

# Lessons from an Impenitent Thief

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Psalter 185:5–9

Scripture: Luke 23:26–43

Psalter 420:1, 2, 6

Sermon Text: Luke 23:39–43

Psalter 265

Psalter 4

*And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But 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. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

—Luke 23:39–43

Beloved, we have before us a very solemn record of the death of Christ and of two thieves. This compelling narrative highlights the heights of God's sovereignty through the condemnation of the one thief and the salvation of the other thief as they hang on either side of Christ. It also highlights the heights of man's responsibility in the gospel. We love to hear the gripping account of the thief on the cross who was saved at the last moment; we are attracted to his story because his life ends well. His life ends in eternal bliss. But perhaps we too quickly ignore the other thief, crucified on the other side of Jesus. Why is that? His life gives us a grim reminder of the opposite side of the coin of eternal destiny;

it offers a horrifying glimpse into the heart of a man who has salvation staring him in the face and yet blatantly rejects it. With God's help, we wish to focus on the lessons we can learn from this impenitent thief.

### **His Blasphemous Challenge**

Let's briefly set up the context of this narrative by following the progression of the events as they lead to the crucifixion of Christ. Throughout his gospel, Luke contrasts two men: two sons (ch. 15); two men praying (ch. 18); two rich men (ch. 18–19); and now, in verse 23:32, we are introduced to two malefactors—evil men, criminals. “And there were also two others, malefactors, led with him [Jesus] to be put to death.” They were both crucified, one on either side of Jesus, verse 33 tells us: “And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.”

Two items from this part of the context are worthy of note. The first is that this setting is permeated with death. The very name of the place of crucifixion shows us that this is a place of death: it was called Calvary, from the Greek word “cranium” which we could translate “skull.” It is a place that reminds of the grave consequences of sin. It is a place of darkness and of profound justice, where criminals were executed for their deeds. The second thing to notice is that, in these details that Luke gives us, prophecy is being directly fulfilled. Isaiah prophesied that this would take place, “And he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many” (Isa. 53:12). These are details that we need to keep in mind as we narrow our focus on the impenitent thief.

The crowds gather around Christ and begin to mock and taunt Him in fulfillment of Psalm 22:7–8: “All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they

shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.” Then, as the focus shifts from the crowds at the foot of the cross, we hear a lone voice, an angry voice, a desperate voice, echoing the emptiness of a soul without God: “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” It is the voice of the impenitent thief as he picks up the sad refrain of the crowd around him.

He issues a blasphemous challenge to Jesus as they both face death. In verse 39, we read these words, “And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him.” The word “railed” literally means blasphemed. It means that this malefactor spoke irreverently or impiously about God. When he blasphemed Jesus, he blasphemed God.

His words revealed his *doubt and self-imposed blindness*. “If thou be Christ.” He is really a practical atheist. He does not really believe that Christ is the anointed One, the Messiah; he does not believe that Christ was sent from God for the salvation of sinners. Never for a moment did he think that Christ could really save him. This is not the doubting of a faint and weak faith. This doubt demonstrates the unwillingness of his heart. He is willingly suppressing the truth in unrighteousness of what he is witnessing. “If thou be the Christ” was doubt that led to self-imposed blindness and hardness of heart.

His challenge also reveals his *mockery and hardness of heart*. “Save thyself.” He joins the crowd in what Luke tells us is mockery. The crowds were shouting this very same thing: “He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.” The soldiers mock him: “If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.” The thief joins in this mockery. The end approaches and he thinks he has nothing to lose by mocking Christ and the claims that He has made. He unflinchingly challenges Him, making an open mockery of the Kingship and power of

Christ. It reveals his impenitent heart. He cries out for Christ to save Himself, but if Christ was to save Himself, there would be no salvation. Here was a direct challenge to Christ to end His mission of salvation. The Savior was hanging beside him and the man was unwilling to bow under Christ's sovereign claims.

It further revealed his *utter selfishness and desperation*. "Save thyself and us." Notice that the thief changes the refrain somewhat. The crowds at the foot of the cross were not in the straits that this thief is now in—he stands at death's door. He is in desperate straits and so he cries out, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." He taunts Christ but does not believe Him. He thinks that in order to be rescued from the cross, Christ first needs to come down. He does not trust in Christ for salvation from sin but simply from the consequences of sin. He wants to escape death but on his own terms. In his desperation, he tries to escape. Ultimately, the cross and Christ on that cross was a stumbling block to this thief. He thought he could be rescued by Christ coming off the cross, but he missed the point that rescue came from Christ dying on that cross for sinners.

What do we learn then from this thief? Let's move through what he reveals about himself and find the invaluable spiritual lessons.

First, salvation is never on our own terms. Salvation is not simply an escape from the consequences of sin. This cheapens grace and minimizes the death of Christ on the cross. Salvation is from sin and its consequences. If salvation were simply salvation from the consequences of sin, then we could go on sinning and simply ask for forgiveness. God forbid. Salvation comes on God's terms—through the cross of Christ—and we say with Paul, "For

the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

Second, we must not wait until the moment of death to repent and believe the gospel. This man waited in his hardness of heart and he had no one but himself to blame for it. Certainly, the prospect of death and the impossibility of salvation after death should move us to seek God in repentance and faith. If you are unsaved, you should never despise the day of salvation. You have more than this thief; you have heard the gospel, perhaps even all of your life. If there is no excuse for the thief, there will be no excuse for you.

Third, impenitent sinners desperately need the grace of God to soften them in order to see their hearts of hardness and the beauty and glory of Christ as the Savior of sinners. This thief was near death, and yet he continued to be hard-hearted and impenitent. The sight of the dying Savior did not move him. His own prospect of eternal death and torment did not move him. But here we also see God’s sovereignty displayed in salvation: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (2 Cor. 9:18). This is never an excuse, though, to sit back and say that your fate is sealed anyway. This truth ought to spur you on in repentance and faith, lest you fall under the same condemnation of the thief.

Fourth, for believers, this thief teaches us this lesson: we must never fall into complacency and be content with a lukewarm Christianity. This impenitent thief ought to spur us on to keep short accounts of sin with God and to live utterly dependent on His grace. His hardness of heart ought to cultivate in us a sensitive conscience and heart against sin and towards God. It should also spark in us profound gratitude for the grace of God which redeemed

us, because we know that outside of grace we are like this blaspheming thief.

### **His Worthy Condemnation**

He makes this blasphemous charge, but how is this charge answered? It is not answered by Christ, but it is answered by the other thief on the cross. In his words, we see how this blasphemy is met with the severest condemnation, confirming the thief's death sentence. His condemnation is heightened by five factors.

First of all, his condemnation is heightened by his companion's rebuke. In Matthew and Mark, we read that both thieves were blaspheming and railing on Christ, but now one thief falls silent. He is grasped from the grip of eternal and spiritual death and ushered sovereignly and graciously into eternal life by Christ Himself. But he testifies as he hangs there in judgment for the crimes he committed, and his heart is opened to the reality of who Christ is. He speaks of what he has learned in these moments. As he speaks, he heightens the condemnation of the impenitent thief. Listen to what he says in verse 40: "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" If the impenitent thief was ever wondering why he was hanging on the cross, he does not have to wonder any longer, does he? He is under the same condemnation as the penitent thief and the same condemnation as Christ—they are all counted as worthy of death. You would expect this rebuke to cut through to the soul of the impenitent thief, but it does not.

These words are a powerful warning to the impenitent thief and they are a powerful warning to impenitent sinners. If your condemnation has been pointed out before and you continue to ignore it, I warn you that it will only heighten your condemnation before the bar of God's justice. Every stab of the conscience that you have suppressed

will heighten your condemnation. Young people, every warning from your parents will heighten your condemnation. When your faithful friends and fellow sinners have rebuked you because of the condemnation you are in, what have you done with that rebuke? If you are elderly, well advanced in years and without grace, you surely have heard your condemnation as a sinner before God sounded from the pulpit. Will it heighten your condemnation or will it prod you to repentance and faith?

Second, his condemnation is heightened because the penitent thief highlights that the impenitent thief is living without the fear of God. That was the key difference between them: “Dost thou not fear God?” Perhaps the impenitent thief had a fear of death, but that fear of death lacked the fear of God. He did not want to think about standing before the judgment seat of God. He remained hardened to the very end. It’s like the interview I watched of Christopher Hitchens, a renowned atheist. As he was diagnosed with Stage IV esophageal cancer, he was interviewed and asked if he would change his mind about rejecting God. He responded that death did not alarm him and if there was something beyond death, he was always up for a surprise. I’m sure it was not a pleasant surprise. He demonstrated a lack of the fear of God.

That’s the question I ask of you. Do you not fear God, seeing we are in the same condemnation? Sin levels the playing field, and its wages are death. Death is inevitable, but what happens after remains unwritten for you. Do you not fear the God of infinite justice, who will and must punish sin? Do you not fear God, who spared not His own Son? Do you not fear God, wanting to know more of Him because of who He is? Do you not want to live for God, seeking His will because He is utterly worthy and glorious and lovely? Do you not fear Christ, who went to such lengths for the salvation of sinners? The word here

for fear is the word *phobos*, and it means to be terrified, frightened, put to flight. Here on the cross, the terrible, consuming fire of God's justice and holiness was on display. The awesome and heart-consuming love of God was on display in the death of Christ. That is what the penitent thief was convinced of as he saw Christ hanging there, but the impenitent thief ignored it. That is what the cross proclaims to us as well—God's infinite holiness and justice and love met together in the death of His Son to pay the price for sin. And as the penitent thief saw this price had to be paid by himself, he knew he couldn't. His fear of God drove him to Christ, but the impenitent thief lacked this fear and it drove him to his ruin. Here is one more attempt to warn and rebuke: "Do you not fear God?"

The impenitent thief's condemnation is heightened even more by his own crimes and crucifixion. There was nothing vicarious or substitutionary about his crucifixion. He was crucified at the place of the skull—Calvary. Again in the other thief's words we see this heightened condemnation. In verse 41, we read, "And we indeed justly; for we received the due reward of our deeds." The penitent thief is saying, "We are worthy of our punishment and condemnation." But the impenitent thief thought that Christ owed him something yet. There was still an element of self-justification when he cried out, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." We do not read that he owned his condemnation. Nor do we read that he acknowledged the justness of what he was now undergoing.

If you remain unrepentant and in your sin, it will only serve to heighten your condemnation. There is no way that you can lessen or mitigate your sin in any way. It stands as a dark blemish on your account and can only be removed by submitting to the mercy of Christ. Don't let your crimes and punishment heighten your condemnation. You cannot reason it away and say that there is



nothing after death, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). Will your crimes be covered in the blood and righteousness of Christ or will they heighten your condemnation?

The penitent thief highlights another thing that only serves to heighten the condemnation of the impenitent thief: the innocence of Jesus. “But this man hath done nothing amiss” (v. 41). The innocence of Jesus testifies powerfully of His perfection. Here is the Lamb of God without blemish. He has done nothing out of place; He was chosen from among His fellow men to be the One without spot and blemish to be offered to God. And yet the thief remains impassable. The innocent Savior that he rejects will only heighten his condemnation.

What help is the innocence of Christ when you are close to death? Your life depends on the innocence and perfection of Christ. He is tempted in all points, yet without sin. He has done nothing amiss, and yet was counted as a transgressor, made to be sin so that you might be made the righteousness of God in Him. It is His blood, the blood of a lamb without blemish that redeems from sin. If this good news does not melt the hardest heart, I don’t know what it will take to soften your soul. For this thief, he did not care nor see the innocence and perfection of the Lamb of God. What about you?

Finally, there is one more thing that heightens the condemnation of the impenitent thief: his companion’s salvation. They were both in the same condemnation. They had committed similar crimes. They were both crucified. They both hung on either side of Jesus. They both saw Christ. They both faced death. And yet they faced it so differently at the very end. The penitent thief was broken for his sin; he saw in Christ what he needed. He

threw his entire being on Christ and pleaded for Christ to simply remember him. He knew he needed more than just the rescue from the cross. He needed rescue from himself and from the wrath of God against sin. He was saved. Salvation in all its glorious possibility shone before the impenitent thief—not only from the person of Christ, but also from the salvation of his former partner in crime. And yet we don't read that this changed his mind at all. There are only his last words of blasphemy and his silence as a memorial.

What a solemn lesson for us! We can see Christ and hear so much about Him, and yet remain so hard. You can even see the effects of grace in others, in your friends, in your family members, and yet remain so hard. The glorious possibility of salvation speaks to you and testifies to you. You cannot deny it and yet you suppress it. You say, "I don't want it" in different ways. You use the excuse that you're too far gone, but the penitent thief wasn't. You use the excuse, "I'm too near death"—and yet this impenitent thief wasn't too near death for the grace of God to take hold of him. If at the end of the day, you remain hard and unrepentant, you only have yourself to blame. It's not that God was lacking in showing the possibility and power of salvation. Will the conversion of others heighten your condemnation? Will you have rejected the power that you saw so evidently at work in others as insufficient for you? Bow before Christ tonight and kiss Him in faith lest your condemnation be made the worse. Learn the lessons from this impenitent thief! Take them to heart and turn to the Lord for salvation. Amen.