

Forgiveness For An Insurrectionist

Sugar Land, TX | May 5, 2024 | John Pollard | Sermon Notes

Foundational Scripture: Luke 23:39-43

Intro:

- Among the Gospels, this short passage from Luke is one of the most well-known and for good reason. We see the glorious love of Jesus, the magnificent heart of the merciful Savior on full display. But we also see the portrait of a man who hangs on a cross rightly condemned with seemingly no hope, nothing for which to be happy and the recipient of merciless pain who becomes a beacon of light for all who would come to God in faith and humility even at the last hour. What does this story teach us about God's mercy and forgiveness through Jesus and how does the words of the insurrectionist instruct us on how we must approach Jesus for salvation?

1. The insurrectionist confesses his sin and guilt before Jesus (vv. 39-41)

- a. Luke introduces the criminals to us back in v. 32. Mark tells us they were violent insurrectionists (cf. Mk. 15:27). These were revolutionaries who sought the toppling of Rome in favor of Judean nationalism and such criminals were often the most crucified by the Romans.
- b. Each hanging on their cross next to Jesus, Luke tells us one of them added insult to the onslaught of injuries being hurled at Jesus from below (v. 39). He has so sense of remorse, no recognition of his evil, his grievous misdeeds, even though he is brutally suffering.
- c. But the other insurrectionist, in vv. 40-41, hearing those words rebukes him vehemently stating that they deserve what they are getting because they have done the crime for which they are being justly punished whereas Jesus is innocent.
- d. It is a striking display of humility that comes as a surprise in the midst of all the abuse being hurled at Jesus—a refreshing turn of events displaying the effect Jesus is having on some of those around him.
- e. Not only does the second insurrectionist rebuke the first but he grounds it in his lack of fear towards God. This is the fear that brings one to recognition of their darkness, their utter fallenness and need for repentance before the mighty hand of God (cf. Ps. 31:19).
- f. This acknowledgement is something that happens when someone experiences holiness and understands what holiness looks like. We see it for example with Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5). In Luke, we see with it Peter (Lk. 5:8) and the tax collector (Lk. 18:13-14).

- g. He implicitly confesses because he fears. He recognizes as he knocks on death's door that now is not the time to harden his heart, now is the time to confess his sins for if there is any forgiveness to be had, he must come to terms with his evil. It is impossible to receive forgiveness otherwise (cf. Lk. 1:50; 12:4-5; Acts 10:2, 22, 35).
- h. Small wonder why Jesus begins the sermon on the mount the way he does in Matt. 5:3-4. Before any good can come, before any fences can be mended, we must recognize that we are spiritually bankrupt. The insurrectionist confesses his sin and guilt before Jesus.

2. The insurrectionist pleads for Jesus' divine favor confessing His identity (v. 42)

- a. Having confessed his sin, the insurrectionist pleads for Jesus' divine favor in v. 42. This is one of a few instances in Luke's Gospel where someone addresses Jesus by His personal name and not as "Lord," "Master" or "Teacher."
- b. It's as if he is basing his plea on the recognition of what the angel told Mary: "...you are to name Him Jesus because He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The humble faith of the criminal is highlighted by the simple but profound words he says next: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."
- c. The first two words, "Remember me" are theologically loaded for they reflect an understanding of the covenant God of Israel and the covenant language used of this loving and gracious God (cf. Ex. 34:6-7).
- d. To utter these words is to express the confidence that God acts on behalf of His name's sake and doing that means He acts in our best interest to hold our sins against us no more as we confess them (cf. Psa. 74:2; 106:4; Lk. 1:54, 72).
- e. Acknowledging Jesus' divinity segues into what he says next: "...when you come into your kingdom." The insurrectionist understands that the cross hasn't got the better of Jesus, the cross is merely the way to glory. Jesus will triumph over death.
- f. He presupposes with knowledge presumably gained with the words he has been hearing from the cross (cf. v. 34) and witnessing the way He is patiently enduring His suffering, that Jesus is not only the One who can take away his sin but also the King whose kingdom will have no end (cf. Lk. 1:33).
- g. There is perhaps no one in all Jerusalem who shares this depth of conviction, not even the disciples who heard Jesus speak openly and repeatedly of His coming Kingdom (cf. Lk. 22:29-30). After He died, they had lost all hope (cf. Lk. 24:19-21).

- h. But hearing the words of Jesus and captivated with the way He is enduring all the abuse, this man sees that Jesus is the only reason hope even exists. The insurrectionist pleads for Jesus' divine favor confessing His identity.

3. Jesus extends His forgiveness to the insurrectionist granting him salvation (v. 43)

- a. Without hesitation, Jesus responds to the man's confession and faith with assurance of his immediate salvation. In Luke's Gospel, the word "today" bears the connotation of salvation that is granted with immediacy in the present, not something that meets a threshold requirement at the very end of life (cf. Lk. 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 19:9).
- b. This is perhaps one of the reasons why so many Christians struggle with confidence in their salvation. Perhaps we think of it merely as something that will come down the road or something that we can't be sure of until we are on the other side.
- c. The Bible never speaks of salvation this way. When we come to Jesus confessing our sins, and yield to His word and His will in faith, we can be confident of our salvation even now (cf. Phil. 1:21; 2 Tim. 4:7-8).
- d. Notice that Jesus also emphasizes the man's salvation is rooted in Him by the phrase "you will be with me." Our confident salvation can never be defined by us but it is always defined by Christ who lives in us (cf. Gal. 2:20).
- e. And this relationship, this spectacular assurance of salvation, is heightened by the declaration that paradise awaits the faithful (cf. 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). The point of the text is not to argue spatial or temporal dimensions of what paradise is or isn't.
- f. The point is that paradise is where Jesus is—it's where God's presence is manifested supremely without fear of death and separation. It was first used this way to speak of Eden's garden (cf. Gen. 2:8-10; 13:10). And perhaps there's a subtle connection here.
- g. Unlike Adam's fear (failure to confess, blame others) that got him cast out of paradise, this man's fear (confess, trust) allows for his entrance into paradise through the new Adam whose obedience and selflessness opened the gates to God for all who believe.
- h. Jesus extends His forgiveness to the insurrectionist granting him salvation.

Conclusion: There are so many wonderful elements to this short yet powerful interaction on the cross. Let me offer a few thoughts as we close:

First, it is common, I think, to use this passage to weaponize baptism or faith only stances. Indeed, we hear on one side that baptism can't save us because this man did not need it. On the other hand we make really bad arguments that diminish the importance of faith and elevate baptism to a pedestal even higher than God. We need to be careful of extremizing arguments or simply making bad ones. It is clear that the Jesus who hangs on the cross pleading to His Father for forgiveness for those who have sinned against Him is the same Jesus who has authority to forgive sins. That is, He is perfectly capable of deciding how and when to save sinners according to His incredible love and wisdom without our say so. Be careful not to meddle on God's end of the stick.

That said, it remains clear that after His death and after His resurrection, believers who came to Jesus in faith did so by demonstrating their commitment and desire to die to sin and live in righteousness through the act of baptism. For Paul and so many others in the NT, baptism and faith, the kind of faith displayed by the insurrectionist on the cross, are not at odds with each other. Baptism is an act of faith, it is confidence in God's power to save (cf. Col. 2:12). It is a reenactment of the Gospel in that we die, we are buried and we rise to walk in newness of life (cf. Rom. 6:3-4). There is no part of that that happens without Jesus' death and resurrection and that's what baptism through faith connects us to. Thank God for His saving plan in Jesus.

Second, how many people have we written off because we perceived their situation was utterly hopeless thinking there was no forgiveness for them? If we are honest, the only thing we should be feeling is shame. Instead of using this passage to weaponize baptism or weaponize faith only, we should see that this passage is showing us the power of God's forgiveness in Jesus even at the eleventh hour (cf. Matt. 20:1-16). We need to appreciate what forgiveness is all about and never forget to whom forgiveness is granted. It is for those whom we might be quite shocked to learn are closer to the truth than those who think themselves religious (cf. Mk. 2:17; Lk. 7:36-50). God is far more merciful than we often paint Him out to be.

We all need to do as this man did in brokenness and humility. We need pay attention to Jesus, listen to the words of Jesus and appreciate His patient enduring on our behalf. We need to confess our sins and commit ourselves to King Jesus, to His kingdom and the transforming presence of His grace that culminates in paradise itself. Confession is not an act of weakness. It is a remarkable display of strength and faith—faith that recognizes we cannot save ourselves and by trying to save ourselves we have made a right mess of things. The question is not whether we need Jesus. The question is, will we open our eyes to see that without Jesus, there is no hope and nothing for which to hope?