

# The Christ among Criminals

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>32</sup>Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. <sup>33</sup>And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>34</sup>And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. (Luke 23:32–34)

### The Darkest and Brightest Moment

- A. You know the interesting thing about the crucifixion of Jesus is that it is at once the darkest moment in history and the brightest. We are here descending into the deep caverns of human depravity and wickedness, and yet we are at the same time ascending towards the lofty mansions of God's mercy heart and unconquerable love.
  - 1. There is no other way to understand this, it seems to me. We are now stepping into the dark and the light. We are now going down and going up. As Jesus is led out now to The Skull and crucified, we are on holy ground here in Luke's gospel. What a privilege!
- B. We've got just three verses to consider this morning, and I've got three headings for us: (1) Unsavory Neighbors; (2) Unexpected Prayers; and (3) Undressed Fulfillments.

## (1) Unsavory Neighbors

### Don't Miss It

- A. Under this first heading I simply wanted to make sure we don't miss the company Jesus kept for himself along the way to the cross.
  - 1. All the gospel writers bring out this fact that Jesus—the only beloved Son of God, the Holy and Righteous One—is crucified alongside two other condemned men.
    - a. Matthew and Mark refer to these guys by a word in the Greek that can mean either "revolutionary" or "robber."
    - b. Luke here chooses a word translated "criminal" that in the Greek literally means "evil-doer." "Two others, who were 'evil-doers,' were led away to be put to death with him" (v. 32).
- B. But even more, every gospel writer goes out of their way to make sure we see that when Jesus is crucified, hung up on that cross, he is hung up there between these two others, with one on his right and one on his left.

1. [Matt. 27:38](#): “Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.”
2. [Mark 15:27](#): “And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.”
3. [John 19:18](#): “There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.”
4. And, finally, [Luke 23:33](#): “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.”

## But Why?!

- A. Now, why are these writers so jealous that we see this—that we not have in our mind neither that Jesus was crucified on his own somewhere, with no one else around, nor that he was crucified at the same time as others but was set apart somehow, evidently different from these other scoundrels.
  1. Why must we forever see him there, strung up between two evildoers? What is the meaning of this?
- B. Well, it’s obvious isn’t it? For, though Jesus truly is set apart and holy and his life and death are unlike anything the world has ever known, at the same time, he’s come to be among us, right in the middle of the mess.
  1. As Isaiah had prophesied in [Isa. 53:12](#) (a verse which Jesus himself had earlier referenced [[Luke 22:37](#)]): This coming Suffering Servant of God will be “[numbered with the transgressors . . .](#)”
- C. So, again, why are the gospel writers so jealous that we see this? Because this is why he’s come! To die among sinners, to die for sinners, “[to give his life as a ransom for many](#)” ([Matt. 20:28](#)).

## A Couple Implications

- A. Couple of implications for us . . .
- B. First, the next time you think that God’s grace has run out on you; the next time you question whether the Father and Son would associate themselves with you; the next time you feel overwhelmed with the twin tidal waves of guilt and shame and would rather run from God than towards him; the next time you hear the devil whisper: “You don’t belong here, you’ve overstayed and over-sinned your welcome” . . .
  1. . . . walk again up Calvary’s hill and see your Savior there crucified between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left, and say to your soul and to the devil: “Next to Jesus is right where I belong! He doesn’t surround himself with the elite, the clean, the best among us. He surrounds himself with the least and the lowest. My sin doesn’t keep him from me. My sin is what draws him towards me. He’s come to be numbered with the transgressors among whom I am chief. He’s not embarrassed to be associated with me. He loves me and is always ready to forgive and receive me.”
- C. And second, the next time you finding yourself wanting to disassociate yourself from someone because they crimp your style, get on your nerves, step on your toes, make you uncomfortable . . .

1. . . . walk again up Calvary's hill and see your Savior there crucified between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left, and remember we may be prone to hang with those who add something to us, but Jesus literally hangs with those who only take . . . and that, of course, includes you and me.
  - a. His whole life was one extravagant outpouring. How about yours? How about mine?

## (2) Unexpected Prayers

### Last Breaths and Last Words

- A. For this, look again at the first part of [v. 34](#). Remember, Jesus is here near the very end of his strength. His whole body at this point likely felt like one enveloping wound.
  1. And, beyond this, we know that one of the worst parts of being crucified was how you'd struggle to breathe as you hung there. With arms outstretched and the weight of your body pulling down, it would lift up your rib cage and force you into an almost perpetual state of inhalation. You would suffocate in the air.
- B. So Jesus has no strength and no breath, and yet he still has something he desperately wants to say. What's it going to be?
  1. If this were you, what it be?
  2. Well, amazingly, for Jesus, it's a prayer, but not for himself, rather for his enemies.
- C. Let me put it as pointedly as I can: Jesus uses the last bit of oxygen he has in his lungs to pray in love for the very ones who have taken that oxygen from him: "[And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'](#)"
  1. Let's break this into two parts and consider it that way . . .

### Part #1: "Father, Forgive Them . . ."

#### "Unexpected" in View of Human Nature

- A. "[Father, forgive them . . .](#)" This, in particular, I say, is unexpected. Why?
  1. Well, when you considered what your own last words in this instance would be, what was your conclusion? I don't imagine it involved anything like this.
    - a. At best it would be a prayer for ourself, right? "God help me!"
    - b. At worst, we'd have some choice things to say to those who were inflicting such torture upon us.

- i. But who among us thinks they would honestly be praying with empathy and pure longing for God to have mercy on your enemies—forgive them, bless them! It’s unexpected.
- B. And it’s important for us to see. We may have been prone to this point to question Jesus’ heart a bit.
  - 1. You remember back when he was being questioned and things and he was silent, he didn’t have anything to say. We might have thought: “Ah, you see, he’s giving the silent treatment. He’s finally had enough. He’s hardened his heart and has no mercy left.”
    - a. And we may go off thinking ourselves justified for treating people we don’t much care for in the same way.
  - 2. Or last week, in [vv. 28-31](#) just above this, we saw a different approach from our Savior, that could likewise have been misunderstood as hardness. Here he does speak but it seems a threat of sorts—talking about crying for yourselves because judgment is coming. It could sound like a threat. Here instead of the more passive aggression we saw in the silent treatment earlier, now we have a more active aggression.
    - a. And, again, some of us may come away thinking, “Okay, if Jesus can talk that way in anger when wronged, well so can I.”
  - 3. And if we’ve erred in either of these directions to this point, well the simple prayer we have before us at once sets us aright.
    - a. Jesus’ heart is as soft and warm as it’s ever been. He is not harboring bitterness, nor is he hucking grenades. He is praying.
- C. And this is so important for us to remember when we come to face our own points of conflict with others.
  - 1. There may be times where we need to keep quiet and there may be times where we need to speak up—but there is a never time where we are permitted to harden our hearts towards a person, nor is there a time where we stop praying in love for them.
    - a. We may take different courses of action on the surface, as the Spirit and wisdom guide, but the stuff underground is all the same: a heart full of love, a mouth full of prayer.

### “Unexpected” in View of the Old Testament

- A. Now, those of us that know our Bibles may find this prayer of Jesus a bit unexpected for other reasons as well. You see, throughout the Old Testament there seems to be a different sort of ethic being promoted, at least on the surface.
  - 1. So we have examples like [Isa. 2:9](#), where the prophet cries out to the Lord against the wicked there in Jerusalem of his day: “[D]o not forgive them!”

2. Or Jer. 15:15, where the prophet here complains: “O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors.” Don’t forgive them. Punish them!
  3. Or Ps. 69:27-28, where David prays not for his persecutors but against them: “<sup>27</sup> Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. <sup>28</sup> Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.”
- B. So what are we to make of this? Are the two Testaments at odds with one another or is there some fundamental unity that’s not at first very obvious? I think there is.
1. For one thing, we know that in the Old Testament, while we see these prayers for vengeance and things, we also see the injunctions to pray for our enemies.
    - a. So Jer. 29:7, where God, speaking to the exiles there in Babylon says: “[S]eek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf.”
  2. And, likewise, we know that in the New Testament, while we see these prayers for our enemies and things, we also see the curses and the crying out for vengeance!
    - a. So Ps. 69 is actually cited in Acts 1:20 with reference to Judas.
    - b. And, of course, in Revelation we have those martyrs under the altar in heaven, crying out for justice: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). They’re not rebuked: “That’s an Old Testament sentiment. Get out of here with that!” No, they’re comforted and told to hang on in faith as God works out his sovereign plan.
- C. So it’s not as simple as it would at first appear. The Old Testament is not all cursing and vengeance and the New Testament is not all forgiveness and mercy. The two run alongside each other and interweave as it were, and both strands really find their unity, their fulfillment, in Christ.
1. You see, the prayer for vengeance and justice, is legitimate.
    - a. The Bible nowhere in Old or New Testaments, permits personal antipathy or personal revenge, but it does say, God will make all the wrong right. And it’s okay, it’s even good and important to long for that.
      - i. In many ways, when you go back and actually read what’s being said, the concern is ultimately for God’s glory—God I trust in you, don’t let your children suffer such things at the hands of those who hate you, don’t let evil succeed, exalt your Name, keep your word and your promise. That sort of thing.
  2. And, again, likewise, the prayer for forgiveness and mercy in the Old and New Testaments is, of course, a good thing.
    - a. But it is never about sweeping things under the rug or asking God to just “chill out a bit” and relax his standards of holiness or something.

- i. No, the concern for forgiveness always runs alongside the concern for justice.
  - 3. But that's the confusing part, isn't it? How do they hold together?
    - a. That's what Paul is wrestling with in [Rom. 3](#) when he's asking the question: how can God maintain his justice while also justifying the ungodly sinner like me?
      - i. God doesn't just relax his standards. He doesn't choose, should I be just or should I be merciful? He is both at the same time. And Paul finds his answer to the riddle in the cross of Christ: "<sup>25</sup> God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (vv. 25–26).
- D. Here is how Christ can cry out from the cross: "[Father, forgive them . . .](#)"
- 1. He is not asking God to refrain from cursing, to refrain from taking vengeance, to refrain from upholding justice. Oh no!
  - 2. He is only saying: "Let whatever justice demands from them, be demanded from me."
    - a. This is why that verse I just referenced from [Isa. 53](#), goes on to add a bit more to the description of this Suffering Servant's ministry: "[\[H\]e poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors](#)" (v. 12).
      - i. Here Jesus is "[making intercession for the transgressors,](#)" for his enemies . . . for you and I. And he can do that because he's bearing their sins. "[Father, forgive them . . .](#)"
- E. So I think it's okay for us to pray on both sides of the issue, keeping them together.
- 1. On the one hand, we cry out for God to make the wrong done to us right and to restore justice and uphold his word and promise—he is a strong tower, we can run in and find protection.
  - 2. And on the other hand, we ask that our enemies come to justice not by way of wrath or hell (though we can be sure God will go there if they remain unrepentant) but by way of the cross, where they too can be forgiven and changed from the inside out.
    - a. We remember, I was once God's enemy, and he forgave me in Christ. How can I then desire to withhold such a thing from my enemies? I can't, I won't!

## Application to Our Culture

- A. You know, there's one last thing I'd like to say on this with particular application to our culture. We live in a culture entrapped in a paradox right now it seems to me.
  - 1. We are as passionate for justice as we are against judgment. Think about this.
    - a. Being for justice says this is wrong and we need to make it right.
    - b. But being against judgment says how could you ever be so arrogant as to call anyone wrong?
      - i. So here in America right now, somehow we want justice without judgment. Or to put it another way: we want heaven (where all is made right) without hell (where wrong is done away with).
- B. But the two are not at odds. The one requires the other. That's the paradox.
  - 1. People in our culture say hell sounds so horrible, and it is. They say they can't imagine such a thing, and they won't.
  - 2. And yet they then hit the streets speaking out against injustice and calling for someone to make it right.
  - 3. They say how can we Christians be so pig-headed as to say such and such a thing is sin. How self-righteous. How unloving!
  - 4. And then they hit the streets crying out against the evil that they see.
- C. You see? The two contradict and don't hold. The modern mind is entrapped in a paradox. They want to have their cake and eat it too.
  - 1. But only Jesus can hold the two together. Truth and love. Justice and mercy. "Father, forgive them . . ." Here at the cross is what every human heart is truly longing for!

## Part #2: "... for They Know Not What They Do."

- A. But Jesus goes on and grounds his request in a somewhat peculiar statement: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
  - 1. Now, I've not left myself much time to really dive deep into this one. But let me at least say a few things . . .
- B. For one, the question that immediately thrusts itself upon us is: In what sense do these guys not know what they are doing?
  - 1. They know that bearing false witness is wrong, certainly they know that jealousy and covetousness and greed and murder are wrong. Certainly they know that they are in these moments engaged in some shady business. The whole lot of them, Jew and Gentile here. They know what they are doing, don't they?
    - a. So in what sense do they not know?

- C. Well, In later statements similarly made about the ignorance of those who killed Jesus (cf. [Acts 3:17; 13:27; 1 Cor. 2:8](#)), it seems this is where the logic leads: while they certainly knew something of the evil which they were perpetrating here, they did not know the full extent of it.
  - 1. They didn't realize that they were in fact denying the Holy and Righteous One, crucifying the Lord of glory, killing the Author of Life. They didn't know they were literally killing God, as it were, in these moments.
- D. And I find it stunning, that Jesus, even in light of all they did know and were sinning against, he is still trying to grab at some last shred of a possibility that they aren't fully hardened yet and could still find mercy. I mean, these guys were terribly wicked. "Ah," Jesus says, "but they're not yet totally wicked. There's hope!"
  - 1. It's like you're looking at a lump of clay that's been left out in the sun by mistake and when you go to investigate in hopes that you can salvage something, you see, the great majority of it all is hard and crusty . . . but then you discover that the little bit that had been facedown against the ground, it's still soft: "We can work with that!" That's the idea.
    - a. It speaks eloquently I think of God's passion to forgive. Here in [Luke 23](#) we have a particular illustration of that more general principle he stated back in [Ezek. 33:11](#): "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live."
      - i. "It's no question which I prefer, and whenever there is even a chance of grace, that's what lights up my heart. I'm still hoping, praying, dying for these hardened enemies of mine."

### (3) Undressed Fulfillments

#### Naked and Ashamed

- A. With this third heading I'm simply thinking of what we see happening there in the last part of [v. 34](#): "And they cast lots to divide his garments." This is a profoundly tragic and yet deeply encouraging scene when we really take in what's going on here.
- B. It was the prerogative of Roman soldiers to claim ownership of whatever was left of the criminal's goods. And so here they are casting lots for Jesus' clothing.
  - 1. What we need to realize is that Jesus quite likely was left at the end of all this hanging naked there on the cross.
    - a. We don't ever present it this way in our pictures and things because it's too crude and disturbing, and so we clean it up a bit. But the cross is disturbing, it is devastating. And we can't turn away from it. You understand?
    - i. Jesus, the one through whom the world was created ([Heb. 1:2](#)), is thrust out of this world with nothing—utterly naked and exposed.



(1) Which is why one commentator refers to what's happening here as "the final humiliation" of our Lord. This is as low as you can go.

C. There's this sort of irony in the fact that lots are used.

1. In the OT, as you may be aware, lots were used by the Jews to determine God's will in various situations. They were used as a way of honoring God.
2. But, here, they are used by these Roman soldiers as a way of stripping him, as a way of undressing him, as a way of exposing and shaming him.

a. And yet, and here's the deepest layer to the irony: in all of this, they are still, in a mysterious twist of providence, truly fulfilling the will of God.

i. What the author of Proverbs said is holding true, whether these men cared to consider it or not: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov. 16:33).

D. This is what John, in his account of this, brings out with particular force: " <sup>23</sup> When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, <sup>24</sup> so they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.' This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (John 19:23–24).

1. John is referring to Ps. 22:18—where David is speaking of a righteous one suffering at the hands of wicked men, and it's all this prophetic pointer to this very moment at Calvary.

a. So John is saying: "Does it look bleak here and tragic? Yes, it looks like man's will not God's is reigning supreme. But, have no doubt, in it all God is on the move for good. He's fulfilling what he's promised."

i. As Peter would soon after say, rebuking the Jews: "[T]his Jesus . . . [whom] you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men . . . [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

(1) Even in such a horrendous state of affairs, God is working to fulfill what he's been after all along. This is why I said at the front, things are getting darker at the very same moment that they are getting brighter!

E. Truly, God is working out on the cross here the very answer to Jesus' prayer uttered just moments before.

1. How shall the enemies of Christ be forgiven? Well, that is what we come to now. He shall be crushed in their place.

- a. So Chris Wright says: “Jesus prayed that they should be forgiven. And Jesus died so that they could be forgiven.”
  - b. And another commentator notes: “The prayer is answered by his death . . . .”
- F. Do you remember when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden and suddenly they realized that they were naked and they were ashamed and they hid from God. What did God do?
  - 1. Well, they deserved to die for their rebellion, to face his wrath, but what did he do?
  - 2. He killed an animal and covered their nakedness.
- G. And that was just a picture and preparation for what he’s doing here.
  - 1. We should be naked and ashamed and dead. But instead we’re covered and forgiven and loved.
  - 2. Jesus should be clothed in regal robes and celebrated. But instead he’s naked and ashamed, carrying our sin and guilt, and exposed, not just before the eyes of men, but before the fiery gaze of God.
- H. This is how we get covered. This is how we get forgiven. This is how Jesus’ prayers for his enemies, for you and I, are answered.
  - 1. So come!