

# LESSONS FROM THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

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## INTRODUCTION:

### **A. Illustration about Edwin & John Wilkes Booth – Choices are powerful aren't they!**

1. What caused these two brothers to take two totally different paths in life we cannot be sure:
  - a. They had the same mother, the same father, the same upbringing, and the same interest
  - b. What we can know is it wasn't one decision but a series of choices that separated the two
  - c. The path they chose made the difference between life and death, for themselves & others!
2. As we stop to meditate at the cross of Jesus we see the same type of thing take place:
  - a. When we approach His death we typically think of only one cross, the cross Jesus died on, but what we all know is that there were really three... His cross & that of two thieves!
  - b. The decisions that each of these men made as they approached not only how they lived, but how they died, impacted greatly their life, death, & eternity... but that of others
  - c. One was a cross of rebellion where a man died in sin, one was a cross of repentance where a man died to sin, and the other was a cross of mercy & grace where the Lamb of God died for sin! What a difference their decisions made!

### **B. Today I want us to spend our time considering one of those crosses – The cross of the thief who was crucified with Jesus but who repented! It's a cross that is often misunderstood and misapplied by many of our religious friends; however it's a cross whose real lessons are often neglected by us!**

## I. LET'S BEGIN BY LOOKING AT WHAT THE THIEF DOES NOT TEACH US:

### **A. Many people look to the thief on the cross as a pattern for how we are saved today:**

1. Certainly we can look at the story of this thief and see some common elements:
  - a. He displays faith, repentance, & even confession to a degree – We must have all of these!
  - b. He is impressed by Jesus & that He was innocent, recognized that Jesus was a King, was desirous to be a part of the kingdom of Christ, & Jesus provided the thief's salvation!
  - c. He developed strong faith! Faith in a dying mangled King being crucified right next to him!
2. It seems to happen every time we have a discussion with someone about the importance of baptism – They'll say, "If baptism is necessary for salvation, what about the thief on the cross?"
  - a. Most of our religious friends and neighbors believe that you have to believe, repent, confess Christ, & call upon Jesus to save you in some way (ask into heart, say prayer)
  - b. Since this is exactly what the thief did, it's not surprising they use him as their example!
  - c. They believe since the thief was saved and there is no mention of his being baptized, then baptism must not be a necessary step in our salvation - Sounds like good reasoning
3. A quote from Max Lucado: "How disturbing to theologians to ascend the mountain of doctrine only to be greeted by an uneducated thief who cast his lot with Christ. Here is a man who never went to church, never gave an offering, never was baptized, and said only one prayer.

### **B. The thief on the cross does not answer the question "What Must I Do To Be Saved?" for us!**

1. The main reason why his example is not for us today is that the thief on the cross was not under the same covenant as we are under today: **(Col 2:14; Hebrews 9:15-17)**
  - a. If we don't differentiate properly between the covenants and laws, what applies to us and what doesn't, we'd get all messed up! You'd have people building huge arks in their front lawns, refusing to eat pork & catfish, and sacrificing animals on a regular basis!
  - b. Throughout time God has given different covenants with different laws governing man...

with each one came certain laws and ways by which people were saved:

- 1) First there was the patriarchal age – This continued until Jesus died on the cross
  - 2) Then the mosaic age – God selected a certain group (the Jews) & entered a special covenant with them. They had their own laws & God expected certain things of them if they were to be saved. Only the Jews were responsible to this... others were expected by God to live by His laws under the patriarchal age
  - 3) The Christian age – Both systems ended here with the death of Christ. All men are responsible to God’s expectations now under the law of Christ
- b. Was he a Jew living under the Old Covenant or a Gentile living still under the patriarchal age? Either way, he wasn’t responsible to the same covenant & laws we are today!
  - c. While the thief lived during the time of Christ, he lived before the death and resurrection of Christ which brought into effect the New Covenant which we are under now!
2. Jesus spoke this man’s sins forgiven as He did several others (**Mark 2:5-7; John 8:11; Luke 7:47-50**)
    - a. In each case it’s their faith that prompts Jesus to forgive them... It took just a spoken word
    - b. People who defend that we are saved just like these say, “Don’t you believe that Jesus still has power to forgive sins?” → That’s not the issue! If we didn’t we wouldn’t be here
    - c. Jesus did forgive sins by just speaking a word in these cases... but do you know anyone Jesus has spoken to today & said, “Your sins are forgiven you!” He speaks through His word & tells us what He wants! That’s what we go by now! (**Hebrews 9:16-17**)
  3. Besides these, if you take the thief on the cross as your example for salvation, you are basing your doctrine on an exception, not on the rule! (**James 4:17**)
    - a. Some say, “What if a person is on their way to be baptized and a tree falls on their head and kills them, will they be lost?” Does a bizarre situation nullify clear cut passages?
    - b. The same is true for the thief on the cross – Even if his case was applicable today, does that one unusual and unduplicatable nullify so many clear cut passages?
    - c. What if one is breathing their last words & seeks salvation – That is God’s end of the stick!
  4. To ignore baptism based on the thief on the cross alone would be to ignore how the New Testament clearly teaches salvation, grace, and mercy are extended to men:
    - a. He was saved based on his faith, but that has been true of all men of all time! But under different covenants, God has had different requirements of that faith!
    - b. We are to believe that God raised Jesus up from the dead, did the thief? (**Rom 10:9-10**)
    - c. The thief was saved before baptism was commanded by Jesus and before Jesus died, was buried, & was resurrected – The foundation of baptism (**Matt 28:18-20; Rom 6:3-4**)
  5. We are under the New Covenant now so we must ask, “What does the Lord tell us to do to be saved now?” (**Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Rom 10:9-10; Gal 3:26-27; I Peter 3:21**)
    - a. When we put all these & more together we find the answer to the question: “What must I do?” - Faith, Repentance, Confession, and Baptism → You can’t ignore any of these!
    - b. Maybe the thief on the cross did the first three, and that’s all that God required of him at that point in time, but we can’t look at that & say that baptism isn’t necessary now!
    - c. Today I hear many people saying baptism is necessary... But what they say is its necessary because we have to demonstrate to others we are saved – Is that what this says?

## **II. NOW, CONSIDER SOME IMPORTANT LESSONS WE CAN APPLY TODAY:**

### **A. The thief teaches us to take advantage of the opportunity of today to make our lives right with God!**

1. This thief understood he was condemned to die and that his time was short! (**Luke 24:32, 40**)

- a. Like a person being led to their execution on death row, this thief understood not only that he was going to die, but when! In just a short amount of time he would be dead!
- b. Teenagers feel invincible and young adults feel like death is very far away for them... But for this man death was an ever present reality! He knew what the cross would do!
2. The thief came to have faith in Jesus the Christ and sought salvation while he still had the chance!
  - a. To speak one had to push up on his feet which were nailed through, scraping his likely scoured back against the wood, taking a deep breath, and then he could speak!
  - b. To me this really makes it impressive how the thief spoke so much in defense of Jesus!
  - c. But not only did he defend Jesus, this thief pleaded with Jesus for his salvation! **(vs. 42)**
3. Isaiah teaches that we need to seek him while he is near and able to be found! **(Isaiah 55:6-7)**
  - a. This passage is a great invitation from God – It’s a call to people whose lives are empty, people who are lost, people who know the guilt of sin to find life, peace, and hope!
  - b. What a wonderful promise this is! If we will forsake our wicked ways & turn to the Lord, He’ll be compassionate to us and not only pardon us, but ABUNDANTLY pardon us!
  - c. But this also a warning... It also tells us when God will pardon... while He is near and able to be found! This means a time will come when pardon & compassion will be no more!
4. Have you been resisting God? What matters is you start to doing God’s will today! **(Mat 21:28-31)**
  - a. The Pharisees felt they were righteous while those who followed Jesus couldn’t be saved due to their past → Yet it was those with a dark past who were truly doing right!
  - b. Jesus considers two sons – One says, “I’ll obey!” but doesn’t. The other says, “I won’t obey” but later regrets it & decides to obey – The second one pleases his father!
  - c. Maybe like the thief you’ve been resisting God all your life. Maybe you think you’ve spent your best years and can’t give God as much and so you’ve squandered your chance... This teaches us regardless of what we’ve done in the past or how much time has passed God wants us to start serving Him now! If you do, that’ll be all that matters!
  - d. Some may think this isn’t fair – Does this mean a person who doesn’t do right all their life can choose to obey God at the end of their life and receive the same reward as a person who has spent their entire life serving God faithfully? YES! Let’s not be like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son... we should rejoice in this!
5. What we all must realize is that TODAY is the only day we have! Therefore, today is the day of salvation! The thief teaches us to seize the opportunity before it’s too late! **(2 Cor 6:2)**

#### **B. The thief on the cross stands as a testimony to the great grace, mercy, and forgiveness of the Lord!**

1. As the thief on the cross rightly points out, he was there because of his own sins! **(Luke 23:40-41)**
  - a. Crucifixion the penalty for every lawbreaker – You had to do something pretty terrible to get this punishment (or with Jesus, having the right people wanting to destroy you)
  - b. KJV uses “malefactor” – Sounds bad, right? It means, “a wrong-doer, criminal, evil doer, malefactor” – Many think they were leaders of robbing gangs, and guilty of murder
2. In Matthew’s account of this same event, we learn that this same thief was initially taking part in the mocking and reviling of Jesus! **(Matthew 27:38-44)**
  - a. It shows the power of the mob mentality! People start hurling insults at Jesus as He hangs dying on the cross & everyone joins in! Picture people losing total self-control, speaking without thinking, and showing no pity! They weren’t acting human at all!
  - b. The made fun of Jesus because He was being crucified, they mocked His claims about Himself & His relationship to God, and they spoke words to try and make Him lose

- trust in His Father! What's so incredible is the thieves crucified with Him join in!
- c. I wish we knew what changed him – Maybe it was how Jesus just took the mocking w/o cursing back or His words of compassion, “Father forgive them...” – We don't know!
  3. Despite this his rough past Jesus assures him that he'd be with Jesus in paradise! **(Luke 23:42)**
    - a. This dying man who had lived a life of crime and even mocked Jesus during His most difficult hours now finds pardon and a future from Jesus! This is grace & mercy!
    - b. The promise: Jesus said he would be WITH Jesus and with Jesus in PARADISE! Those are comforting words of companionship for a man who knows he's a dying sinner!
    - c. Paradise is a neat word – An ancient Persian word that referred to a private extravagant garden enclosed behind a wall where a Persian king walked with his closest friends
    - d. Barclay: It was more than immorality that Jesus promised the penitent thief. He promised him the honored place of a companion of the garden in the courts of heaven.
  4. Through Jesus we have so many wonderful spiritual blessings... At the top of the list is the grace and mercy extended to us through Him which gives us forgiveness! **(Eph 1:3-7; Col 2:13)**
  5. The Lord doesn't just forgive us of our sins now, but gives us a place with Him eternally! We can live with Him and we walk with Him in the paradise of His presence! **(John 14:2-3; Rev 3:4)**

**C. The thief gained a proper understanding of his spiritual position which led to his salvation:**

1. The words this thief spoke to the one who continued to mock Jesus shows that his heart and his mind had changed – A humble spiritual attitude! **(Luke 23:40-41)**
  - a. As we've noted, he realized that he was going to die – There was no way he was going to wiggle off the cross, his physical fate was sealed, death was an ever present reality!
  - b. He realized that he was a condemned sinner! He likely heard Jesus express His desire to forgive those around the cross and understood that forgiveness was what he really needed! He saw that Jesus was innocent of Jesus' charges while he was guilty!
  - c. He gained fear of God! His words show that he understand that sin would be punished and that as he went into eternity, he wasn't just going to face death, but the Lord!
  - d. He realized he was about to enter eternity with no hope and all alone! He watched Jesus suffer in agony but with a different disposition... Jesus didn't suffer like a criminal, He suffered like a man who had a greater cause and like a man who had real hope!
2. We can't appreciate our salvation in Jesus Christ until we come to see ourselves as condemned sinners without Jesus! **(Colossians 2:13; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:12)**
  - a. Why aren't more people more active in their faith? Why do we have problems with some not supporting all the services? Why do some feel compelled to try to live in sin and live in Christ? All these questions & more boil down to not appreciating our salvation
  - b. Some of us grew up with Christian parents, spiritual focus, & have led moral lives... → Do we appreciate that we were once dead in sin, lost, without hope, and without Christ?
  - c. Until we appreciate these the subjects of grace & mercy are abstract subjects we really don't feel! Religion becomes habitual! This sparks a lack of love & zeal for the Lord!
3. Christians today need a healthy dose of fear for God! Fear by standing in awe and respecting what He can and will do if we turn away from Him... Do you fear God? **(Hebrews 10:30-31)**
4. The thief on the cross teaches us what we need to get others to see so they will turn to the Lord!
  - a. People have to realize that they will die or the Lord is going to come back – We need to ask others if they'd made preparations for eternity! What if their life ended now?
  - b. We need to help people realize their position outside of Christ! Too many think if they are

good and moral enough they will be saved... We must get people to see they are lost before they're ready to see their need for salvation!

- c. Help others see why they should fear God... Many have been fed cheap imitation religion! They think God is too loving to send anyone to Hell! If this is their view, why repent?
- d. Show them their hopelessness now in death & eternity compared to the hope available!