

Found: When Ordinary People Meet Jesus – Jesus and the Last Chance

Luke 23:26-43

By [David Strain](#)

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We are so very glad to welcome you all here this evening, particularly if you've come along at the invitation of a friend. We have designed these six Sunday evening sermons especially for you if you're a visitor. Tonight as we come to the last in the series of sermons, I want us to go to the climactic moment in Jesus' earthly ministry. We've been looking in each of these Sunday evenings at a different encounter between Jesus and ordinary people in the Gospel narratives and I want to turn tonight, as we turn to the cross itself, to one final encounter as it were, this time between Jesus and one of the two men who were crucified along with Him. It was the climactic moment of Jesus' ministry; it was also the last chance for the two men crucified, one on either side of our Savior. And how they responded to Jesus does have important lessons for all of us today. Here is Jesus and the last chance. So let me ask you to go ahead now and take your copies of the Scriptures or take a Bible from the pockets in the pews just in front of you and open them to Luke's gospel chapter 23. Luke 23. You'll find that on page 884 in our church Bibles. Page 884. About halfway down the left hand column you'll see verse 23 - sorry, verse 26 I do beg your pardon. That's where we're going to start, verse 26, toward the top of the left hand column, and we'll begin our reading there in just a moment. Before we do that, we ordinarily pause before we read and ask for God to help us understand His Word, so would you bow your heads with me as we pray?

Our Father, Your Word is living and active. It is sharper than a double-edged sword. It penetrates and we pray that it would do so tonight. As we come together to the cross, we ask that we would come humbled and moved and enabled, perhaps unlike the crowds who gathered at the foot of the cross, but like the thief who hung beside our Savior, to see the truth about You, the truth about Jesus, and to turn from our own sin and to receive and rest upon Christ as He comes to us anew and offers us Himself in the preaching of the Gospel. Would You do that, please, as Your Word is read and explained in our hearing? For Jesus' sake, amen.

Luke 23 from verse 26. This is the Word of Almighty God:

And as they led him away, [that is, as they led Jesus away] they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

Amen. We thank God for His Word.

The Scene at Calvary

The three men have been condemned and stripped, beaten and forced to carry the heavy wooden crossbeam through the streets. One of them is so weak, a bystander, one Simon of Cyrene by name, is forced to help. Soon the strange procession arrives just outside the gates to the north of Jerusalem, to the oddly shaped hill, the skull shaped hill which, in Aramaic, is recorded in the other gospels as Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Exhausted, the men drop their terrible burdens as the crowds surround them finding the gruesome spectacle, finding in it both revulsion and entertainment like drivers on the interstate who slow to a crawl to get a good look at the smashed up cars and the emergency vehicles at the side of the road. Just then the grim-faced and hardened soldiers set about their business with brutal efficiency, first swatting the heavy crossbeams into their uprights forming three, rough hewn crosses, then strapping the condemned men's arms in place. Without hesitation they drive nails into each forearm and then bending their legs together to one side, a single nail is driven through both heels as the three men are each penned to his own cross. The screams of the victims now mingle with the jeering crowds as the crosses are hoisted into place and with a dislocating jolt dropped into their stands.

So it seems ends the careers of three men, each one an utter failure according to the standards of the day. Two of them, Luke tells us, were criminals. The other gospels call them bandits. They are petty thieves. Possibly they are Zealots, members of the revolutionary band, agitating for the overthrow of the Roman occupying forces. Either way, they are hardened and dangerous men whose desperate lives have led perhaps inevitably, even predictably to this terrible lingering end. But between them hangs someone else. He has walked the streets of Jerusalem, neither a crook nor a revolutionary. Instead, His life has been devoted to healing the sick and preaching the forgiveness of sins. Nevertheless, His Messianic claims were considered a direct challenge to the authority of the Jewish elites who would brook no rivals for the religious attention of the masses. It was not terribly hard for them to enlist the support of the Roman political apparatus that then governed Judea who took any claim to Lordship as a direct challenge to the supremacy of Caesar. And so here He is too, as verse 38 tells us, crucified between thieves and criminals for being the King of the Jews.

What's so remarkable about this whole episode is not simply the injustice of His condemnation, twice - once by the criminal crucified with Him and once by one of the soldiers who did the deed. Christ's innocence is recognized. But it's not His innocence that is so very striking about this episode but His extraordinary response to it. Luke's account makes it abundantly clear that this man, Jesus Christ, is like no other. Look at verse 34 with me please. Notice Jesus' words. How does He respond to the horrific penalty He is here being made to pay? Verse 34 - "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Others, as we will see, respond to what is happening here with venom and animus. One of the criminals responds in remorse but Jesus responds with prayer. And do notice it's not a prayer for Himself. These are not the cries of a wretched victim begging for

someone, anyone to come and rescue Him. There's not the slightest hint of a desire to be relieved of the horror of crucifixion here, is there? Those are thoughts that do not enter His mind. Somehow not even the throbbing pain that must have racked His broken body was allowed to dominate His consciousness at this moment. That is somehow held at bay that He might fulfill His mission on behalf of others. He is preoccupied. Only with the crowds gathered below Him, the crowds that had hours before screamed at Pilate the Roman governor for His execution, crowds now staring in macabre fascination at His naked and torn and disfigured form, crowds that now jeer and mock Him in His agony. And He prays for them! He intercedes for them! It's extraordinary. He's suffering terribly and here He is praying for the forgiveness of His tormentors. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

A Stunning Picture of a Sacrificial Savior

You understand, of course, that He is not excusing their actions as He prays, as though their ignorance might somehow justify their crime. Not at all. But He is saying that the full enormity of the sin they were committing is something they had missed entirely. "They know not what they are doing," He says. They could not, would not see it, but they were in fact crucifying the King of the Jews. Pilate's mocking inscription proclaimed more than he believed. Here is God's Messiah, not just an innocent man - the Lord of life Himself. It was culpable ignorance. It was culpable ignorance on their part to be sure, but it was an ignorance that nevertheless elicited the compassion of the heart of the very one here they brutalized and torment. They ought to have known. Their ignorance was as inexcusable as the crucifixion it made plausible and yet Jesus sees is in the ignorance of the people, lost and locked in spiritual blindness as they were, a motive for mercy. And so He prays, "Father, forgive them." It is stunning, isn't it? Stunning.

Too often our impression of Jesus Christ is shaped not by the Biblical narrative but by our experience of those who claim to follow Him. Isn't that so? Perhaps your idea of Jesus is of a judgmental tyrant or maybe you dismiss Him as weak and ineffectual. Perhaps that's been your experience of church folks and so now that's how you think of Jesus - either judgmental or a weakling. But here at the cross, gazing up at the Man of Calvary, those distortions, they dissolve into nothing, don't they? Here is no limp, effete fool whose religion extends no further than the polite niceties of contemporary social acceptability. Here, rather, is one into whose flesh nails are pounded, who refuses despite the agony of it all to take His eyes from His singular objective. His mind is set on securing forgiveness for others even at the expense of His own life. Neither do we find here some judgmental bigot who censures anyone who will not bow to their particular idiosyncrasies. It's forgiveness for which He prays. He loves them. They hate Him; He loves them! They torment Him; He prays for them! The cross demands that we readjust our ideas of Jesus. We really cannot dismiss a man like this, can we?

Considering the Responses to Christ

And I want to suggest to you tonight that as you look at the responses of those gathered around the cross that no one that day could dismiss Him either. And all I want to do with what remains of our time is to work through those responses and to reflect on our own response to this crucified Christ as He comes to us from the pages of Scripture in the light of the responses of those who are to be found gathered around Him.

Rejecting Christ: The Crowd

In the first place, there's a group of responses of those who reject Jesus. First of all there's the crowd in verse 35. They stood by watching. We know that at various points in the narrative they are mourning. Some of the crowd are grieving - the daughters of Jerusalem. Some leave beating their breasts in distress. But I think it's unlikely, at least at this point, that the crowd in general are watching Jesus in silence out of sympathy and support for Him. Others are openly jeering and mocking. There are voices coming from the crowd only wounding Him with their words. The rest of the crowd is silent.

But their silent vigil is not a testimony to support our sympathy for Jesus. It is, I think, disdain. There is no give in their eyes as they look on. This is the same crowd, remember, who were screaming out for precisely this kind of death for Christ. When they were asked for their opinion of what should happen to Jesus by Pilate at Christ's trial, their silence here, I think, evidences grim satisfaction or perhaps even open revulsion, horror at the spectacle of Christ impaled and dying before their eyes. Deuteronomy 21:23, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged upon a tree." That's what the Law said about Jesus. His cross, to us, what is it? It's jewelry, right? We wear them around our necks. To the crowd who were looking on, it was the great emblem of divine cursing, of heaven's rejection, and Christ hanging there to them was an utterly repugnant thing. That's the cross - a repugnant thing, the epitome of the uncleanness of sin. They are appalled at Him. Isaiah the prophet says of this moment. "Many were astonished at you. His appearance was so marred beyond human semblance and His form beyond that of the children of mankind. He was despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised and we esteemed Him not." That's Jesus. He was in the world, as the apostle John puts it, and though the world was made through Him the world did not know Him. He came to His own and His own people rejected Him.

Rejecting Christ: The Rulers of the People

And then there are the rulers of the people. Verse 35 again. For them, this is the great moment of victory and triumph. He had been a thorn in their side, a

constant annoyance, challenging their authority, undermining as they saw it their traditions. But now at last they're rid of Him so they fill the air with catcalls and contempt. "He saved others. Let Him save Himself if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!" You see for them, this moment, Christ's cross, was the great vindication of their cause. If Jesus was the Christ, the Chosen One of God, then they're thinking this could never have happened. So to them the Messiah was a great conqueror, a liberator, a new David come to free Israel from the oppression of their enemies. The cross, therefore, to them was utter defeat for Jesus and complete, decisive victory for them. He claimed to be a Savior but He can't save Himself. He claimed to be a Deliverer, God's Messiah, but here He is dying under the very boot heel of the power the real Messiah would save us from. "What a failure He is. How right we always were." The cross to them was the great absurdity. A crucified Messiah - it's a joke, a nonsense, a contradiction in terms.

Rejecting Christ: The Roman Death Squad

And then there's the Roman death squad, the *crucificare*--- they were called. They add their voice now to the mockery, verse 36 through 38. "The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'" Here now are Gentiles adding their voices to the Jewish chorus so that the two parts of the ancient world, the whole world, unites in rejecting Jesus Christ. To them, the cross is an object of ridicule. Jesus is a colossal joke. Pilate was really laughing at Him and at the Pharisees who would be offended at the inscription hanging over Jesus' head when he wrote that "This is the King of the Jews." The soldiers casting lots here for His clothing find the whole thing terribly funny. "No throne for Jesus, only a cross. No wine for a King, only vinegar."

Rejecting Christ: The Other Crucified Men

And then there's the men crucified with Jesus. Verse 39. One of them hanging on a cross next to Him, agony ripping through his body too. You might expect some remorse over his own fate or some semblance of empathy with Jesus in His, but his heart is filled only with venom and his pain fuels his spite and he hoists himself on the nails from which he is hanging and spends the lung full of air the agony and effort buys him only in hurling insults at Jesus. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us! Some Savior You are, Jesus. Every second You remain on the cross the clearer it appears to the whole world what a fraud You always were!" And in the face of it all Jesus is silent; not a word. "He committed no sin," Peter says, "neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled He did not revile in return. Though He suffered He did not threaten but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly" - 1 Peter 2:22 and 23. Or as Isaiah has it, "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep before its shearers that is silent, so He opened not His mouth." If the nails pierced His hands and feet then the cruel barbs of the crowd and the soldiers and even the criminals

crucified with Him must have pierced His heart.

Receiving Christ: The Repentant Thief on the Cross

But not everyone responds to Jesus like that. Mark's account of these same moments tells us that for a while both criminals on either side of Christ join in the mockery - Mark 15:32. But at some point things change for one of them. Verse 40 - and of all the ironies seen that day at Golgotha, surely here is the most poignant of them all. It is a sinful, condemned, dying man, crucified beside Christ, who becomes His only advocate amidst the jeers and the mockery and the disdain. It's an amazing moment, one I hope you'll study carefully with me, because it's actually here in this impoverished man's words, not in the words of the scholars with the brains or the soldiers with the brawn at the foot of the cross, but here in the man hanging from a cross of his own that we learn how we really ought to respond to Jesus Christ.

A Confession of Sin

First as he rebukes the other thief there is a clear confession of sin, isn't there? A clear confession of sin. You see that in verses 40 and 41? "Do you not fear God since you're under the same sentence of condemnation? We indeed justly. We are receiving the due reward of our deeds." The fear of God has penetrated his mind. He knows that somehow unless his sin should find a remedy a greater tribunal and an eternal punishment waits for him beyond the grave, hastening toward him with every moment he hangs on a cross of his own. The death he dies here he now sees as but the first blow of cosmic justice on the sin of his life. If we are going to respond to Jesus correctly this is where we need to begin - confess. Confess. Stop hiding. Stop covering up. Confess. Acknowledge your sin. See the just sentence your sin deserves. Confess.

Trusting Faith

Then secondly, notice as the criminal turns from his word of rebuke to Jesus, his request to Christ expresses remarkable faith. His conviction, despite all the evidence that confronts his senses and all the accusations and mockery of the crowds, that the Man of Calvary is in fact God's true King and his only Savior. That is very clear in verse 42, isn't it? Look at it please, verse 42. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Somehow he knows He is a King, the only King, who can possibly rescue him. He doesn't bargain. There is no quid pro quo here. He makes no attempt to justify or defend his misspent life. This is no foxhole conversion. He simply throw himself entirely unreservedly upon Christ, on His mercy. We must confess our sin but we must also cling to Jesus alone to save us because only He can. Only He can.

Doubtless he had heard Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them," and here now he throws himself wholly on that prayer that expressed, as it were, Christ's mission

statement for the cross. "This is why He's hanging here. This is why He's dying. 'Father, forgive.' That's what He's after; that's what this is about. And if this is what He prays for the mocking, jeering, tormenting crowds, isn't there room for me if I will trust and believe and rest on Him? He prays for forgiveness for them; won't He secure forgiveness for me?" And so he cries out for mercy from the only kind of King that can ever give it - a crucified King, a King on a cross, a King who pays for sin for you. Luke even goes on to show us how it is that Jesus could secure forgiveness. Look down at verses 44 and 45 with me. "It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two." As Christ's life draws to an end, the sun refuses to shine, darkness like a funeral pall hangs over nature itself. And as Jesus breathes His last the great curtain that hung inside the temple separating the Most Holy Place from the rest of the sanctuary is torn in two, from top to bottom, six inches thick, designed to stop any from entering but the high priest, then only once a year, to make blood atonement for the sin of the people.

Purchased at Calvary: Redemption, Forgiveness, Fellowship with God

The Most Holy Place, you know, was said to be the place where the very presence of God dwelt in the heart of His people, in the midst of the community. And none could ever enter there but the high priest with blood to make atonement. But now here, as Jesus breathes His last at the cross, that curtain that kept everyone out is torn apart, taken out of the way, because Jesus the true and final High Priest has just offered the perfect atoning sacrifice for sin, for your sin. Sin paid for, once and for all, with His own blood. That is what is going on at the cross. "In my place condemned He stood, sealed my pardon with His blood." The great barrier to fellowship with God was gone and all, all may come in through faith in this crucified Christ. The way flung wide for sinners, like me, like you, like the thief on the cross. And so he confesses his sin and clings in faith to Christ crucified, the only King, the true and perfect Priest who secures forgiveness for everyone and any who will come to Him.

Let me say to you tonight, whoever you are, whatever the reason may be for your presence with us here, it is not too late for you. It's not too late. Isn't that the lesson this dying criminal's story teaches us? It's not too late. Your sin and guilt is not too great. You have a Savior in Jesus Christ. He died to pay your debt, to cancel your sin, to atone for your offenses, to open access to God for you if only you'd turn to Him. The dying thief feared God, feared the wrath to come, and so he fled to the only refuge for sinners in his final moment. He fled to Jesus and he was safe. The glory of the story is that at the cross you know the very wrath he feared was in fact being poured out but not upon the thief but upon Jesus in place of the thief, bearing the sentence of condemnation under the wrath of God, not just the wrath of men, that this man might receive pardon not condemnation. And so Christ turns and speaks a second time with a word of assurance. Verse 43, "Truly I say to you, this day you will be with me in paradise."

Responding to Christ

How are you going to respond to Jesus Christ? You may join those gathered around the cross that day deriding, rejecting Him. His name may be a word of contempt and scorn, a cosmic joke perhaps. Or you may come to Him like the thief crucified beside Him, confessing your sin, you need, fearing God, crying for mercy. The dying thief teaches us no matter when you come to Jesus looking for mercy it's never too late - you will always, always find it. You will always find it. This is no warrant of course for delay, but it is an incentive to come, and to come now. It means that today, however far you have strayed and wandered, however low you may have sunk, Jesus is a Savior for you. And today is not too late. Today is not too late. Won't you come confessing and repenting and believing to Christ? Today there is forgiveness for you in the wounds of Jesus Christ. Many people still reject Jesus, of course, many even take offense to His claims, but anyone, anyone at all, perhaps you, who comes looking for forgiveness from this crucified Christ always finds it. Won't you come to Him? Let's pray together.

O Lord, we pray that You will help us, all of us, every one of us, to come back again to Calvary. Not to mock, not to hold in contempt the Man crucified there, but in repentance there to bow down and cry for mercy. O Lord, forgive our sin and in Christ save us. For Jesus' sake we pray, amen.

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