

The Thieves on the Cross

It is quite common to use the “thief on the cross” as an excuse for lack of obedience:

“Look at the thief on the cross...he did no good works and he was saved!”

The implication is that if he did it, then we can too. So I would like to look more closely at the “thief on the cross”, or rather, the “thieves” because there was more than one.

First of all, let’s note that the thief on the cross responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit when they were offered to him. He did not waste his whole life rejecting God’s call, and then suddenly slide into home base at the last moment before death!

Salvation is a work that God works for us and in us, when we are fully disgusted with our bondage to sin and longing to be free. He gives the faith, he does the work. It’s not something we can turn on or off at will (although we can certainly put ourselves in places where we are more likely to receive His grace, but even then it is His Spirit that prompts us and encourages us). We have to accept it when it comes to us, and refusing to do so grieves the Holy Spirit, and makes our hearts harder, so that it is more difficult to receive Him the next time.

Anyone who thinks that they can fool God by repenting at the last moment, will eventually become so joined to their sinful pleasures, that they’ll either lose any fear of God at all, and therefore not repent (if they even had the time before dying), or they will come to see themselves as “not so bad”, and therefore think they are fit for heaven as they are. But assuming that such a person would try to repent on their deathbed, it would just be fear-based, not faith-based, and therefore, like Cain’s offering, just “filthy rags.”

The thief on the cross who repented was not such a case. He saw Christ's divinity and sinlessness at a time when almost nobody else did. That was real faith! His faith was not based on what the majority were doing, for the majority at the cross were denying Christ. He saw the glorious character of the suffering, meek Christ, and recognized it as divine. He wasn't looking for miracles. Like the apostles, he was drawn to Christ because of the "words of life."

He saw it all, and in contrast saw his own desperate need. He admitted his guilt, that he deserved the cross for his sins. There was no attempt to lessen the sentence, to complain about getting punished, or to escape the penalty. He probably didn't even know much of what Christ's kingdom would be about, but he knew Jesus was called a King, and he saw that unearthly, kingly character, and said in his heart, "That's the kingdom I want to be part of."

Then, under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, he did the only works he was capable of doing at that time, which was to openly confess his own guilt, and his need of a Saviour. This was not an insignificant work! Even Peter, the apostle, failed to confess Christ in this trying time. It was a bold, courageous work, and God chose to record it in the Bible as a memorial of what real faith looks like.

I think those who use this story as an excuse for not doing righteous works, obviously have no idea what real faith is, nor love for Christ. They only want the reward of heaven as cheaply as possible. They, in essence, sell their Lord for thirty pieces of silver. In no way would they confess Christ under the same circumstances that the thief was in.

It strikes me also that really there were two thieves, and so when people use the thief on the cross as an excuse, maybe we should ask them "which thief?"

The first thief also asked Christ for salvation: "If thou be the Son of God, save thyself and us." Actually the Bible says,

“he railed on him.” So it was more of a demand. It was also filled with doubt: “if thou be the Son...” He was not open to seeing the divine attributes in the suffering Saviour, nor did his heart beat in sympathy with that type of character. Freedom from suffering was all he wanted.

There was no heartfelt confession of sin, or regret. The type of savior he expected is one who would break out of the cross, and beat his enemies over the head, just like the movies all portray the hero as doing.

It was presumptuous, because he was not interested in fulfilling conditions, only in receiving the temporal blessings. His kind of “faith” was the same as that of the Jewish nation:

“We have our own way of living our lives, just give us the power and freedom to do what we want, and we’ll handle the rest.”

It really is the same type of attitude as those who use the other thief as an excuse.

The second thief, on the other hand, made no demands. He probably trembled at the thought that his whole life had been devoted to sin, and could not imagine himself as a good candidate for Christ’s holy kingdom. So he didn’t demand; he just said, “remember me.” But it was exactly this humble, broken spirit that showed that the Holy Spirit was transforming him, and making him righteous.

And Jesus, ever sensitive to the cry of true faith, recognized it as genuine, and assured him of his reward.

Note that he did not promise him mansions and gold, but simply said, “you will be with Me in paradise.” “With Me.” That is what the second thief wanted, to study and follow Christ, and that is what he was promised: a chance to walk in the garden of Eden, communing with Christ, just as Adam and Eve used to do before the fall.

So the next time someone mentions the “thief on the

cross”, be sure to ask them, “which thief?”