

Luke 23:33-43

The difference between heaven and hell is as small as a few little words. The one criminal said to Jesus, “*Save yourself and us!*” The other said, “*Remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” Yet only to the second did Jesus say, “*You shall be with Me in Paradise.*”

Now wait a minute. If you don’t mind me asking this, it says in Romans 10 that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” So why didn’t Jesus give the promise of heaven to that first thief? He cried out to Jesus. He was in anguish. He recognized how desperate his situation: “*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*”

But perhaps we can liken this to a man who climbs to the top of a very high building. He then proceeds to jump off, and as he is falling to the concrete pavement below, he cries out to the Lord to save him from death. This is, in essence, what this thief was doing. He wasn’t repentant. He was just sorry that he got caught. “Get me down from this cross,” he was crying, “so I can go back to my life of crime!” He had no change of heart. The only change that happened in his life is that his hands, rather than taking money from others, were now nailed to a cross. His concern was with his temporal situation, not with his eternal destiny. And he didn’t believe that Jesus could actually save him. “If you really are the Christ, prove it by saving yourself first, and then save us!” That’s not faith; that’s unbelief.

The second thief had faith. His words show it. He begins by rebuking his partner in crime. “*We’re getting what we deserve!*” he says to him. He is admitting his guilt. He is not trying to wriggle out of the sentence that his life of crime had bought for him. He deserved to die, and he confesses this.

But then he turns to Jesus to call on the name of the Lord. He does not say, “Are you not the Christ? Are you not him whom they call Jesus?” He says, “*Jesus, remember me...*” Jesus. In the Greek this name means *Savior*. “I deserve my punishment,” he is saying, “but Savior, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

This man believed. Jesus was not just a man dying on a cross. This thief believed that He was the Christ who was the eternal King. “When You come into Your kingdom after You die, Jesus, Savior, remember me.”

Where did he get this faith? He sure didn’t have it before, or he would not have lived as a criminal. Romans 10 tells us: “*Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ.*” This thief listened to Jesus. So did the first thief. But this one latched on to what Jesus was saying. “*Father,*” Jesus was praying from His cross, “*Forgive them...*” Forgive who? The soldiers? The chief priests and scribes down there making fun of Him? This thief said within his own heart: “Jesus is praying for me! I am one, miserable though I am, whom Jesus is asking His Father in heaven to forgive. He believed. And so he turned to Jesus and said from a heart of faith, “*Savior, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*” “I will soon die, for this is what I deserve. But when this life is over, give me what I do not deserve.” This thief, in his dying hours, confessed his sins, rebuked his erring brother, calling him to repentance, acknowledged Jesus’ innocence, and turned to Him for salvation. That’s more than most people do in their entire lifetime.

So where do you fit in the story? There are, in this story, soldiers, chief priests and scribes, along with other rulers of the Jews, and there are these two criminals. Yet Jesus speaks only to the one and tells him that he would be in heaven with Him. He does not speak to those beneath the cross; to those who had never been in trouble with the law; to those of noble reputation. He speaks to a man whose life was

deemed worthless by society. He was unloved, unwanted. The only thing anyone wanted for this thief was to rid the earth of him. Yet to this man, and only to this man, Jesus gives the promise of Paradise.

What this means for you and me is that we must become like this thief if we are to be saved. He is not the exception; he is the rule. He did not somehow squeak into heaven. The way he entered heaven is the only way that anyone can enter.

He was nothing in his own eyes. The first thief was too proud to repent. Not this man. He confessed his sin. He offered nothing to God. He had nothing to offer. If he was to be saved, it had to be purely by grace. We must become like this thief.

He was placed on a cross next to Jesus. This was not by his choice. Had he had his way, he would not have met Jesus that day, or ever. The soldiers put this thief up next to Jesus to die there with Him. But truly it was God who put him there. It was time for this thief to die. But more, it was time for him to die with Jesus. St. Paul says in Romans 6, "*Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.*" And thus, Jesus gives to this man the promise of life: "*Today, you shall live with Me in Paradise.*"

You, friend, become like this thief in your Baptism. For "*all of us,*" writes Paul in Romans 6, "*who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death.*" Your Baptism places you next to Jesus just like this thief was placed next to Him. And neither was it by your choice. Your parents acted as the soldiers in putting you next to Jesus. But truly it was God's choice to have you die with Christ in Holy Baptism. And those who die with Him also live with Him. The word of promise that Jesus gave to this thief is given to you in your Baptism: "*You shall live with Me in Paradise.*" This is not an empty promise. It's not a promise based upon how well you live. There are no strings attached. Jesus' promise to you is fulfilled by His perfect life, not yours; fulfilled by His sacrificial death for you, not by what you do for Him.

You, dear sinner, heard this morning the very same words spoken by Jesus that this dying thief heard: "*Father, forgive them...*" You heard those words in the Absolution given to you. You will hear them again in the Sacrament of the Altar. The first thief heard the same words, but he did not believe that they were for him, even though they were. "*As you believe, so shall it be.*" Everyone, in the end, will be with one of these two thieves. No one needs to spend eternity with that first thief. But sadly, most will. For most are too stubborn to repent. And even if they hear Jesus' words, they refuse to let His words take root within them and make Christians out of them.

There is hope for you no matter who you are. Jesus did not care about all the sin in the life of that second thief. It was forgiven; all of it. He said so: "*Father, forgive...*" And so are you...forgiven. Jesus says so. This is not an empty word, friend. When you believe it, it performs its work within you. Your faith will show. Even that thief showed his faith. Though nailed to a cross, he called his brother to repentance. But even more, he turned to Jesus as a sinner turning to his Savior.

Your faith will show in different ways. But the greatest way is in always, like this thief, turning to Jesus, seeking His word of pardon, receiving His Sacrament for you, thanking God for allowing you, too, to die with Jesus, for to you is given the promise that you, also, shall live with Him. Amen.