

Series: Prayers from the Cross

Today: Prayers of Those We Would Like to Forget

Text: Luke 23:39-43

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

When my wife was in the hospital a few weeks ago, a friend of mine was attempting to comfort me. After asking me how I was doing, she said, *“It isn’t fair! It just isn’t fair! Why should she suffer when there are so many bad people in the world who get off scot free?”* While I appreciated the comfort, the question itself came from an ethic in our culture which places a high value on morality and goodness as a way of earning God’s favor; a culture which also believes that if you are bad, you should be punished.

We have not progressed much in our beliefs from the time of Jesus. You may remember the story of the man who had been born blind and the question which people asked him was, *“Who sinned, this man or his parents?”* In our culture we tend to believe that if you are good you will be blessed, and if you are bad you should be punished. So we may be surprised when the likes of Phillip Yancey remind us that there is only one person in the bible who receives a direct promise of heaven, and he is a thief.

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You will recall from last week the context of the prayers of these two criminals who hung beside Jesus on crosses of their own. It was more like a circus than an execution. Some in the crowd are gambling for his clothing. Some are offering him sour wine to quench his thirst. Leaders from the Temple are chiding him to come down from the cross if he was, indeed, the Son of God. The sign above his head in three languages read, *“This is the King of the Jews.”*

Then there were these two thieves; two men who deserved to be punished for their crimes. One of them joins the crowd in by offering a prayer which mocked Jesus: *“If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us!”* Even in the death of Jesus we can trust that there will always be someone who goes along with the crowd. But there is this other criminal who has a “God moment;” a moment when he realizes that there is something different about Jesus than any other man he has ever met. He is the one who utters the prayer that all of us might do well to learn: *“Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”*

To the man who made the demands, Jesus makes no response at all. To the man who asks Jesus to remember him, Jesus says, *“Today, you will be with me in paradise.”* So this morning I want to suggest to you that there are lessons about prayer to be learned from these men whom society would just as soon forget: 1) Stop Demanding that God to Do It Your Way; 2) Be Honest About Your Circumstance; 3) Trust God with the Outcome.

Stop Demanding that God to Do It Your Way

The prayer of the first thief is consistent with the way he had lived his life up until the time of his execution. He assumed that the world owed him something, and it was his job to take it. The consequence of his actions was the death sentence, yet there he is demanding that Jesus get him off the hook. *“If you are the Son of God, save yourself, and save us.”* There is no humility in this prayer. He still believes that the Son of God owes him something, and he demands payment.

Sometimes when we pray, we are involved in the same kind of selfishness. We tell God what God should do, and we are disappointed when things don't turn out the way we want them to turn out. Our prayers are too often like the seventh grade student who turns in a test and prays, *“Dear God, please make Philadelphia the capital of Pennsylvania.”* We demand that God do what we want, and expect God to meet our request exactly as we demanded it. But don't you wonder what kind of view of

God such demands represent? If we demand that God do things exactly as we pray for them, to whom are we praying? If we had the power to know what is best for our lives, why wouldn't we just go after what we need ourselves. The prayer of the criminal reminds us that the ultimate goal of prayer is not to make demands of God, but to surrender our will to God's.

Be Honest About Your Circumstance

It is the second criminal who helps us with the proper attitude in prayer. It requires us to be honest with God about our circumstances. One criminal demands that Jesus take care of his needs and expects a response. However, Jesus remains strangely silent toward him. The other criminal speaks the honest truth. No one else is to blame but themselves. They are on the cross because of their own misdeeds and no one else's. Honesty with oneself and with God is the only way we can pray and expect God to respond.

A colleague tells of one of those embarrassing moments in ministry during a word to the children. It seems that she and her husband had company for dinner the evening before, and after dinner she put all the food scraps in a big, black trash bag and set it out on the deck instead of putting it in the trash can. Forgotten on the back porch, the dogs in the neighborhood had a field day and the trash the following morning was strewn across the deck and back yard. She did not look forward to coming home to pick it all up, but she decided it would make a good object lesson for the children about the our stewardship for the earth.

So she took a black plastic trash bag with her, filled it with some trash, and during the word to the children, she emptied it on the platform—coke cans, papers, and wrappers. She then asked the children, "Now, what does that look like?" Her son stood right up, hands on hips, and loudly said, "Mommy, it looks *just* like our house!"

We have to learn how to be honest with God about where the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We might like to blame others for the things that have happened, but we cannot change others. God cannot change the circumstances we have brought on ourselves, but God can change our responses to those circumstances and use them to shape our lives to be testimonies of God's grace.

There is a saying in the community of those who are recovering from addictions which goes like this: *If you always do what you always did, you will always get where you always got.*

The only way I know how to allow God to go to work on whatever kind of problem you may be facing is to be honest with God in prayer. Tell God how you got into the circumstance you in which find yourself. Don't blame anyone else. Be honest, and allow God to go to work transforming the rough patch you may be going through into something God can use.

Trust God with the Outcome

When we have stopped demanding that God do things the way we want them done, and when we have been honest with ourselves and God about what we deserve, we are ready to trust God with the outcome, and we can trust that the outcome will be full of grace. The thief asks, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" Jesus responds, "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" When we are honestly seeking to move in a new direction, it is not sometime in the distant future that we trust the grace of God to be good. It is today.

It is worth noting that the word which Jesus uses for today is the same word he used when he taught his disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer. When he says "*Today you will be with me in paradise,*" he means this very day. When we trust really God with the outcome, the future is right now because in God's sense of time the outcome is secure. Whether it is in life or in death, we will be with God.

The thief on the cross is a reminder to us all that there are no limits on the love of God. Human beings may want to set limits on who is in and who is out, but that is not our business. That is God's business. There are no limits on the love of God!! Our business is to live lives that reflect the kind of love which Jesus shows to this thief, and leave the rest up to God.

We should not be surprised that Jesus offers heaven to the dying thief. It is consistent with his character. He died the way he lived, and the fact that his offer of sanctuary to one in need does not fit our image of who belongs in heaven should not bother us. In fact, it may not even fit our idea of what will happen when we die, but the truth is none of us knows what happens when we die. We have glimpses of hope through scripture, but only those who have gone before us really know what happens when we die.

Perhaps the words of the following parable which was found on the body of an American Jewish soldier, Col. David Marcus, is a fitting reminder that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Listen:

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails in the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength, and I stand and watch her until at length she is only a ribbon of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other. Then someone at my side says, "There! She's gone!"

Gone where? Gone from my sight—that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side, and just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her, and just at the moment when someone at my side says, "There! She's gone!" there are other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "There! She comes!" And that is dying.

Conclusion

These second prayers from the cross are from two people our culture would just as soon forget, but they teach us lessons we should never forget: Effective prayer means that we stop demanding God do things our way; it means being honest about the circumstances in which we find ourselves and accept our responsibility for them; and it means trusting God with the outcome.

During my sabbatical in 2004, I spent a week on the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland. Twice a day I worshipped with people from all over the world in a 16th century Abby. There is a song I learned there that I would like to end this sermon with, and I would invite you to join in it whenever you feel comfortable.

Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom

Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom. (repeat 4 times as people join in)