

Today, You Will be with Me in Paradise

Luke 23:32-43 (NIV)

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."

As I look out today, I only know a couple of you, and I wonder what you expect me to say. Maybe you expect me to share some Louis stories so that we can just kind of reminisce, have a good ol' time. Maybe you expect me to tell you about his generosity, how many things he did for our church over the years, really talk up what a good man that he was, gloss over any faults or failings. Really, today, though, I'm going to tell you what I know about God and death and how it relates to Louis and to you.

I served Louis and Olga during their last couple of years living in Layton before they moved to Florida. I appreciated getting to serve him with God's Word. He listened, but he also pushed back on a few things, disagreed and fought on certain teachings from the Bible. Louis also had made life choices that were bad for his health, some illegal. He knew it. He suffered the consequences, paid the price. He accepted that his abuse of alcohol led to many of his health problems. And he made some other morally bad decisions. He sinned. Who of us cannot say the same as we reflect on our lives?

Probably because we just celebrated another Holy Week, Jesus' journey to the cross, that when I heard about Louis' death, I immediately thought of one Bible story, the one I just read for you.

Jesus went through death. Crucifixion was a terrible, dreadful, excruciatingly painful way to die. You didn't die from the nails that were pounded into your hands and feet, fastening you on to these wooden beams. The punishment was meant to last a long time, days even so that you would serve as an example to not do wrong, to not break the law. Because of the position of the body, someone on a cross would have to push up with their feet or their arms in order to get each and every new breath. Eventually, you would be too weak to do so. You died a slow death of suffocation.

There were three crosses on that Friday when Jesus was crucified. One for Jesus, and the other two for unnamed criminals. Maybe they were thieves. Maybe they were murderers. I don't know. Whatever they had done was bad enough to warrant the death penalty. They had had their trials. The verdicts were passed down. They would die for what they had done. They were getting what they deserved.

Jesus, though, had done nothing wrong his entire life. He was wrongfully and unjustly convicted as the Jews flouted their own laws in order to pin a charge on him that would warrant the death penalty. Soldiers feigned worship of him, draping a purple robe over him, and hit him. The religious leaders spit on him, taunted him to save himself if he really was God. Even these two criminals, the ones being crucified with Jesus, heaped insults on him.

Then something changed. We don't know what exactly. Maybe through the insults, one of the criminals saw how Jesus responded – not with spite or hatred, but with compassion, that this Jesus would even pray: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (verse 34) Maybe it was because this criminal was just following along with the crowd and figured it made sense to mock this man, but after thinking about, he changed his demeanor and his actions.

Through his careful investigations, Luke recorded for us: One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (verses 39-42)

This man, this criminal, did not at all deserve to have Jesus grant his request. One good deed does not make up for a life of wrong choices. In fact, a lifetime of good deeds but just one bad, wrong choice does not make a person deserving of being spared from death, from being condemned by God. God demands justice and perfection. Anything less cannot stand in his presence.

Louis was a sinner. God tells us that the wages of sin is death. Louis died because he was a sinner. The pastors I talked to who ministered to Louis days before he died had heard Louis confess his sins. He knew that he was suffering, his health failing because of them. Louis didn't deserve to have Jesus remember him in that hour any more than this criminal on the cross.

Neither Louis nor the criminal on the cross deserved forgiveness, deserved to be spared from being cast away from God, remembered by Jesus in heaven. Yet, what did God do? Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (verse 43)

Why? Why would Jesus say this to the criminal on the cross who had made a mess of his life and didn't deserve any good thing from God? It's because Jesus hung there on the cross for him and for all his sins and died for him and all people of the world.

Louis believed, all the way through the moment when he breathed his last, that God had forgiven him all his sins – not because he deserved it, not because he had done good things, been generous, righted wrongs at the end, not because God just forgives everyone anyway with no consequences. Louis believed that he was forgiven in spite of all the wrong he had done because Jesus died for him. When Christ called out on the cross that it was finished, he was talking about the entire debt of bad things that Louis had ever done. He said that for the criminal on the cross. He said that for you and me. Louis believed that Jesus had paid the price and would remember him and bring him into his kingdom because of what God did for him, not what he did.

And Jesus did. That day, the criminal on the cross was in heaven with Jesus. He's still there today. The same is true for Louis. He's in heaven with Jesus right now. Jesus remembered him because on his palms he bore the scars of where the nails had pierced him. He remembered that Louis' sins were paid for, with nothing else owed. Jesus paid the price to give Louis this wonderful gift of heaven that he didn't deserve. Louis now has no more pain. He can sin no more. He is freed from all the bad things he's ever done. He is perfect and with God right now.

One day, all of us will have to face our Maker the way this criminal did, the way Louis did. We will all die because all of us have done something wrong in lives. We have all sinned. As we say, nobody's perfect.

So, what will happen on that day? Will you take your chances that there is no God and that you will simply cease to exist? Will you take your chances that God works on a balancing scale that your good deeds will outweigh your bad, that you've done just enough good deeds to eek your way into heaven? Can you be certain of that? What if you are wrong?

Or will you believe like Louis, like this criminal on the cross, that you have a life mixed with good and bad, but the bad is not simply forgotten. Will you look to the Lord for your help? Will you turn to God and ask him to remember you, knowing that you don't deserve it, but remembering the scars on his palms which unconditionally say that your sins, everything bad that you have ever done, is forgiven, taken away, and forgotten by God? Will you confess today, not just as your end, that you believe God has forgiven you and then start to change your life out of thanks for the Lord?

Louis and this criminal on the cross are in paradise right now with Jesus. They're in heaven because Jesus suffered and died for their sins. It's a fact that they live right now. When we believe in Jesus to remember us and save us from all the bad things we have done, Jesus responds to us in the same way: "Truly I tell you...you will be with me in paradise." (verse 43) Believe that Christ has done this for you. Find your help in the Lord. He will rescue you as he did Louis. And you will be reunited in heaven. Amen.