know I have. **And when it doesn't happen, we find ourselves absolutely frustrated and angry.** "God, I thought You loved me! *Is there something that I need to do for You to make this happen?* Do you want me to serve, read the Bible, pray more, or give more? *Is there something that I shouldn't do?* I won't swear; I won't lie; I won't do this and that. Please make this happen!"

Friends, please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that you can't pray this way. God wants us to be honest with our hearts. We should be able to go to Him with everything and anything. And I know that sometimes we're so tempted to pray this way because we're just confused, but when we only pray this way, two things happen: **first, intentionally or unknowingly, we make His love for us and our love for Him absolutely conditional.** Just like this criminal, we're just testing Jesus. We'll love Him *if* He does this. We'll only believe that He loves us *if* He does this. **Secondly, on a more serious note, we distort who God is.** Let's say that it didn't go the way you desired. Will you doubt His love for you? Will you doubt His power and authority? Will you doubt His wisdom and sovereignty? In all of these cases, we've made God to be selfish and stingy; weak and ineffective; ignorant and limited.

Friends, it's important to pursue Jesus, but more importantly, we have to understand why we pursue Jesus. Do we really long for Him because we want to know Him and we want to be with Him? Or are we pursuing after Him because of what He can give us and do for us? If you are pursuing Jesus for something else, it's clear that your heart was never zealous for Jesus; you were always zealous for the very thing that you were running after – power, prestige, beauty, relationship, or wealth. We do this because we're hoping that these things would make our life better. **If this is true, maybe we weren't really zealous for Jesus or even for these things after all; maybe we were just zealous for ourselves.**

Luke shares this as a warning to us all. This clearly is not the right way to respond. **The first criminal's response shows that when we're driven by our own selfish desires and expectations, it's very easy for us to miss everything.** Jesus is no longer the King who died for our sins but a genie to get us everything we want.

3) THE SECOND CRIMINAL – RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

In complete contrast, we see that the response of the second man is radically different. Unlike the first criminal, he doesn't question Jesus' identity or uses that to get down from the cross. He's not influenced by what others were saying. But what he does is incredible. He says in verse 40, "*Don't you fear God?*" **The first thing that happened to this criminal was that he feared God.** All of a sudden, God was real to him. And in humility and trembling of the heart, he submitted himself to God. He basically recognized God as God and realized that he will never be God. **Then he admits that he had done something wrong.** He says in verse 41, "*We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.*" He wasn't trying to save himself or justify all that he has done. He understood the seriousness of his sins and recognized that he was being executed justly. **Then the most amazing thing was his confession about Jesus.** He says in verse 41, "*But this man has done nothing wrong.*"

Even though no one saw it, this criminal hanging on the cross realized that Jesus was not guilty – unlike him, Jesus was being executed unjustly. Luke doesn't tell us how he came to this conclusion but regardless, **he comes to acknowledge that Jesus was innocent, merciful, and worthy of his faith and submission. Then with nothing to offer (because he had none), he placed his faith in Jesus and pleaded for His mercy.** He prays in verse 42, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" This is incredible. The first criminal said, "I'll be with you, *if* you get me out of here." But this man said, "I'll stick with trouble, *if* I can stick with you." **For the first man, the negotiable was God and the non-negotiable was what he desired – no pain. But for the second man, the non-negotiable was Jesus even if it meant that he would suffer.**

To this amazing confession, we read of Jesus' response in verse 43. He says, "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" **Jesus was extravagantly gracious in his answer.** But I wonder if some of Luke's readers would've been upset to hear this. Let me explain. In one sense, this second criminal was no different from the first. **First of all, he did something that was fitting to be punished by crucifixion. Secondly, although it's not written in Luke, other Gospel books tell us that both of these criminals were hurling insults at Jesus.** Just like the first, the second man mocked and cursed Jesus along with everyone else. Then just because he repented, Jesus promised him salvation and glory. That's just not fair. It's unjust because he doesn't deserve grace.

When I went to Cambodia ten years ago, we took the team to a place called Toul Sleng. This was originally a school building which the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian communist) soldiers used as a torture center to kill in gruesome and unthinkable ways. You almost can't believe how one can do such a thing to another human being. Some were drowned; some were beaten to death because they didn't want to waste their bullets; some were buried live; women were raped; children were abused and raped. The Khmer Rouge movement killed over 2 million people within the span of four years. **My heart was beyond breaking – it was crushed.**

At the top of the building, they updated the lives of people who were involved in this genocide. Some of the leaders escaped the country; some were imprisoned; and then I came across news that really bothered me. It stated that one of the leaders who promoted and led this genocide became a Christian in prison. And I was angry. I just couldn't accept the fact that someone who was responsible for such horrible things could be just forgiven in an instant – He would forever enjoy His salvation in the presence of God. I couldn't understand the logic. It simply wasn't fair – It wasn't fair to the victims who lost their parents, brothers, sisters, children, and friends. With this uncontrollable anger, I wrestled with God. "God, how can this be? How can he just walk away free from all that he did? He doesn't deserve life. He deserves death!" Then in my prayer, I sensed God speaking to me this way: "Woohyun, in the same way, *you* don't deserve grace." It hit me like a brick. It was the first time that I truly understood that I was no different from this leader or any other criminal – *I* didn't deserve grace. God began to show me that this forgiveness wasn't free – but that Jesus paid the price. He wasn't saved because of what he did or what he didn't do; but simply because of what Christ has done on the cross – His love covered it all. **Friends, grace is scandalous.** Sometimes it's hard to understand and accept. **But this grace is offered to you today.** Well, what exactly was Jesus offering to him?

Let's go back to verse 42, "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" Now, a lot of people read it like this: "Because you suffered a lot for Me, you'll be in My glorious paradise when you die." Yes, it's true that He is saying that. But listen again, the focus is on **someone** not **something**: "*Today you will be with ME in paradise.*" I know it's a little hard to see that in English and you could argue that this is just my own interpretation – putting my own emphasis there. But when we read this verse in Greek, the original language of this book, it will tell us more clearly. In Greek, it's often the case that the emphasized word is intentionally placed at the beginning of the sentence. And that's exactly what we see here. It literally says, "Today, *with me*, you'll be in paradise." **What Jesus ultimately offered to this criminal was Himself.**

What does it mean to be a Christian? Think about that for a moment. Is it someone who believes in Jesus? Is it someone who obeys Jesus' teachings? I think Pastor Sinclair Ferguson defines it accurately when he says, "The overwhelmingly dominant way the New Testament describes Christians... is that we are 'in Christ.'" **Two words: in Christ. To be a Christian is to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ and allowing that relationship to transform you.** Let me give you a silly example. Living at home with my brother, I never had to put my toilet seat down. I never thought about it and never did it until I married Alicia. She reminded me over and over that I had to put the toilet seat down. Of course I would forget time to time but I began to realize that I was doing it even when Alicia wasn't there. And the scary thing was that I started putting the toilet seat down wherever I went. As silly as that example is, don't you find this to be true in your lives?

Maybe you find yourself growing to love the type of food your spouse likes; maybe you find yourself listening to the type of music your close friends listen to; maybe you find yourself imitating everything your mentor does. **Relationship transforms you.**

This is what it means to be a Christian. **We enter into a relationship with Jesus; and we begin to imitate Him, love what He loves, and hate what He hates.** You are not necessarily a Christian because you go to church, serve in a ministry, join a Life Group, sing Christian songs, pray, or read the Bible – though they are all vital parts of our faith, **but we must remember that we do these things not to be loved but because we’re unconditionally loved by Him.** This relationship doesn’t restrict us; rather it liberates us.

Pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones once asked one of his church members, “Are you a Christian?” to which the member responded by saying, “I’m trying.” He then said, “If you’re still trying to be a Christian, you haven’t understood what it means to be a Christian.” You are a Christian when you have a genuine, intimate, and growing relationship with Jesus Christ. This was what He was offering to the criminal on the cross and to us today not because we deserve Him, but simply because of His love and grace for us. **We’re saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.**

APPLICATION

Friends, Jesus is the King who died for you and me because He loves us. Without Him, we have no life. But in Him, we find everything, because He is the source of all joy, hope, and life. I want to let you know that **there is an invitation for you to start a relationship with Jesus. I want to plead with you – turn to Jesus today.** I urge you not to delay your decision. You don’t have to wait for the “right” moment because this *is* the right moment. All you need to do is simply believe and give your life to Jesus. **Would you place your faith in Him today?** You don’t have to have it all together. You don’t have to pray this fancy prayer. All you need to do is come as you are, with nothing to offer – just like this criminal did, but simply plead for His mercy as you pray, “**Jesus, remember me.**” Enter into that relationship with Him today.

For those of you who profess Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, **how is your relationship with Jesus today?** Are you pursuing Him as a means to something or is He really the reason why you’re pursuing Him? Do you truly delight in His presence? Do you find yourself desiring Jesus more and more? I want to let you know that **there is an invitation for you as well – to strengthen and deepen that relationship with Him.** It means that **we grow to love spending time with God.** It means that **we grow to love what He loves and hate what He hates.** It means that **we work and live out of our love for Him.** It means that **we can’t stop talking about Him.** Isn’t it true? This is how we would strengthen and deepen our relationship with anyone. For example, in marriage, we grow to love spending time with our spouse. We grow to love what our spouse loves and hate what our spouse hates. We serve out of our love for our spouse. We just can’t stop talking about our spouse. This is what it means to grow in our marriage – or any other relationship with others. Then it’s no different with Christ – I invite you to continue to cultivate your relationship with Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Friends, Jesus Christ is God’s Messiah, the Chosen King, and His death conquers sin and death – and He did this for you and me because of His love for us. In grace, He now calls us to enter into a relationship with Him, who is the greatest gift of all. This is what it means to be a Christian. I pray that you’ll experience this today.

Let’s pray.