

The Criminal on the Cross

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Date: 03 April 2026

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[0:00] So there's a saying among soldiers, there are no atheists in foxholes.! To reach out to something more powerful than yourself.

And it's a phenomenon. Even the least religious people will end up praying in these kind of moments. And this is what we find this criminal doing. Who is crucified next to Jesus on Good Friday.

He's literally at the breaking point of his life. And he effectively prays to Jesus a most simple prayer. Jesus, remember me.

And he's not religious, we're told. He has no theology degree. He has no understanding of the atoning death of Jesus that's happening. And yet, astonishingly, his simplest of prayers actually works.

And Jesus responds to it with one of the most profound promises he's ever given to anyone. A guarantee of eternal life for this criminal. And a place in the future kingdom of God.

[1:30] And as I was looking at this week, I just thought to myself, what is it that makes this criminal's prayer enough?

Why did it work? And that's what I want us to consider this morning. Why did it work? And that's what we're going to see this Good Friday. And we're going to see how, because of what happened on this day, your prayer can work as well.

Because as we look at this criminal, it all comes down to the attitude he had, firstly, towards himself, and secondly, towards the man next to him.

And so, firstly, as opposed to the other criminal on the cross, this guy saw himself as he truly was. So, there was this other criminal, Luke tells us.

And so, you can follow along the passages, Luke 23, from verse 39. And we read what this other criminal says. He hung there and he hurled insults at Jesus.

[2:36] Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us. Okay, now, I think this first criminal gets, we see him as a baddie, he gets a bad rap.

But come on, in that situation, think of what he's going through. He's in excruciating pain. He's in the last hours of his life. And there's this guy next to him who is supposedly a king who is powerful and can do amazing things.

Surely, if he is who he says he is, he's going to help us. But he doesn't. And so, you can kind of understand why this man is mocking him. He's obviously not who he says he is. It's a kind of a valid objection.

But then look at how the second criminal reacts to that. You'd expect the same kind of skepticism and mockery. But instead, look what happens from verse 40.

But the other criminal rebuked him, the first criminal. Don't you fear God, he said. Since you are under the same sentence, we are punished justly.

[3:39] For we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Now, when last did you hear a convicted felon say, I'm getting what I deserve?

I used to do some ministry in Polesmoor prison for a few years. And I got the privilege of meeting a number of the criminals who were incarcerated in Polesmoor.

And getting to know their stories. But you know what amazed me? It was amazing how many people in Polesmoor were innocent. When I heard their stories.

And it's amazing how many criminals, even after they're convicted by a court of law, will maintain their innocence for their entire incarceration. But this man here is different.

He's honest about himself. He realizes he's getting what he deserves. And not just under Roman law, but based on what he says. I think he's referring to his guilt before God.

[4:44] He refers to God and he says, I'm getting what I deserve. His death that he is experiencing is what his deeds deserve. And he realizes that.

He, at his breaking point, is not in denial about the reality of what's going on. He's not maintaining his innocence. But he has this moment of clarity to see the state he's truly in.

It reminds me, actually, of the 17th century philosopher, French philosopher, Voltaire. Now, he was quite a nasty guy.

He was an arrogant opponent of Christianity. He spent his whole life denigrating Christians, opposing Christianity, opposing God.

And yet, there was a turnaround on his deathbed. As he was lying there dying, he apparently was in a tortured state because he realized for the first time, despite all his previous objections, he realized and he experienced the fact that he is a sinner about to face his God, the Holy God.

[6:05] And he had on his deathbed, apparently, this moment of clarity when he realized that. And that's what we see in this criminal next to Jesus, this moment of clarity where he realizes the real state he's in.

But what's important to notice for us is how this affects the way he prays, the way he asks Jesus what he asks him. Because he sees himself truly for who he is, he's got nothing to appeal to but Jesus' mercy.

That's all. That's all he can ask for. He knows he has no right to ask what he's asking. He knows he doesn't deserve it and that's why he simply asks for mercy.

And that is exactly what he gets. But more mercy than he ever expected. He gets immediate, just by the word of Jesus, he gets immediate forgiveness for his sins and immediate entry into God's kingdom.

Just like that. Jesus does not hesitate. Jesus does not hesitate. And he makes this promise on the spot to a man who is completely, completely unqualified for it.

[7:25] Because that is how effective his death is to pay for sins. So that he can give this kind of immediate, unqualified mercy to sinners.

That is why he's dying on the cross. That is why he's paying for sins. Because none of us can pay for our sins against God. No matter how much we do. No matter how hard we try.

None of us will ever be able to pay for our sins against a holy God. And the first step to receiving forgiveness on the spot, immediately, without qualification, is actually just realizing that about ourselves.

Being true about who we are. Not pretending that we're good people. That's all a Christian is. A Christian is no more than this criminal on the cross.

Someone who sees themselves as the sinner they are. And they have nothing to bring to God. And so they rely on God's mercy alone. This guy on the cross, he essentially was the first Christian.

[8:31] The first one to benefit from Jesus' death and draw close to God because of it. Even though he was never baptized. As far as we know, he never attended a membership class in a church.

He never took communion. The first Christian was the most unqualified person in the Bible to draw near to God. Now what does that tell you?

What does that tell you? If he can come, so can you. Right? Oh, but I'm not good enough.

I've sinned. I've made too many mistakes in my life. Really, more mistakes than him? Are you worse than him? Oh, but I won't be able to live, you know, the way God wants me to.

I won't be able to do the things God wants. Really? Well, what could he do? What could this criminal hanging on the cross do? He literally spent the rest of his life, which was not very long, with his hands nailed to a piece of wood, unable to do anything.

[9:35] And yet, despite his total inability to bring anything to Jesus, Jesus gave him a place in his kingdom. In fact, bringing nothing is the qualification.

See, salvation is a gift. Salvation from God. The reason he went through all this was so that he could give you a gift. But it is a gift you can only receive with empty hands.

With totally empty hands, bringing nothing. And that is why this criminal received mercy that day. Because he knew he couldn't bring anything.

Except empty hands. And I want us Christians to remember that. As we approach God. Or if you're not a Christian, when you approach God for salvation and mercy, remember that because of Jesus dying on the cross, the only qualification is empty hands.

Realizing that you're unable to bring anything to God. And that is the first reason this criminal's prayer was enough.

[10:54] Because he saw himself as he truly was. And we need to as well. But that's not all. The second thing we see as to why his prayer was enough is not just he saw himself as he truly was, but he saw Jesus as he truly is.

Did you notice as we were reading the story, how many people, different people mocked Jesus? They didn't just watch him. They actively mocked him. Did you notice that?

From the highest to the lowest in society. Whoever it was, they actively reviled and spat on him and thought up horrible things to say about him.

Let's read some of it from verse 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. The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, if you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

[12:02] There was a written notice above him which read, this is the king of the Jews. And one of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him, aren't you the Messiah?

Save yourself and us. All this mockery that God allowed his son to endure to save us. But this mockery that was inspired by people who saw Jesus.

Why? Think about this. What is the reason we mock things? Why do people mock things? Well, people mock things that they don't want to have to take seriously.

That is the cause of mocking. Mocking actually comes from insecurity. But it's when you really don't want to take something seriously that you will automatically mock it. We might mock the politician that we don't want to win the election.

Or, boys and girls, you might mock a teacher that you don't want to listen to, which is not very nice, and you shouldn't do it. But have you noticed, Jesus Christ is the single most mocked person in history?

[13:14] Right from Roman times, actually, I want you to see a picture. This is the earliest example of graffiti ever discovered by an archaeologist in the city of Rome.

And it is also the earliest depiction of Jesus. This is ancient Roman graffiti from about the first or second century. And it depicts a man worshipping a donkey-headed figure.

And in Latin, written underneath, are the words, Alexamenos worships his God. And so this was apparently making fun of a certain Christian called Alexamenos and the Jesus he worships.

But it hasn't changed. It's the same today. You don't have to go far online to see how Jesus is mocked.

Or just in daily language of most people in the world, people use Jesus' name to mock, to express disgust as a form of mockery over and over again.

[14:19] In movies, it comes out of people. Why? Why Jesus? Of all the historical figures that have ever existed, you know, you could choose far worse people to use as a name of disgust.

But no, it has to be Jesus. Why? Well, it is a way, you see, for people to write him off. The more threatening and serious his claims over our life, the more people will want to write him off so that they don't have to take him and his claims seriously.

And that is why everyone in this passage is mocking Jesus as he walks to the cross. Everyone, from the lowest, from the highest right to the lowest, they're all mocking Jesus.

They don't want to take him seriously. Except one. The second criminal on the cross. Look at how he responds.

Verse 40. But the other criminal rebuked the first criminal. Don't you fear God, he said. You know what he's saying?

[15:26] He's saying, if you write this man off, if you write off who this man is, you're not fearing God. Now, this first criminal who was mocking Jesus, just like everyone else, we would classify him probably as non-religious.

Many people in today's world, especially in our age, classify themselves as non-religious or no religious affiliation. But you know what's really interesting?

The Bible never classifies people as religious or non-religious. The Bible only classifies people as those who fear God and those who don't.

And so to say, I am non-religious is actually to say, I don't fear God. And I'm going to ignore God and what he's done in this world.

And these two criminals on either side of Jesus are examples of not fearing God and fearing God. You only get those two in the world.

[16:41] Every person in the world either is one of those two. And the first criminal here did not fear God because he disregarded Jesus and he joined the world in mocking the one that God has sent.

He didn't want to take him seriously. Because amongst other things, Jesus didn't do what he wanted Jesus to do. So he didn't want to believe him. He didn't want to take him seriously.

And so many people don't take Jesus seriously today because he's not what they want. And so they'll disregard him, mock him, use his name in vain as a way of just convincing themselves, I don't have to take him seriously.

That's what the first criminal did. That's what all these other people did. But the second criminal does the opposite when he says these profound words, Jesus, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

You see what he saw when he looked at this man next to him? Despite the fact that it didn't look like it, he believes that Jesus is who he claims to be.

[17:54] The one sent by God into this world to fulfill God's plans to fix the world that the prophets had spoken about for centuries, the king of the future who will one day determine the fate of all people who have ever lived.

And that is why this second criminal set himself apart from all the mockers around him and he sides with this king. And because of that simple fact, he receives immediate welcome into his kingdom and into the future that God has planned for this world.

And so do all who set themselves apart from this mocking world and are willing today to see Jesus for who he really is are you.

Because that's all that you need to do. What's interesting as we close, considering this criminal, is that there were two criminals and both of them are exactly the same, in the same position.

They've had the same experience. They're in the same situation, but they have completely different responses. And as I was considering that, I realized it's the same today.

[19:14] people come to the same church. They hear the same sermon. And while it changes one person and they go out different, it'll leave another person completely unchanged, unmoved.

Which one are you this morning as we consider what Jesus has done on Good Friday? Okay. Is that changing you? Or is it leaving you unmoved?

Well, that will depend on two things. Whether, firstly, you see yourself for who you truly are before God. And secondly, whether you turn and see Jesus as he truly is.

As the only one who can save you and give you a future beyond this broken and failing world, all because of what he did on Good Friday.

Shall we pray? Oh, Lord, Lord Jesus, raised and seated in glory, we pray to you now.

[20:40] and we to do the same as him and to see ourselves as we truly are and then help us to look to Christ, to you, to see you as the king you truly are and to be changed.

In Jesus' name, Amen.