**The Drama Behind the Cross Series**

“The Criminal on the Cross – A Criminal’s Confession”

Luke 23.26-27; 32-47

**Introduction**

In preparation for Passion Week we have been looking at the supporting cast behind the drama of the cross. In any great drama there are people who might not be center stage but are essential for the story to be told.

Last week we considered Barabbas – a murderous insurrectionist who was released by Pilate because Jesus took his place on his cross. Before we get into today’s text let’s revisit the story of Barabbas for some context. Barabbas was a son of a Jewish rabbi who developed racial religious views about the sacred state of Israel, joined the party of the Zealots, and rose to the top of that terrorist organization by leading violent riots against Rome. Barabbas was a hometown hero who had killed during these riots, was eventually captured, imprisoned, and was sitting in a Roman jail cell awaiting his execution by crucifixion.

The chief priests desiring to put Jesus to death brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, early Friday morning accusing Jesus of being an insurrectionist against Roman rule. The chief priests knew that the punishment for insurrection was crucifixion and that Pilate had already ordered for the crucifixion of Barabbas and his two accomplices for later that morning. They also knew that Pilate had a custom of releasing one prisoner at the feast of Passover. (Mt.27.15; Mk.15.6; Jn.18.39; [textual variant Lk.23.17]) So, it’s easy! Give us our hero and you can have this heretic to crucify in his place. The problem was that Pilate believed Jesus to be innocent of all the charges. But as the chief priests stirred up the crowd demanding Barabbas’ release Pilate became concerned that a riot was going to break out right in front of him if he didn’t substitute Jesus for Barabbas. (Mt.27.24) So, as Pilate releases Barabbas the guilty, and delivers over to death Jesus the innocent, we have a perfect picture of substitutionary atonement through Christ.

Let’s continue the story reading from Luke’s Gospel chapter twenty-three:

***26****As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.****27****A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.*

***32****Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.****33****When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.****34****Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.* ***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.”*

***36****The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar****37****and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”* ***38****There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews.* ***39****One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* ***40****But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?* ***41****We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”* ***42****Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* ***43****Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* ***44****It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,****45****for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.****46****Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.* ***47****The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”*

There are so many aspects of this story that could be preached on but this morning I want to focus our attention primarily on the criminal on the cross. Many times the man is identified as “the thief on the cross” but this title is a little misleading. Common everyday thieves were not sentenced to the death penalty. They were just sentenced to serve time in jail. But insurgents, rebels, insurrectionist, terrorist were sentenced to death by crucifixion. And these two other men were hard-core criminals just like Barabbas.

**A Criminal’s Cross**

The Romans used crucifixion for the most serious criminals because to be crucified was to suffer a thousand deaths. The criminal would be beaten, whipped, and forced to carry his cross outside of the city to a hill called Golgotha or Place of a Skull. He would lie down with his back on the wooden beams and seven-inch nails would be driven through the wrists so that the bones could support the body's weight. The nail would sever the median nerve, which not only caused immense pain but also would paralyze the victim's hands. The feet were nailed to the cross, so that the knees were bent at around 45 degrees. With the victim nailed to the cross the soldiers lift the cross upright and the cross would drop into a hole causing a jolt of pain throughout the victim’s body. The victim would used his legs to support his weight but once the legs gave out, the weight would be transferred to the arms, gradually dragging the shoulders from their sockets. The elbows and wrists would follow a few minutes later causing the arms be six or seven inches longer. The victim would immediately have trouble breathing forcing him to perpetually gasp for air. Suffocation would usually follow, but death could also occur due to the loss of body fluids and multiple organ failure. Often the victim’s leg’s would be broken to make sure they were dead. To say the least, death by crucifixion was a torturous death. As the Bible says, “*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*.” (Dt.21.22-23; Gal.3.13)

**The Cross of Christ**

But Christ not only suffered the physical agony of crucifixion but He suffered the full weight of our sin, our guilt, our shame, and complete separation from God the Father as He hung on the cross. The One who knew no sin took our sin upon Himself. (ICor.5.21) *He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.* (Is.53.5) *He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*(Phil.2.8) Christ established peace between God and sinful people through the blood He shed on the cross. (Col.1.20) The cross of Christ is the only basis of union between God and sinful humanity.

The cross of Christ was divinely planned. God in His infinite wisdom had decreed during the second giving of the Law in the book of Deuteronomy that anyone who is hung on a cross is cursed. (Dt.21.22-23) If Christ was going to take our curse upon Himself He had to suffer the death of the cursed. We deserved the death of the cross, and therefore our Lord was crucified. Dr. John Murray writes, “There were no lower depths possible.” Nothing less could save us. Jesus had to be crucified on a cross. The Apostle Peter makes it clear in his first sermon on the Day of Pentecost, “*this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”* (Acts 2.23) The cross of Christ reveals the character of God for in it we see God’s love for sinners and His perfect justice satisfied. As the saying goes, “What God’s justice demanded, His love provided at the cross of Christ.”

But the message of cross has fallen on hard times. We live in a world that loves ageless beauty and fantasizes of a life without wounds and scars. To them the message of the Hero of our redemption being tortured, suffering anguish, and being crucified on a criminal’s cross is foolishness but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (ICor.1.18) The fact is that sin has scared each of us and has caused deep wounds in our lives. We all are criminals at our core. We need someone to bear our iniquities and to bring healing. The Bible tells us that Jesus Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross . . . for by His wounds we are healed! (IPt.2.24) By Jesus being nailed to the cross God canceled certificate of debt and sin against us. (Col.2.14)

**A Changed Heart**

Matthew and Mark’s Gospels tell us that the two criminals who had been crucified on both sides of Jesus joined the crowd casting verbal insults at Him. (Mt.27.44) But Luke records that eventually only one of the criminals continued to insul our Lord saying, *“Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?* It seems that the other criminal had a change of heart. But what had caused this man to laid aside his verbal cruelty and proud contempt for Christ? What caused this change of heart?

It seems that as this criminal hung on that cross suffering the punishment for his lawless deeds that the Holy Spirit captured his heart, convinced him of his sin, and enlightened his mind to redemption found in Christ. (WSC#31) The evidence of his changed of heart is seen not only in his rebuked of his wicked companion but in his words of confession.

*We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* (23.41-42)

Here we have a criminal’s confession.

**A Criminal’s Confession**

He first confesses his guilt, then the innocence of Christ, and lastly his desire to enter into Christ’s Kingdom. Let’s look closer at the three elements of the criminal’s confession.

He first confesses his personal guilt saying, “*We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.”* Back in 2002 someone shared with me four basic elements of true confession.

1. Address everyone involved (Prov. 28.13; I John 1.8-9)
2. Avoid *if, but* and *maybe* (don’t make excuses; Luke 15.11-24)
3. Admit specifically both attitudes and actions
4. Accept the consequences (Luke 19.1-19)

And it seems to me that the criminal includes each of these elements in his confession of guilt. In a chapter on confession and communion in his book “[Life Together](http://www.amazon.com/Life-Together-Exploration-Community-Bonhoeffer/dp/B00E31H92O/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1403733659&sr=8-3&keywords=life+together&tag=desigod06-20),” Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “he who is alone with his sin is utterly alone.” It is as the Psalmist wrote, *When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.**I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”; And You forgave the guilt of my sin.**Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found.* (Ps.32.3-6) And this criminal confessed his guilt in the time that the Lord could be found and the Lord changed his eternal destiny from hell to heaven. The Bible says, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (IJn.1.9)

This man not only confesses his personal guilt but he confesses Christ’s innocence when he says, “*But this man has done nothing wrong.*” As I shared last week four times Luke records that Pilate declares Jesus innocence. (23.4, 14b-15, 20, 22a) Luke continues underscoring Christ’s innocence here in both the criminal’s confession and the centurion’s declaration, *“Surely this was a righteous man.”*(23.47)

This criminal knew that Barabbas was supposed to be on that cross not Jesus. He knew all about Barabbas’ guilt as an insurrectionist and murderer. He knew that even though Jesus was innocent He willing took Barabbas’ place. He knew that one would hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for a good man someone would dare to die. But Jesus was dying in the place of a no good sinner like Barabbas and he must had thought “maybe Jesus was dying for a no good sinner like me!” He must had thought by Jesus willingly dying on the cross God was demonstrating His own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He must had come to the conclusion that Jesus shedding His innocent blood on that cross would save him from the wrath of God. (Rom.5.7-9)

The Gospel was staring him right in the face as he hung on the cross next to Jesus. As he glazed upon the innocent Savior dying on the cross and he said*, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* Isn’t it ironic that a person who had spent his life revolting against a foreign government was asking for entry into a kingdom that was not his own. The one who was an outcast of society was asking to be welcomed into the Kingdom of Christ. *Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Just think, Jesus began His earthly ministry preaching the Gospel in Galilee saying, *“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”* (Mk.1.15) And here on Jesus’ last day on earth as He hangs on the cross securing our redemption he grants entrance into the Kingdom of God to a criminal who repented and believed in the gospel. There was no time to get baptized, no time to do good works, no time to give a gift at the altar. Faith in Christ is all he had and faith in Christ is all he needed.

This man only had a few more minutes to live but it was the best few minutes of his life. As he suffered the pain of crucifixion he rejoiced in the salvation that had just been granted to him. As the weight of his body was pulling him downward he experienced release from the weight of sin off his life. He heard Jesus cry out with a loud voice saying, *“Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit.”* (23.46) He saw Jesus breathe His last. He heard the centurion confess, *“Certainly, this man was innocent. Truly, this was the Son of God.”* (23. 47; Mt.27.54)

As the soldiers approached the criminal to make sure he was dead by breaking his legs he knew that the curse of sin had been broken from his life. He knew that upon his death his body would be thrown on a smoldering trash heap outside of the city but his soul would enjoy the paradise of heaven with Christ. His body would return to the dirt but his soul would be with Christ in the paradise of heaven. Not some “soul sleep.” Not some holding facility. Not some halfway point like purgatory. He knew that upon the moment of his death his soul would be in the presence of the Lord in heaven because the Bible tells us to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord. (2Cor. 5.8) And this criminal was at home with the Lord. Thanks be to God. And this promise of paradise is offered to you too.

**Closing Thought**

*Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* Do you believe this? The criminal did. And I do, too. But do you? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life; and whosoever believes in Him will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Christ will never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn.11.25-26)

Has the Holy Spirit convinced you that sin has scared your life? Are you tried of living in guilt and shame? Is the Holy Spirit calling you to embrace forgiveness offered through Christ?

*“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”*

**Call to Prayer**

*Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near.* (Is.55.6)

**Benediction**

*He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,****6****whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.* (Tit.3.5)