



# SIX LESSONS FROM THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

*TEXTS: Matthew 27:38–44; Luke 23:39–44.* It is not uncommon to hear people say, “Be saved as the thief was saved.” The impression is left that being saved as the thief was is a simple matter: “All you have to do is believe and call on the Lord the way the thief did, and you will be saved!” Some who make that assertion have never thought about the difficulties faced by the thief.

The thief called Jesus “Lord” and implied that He was King at the time of His most awful humiliation—when He appeared to be more a criminal than the Christ. Contrast that with the confession we make with full assurance that Jesus is reigning at God’s right hand. The thief expressed his faith when he himself was in physical agony and naked shame. What a difference exists between this and confessing in a church building, clothed in our Sunday best!

Further, the thief stood up for the Lord when He was surrounded by a howling, reviling, sadistic mob. J. W. McGarvey wrote, “[T]he example of the penitent robber is a difficult one to follow: he professed faith in Christ and his kingdom when there was no other voice in the whole wide world willing to do such a thing.”<sup>1</sup> Picture the scene: Near the cross were Jesus’ enemies, sarcastic and abusive. At the edge of the mob were Jesus’ friends, brokenhearted and silent. Their hopes for a physical, political kingdom had been dashed; their preconceptions had no place for a crucified King. In that crowd, a single expression of faith was heard: the voice of a nameless thief.

The world has seen few expressions of faith greater than that of the man crucified alongside our Savior. Those who use the thief’s faith as an excuse for disobeying the commandments of the Lord are not worthy to be mentioned in the same breath with him.

In the previous sermon, I asked, “Why did God put the account of the thief in the Bible?” In that sermon, the emphasis was on the negative. We spent most of our time establishing that the thief’s salvation is *not* an example of salvation for non-Christians today. However, I would do the thief an injustice if I spoke only of the negative aspects of his story. Lessons are inherent in the incident—lessons we all need.

## A LESSON IN HOPE<sup>2</sup>

The subject of our discussion is introduced as a robber, a criminal (Matthew 27:38). Some think his crime could have been minor. “Maybe he just stole a loaf of bread to feed his hungry family,” they suggest. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that he was a hardened criminal.

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<sup>1</sup>J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *The Fourfold Gospel or A Harmony of the Four Gospels* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1914), 728.

<sup>2</sup>This was the lesson drawn from Jesus’ discussion with the thief in “The Cross for a Pulpit,” in “Meet the Master, 2,” *Truth for Today* (September 1994): 38–39.

We speculated in one of our recent lessons<sup>3</sup> that the center cross was reserved for Barabbas, while the side crosses were set aside for his followers. We pointed out that the Greek word translated “robbers” in Matthew 27:38 is the plural form of the word used to describe Barabbas in John 18:40. We further noted that violence is inherent in the Greek word for “robbers”; the word implies robbery by force.<sup>4</sup> We could think of the thief in terms similar to those used to describe Barabbas, who was, in addition, an insurrectionist and a murderer (Luke 23:19). This would help to explain the thief’s callousness when he first joined with others in insulting Jesus (Matthew 27:44). The man himself conceded that his crimes were serious enough to justify the torture of the cross (Luke 23:41).

However, as the minutes turned to hours, the thief had a change of heart. In that change of heart, we find our first lesson: a lesson of *hope*. If that man—a self-accused criminal—could experience such a dramatic change of heart, is there not hope for any sinner? If he could be saved under the most unlikely of circumstances, is there not hope for all?

Is there someone you wish to be saved—someone you love more than life itself? Maybe you have poured out your heart to this individual. You have prayed that he would decide to be baptized or be restored. You have shed tears. Years may have gone by, and he apparently remains unmoved by the story of the cross. By now, perhaps your hope has faded. Look at the thief, and let your hope be renewed!

### A LESSON IN CONVERSION

Further, as we read the story of the thief on the cross, we see a lesson in conversion. I do not mean that his conversion is like ours in every respect.<sup>5</sup> Rather, I mean that we see a demonstration of what true conversion involves. The word “conversion” basically means “change.” When water is “converted” into ice or steam, a *change* takes place in the water. Even so, a change took place in the thief. Notice these indications of change in Luke 23:

<sup>3</sup>See page 46 in “The Life of Christ, 12.”

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>We saw the difference between the thief’s conversion and ours in the sermon “What About the Thief on the Cross?”

## INDICATIONS OF CHANGE IN THE THIEF

He was not embarrassed to acknowledge his faith in God (v. 40).

He spoke of his reverence (fear) for God (v. 40).

He confessed that he was a sinner (v. 41). He was not proud of his sinfulness. Evidently, he repented.

He recognized the sinlessness of Jesus (v. 41).

Since only God is sinless, he had caught a glimpse of Christ’s deity.

He spoke of Christ’s kingdom (v. 42), indicating that he recognized Him as King.

He asked Christ to grant him spiritual blessings (v. 42), a prerogative generally reserved for God.

Though his death was eminent, he did not believe death was the end. His words (v. 42) imply a resurrection; they express a faith in life beyond this life.<sup>6</sup>

What factors brought about this change? The thief may have known something about Jesus before he was placed on the cross. After all, the whole city had been talking about Him (see John 11:56).<sup>7</sup> Surely, however, Jesus’ unique response to the cruelty and pain was the deciding factor. Christ’s conduct on the cross moved the Roman official in charge of the crucifixion (Mark 15:39); it probably also affected the thief. Whatever the reasons, the man underwent a dramatic change.

Unfortunately, when we teach people, we sometimes try *convincing* them instead of *converting* them. We convince them they need to do certain things, even though no real change takes place in their hearts and lives.<sup>8</sup> They still think

<sup>6</sup>If appropriate, you can note that the thief’s change was so complete that he even talked to another sinner about Christ and rebuked him (Luke 23:40, 41). Some of us have not changed enough to talk to others about Jesus, much less rebuke them for their sinfulness.

<sup>7</sup>There is the possibility that the thief had been baptized by John the Baptizer or by Jesus’ disciples—either of which would imply that he had heard some teaching before being baptized.

<sup>8</sup>I have personal illustrations of this which I will not include. You may want to give an example if you can do so without embarrassing anyone.

the way they did before their baptism; they still live the same way and speak the same way.<sup>9</sup> If any change has taken place, it is not apparent. Some of us have been guilty of teaching too little and persuading too much.

Where does conversion begin? It begins in the heart. If there is no change in the heart, there is no real conversion. Several years ago, I was talking with a man who worked in the Arabian oil fields. He told me that, in the country where he worked, if they caught a thief, they cut off his right hand. He smiled wryly and added, "Some call it the land of left-handed thieves."<sup>10</sup> I do not know if this practice still prevails in that area, but the truth is that cutting off a hand does not change the heart. True conversion—authentic change—must first take place in the heart. That is where it started with the thief on the cross, and that is where it starts with us.

Regarding the thief, we could take the lesson in conversion a step farther. Because a change took place in the thief's attitude and actions, a change also occurred in his relationship with God. What a change! That morning, the thief had struggled to Calvary under the weight of his cross. That morning, he had heard the jeers of the crowd; he had felt the pain of nails being driven into his hands and feet. But that night—ah, that night—he strolled in Paradise with Jesus, the benevolent sun of God's love shining upon him, the soft breeze of mercy stirring his hair!<sup>11</sup>

### A LESSON IN COURAGE

Other lessons can also be drawn from the story of the thief—for instance, the lesson of courage. We have emphasized that he expressed his faith in Jesus at a time when all other voices were silent. That took courage. Someone may object, "But he didn't have much to lose!" I

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<sup>9</sup>Becoming like Christ does not happen overnight; it takes a lifetime of effort and will be incomplete when death comes. Nevertheless, *some* change should be evident if one has really been converted.

<sup>10</sup>You may have another illustration you can substitute or add. I once read of a forger who was caught and jailed. He was so disgusted with himself that he cut off the forefinger of his right hand, the finger most crucial in his forging. Before long, though, he learned to forge without that finger. His heart had not been changed.

<sup>11</sup>"Paradise" is a word that basically means "pleasure garden." There is no way we can express in human terms what Paradise will be like. I have used metaphors to try to express how wonderful it will be.

suppose that is true, but consider this: Most of us, when we are in pain, have no desire to add to our agony. We avoid additional distress. Prior to the thief's words, the abuse was focused on the center cross. By speaking up for Jesus, he called attention to himself and took the risk of the mob turning its animosity in his direction.

It is easy to speak for Jesus when we are surrounded by fellow believers. The test of courage comes when confessing Him invites derision: when we are around foul-mouthed people at work, when a friend makes fun of truths we hold dear, when family members ridicule us for our convictions. I once preached for a congregation that met in a building with a flat roof. As long as the sun was shining, that roof was fine; but when it rained, water poured into several classrooms. A roof that is only good when the sun is shining is not much of a roof—and a faith that confesses Jesus only to smiling believers is not much of a faith.

When Jesus responded to the thief (Luke 23:43), He probably turned His head to speak to him. A few hours before, He had looked at one who had denied Him under duress (Luke 22:61); now He looked at one who confessed Him under even more adverse conditions. The Lord is also looking at us (see Hebrews 4:13)—and He knows whether we are filled with cowardice or with courage.

Let us learn from the thief to have courage to take a stand for the Lord regardless of the circumstances. Moses told the people of God, "Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). Joshua later told them, "Only be strong and very courageous" (Joshua 1:7a).

### A LESSON IN HUMILITY

Another lesson to remember from this story is the need for humility. After the thief looked at Jesus and then at himself, he became painfully aware of his sinfulness. Burton Coffman wrote, "One corollary of the soul's awareness of God's presence is the accompanying recognition of one's own unworthiness."<sup>12</sup> The thief, in effect,

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<sup>12</sup>James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Luke* (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Press, 1975), 451. For examples of those who declared their unworthiness, see Isaiah 6:1-5; Luke 5:8.

admitted, “I deserve this punishment; I deserve everything I’m getting!”

I am told by brethren who minister to those in prison that such an attitude is uncommon among convicted felons. I can testify that such an attitude is also seldom seen among those of us who live outside prison walls. I held a meeting in an Oklahoma town where I lived as a young boy. While I was visiting with a former classmate, she sadly told me that her husband (another former classmate) had spent some time in prison in connection with Oklahoma’s infamous County Commission scandal. She did not excuse her mate’s actions, but she could not resist adding, “But many, much more guilty than my husband, were never convicted and never spent a day behind bars!” It is hard for any of us to say, “I got what I deserved,” and then leave it at that. However, that is what the thief did. He provides an example of humble confession.

He also supplies an example of a humble request. A short time before, two of Jesus’ apostles had requested, in effect, “When You come in your kingdom, give us the places of highest honor: on Your right hand and Your left” (see Mark 10:37). The thief did not ask for special treatment: a reward, a mansion, or a place close to the throne. He asked simply to be *remembered* (Luke 23:42)—not to be forgotten. Peter said, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6). The thief humbled himself, and Jesus exalted him.

We all need the lesson of humility. Paul wrote, “I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think” (Romans 12:3a).

### A LESSON IN CONCERN

I admire much about this man who died at Jesus’ side, but near the top of the list is his confidence that the kingdom would still be established. There was probably much about the kingdom he did not understand.<sup>13</sup> Still, he understood something even Christ’s disciples did not understand: Jesus’ death did not nullify His promise that His kingdom would be established. “[R]emember me when You come in Your kingdom!” he said (Luke 23:42).

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<sup>13</sup>See page 6 in “The Life of Christ, 13.”

The lesson I want to draw from this is that the thief was interested in the kingdom. It was important to him. It was also important to Jesus. Christ preached that the kingdom was at hand (Matthew 4:17), that it would come in the lifetime of some of His listeners (Mark 9:1). He challenged His followers to “seek first His kingdom” (Matthew 6:33). He spoke of establishing His kingdom/church in Matthew 16:18, 19. He died for His kingdom/church (Ephesians 5:23, 25). When we obey the gospel, the Lord makes us part of His kingdom (Colossians 1:13, 14). We must ask ourselves, “Are *we* interested in the kingdom/church?”

One day a man rushed into my office. “I’m a member of the church of Christ,” he said breathlessly. “I just moved into town.” I waited for him to ask about the congregation. Instead, he asked about a certain civic organization: where and when it met. “I figured you’d know,” he said. There is nothing wrong with civic organizations—some of them do much good—but such groups should not have top priority.<sup>14</sup> Our first concern should be matters relating to the Lord, including His church.

How important is the church/kingdom to us? How much time do we spend thinking about it and praying for it? How much effort do we put forth trying to spread it? The kingdom was important to the thief. I pray that the kingdom/church is also important to us.

### A LESSON IN MERCY

Other lessons might be noted,<sup>15</sup> but I want to close with one that touches each of us. I have emphasized that the story of the thief was not given to provide an example of how non-Christians should be saved today. Still, one aspect of his salvation relates to every person’s salvation: He was saved by the mercy of the Lord. Jesus did not promise him Paradise because he deserved to go there. Rather, Christ did it because He is a merciful Savior.

Think of people throughout the Bible who were saved—Noah and Abraham in the Book of

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<sup>14</sup>Subsequent events made clear that the man was more concerned about faithful attendance at his civic club than at the worship services of the Lord’s church.

<sup>15</sup>As you contemplate the story of the thief, you may come up with other lessons. Use those most needed by those you teach.

Genesis, Moses and David under the old covenant, Peter and Paul under the new covenant. None were perfect; all were imperfect men, struggling to obey God, who were saved by His grace and mercy.<sup>16</sup> Paul wrote, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy” (Titus 3:5a).<sup>17</sup>

It is possible that some of you are discouraged over your spiritual failures. Perhaps you feel that you are not living up to your spiritual potential. You may be saying, “I’m a failure at living the Christian life!” Some people go through the motions of regular attendance and trying to live by Christ’s standards outwardly, even though they are on the verge of giving up inwardly. If you are one of those, stop and look at the thief: There was hope for him, and there is hope for you! Turn to Jesus, as he did. Throw yourself on His mercy, as the thief did. Our Lord is merciful!

The psalmist wrote, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence” (Psalm 42:5). The writer was despondent until he had a talk with himself. “Why are you so discouraged?” he asked himself, in effect. “Hope in God. God is merciful! He will help me! I will praise Him!”

The first lesson we discussed was a lesson regarding hope. The last is a lesson about mercy. They go together, don’t they? We have hope because we serve a Lord of mercy!

## CONCLUSION

At the close of the previous sermon, I encouraged you to turn your eyes from the thief to Jesus. Now I suggest that you turn your eyes from the thief to yourself. Instead of asking, “What about the thief?” ask, “What about *me*? What are *my* spiritual needs?” Peter once asked

<sup>16</sup>A simple definition of “grace” is “unmerited favor.” A simple definition of “mercy” is “grace expressed.”

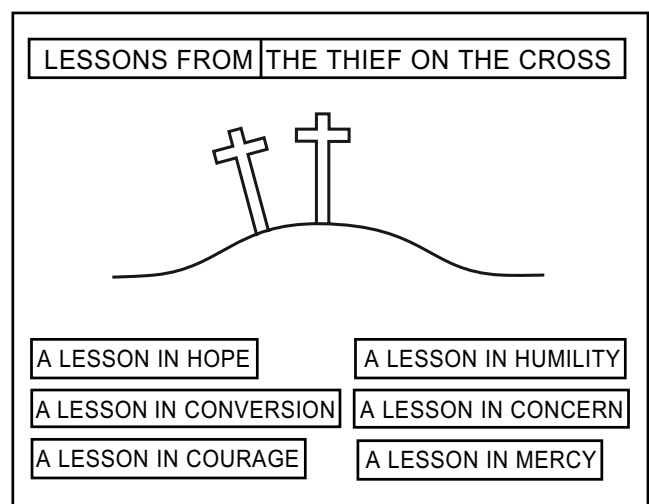
<sup>17</sup>God requires certain “deeds” of us before He saves us, but we need to understand that doing these “deeds” does not *earn* our salvation. They do not put God under obligation to us. We are saved by the grace and mercy of God.

*The lessons on the “Life of Christ” that are referenced in this article are not available on biblecourses.com, but are available in commentary form. Contact Truth for Today for more information.*

Jesus what was going to happen to John. Christ replied, “[W]hat is that to you? *You* follow Me!” (John 21:22; emphasis mine). In other words, He was saying, “Instead of worrying about John, make sure that *you* are doing what you need to do.” In the same way, you should not fret about the thief; God is taking care of him. Rather, be concerned about whether or not you stand in a right relationship with the Lord. Are you following Him? If you once started to follow Him, have you continued to do so? The Lord is merciful, ready to forgive—so come to Him today!

## NOTES

As stated in the notes after the previous sermon, flannelgraph presentations were prepared for the two sermons on the thief on the cross. Before the second presentation, all the pieces are removed except the heading, the yarn outline of a hill, and two crosses (the cross of Jesus and the cross of one thief). The suede-backed pieces with the words “WHAT ABOUT” and the “?” are removed from the title, and a piece with “LESSONS FROM” is placed in front of the title. The “lesson” pieces are added to the bottom half of the board as the presentation progresses. At the close of the sermon, the board looks like this:



Of course, this chart can be adapted for various methods of visual presentation.