

TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE

In college, I heard one of my favorite quotes about sharing our faith with others, “Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” (Sri Lankan pastor, DT Niles)

In our text this morning, we encounter such a beggar whose humility and faith is an example and pointer for the rest of us who seek life.

This is our 3rd week reflecting on the 7 last recorded sayings of Jesus upon the cross. And today’s saying is rather unique among the 7 because it’s the only statement that Jesus makes in response to someone else speaking to him.

That is significant. Everyone else there is either mocking him or watching in silent despair and horror. This man speaks to him with empathy, honor, and enough hope to actually ask something of Jesus.

Who is he? Luke describes the two men crucified beside Jesus simply as criminals. Matthew and Mark identify them as thieves (*lestoi*), bandits/rebels. Not just guilty of burglary but violence.

This is the same term used to describe the ones who attacked the man along the road in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30).

It’s also the term used in John’s Gospel to describe Barabbas, the violent rebel the crowds ask Pilate to release while demanding that Jesus be crucified in his place.

It’s not a far leap to suggest that these two criminals may have been co-conspirators with Barabbas. Arrested and sentenced to the same fate. But Barabbas walked free, while they now endure the cross alongside Jesus.

One of these criminals endures the events with little remorse, apparently turning the pain outward by joining in with the mockery of Jesus.

But the other apparently senses the significance of the moment. He interjects, and affirms that he and the other have received their due, but this Jesus is innocent. He then turns to Jesus with a simple request, “Remember Me.”

Jesus responds: “Truly I’m telling you, Today you will be with me in paradise”

It’s simultaneously a comforting word, while also bringing up a lot of questions for readers:

- So what or where exactly is this paradise, and what does that mean for life after death?
- Why does this guy of all people make the cut?
- And what does that mean for us?

So let’s get into it:

I. WHAT IS PARADISE, AND WHAT HAPPENS TO US AFTER DEATH? (23:43)

My wife has told me for years that I should preach on this, because there are so many wrong ideas out there on the topic. The Bible NOWHERE says that we become angels at death, or that God is somehow in need of us at any particular time. These are the kinds of things you might hear often at a funeral, I think in our desire to minimize the pain of death.

Now, I typically don't get into theological debates with people at a funeral - it's just not the time and place for that. But I also don't preach on these things often either because there is honestly surprisingly little material in the Bible that directly deals with the question.

But THIS passage does, so my wife will be happy today.

This man and Jesus are both on the brink of death, and Jesus tells him they will be in paradise.

Exp - This is a compound word in Greek, originating from the Persian word *pardes* meaning, "an enclosed garden or orchard." For first century Jews, the term "paradise" formed a picture of a safe, pleasant place (think Garden of Eden) where the souls of the just would find rest after death. The NT writers further use this term as a synonym for the dwelling place of God.

The idea is that while the body dies, the soul continues on in some kind of immaterial state.

We DON'T know what exactly the experience there is like. The Bible doesn't say.

To what degree does a soul have a form? How does the soul interact with its environment? To what degree does the soul experience the passing of time? Where exactly IS paradise, or heaven, or Abraham's Bosom (as Jesus refers to in the parable of Lazarus)?

Are the images we see described in the NT to be taken literally, or are they images attempting to describe something beyond our senses and understanding?

In one sense these questions are entertaining to consider. But we honestly don't know.

Yet there are a few things we DO know that are more helpful for us to focus upon:

- In some way, those with active faith in Jesus will be with Jesus even in death.
- Likewise, those who reject Jesus will continue to *not* be with him in death.

Whether there will be a second chance for those who were never adequately told or who rejected Jesus because of some wound or hurt, we just don't know.

Whether either the faithful or the wicked experiences this state in a sort of soul sleep or a conscious experience of either bliss or torment...I just don't think we can say for sure.

- But we also know that whatever experience we have upon death, there is still more to the story. Death is not the end! Not just in the sense that our souls continue on after the death of our bodies, but in the sense that the salvation story is not yet over.

There's a scene in Revelation 6 that I find really interesting. We have a view into heaven, and it says that the souls of the martyrs are there crying out, "How long, O Lord, until you judge the earth and avenge our blood?" - This is significant, because it shows us that even in heaven, there is a longing for what is coming next. The story isn't over.

Jesus will yet return. Death will yet be put to death, and all sin and brokenness will be no more. There will be a judgment and a new creation - a wedding of heaven and earth.

We're getting ahead of ourselves, but this frames the GOOD NEWS of Jesus' statement:

Jesus will indeed enter his kingdom, and *in the process* he will not only remember humble souls like this man's but be present with them in peace.

We may not know much about the current experience of those who have passed on. We also may know very little about the state of their relationship to Jesus in their last moments - this man on the cross didn't seem to have much in the way of impressive faithfulness prior to this moment, and yet his heart was softened.

What we DO know is that Jesus longs for our reconciliation, and there is assurance that those who put their trust in him will find comfort and peace with him.

But when should we put our trust in Jesus?

II. IF WE CAN BEAT THE BUZZER, WHY BOTHER WITH FAITHFULNESS NOW?

This is a question people often get hung up on. When we're uncertain about the spiritual lives of loved ones who have passed, what happens with this thief is encouraging.

I have people I love who have died, and most of what I observed of their lives tells me they didn't have much care for God at all. It's a comfort to me to know that I'm not the one making that call. And there's so much of someone's interior life, especially in their last moments, that we are unaware of.

On the flip side, that also can make us wonder why we should even bother with faithfulness to begin with. I mean, if we can just wait til the end and say, "I'm sorry... y'know, just in case" ... then what's the point?

To take that even deeper, doesn't it feel a bit outrageous to think that someone could commit atrocities with no judgment whatsoever just because they prayed a prayer? Or that someone who lived an otherwise upstanding life would be punished just because they weren't religious?

At a gut level, most of us feel that just isn't right.
But the thief's confession here demonstrates there is more to the story:

The faith he expresses is more than just thoughts or words, even as he's nailed to a cross.

He didn't just have a cognitive belief. He acted upon that belief:

- He interjected against others who were mocking.
- He confessed Jesus' innocence and kingship; AND
- He confessed his own guilt.

It may not seem like much, but it's a perfect example of repentance. He acknowledges what is true and what was wrong, and he turns to a different course of action.

I'll point out as well that he doesn't even ask for forgiveness or salvation. He just asks to be remembered.

It reminds me of Jesus' parable of the 2 sons. One asked the father for their inheritance and then goes off and squanders it on all kinds of wild living.

When he hits rock bottom, he returns home remembering that the servants in his father's house at least had food to eat. He has no expectation of being welcomed as a son...he just wants to eat.

But the Father welcomes him with open arms and throws a party. And the older brother who stayed gets super angry. He says, "I've been here this whole time and I didn't get any party! This guy has done nothing and gets a party! What gives?"

How does the Father respond? "My son, you're always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate - because your brother was dead and is alive again, lost and now found"

So why be faithful?

Because faithfulness is a reward in itself. Faithfulness is what we were made for. It's finding our rightful place in the family, living out our identity as Sons and Daughters in God's Kingdom Family, bringing life and light into the world instead of death and darkness.

III. HOW THEN, CAN WE BE FOUND FAITHFUL? (23:42-43)

If we are with Jesus in this life, we can be assured we will be with Jesus in death and in the Kingdom to Come. It is a life of joy and peace, even as we endure a broken world until his return

If we are not yet with Jesus, this text assures us that we will be welcomed home as Sons and Daughters of the King even if we return in our last moments.

But it requires our confession and repentance. And I can tell you from personal experience that those are not habits that come easy without practice. It requires that we recognize the truth about who Jesus is and the truth about our condition. And it requires that we are willing to humble ourselves and turn toward him. Those things are easier said than done.

Many of us spend our time practicing the opposite:

- Rationalizing our behavior.
- Soothing our ego.

The Biblical term for this would be “hardening our hearts”

We fool ourselves into thinking we’ll make the right decision when it matters most while training ourselves every day to do the opposite.

But when you practice confession, it does the opposite.
It’s like you are training yourself to see clearly.

When you confess that Jesus is Lord and give praise and thanks, it right-sizes your perspective of the world and the things that make us feel anxious.

When you confess your sin and ask forgiveness, it right-sizes your view of yourself and the lies that stir up both inflated pride and self-condemnation.

You soften your heart, and strengthen it in faith for the moments that matter most.

To that end, I want to end this morning with an invitation to practice confession.

You don’t have to pray these specific words for your confession to be valid, but I also know that the practice may be foreign to some and you may just not know where to start.

So let’s practice together!

God I confess that I have sinned through my own fault,
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.
Search my heart, and reveal any offensive way in me.

[Take a moment of silence to confess specific sins to God]

In the glory of your Kingdom, Jesus, remember me with mercy.
In the promise of your salvation, I rejoice that I am found in you,
in this life and forevermore.