

Exhortation 14: Christ's Company at the Cross

Charles Herle

Matthew 27:38

I. The Text Opened

A. "Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left," (Matt. 27:38).

1. The scene atop Mount Calvary the day of Christ's crucifixion is representative of what still happens today when sinners encounter the Savior.

a) For in addition to the cross erected for our Lord, there were two others, one on either side of him.

b) And the two men set to be crucified on either side of Christ were convicted criminals who well deserved to die a criminal's death.

c) In that way we might say these two criminals represent the whole of humanity, for as Paul says in Romans 3:23, we, "all have sinned."

d) And yet, though they were both in the same condition before Calvary, this is the point where their kinship ends.

(1) For when the one that hung on the cross to the left of Christ observed the Savior, he saw him as nothing more than someone to berate.

(2) As a result, he joined in with the others with such insults as, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39).

e) But as Luke goes on to add, the criminal on his right hand saw Christ in an altogether different light.

(1) He realized who this man between them truly was, because when he heard his fellow criminal's insulting remark, he rebuked him in response.

(a) "Don't you fear God?" he asked. "We are getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then turning to Jesus, he adds, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

f) This dying man's final words demonstrate that he believed Christ was the Messiah, the sinless Son of God.

(1) He also believed he was indeed a king, for only a king has a kingdom. And because of his faith, this penitent man's request is heard and answered at that very moment, as Jesus responded with, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

II. The Doctrine from the Text

A. Doctrine: Every man, woman and child who encounter the Lord see him in one of two ways, either for who he is and in response come to him with a repentant heart and experience his gift of saving grace, or, they encounter Christ and do not recognize who he is at all, and thereby remain condemned to eternal damnation.

1. The call to, "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," still rings out to all who will hear and heed, just as when John the Baptist originally preached it, (John 1:29).

a) Some answer that call by supernatural faith and they believe, and others neither hear nor see. Which are you?

2. The Lord hung dying on the cross, flanked by thieves on either hand and murderers at his feet.

a) And yet the fountain of all grace still flows freely through him to those who repent and believe.

(1) What more beautiful picture of grace than that which super abounds at the foot of the cross, this same grace that triumphs over all sin and the vilest of sinners.

b) He is the Way, as well as the Truth and the Life, (John 14:6).

(1) All men are lost and cannot find him without your Spirit leading them.

(2) They are steeped in the lies of the devil and cannot know his Truth until he opens their heart to hear it from his Word.

(3) They are dead in sin and cannot experience Life until he breathes into them that breath of life they may now know as the new birth he speaks of in John 3.

(4) Why then should men trust themselves to follow him at will?

(5) Today, if they hear his voice, they will not harden their heart.

(6) For if they refuse him, they cannot be assured of a second chance.

c) That men would not deceive themselves regarding repentance, for they are not guaranteed good health or a long life.

(1) Should they live forgetful of him, the winter of age or sickness may creep in unawares and they will have squandered the only life he have given them to love and worship, serve and honor him.

B. “And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou come into thy kingdom,” (Luke 23:42).

1. Christ was often found in the company of sinners, and the day he was crucified was no different.

a) On Calvary’s hill Christ was flanked by two criminals – one on each side – paying for their crimes to society with their life.

b) The one to his left was oblivious to the truth that God’s grand plan of redemption was being carried out right before his eyes, for he chose to spend his final dying breaths in concert with the crowd below him taunting and reviling and challenging the Lord to come down off the cross and save them all from this gruesome death.

2. But the response of the criminal on his right side was altogether different.

a) Because within a few moments of encountering the Lord, the spiritual eyes of this man were opened by the Holy Spirit, allowing him to see the mutilated form hanging beside him as the innocent Lamb of God.

b) As a result, in an instant he was transformed from reviler to repentant believer.

c) How wonderful in his humility and fearless faith does this sinner not only proclaim the state of his own condition but that of the Savior’s as well when he says, “we deserve to die, but this man has done nothing wrong!” (Luke 23:41).

d) This thief knew his punishment of death was well deserved.

III. The Text Applied

A. But in truth, we all deserve to die, because as Paul reminds us, “we all have sinned,” (Rom. 3:23) and, “the wages of sin is death,” (Rom. 6:23).

1. So instead of mimicking the request of the other thief, the thief humbly asks, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” (v. 42).
 - a) Because once his eyes of faith were opened, he knew this man hanging beside him was truly the King, the Messiah.
 - b) An interesting note is that the thief’s request to be remembered by Christ came at the same time the Son of God was forsaken by his Father, (Matt. 27:46).
 - c) And yet through his spiritual eyes, he saw beyond Christ’s present misery to his ultimate glory when so many others could see nothing but a mutilated form of humanity.
2. What amazing mercy from the Savior!
 - a) For while Christ begs for water, he is rewarding this thief with heaven, even though it is his first request and uttered with his last gasp of breath.
 - b) He forever frees him at that very moment from the grip of eternal death and secures passage for him into the glories of eternal life.
 - c) To this despicable soul who deserved the full measure of society’s worst punishment for his crimes, Christ grants full access to heaven to be with him and the Father forever.
3. Our divine Designer weaves faith together with all those aspects of salvation – calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification – in so narrow a compass as the hour of death, and then he bestows so great a salvation on this thief who, that very day, was welcomed into Paradise with God.
4. Even though the Lord chose to save this thief at his last, dying gasp, we do not need to make his success in entering the kingdom our security, for the thief merely did not know Christ until that point.
 - a) Christ saved us from eternal death during his last moments on earth, but that does not mean we may presume he would do the same for anyone else.
 - b) In other words, just because he caused Balaam’s donkey to speak once (Num. 22:28) does not mean that we should expect another donkey to also speak.
 - (1) *For what he has made peculiar, we may not make common, (Acts 10:15).*
5. And yet, true repentance is never too late, and late repentance is seldom true.
 - a) Let us take then a wise man’s counsel to humble ourselves before we are sick, for he requires the first fruits in his sacrifice and reject the blemished (Exod. 23), the blind, and the lame (Lev. 23).
 - b) That he would not let us then expect to sacrifice our youth, our strength, and our health to sin and hell, only to lay our old and withered bones on his altar.
 - c) But with hearty David, may it ever be our resolution, “O Lord thou art my God, early will I seek thee,” (Psa. 63:1).
 - (1) *That he may let us continually hear his now while it is today, while he stands at the door of our heart and knocks for entrance (Rev. 3:20), lest at last when night comes, he do not hear us.*
 - (2) *If this thief fared well, let us not then fare worse; and let us by this learn to bless and to trust, but not to tempt his mercy.*