

Sermon for Sunday, July 13, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor Central
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"THREE CROSSES ON CALVARY"

"The Man Who Wasn't Sorry"
St. Luke 23:32-49

Text: "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" St. Luke 23:39

"Three crosses stood on Calvary
Stark against the sky.
Roman soldiers laughed to see
Three ways a man may die." (Rotherburger)

Yes, three crosses stood on Calvary that day. Somehow each of those crosses is important. Somehow each of them brings sharply into focus something about humanity, about you and me. The cross of the man who wasn't sorry speaks to us of who and what we are. The cross of the penitent thief speaks to us of what we should be. The cross of Jesus Christ tells of what we can be--forgiven sons of God. Beginning today I will preach a series of sermons entitled "Three Crosses on Calvary". Each cross, in its own way standing out stark against the sky of history, speaks either to our condition or to our possibility.

The Bible tells us that "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." In this gloom that gathers around Calvary and the three crosses there, let the spotlight fall first on the cross on the left. Who is this figure transfixed there by the cruel nails? We know little about him except the man is a thief, a criminal so vicious and ruthless that society feels it must protect itself by doing away with him. Yet, to call him a thief tells us, after all, a great deal about him. To call a man a thief speaks of the kind of life he lived. It speaks of preying on others, of living off the labor of another man's hands, of taking what is not one's own for one's own use, of a parasite quenching his thirst on the sweat of another's brow. To call a man a criminal is to introduce us to a life that is lived without God at the center, to a life that has gone its own unheeding way, paying no attention to the laws of God and the requirements of his holy will. Here is a life lived with self at the center. Here is a life with no consideration for others or concern for right and wrong. Here is a life that has placed its own needs, its own wants and wishes and satisfactions at the center of existence.

Surely all of us see something of ourselves reflected here. I see me, I see at the center of my life standing nothing but self. We are so concerned with our wishes, our wants, our needs, our desires. Does God really stand at the center of your life? Is your life lived in loving obedience to God's will for you? Are you doing everything because you feel it's what God wants you to do? Or, like Adam, do you and I not instead succumb to make ourselves God and to put me and my and I and mine at the center of life?

But not only is this man a thief, he is crucified. That is to say, he was bearing the penalty of a self-centered life. He was justly and rightly suffering the rewards of injustice and inhumanity and selfishness. He was properly enduring the punishment for a life lived in separation from God, a life that ignored holy requirements and divine law. There is no indication that his crucifixion was not just nor right. There had been no slip of the law nor was an innocent person being unfairly punished. As a matter of fact, the second thief said to him concerning their crucifixion, "And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds..." This man has no claim on God. He has no claim on justice. He has no claim on fair play. He has no claim on the sympathy of men. He has no claim even on the harsh Roman law. No, he is receiving the just reward of a self-centered life. Self-centeredness always bears its reward and do not think you can live your life that way and, in the end, escape the consequences of self-centeredness.

The bible goes on to say that this crucified thief rails at Christ in his agony and pain. Does his railing not imply that Christ owes him something? There is no thought here of his guilt. There is no thought here of the justness of his sentence. No, there is only the thought that if Christ is the Messiah of God, the Son of the Divine, then he ought to take this cup from him. Do we not see ourselves reflected here? Where do we turn in times of great trouble and distress and sorrow? Do we not also turn to God? And with what justification? What claim do you have on God this morning? Is it that we have lived just and holy lives? I haven't, and I don't think you have. Is it that we have served him with utter faithfulness and with full obedience? I can't say that. Is it that our lives have been a reflection of his glory and a testimony of his goodness? I can't say that. The thief certainly could not say this. The thief had not loved the Lord, he had not been obedient to his commandments, he had not loved and served him. Instead, his life had been one of unrestrained greed and selfishness. He had sustained himself on the labor of others as he stole and robbed and took what he had no right to take. Yet, in the extreme moment of his life, in spite of the way he had lived and the deeds he had done, rails against the injustice of a God that will permit something like this to happen to him. Do you catch yourself judging God on the basis of what he does for you? I do. I never catch myself judging what happens in my life on what I do--I am always judging God because things happen to me and putting the responsibility on him instead of where it belongs--on me.

But there is something far more serious involved here. Not only did his railing imply that God owed him something, it also implies that he is unrepentant about his life. St. Paul tells us that the wages of sin is death. Whatever life brings to us, whatever disaster comes or tragedy befalls, it is the result of sin in human life. Therefore, God is not chargeable for what happens to us. Yet, and this is the most glorious thing in human existence, even though God is not responsible for the awful consequences of sin in our lives, if we repent of our sins, if we are sorry for our sins, if we turn away from our sins, the Bible assures us that he will forgive us and save us. Whoever you are this morning, that's the good word to you--you can be forgiven--you can have eternal life by repenting and turning from your sins.

But look at this criminal! There is no repentance. There is no sorrow for deeds done, for acts committed, for thievery carried out. No, there is only a figurative shaking of the fist at God because in the thief's moment of need, Christ will not help him.

I want to tell you this morning that Christ could not have saved him. God cannot save the unrepentant. I want to tell you that God is not a stage-hand to be called front and center when something goes wrong with life's play. God is not a mechanic to be called when life's motor sputters and misses. God is not a life-vest to be snatched up when the boat is sinking. God's not an ambulance to be called when life's had a wreck.

We ought not to have any illusions about this unrepentant man. He only wanted to use God. Do you catch yourself doing that? Too often I do not want to live my life the way God wants me to live it, but when things go wrong I want him to rescue me. He only wanted God to serve him in his time of need. You cannot use God. You may worship God; you may serve God; you may be obedient to God. Yes, you may do all those things, but you may not use God.

Do you remember the story of Esau in the Old Testament? Esau, as the elder brother had a great responsibility as the successor of his father and of leading the people of God. Yet, we discover that self stood at the center of Esau's world. The Bible tells us that he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. There came a moment when his own needs, his own desires, his own wishes were greater than his duty to God. Over in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews, the writer speaks of Esau. He writes, "See to it that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal." And then I would have you hear the next sentence for the writer of Hebrews says, "For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears."

Why could Esau find not a chance to repent? I think that is a danger you and I overlook. There may be the possibility we won't have a chance or find a chance to repent. Why could that unrepentant thief not repent? Was it not because, even in the face of death, he was unwilling to accept responsibility for himself and change? No, Christ could not have saved the unrepentant thief. As long as his heart was rebellious, as long as his soul was unrepentant, Christ could not help him. That same is true of us this morning. We can live our lives ignoring God. We can live a life that is selfish and self-centered. We can spend our days and weeks and years for our own pleasure and our own self-gratification. Yet, the time will come when trouble will be sharp nails driven into our hands. The time will come when our bodies will be racked by some private crucifixion experience. The time will come when the sword of hard circumstance will thrust itself into our side. The time will come when the conscience is dulled with the pain of threatening disaster and death. And when such a time comes, Christ cannot help us. He will want to help us. He will long to help us. He will have died in a vain effort to help us. Yet, without repentance he cannot. Without repentance, without accepting responsibility for who and what we are and without being willing to change, Christ cannot help us. And though we cry out to him in our extremity, though we rail against him in our dilemma, he cannot help us.

Let the spotlight shift for a moment to the thief on the other side of Christ. Here, too, is a life lived with self at the center. Here, too, is a man who has made the satisfaction of his own needs and desires the goal of his existence. Yet, there is a difference, a radical difference. This man knows that his judgment is just. This man knows that his death is fair. This man accepts responsibility for his life. But most important of all, he turns to Jesus. Out of deep remorse and sorrow, out of deep regret and repentance for his life, he turns to the Jesus of the cross and cries out, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power."

I want to tell you this morning that Jesus can help a man like that. Jesus can save a man like that. On the day of Pentecost Peter got up and preached that sermon and the Bible says that the Holy Spirit cut the people to the heart. They cried out, "What shall we do?" Do you remember what Peter replied? He said, "Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." Jesus can get into the life of a person who sees himself for who and what he is, who accepts responsibility for what sin has done to his life, and repents and turns to Him.

There were two thieves on Calvary that dreadful day. One of them went down into eternal death with rebellion and hatred on his lips, with sin in his heart, an unrepentant man. Do you want to do that? The other thief repented and turned to Jesus. He brought nothing in his hands for his was an empty life --nothing in my hands I bring simply to the cross I cling, and yet, when he turned to the cross of Jesus he found salvation. To this man Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

The hands of Christ
Seem very frail
For they were broken
By a nail.
But only they
Reach heaven at last
Whom these frail, broken
Hands hold fast.

Have you put yourself into the nail pierced hands of Jesus? Have you repented and turned from your sins and asked him to take your life? If you haven't, why not?