

“Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

Today we are looking at just five verses from the pages of Scripture. Included in these verses are the second words Jesus spoke from the cross during his execution. As I studied these verses again in preparation for the sermon this evening, it struck me how much deep theology is contained in these few verses... and taught through this real historical event in an easy-to-understand story. What we'll see today is what God teaches about...

- The nature of human beings
- Contrition (Godly sorrow over sin... what it is and what it looks like.)
- The nature of Christ (Or the seminary term: “Christology”)
- Conversion (How a person comes to faith in Christ.)
- Faith
- The nature of the Kingdom of God and Heaven
- Grace (What it is and what it means for us.)

When I was in seminary they taught us that we need to be careful not to try to teach the whole counsel of God in every sermon. We were told to stick close to the text and teach what it teaches. Seminarians and young pastors tend to try to pull every doctrine of God in to the sermon, even when it's not in the text. Well, with this text, it will seem like we're doing just that... except all of it truly IS in the text! We have to talk about it because it's there. So we're going to learn God's revelation about these vitally important doctrines:

All of this to say, I think these 5 verses are worth coming back to again and again. I hope that during the next week or so, you'll open up your Bible and read these verses again and again. Contemplate their meaning and the richness of what God is teaching us here.

Now, if doctrine and theology aren't your cup of tea, let me give you another reason to listen carefully to these verses. Have you ever been troubled by something wrong that you did? Can you think of a time when you had a hard time forgiving yourself for something? Have you ever doubted whether you'll go to heaven when you die? Has the thought ever crossed your mind that God maybe doesn't love you, isn't near, isn't helping, or has forgotten you?

This text will give you all the answers your heart is looking for. Let me back up a few verses for some important context. Luke 23:32...

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, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. [...Our focus tonight will be on one of those two criminals. Matthew's Gospel calls them “robbers.” To deserve death by crucifixion, there must have been violence involved... and/or they robbed prominent Romans. One of the criminals will later acknowledge that their sentence was well-deserved. This in stark contrast to Jesus who most certainly does not deserve to be on that cross.]

34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” ... This would be important enough to spend the sermon on, but for our focus today just take note that the criminals being executed along with Jesus heard these words as well.

35 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.”

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.

So we have everyone chiming in to mock Jesus... the people watching, rulers, the soldiers crucifying him. And loo who else was mocking Jesus:

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

Now Mark’s Gospel tells us that both criminals were mocking Jesus. We don’t have a contradiction. At first they both were, but then suddenly, one of the two has a change of heart. Something happened to the other criminal.

What we see is a massive transformation, a complete turnaround, a shocking, 180 degree change of heart. As he suffers in pain on the cross, as the dying process has begun, he suddenly comes to a moment of clarity. What happened was a miracle:

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, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Isn’t this incredible? A convicted violent felon who at first joined in mocking Jesus has a change of heart and trust in Jesus. Let’s unpack what happened here. There’s no other way to describe this than to say that it was a divine miracle. Let’s take a closer look at the drastic change, the theology it teaches, and the profound impact and meaning this has for our lives.

1) **He became aware of God and the fear of God.** The other criminal had no fear of God, no fear of judgment, no sense of sinfulness, no sense guilt, no desire for forgiveness, no desire for reconciliation. At first the 2nd criminal was the same way, but he changed completely. He rebukes the other criminal: **““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.”** Friends, this is the first evidence that God has changed a person’s heart. They become keenly aware of their sin and thus greatly fearful of God. The unbeliever does not fear God, he dismisses God, mocks God, denies God’s existence, mocks those who do believe in him. The unbeliever sins against God and actively opposes God and does so in peace. The 2nd criminal confessed that he deserved the crucifixion he was getting. He knew that his punishment was just. You would think that his attention would be consumed by the earthly punishment of crucifixion. But he was also aware that whatever punishment God was about to give would be just too. And he was rightly afraid of God’s punishment. He knew that God’s punishment was the one that was truly terrifying.

APPL: Friends, let me ask you this: Are you at peace with the sin in your life? Are you living in violation of the commands and will of God, and it doesn’t disturb you? Maybe it did at first, but now you’ve silenced your conscience, you’ve rationalized your behavior, you’ve dismissed the fear. As a messenger of God, I have to warn you: God is a real threat. He doesn’t wink at sin. He doesn’t buy into your rationalizations. He doesn’t yield to you and your

definition of morality. God is absolutely righteous and holy. He makes the rules and he doesn't compromise on holiness. So give careful, prayerful thought: are there any sins in your life that you are comfortable with? Sins you commit after which you're not trembling in your boots? God is calling each of us to search out the dark corners of our heart and life, to fully appreciate the weight of our sins and God's anger about them, and to repent.

THEOLOGY: I told you we'd learn some important theology: **The nature of man** apart from God is that we are sinful, dead, blind enemies of God... just like that first thief who was completely unaware of God and had no fear of God.

We have learned **the nature of God**. He is holy, blameless, righteous and true. He does not compromise with sin. He is

We have also learned what true **contrition** looks like. It's to become keenly aware of God and his holiness, and also to become keenly aware that I have not been holy. I only deserve God's right anger. Contrition means to genuinely be sorry about our sin.

Now what happens next is extremely important. Judas got to this point, despaired and hanged himself. This criminal did not do that.

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.”

This criminal knows that Jesus is his only hope. And so he turns to Jesus with his request. Did you notice what he confessed about Jesus? **He has done nothing wrong.** This man knew and believed that Jesus was innocent... that Jesus was perfect. We don't know how much he knew about Jesus before they hung on adjacent crosses. But even if that was all, he saw Jesus' demeanor. He heard Jesus' prayer to his Father that those crucifying be forgiven. This was not the bitter rebelliousness of a criminal. These were the words of an innocent.

And so he made his request of Jesus, addressing him by name. The name “**Jesus**” means, “The LORD saves...” An angel told Joseph he should name his baby boy Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. The Bible says there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. The criminal believed that Jesus could save him, and make him right with God so that he would no longer need to fear God.

THEOLOGY: This man knew his Christology. He knew the nature of Christ. He knew and believed that Jesus was guiltless and innocent.

His request is simple: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He makes no appeal based on who he is or what he's done. He couldn't. He only is looking for mercy. He hopes God can show him grace – undeserved love and kindness even though he didn't do it.

In his request, “**Remember me when you come into your kingdom.**” He shows a knowledge and faith in that Jesus is indeed a King, and that his kingdom was not of this world. He knows and trusts that Jesus does have influence with God almighty and trusts that Jesus can make things right if he chooses to do so. This man entrusts his eternal future to Jesus. He knew it was his only hope.

THEOLOGY: This is the nature of faith. It is despairing of self and fully relying on Jesus. The criminal had it. Now listen to Jesus' answer:

43 Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

There is the phrase we've been looking at through out Lent: “I tell you the truth...” What Jesus was about to say was extremely important, counterintuitive, and hard to believe... but it

was the absolute truth. TODAY you will be with me in paradise. Not eventually you'll be with me. He doesn't say that there will be some time needed to work off his sins before he'll be able to enter. No, that every day Jesus would be in paradise. The criminal would be in paradise. Paradise, just another name for heaven. They would be in the heavenly glory free of the pain of this world and enjoying the perfection heaven. The true joy being that the criminal would be with Jesus, because where Jesus is, there heaven is.

THEOLOGY: And this teaches us about the **nature of grace**. The man was a violent criminal! He deserved no place in heaven! Honestly, you don't either. Neither do I. God demands perfection. You'll either have to produce it yourself, or you'll have to take the perfection God offers through his Son Jesus, who is the innocent sacrifice for the sins of the world... yours too. And how amazing that God even offers it! Grace is illustrated here, and also in the parable of the Lost Son.

And we understand what it means to **be converted**. God works a massive transformation in our cold, dead hearts. He turns us around, leading us to be horrified at sin and its consequences, and to turn to Jesus for full and free forgiveness.

The conversion of this criminal was nothing short of a miracle. The conversion of the apostle Paul was also an incredible miracle... that persecutor of Christians became a follower of Jesus and the greatest missionary to the Gentiles.

APPLICATION: But friends, your conversion was just as much a miracle. God turned you around. Turned you from sin and turned you to Jesus.

Just look at what we've learned today!

The nature of human beings: Do you believe your true nature is one of sin? Are you afraid of God because of your sins?

Contrition (Are you sorry, just as the criminal was?)

The nature of Christ (Do you understand his perfect life... his perfect obedience to the Father. Do you believe that he was the perfect sacrifice for all of your sins?)

Conversion (Has God transformed your heart... turning you from sin, to trust Christ?)

Faith (Do you have faith... a complete reliance upon Christ for your right standing with God?)

The nature of the Kingdom of God and Heaven (Do you understand that Jesus rescues you from this world of sin and death and promises you today that you will be with him paradise?)

Grace (Do you believe that no matter who you are and what you've done, God loves you, forgives you, calls you his child and had prepared incomprehensible blessings for you?)

Friends, I pray you go with piece today. Jesus took your place on Calvary's cross and he paid the ultimate price for your salvation. And so he says to you today: You will be with me in paradise. Amen.