

Paradise Lost . . . and Found (Part 2)

Introduction

The Text

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:39–43)

Paradise—the What and the How

- A. The title I’ve given to this and last week’s sermons is “Paradise Lost . . . and Found.” We’re dealing with this issue of paradise—a word that, as I said last time, touches on the deepest longings of the human soul.
- B. And last week we looked at what exactly paradise according to the Scriptures, especially as it’s presented to us here in this text.
 1. And for that we spent the whole of our time together looking bit by bit at that closing statement there that Jesus makes to this criminal hanging next to him: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43).
- C. And, now, this morning, we have it on our agenda to consider the how—namely, how do we get in on this paradise that Jesus has to offer?
 1. And for this we’re going to fasten in on the words of the second criminal there in vv. 40-42. And here what we find, and what we shall today unfold, is that, just as paradise itself is not what we would at first expect, so too the way of entrance into paradise is a bit surprising and counterintuitive as well.
 - a. We would think you make your way to paradise by your own merit and hard earnings and pedigree and resume and things like this.
 - b. But what we see put forward so eloquently here in the span of these three little verses is that the way in involves none of these things. In fact, such self-reliance and self-esteem are often a great hindrance. No, it is not might nor merit that get you in, but repentance and faith—turning away from yourself and trusting in another.
 - i. That is what we see in this second criminal.
 - ii. That is what we must get for ourselves if we are to know paradise, not in the fleeting forms of this world, but in the true and lasting and biblical sense.

- D. So, all I should like to do this morning is identify and elaborate on five aspects of this repentance and faith that we see modeled here so wonderfully in this second thief. I'll give them to you up front: (1) Allegiance to God before Men; (2) Admission of Our Guilt; (3) Acknowledgement of God's Justice; (4) Admiration of Christ's Innocence; and (5) Appeal for Mercy.

Aspect #1: Allegiance to God before Men

"Do You Not Fear God?!"

- A. This is what is brought immediately to our attention there at the beginning of v. 40 where we read: "But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God . . .'"
- B. As this second criminal rebukes the hard-heartedness in the first, we are brought to see the first and most fundamental aspect of this repentance and faith, that which is situated beneath them both and gets them going: namely, the fear of God.
1. Before there can be any repentance and faith, any turning from sin and turning towards the Lord, there must be the fear of God. Here is the foundation of it all, the engine that sets everything else in motion, the fountainhead from which all else flows.
- C. This is why it's the lack of this fear of God that is the chief rebuke of fallen humanity in all the Scriptures.
1. So Paul in [Rom. 3](#), when he's making the case for the utter depravity of all people (Jew and Gentile alike) and he's mish-mashing these quotes together from the OT, the whole thing cascades and climaxes to this singular point. Listen: "⁹ Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,¹⁰ as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one;¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'¹³ 'Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.'¹⁴ 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.'¹⁵ 'Their feet are swift to shed blood;¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.'¹⁸ 'There is no fear of God before their eyes' (vv. 9–18).
 - a. That's the fundamental piece beneath it all! Why is there all of this wickedness in thought, word, and deed? Well, it is because there is no fear of the Lord.
 - i. If you are going to change a person, to transform a person, to bring them to repentance and faith in Christ, this is the crux of the matter, this is the place to start. You need the fear of God.
- D. For this, consider the trajectory of the book of Jeremiah:
1. It begins with the charge issued in [Jer. 2:19](#) where God says: "Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God; the fear of me is not in you . . ."
 2. But it carries on towards the great promise of the New Covenant and the gospel where God says marvelously in [Jer. 32:39-40](#): "³⁹ I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. ⁴⁰ I will make

with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.”

- a. God knows this is the nub of the nub of the issue, so he takes it upon himself to make the change. “I will put the fear of me in your heart, not for ill, but for good!”
- E. That’s what’s happening with this second criminal next to Jesus. And it’s what’s missing with the first: “Do you not fear God . . .” What a question.
- 1. So many of us have seen it, haven’t we? Friends, family, loved ones . . . on the brink of death. The monitor in the hospital shows their heart is slowly giving out. The doctors know it, you know it, even this individual knows it . . . and yet there’s no fear of God.
 - a. You can yell as loud and as passionately as you want: “It is appointed for man to die once and then comes judgment . . . brother/sister why would you stand before God on your own when you can stand in Christ. Turn and trust. Repent and believe.” And yet . . . nothing. No fear. Just a callous calmness.

Repentance As Rebellion

- A. One last thing to point out. I say here that this first aspect is “Allegiance to God before Men” and I want you to consider that a bit more with me.
- B. The Scriptures regularly contrast fear of God with fear of man. And here’s what I want you to see.
- 1. We often think that unbelief and sin is a rebellion against the powers that be, a raging against the machine, we’re original thinkers, it’s unique to be an atheists or a secular person. “Christians and their like, they’re just sheep, going with outdated structures of authority and things, old tradition, but we know better, we’re enlightened. We’re the rebels.”
 - 2. But what we see here is that repentance is the real rebellion.
 - a. The first thief is just going with the flow.
 - i. We’ve spoken of it for so many weeks now, everyone is in that current of unbelief and sin. Everyone is in on this rejection of Jesus. The Jews, the Romans, Pilate, Herod, the rulers, the soldiers, the criminals, the crowd. There’s no rebellion or original thinking in rejecting God and Jesus.
 - (1) This is just status quo. This is just cliché. This is just going with the current. This first thief is still fearing man above God, going with the thoughts of man and the culture round about him, rather than stand for something fresh, something new, something original, something truly rebellious. His voice just sounds like all the rest.
 - b. Ah, but it’s this second thief that sounds altogether different.

- i. Here is the real rebellion. Repentance is a protest against status quo. To repent and believe, to fear God above man . . . that takes real courage and fortitude. You've got to kick and scream against the current for that.
- C. And I'll tell you that's the kind of person our world needs now more than ever—men and women who are not scared to stand up for biblical truth whether it's popular or not.
 - 1. Our positions may come in and out of favor with the masses, but it matters little to us, because we fear God before men. We will stand with him even all else stand against us.
- D. So I wonder, where are you?
 - 1. Maybe you know your parents will reject you, your boyfriend or girlfriend will reject you, your coworkers will reject you, if you really get serious about all this, if you become a "Jesus freak."
 - a. But who are you going to fear? Them or God? Are you going to keep walking that same wide, broad, unoriginal road? Or are you going to turn and start going the other way?!
- E. So that's the first piece, and it's the most fundamental bit, but now we see how it starts to work out above ground in our lives a little more . . .

Aspect #2: Admission of Our Guilt

"I've Done Wrong"

- A. So we keep reading and here's what this criminal says: "⁴⁰Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (vv. 40-41).
- B. The first thing I want you to see in these verses is that this man admits his guilt.
 - 1. In contrast to this idea of Jesus who's "*done nothing wrong*" as he says, we are supposed to see that he understands and is admitting that he himself has done many things wrong—that he's a sinner, that he's guilty.
 - a. Here is a critical component of repentance and faith. We turn from ourselves, we stop playing games, we get real and honest.
- C. You see, again, here is the real rebellion. It's just cliché, status quo human nature to deny guilt. Everyone's doing it.
 - 1. Just turn on the news, listen to the politicians. Oh how wonderfully miraculous and strange it would be to hear one of these self-trumpeting egoists say for once: "You know, I think I was wrong on that. I could have done better. I'm sorry." Oh no. It doesn't happen.

Strategies for Denial

- A. We have all sorts of strategies for denying our guilt. I'll give you just three of the most common here and I encourage you to search your own heart to see if and how they apply . . .

Denial Strategy #1: Lie

- A. One way we deny our guilt is by straight up lying about it. We know we've done it. The blood is on our hands, so to speak, but we wash up with finest soap, put on our nicest suit, and go on acting like there's never been a problem. And when the finger is pointed our way, we outright lie about it. "I didn't do that. I would never do such a thing. I'm offended you'd even suggest it!"

Denial Strategy #2: Justify

- A. Another method of denial is we justify. We know it's wrong, but we make a case for why it's right, and we tell ourselves and others the story. It helps us sleep at night.
1. So you may know your being a pigheaded jerk, but you quote a Scripture and say I'm just passionate for truth. "Look even Jesus turned over tables."
 - a. Yeah, but you're not Jesus, bro. And the Bible says: "[T]he anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20).
 2. You may know you're being an overbearing and demanding husband, but you say: "The Bible says submit, I'm the head."
 - a. Yeah, but it also says: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . ." (Eph. 5:25). What about that?
- B. This is the strategy the Pharisees had mastered. It got to a point where they couldn't even see they were sinners, because they had so justified what they were doing with the Bible and things.
1. "The reason I can't serve you right now, is I need to be in the church serving God."
 2. "The reason I can't be generous with my wealth towards you, is I've got to tithe." And so forth.

Denial Strategy #3: Blame

- A. A final strategy for denial I'll share is we blame. We blame our biology, our upbringing, our circumstances, other people, etc. We know what we've done is wrong, but we excuse ourselves from the guilt of it and place the blame elsewhere—somewhere out there.
1. Of course the classic example is when God comes for Adam. "The woman you gave me made me do it!" (Gen. 3:12). But this takes on all manner of expressions.
 - a. So we know we've been acting poorly, but rather than saying sorry we say: "Ah, I didn't get enough sleep."
 - b. "I haven't eaten today and I'm hangry that's why I'm a bit snippy."

- c. “I learned this from my father, that’s why I handle conflict so poorly or remain aloof.”
 - d. “I was burned by the church, that’s why I don’t come” . . . and so forth.
- B. We like to think that we can hide what’s in our hearts by shifting attention to these external things, but God says it’s these things that actually expose what’s in our heart.
 - 1. So Israel may have said: “The reason we were so nasty in the wilderness, God, is that it was hot and we were hungry and tired and stressed out. Surely you can understand. It wasn’t us but it was the circumstances.”
 - 2. But God moves in precisely the opposite direction with it. I took you to the wilderness “to humble you, [to test] you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep [my] commandments or not” (Deut. 8:2). “You can’t blame what’s in your heart on the wilderness. The wilderness doesn’t cause it, it exposes it.”
- C. I’ve heard the illustration given that we’re like these bottles of water with a little dirt mixed in.
 - 1. When things are stable and going good, well the dirt is settled in the bottom and we think we’re clean and pure.
 - 2. But then when circumstances get hard, we’re shaken up by them. Nasty stuff comes out. We get anxious and angry and lip off and hurt people. And we say: “Ah, it was the hard day at work or the stressful circumstance.” But no. If the dirt wasn’t already in us, no amount of shaking would make that come out. It only comes out because it’s already in.
 - a. If you need a positive proof on this, just look at Jesus. Look at how he’s being shaken there on the cross. Look at how violent and aggressive these people are. Look at how horrible his circumstances. And yet . . . look at what comes out: “Father forgive them . . .” (Luke 23:34).
 - i. What?! Don’t you see? You can’t shake sin out of him because it isn’t in him.
- D. And I think we play these denial games because admitting guilt seems a real threat. We build our identities on our own performance and things, and to admit we’re wrong would leave us hopeless and despairing—so we’d rather deny—lie, justify, blame . . . anything but admit it.
 - 1. But this thief is able to admit his guilt because he gets that there is another path opening up in Jesus. It’s not either deny or despair. He’s beginning to see that his identity and destiny can be built on another’s performance, not his own. So he can be both honest about his sin and hopeful about the prospect of forgiveness and chance.
 - a. This isn’t the end, but a new beginning. Repentance isn’t just rebellion it’s a restart in Christ!

Aspect #3: Acknowledgement of God’s Justice

“We Are Receiving Our Due Reward”

- A. But there’s another aspect to bring out in his words there. You notice he says “We ‘⁴⁰are under the same sentence of condemnation [as Jesus.]⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds . . .” (vv. 40-41). He’s talking about God’s justice here and receiving the due reward for his guilt.
- B. You see, along with admitting his own sin, he’s acknowledging God’s justice in giving him what his sin deserves.
 - 1. Now, again, you can see how all of this flows out from the fear of God. God is big, God is holy, God is righteous. When we have that view of God, well then we see our sin plainly, and we can’t deny the truth of what our sin deserves. Judgment, wrath . . . even hell.
- C. Oh how different this is from the ways of natural man!
 - 1. The natural person fears man over God, denies guilt, and grumbles in the face of God’s justice—at least when it finally comes for them. “I don’t deserve this!”
 - a. We naturally feel entitled like God owes us, not judgment, but blessing. We are taken aback when things are hard, and grumble and hurl accusations in the face of God. We act like it is he who is the problem here not us.
 - i. Again, this is Israel in the wilderness (we learn so much about ourselves from reading those stories). Not only are they denying their sin there, but they are grumbling against God time and again.
 - 2. And if we feel we don’t deserve even a bit of hardship in this world, how much more are we prone to think we surely don’t deserve hell in the next.
 - a. Oh what a grave overreaction that is on God’s part. We would stand in the fires of hell and say: “What have I to do with this place? A man so good as me? What an unkind and unjust God you are!”
- D. But the flow of Scripture as it speaks of those who have been truly touched by God always moves in the opposite direction.
 - 1. You look at Isaiah when he sees God in his glory, what does he say? “Woe is me! What am I doing here? I’m a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).
 - 2. Or Peter when he sees Jesus in a bit of his glory unveiled there on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Do you remember? He falls down on his face and cries out: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). “I don’t belong here in your presence. Go!”
 - 3. And it’s the same with John when he’s given that vision of heaven and Jesus blazing like the sun: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17). I can’t live in this place. I don’t belong here. It’s too much.
 - a. These men are not those saying: “Of course we should be in heaven. We are quite spectacular in our own right. Surely we are entitled to such a glory.”

b. No, they are all saying to the one: “In the face of such a glorious, holy, righteous, and pure God why is a sinner like me not in hell? How can I be here? It isn’t right!”

i. That’s what this thief understands. “I deserve the worst of what’s coming to me and more.”

E. I wonder if you’re there with him? Are we still grumbling about our lives talking about what God owes us, or are we getting it, what our sin truly deserves?

F. When we start to get that, this is what makes the next aspect so surprising. If it is our sin that deserves such judgment, why is Jesus here getting the same? What sin has he ever committed?

Aspect #4: Admiration of Christ’s Innocence

“This Man Has Done Nothing Wrong”

A. So we carry on. And if I had to get a bit more drilled down, I’d say here is where we really shift gears from repentance to faith.

1. They’re related, you know, like two sides of the same coin.

a. But the last two have really majored on the repentance side, the turning from myself and my sin.

b. And now we really see what we are turning to, what we can have faith in, or better put, who can have faith in.

B. So here it is Jesus who comes into view for this second criminal and we hear him say again: “. . . but this man has done nothing wrong” (v. 41).

1. And here is where hope really breaks in. There’s some strange sense in this man, that though he is guilty, and though he deserves God’s judgment and wrath, here in Jesus there is possibility of refuge.

C. Again, the natural man doesn’t see this. There’s no fear of God before his eyes, and there is certainly no admiration of Christ. All the snarling beasts around the cross there seem to think that Jesus is simply getting what he deserves.

1. It’s as Isaiah says in *Isa. 53*: “[W]e esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (v. 4).

a. “If God was for you, if you really were innocent as you claim, surely he would come to your rescue Jesus. But as it is you are still hanging here. And we all know it’s because this is what you deserve.”

D. But it’s not. And this second criminal sees it.

1. For him the broader context of the prophet's words are finally coming into focus, *Isa. 53:4-6*:
 “⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But 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. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”
 - a. “These aren't his own sins he's bearing and suffering judgement for here. These are mine! I don't know how. I don't know why. But I get this sense that Jesus here is not just dying alongside me. He's dying for me. '[T]his man has done nothing wrong' (v. 41).”

Aspect #5: Appeal for Mercy

“Remember Me!”

- A. And all of this then leads to this final, impassioned plea for mercy. We see it there in v. 42: “And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”
 1. Somehow, even in these last moments of our Savior's life, where he himself is hanging onto the last threads of life, this criminal knew he was still welcome, that Jesus would be open to his humble appeal.
- B. Again, the way of the worldly with Jesus is so different, and it's embodied in that first thief. Instead of humble requests for grace, there's arrogant demand for service.
 1. Look back up at v. 39: “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’”
 - a. Don't you hear it? “If you're the Christ, let me put you to work. I've got things I want you to do for me, not the least of which is get me down from here!”
 - i. That's where the “no-fear-of-God” thing leads—to barking orders at him like a servant. The roles are completely reversed, and somehow, in our insanity, we imagine ourselves superior even to God himself.
 - (1) But Jesus doesn't respond to that man. He won't be our lackey. He can only be our Lord.
- C. He responds not to the first but to the second, to the one who has nothing to commend himself, to the one who sees his sin and need, to the one who's poor in spirit, to the one who holds out the empty hand of faith, to the one who throws himself upon the Savior's mercy heart: “Remember me . . .”
 1. Not: “Repay me, you owe me.” But: “In your mercy, in your kindness, remember me.”

D. With this plea we are actually tapping back into a significant theme in the gospel of Luke that was introduced to us back at the very beginning. It's this idea of God remembering his people in mercy and that remembrance leading to action and salvation and things.

1. So Mary, reflecting on God's bringing the Savior, at the close and climax of her Magnificat, says: "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy . . ." (Luke 1:54). He's not forgotten us.

2. Or John the Baptist's dad, the priest Zechariah, a few verses later, reflecting on how God is on the move now to redeem his people and raise up a king in the house of David, says God is doing all of this: ". . . to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant . . ." (v. 72). Again, as the years went on, we thought maybe he'd forgotten us. Ah, but at last we see, he's remembered!

E. And here this thief says: "I want in on that. Don't just remember them. Would you remember me too?!"

1. And you know what, he will: "And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise'" (v. 43).

F. So the choice is laid out before us. Which of these two criminals do you want to be? Which path do you want to travel down? We're all sinners. We all deserve judgment. We're all dying. And we all have a choice.

1. Will we scoff and mock? (No fear of God. No admission of guilt. No acknowledgment of what we deserve. No admiration for Jesus. No plea for mercy?)

2. Or will we repent and believe?! "Remember me!"

a. Only one of these options leads to paradise.