

This morning is the second in a series of messages looking at the last words of Jesus on the cross. These words have famously been called, “the seven last words of Christ,” though they are not literally seven words, but seven statements. If you missed the start last Sunday, then I encourage you to check out the church website where Sermon audio and text are available. Or if you're more old-school, then print copies are also available in the lobby. Today, we see that Jesus gives an assurance of being with him in paradise.

As Luke continues to narrate what happened at Jesus’ death, he tells us that a number of people were mocking and making fun of Jesus as they watched him die – Roman soldiers, rulers of some sort...and of course a lot of other people as well. A sign is put up on the cross above him that is intended to mock him as well. **Even one of the criminals, who is on his own cross, joins in with his own insults.** He is “hurling” them at Jesus, indicating there were more than just the couple that Luke records for us. This reminds me of a child antagonizing a sibling by mocking them, or doing stuff just to bug the other child. Probably many of you have seen it in your own children or grandchildren where one works to get under the skin of another and annoy them. Because our kids are perfect saints, we never have that in our home. 😊 Ok...we do have it in our home too: someone will make fun of someone else, annoy a kid by singing, beat-boxing, or copycatting everything they say, or just following them all over the house. Those are the things that happen in our house, and my kids keep asking me to stop doing them. 😊 And when someone does this, the purpose is to try to get under the skin of the other kid.

That's kind of what's happening here. He's an annoying, disrespectful chatterbox – at least as much as he was able while nailed to a cross. Doesn't the fact that he treated Jesus this way just bug you? Don't we just want to reach our hands back in time and wring the guy's neck? He is so full of arrogance and disrespect of Jesus. No God-fearing person would deliberately speak those words to the Messiah! Then, he has the gall to say, “Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself *and us!*” After his sarcasm, raking of Jesus over the coals, questioning his identity, and so forth, he wants Jesus to save him!

How ironic is that?!? And if you're like me, you find yourself saying, "I can't believe that this guy would have the nerve to do that!" **And then I realize that I have oftentimes done the same thing.** I've mistreated Jesus. I've questioned Jesus. I've wondered at times if Jesus really knows what's going on. I've offered my advice, suggesting that maybe he needs a calendar so he can schedule things better, that maybe he needs Microsoft Outlook to keep track of all of the "things to do" on his list...I've thought that His Word should talk more about grace and easy living, and leave more room for materialism and idols like wealth and power...and that he should talk less about our sin, dying to ourselves, carrying our cross and following him. I've wanted to exercise my free will to do things that I know weren't right...and then I have the gall to say, "But save me, Jesus. Deliver me out of this circumstance and from these consequences." And so I realize that I'm not as different from this first guy as I'd like to think that I am. Maybe you've had that same realization. (...About yourself, not me. ☺)

Fortunately, like the parent who finally steps in when one sibling is being obnoxious toward another and says, "Enough!" the other criminal does exactly that. He puts the first guy in his place. Now here's the guy that we'd all like to identify with – other than the part about being a criminal and getting crucified for it, I suppose. But, he stands up for Jesus, humbly acknowledges that the two criminals deserve what they're getting, and then makes a request to Jesus that shows a budding faith that maybe even surprised himself when we read, **"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'" (Luke 23:42).**

You kind of get the feeling that he had heard of Jesus before, which wouldn't be surprising, of course. Maybe he'd been in the crowds at some teaching moment of Jesus'. Maybe he knew some people who had been impacted by Jesus' teaching or a miracle he performed. Maybe some of his shady friends were some of the people Jesus hung out with, and they told him about this holy man named Jesus, this rabbi, who welcomed them in his presence, who even though he didn't condone the sin in their lives, he gave them dignity and value...who would even sit down for dinner with them and look them in the eye and have a real conversation with them. Maybe those seeds had been

planted in him. Or maybe this is the first he's ever heard of Jesus, and he was moved by Jesus' prayer just shortly before this, when he asked his Heavenly Father to forgive these very people who are crucifying and mocking him.

Whatever it was, this criminal suddenly reaches out to Jesus in what seems to be a genuine step of faith with this statement. Certainly, *Jesus* responds like it is a genuine step of faith, and Luke *presents* it that way, especially in contrast to the crowd and the other criminal. So Jesus then responds with one of the most famous statements that Jesus ever made when we read: **He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43).** Wow! What a promise! What an assurance! Here's a guy who has done absolutely nothing in his life to deserve a promise like that from Jesus, and yet Jesus welcomes him with open arms – quite literally – as he hangs on the cross.

Now, the skeptic would say, “Yeah, but Jesus died a few hours later. What kind of a promise was that? He could have promised him a million dollars, or a spot on the Israeli bobsled team, or to be crowned the next winner on 'Dancing With The Stars'...and it wouldn't have mattered.” But that presumes two things: that the death of Jesus on the cross was unexpected by Jesus and not a part of the divine plan; and that Jesus' death had the final say.

First of all, Jesus is clearly *not* surprised by this situation. In his humanity he may not have *wanted* to do it – in fact, we see that in the Garden of Gethsemane a bit earlier when he prays “Father take this cup from me” – but he's faithful to the plan regardless: he also prays right after that, “Yet your will be done.” And so he's not surprised by his death. **Jesus understands his death as consistent with the divine plan.** That's why he prays a short while earlier, “Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” It's why Jesus said no one takes his life from him but he lays it down of his own accord. And it's why he can offer paradise to this man even as he hangs on the cross. He can make this statement that this man will be with him in paradise, rather than, “Well, I thought I was the Messiah, but I guess I was wrong...so God's best to you. Good luck!” With all sincerity, he promises this man paradise because he sees his death as part of the divine plan.

Secondly, and Jesus spoke of this, and we have the benefit of being on the

other side of this event in history, we know that: **The grave couldn't hold him.** Death was not the final note played in the symphony. The cross of Christ wasn't the resolved chord that draws things to an end; it wasn't the last chapter of the book or the final buzzer of the game – there's an overtime period. The resurrection shows us that Jesus can make this promise to the criminal and mean it with all sincerity.

There are three things I want to highlight for us that come out of this passage and out of some of these observations we've just looked at. **First, Jesus makes it clear that entering into "paradise" as Jesus calls it here – which is clearly another way of speaking of "heaven" and the eternal presence of God – happens immediately upon death.** For this man, that means "today" he will be in paradise. The subject of when people go to heaven in relationship to when they die is one that's been discussed for a long time. Now, for him this is a great assurance, especially considering the state of his life right there. I mean, he's not that far away from death, and this assurance of going to paradise "today" is a real good one.

It reminds me of the story about two 90-year old guys, Leo and Frank, had been friends all of their lives. When it was clear that Leo was dying, Frank visited him every day. One day Frank said, 'Leo, we both loved playing baseball and softball all our lives, playing all through High School and beyond. Please do me one favor: when you get to Heaven, somehow you must let me know if there's softball there.' Leo looked up at Frank from his deathbed and said, 'Frank you've been my best friend for many years. If it's at all possible, I'll do this favor for you.' Shortly after that, Leo passed away.

A few nights later, Frank was awakened from a sound sleep by a blinding flash of white light and a voice calling out to him, 'Frank... Frank' 'Who is it?' asked Frank sitting up suddenly. 'Who is it?' 'It's me, Leo' 'You're not Leo, Leo just died.' 'I'm telling you, it's me, Leo' insisted the voice. 'Leo! Where are you?' 'In Heaven,' replied Leo. 'I have some really good news and a little bad news.' 'Tell me the good news first,' said Frank.

'The good news,' Leo said, 'is that there's softball in Heaven. Better yet all of our old buddies who died before us are here, too. Better than that, we're all

young again. Better still, it's always springtime, and it never rains or snows. And best of all, we can play softball all we want, and we never get tired.'

'That's fantastic,' said Frank 'It's beyond my wildest dreams! So what's the bad news?' Leo said, 'You're pitching on Tuesday.' So Jesus gives this assurance that when we trust in Jesus, we will be in paradise with him in the blink of an eye when we die. It may not be today or tomorrow or Tuesday for us...but when we breathe our last and we've put our trust in Jesus, we go to be with Him in paradise right away.

The second thing that's really good news here is that: **Second, even with faith the size of a mustard seed – which Jesus says is enough faith to move mountains – even with that amount of faith, Jesus gives the assurance of being in paradise with him.** You don't have to have perfect theology, or memorize the Bible, or never have any questions about faith. It's not that we shouldn't become more theologically educated or that we shouldn't memorize Scripture, or seek answers to our questions. These are all good things. Just this week I had a really fascinating and engaging theological conversation. I really had to have my brain engaged and I really enjoyed the dialogue. But if we wait for our theology or our faith or the answers to all of our questions to come to some state of perfection before we say “yes” to Jesus and follow him, the ship is going to set sail without us. The interesting thing is that in some ways, the more we know, the less faith it takes. Faith the size of a mustard seed sounds like a faith that doesn't really know or understand a lot. But once we know and understand a lot, is our faith bigger, or is it smaller? I'll let you wrestle with that one on your own.

But...maybe it's more accurate to say this guy had “knowledge the size of a mustard seed, and faith the size of Mount Rainier.” The point is, unless there's a theological background to this guy that we just wouldn't expect from a criminal, he's a great example of this truth about faith and understanding. *Faith comes first, and understanding comes second.* And we see it with other people throughout Jesus' ministry all the time. The only understanding we really need is to understand our need for a savior, and that we cannot save ourselves. From there, we can step out in faith and trust

Jesus, and let other theological and Scriptural understanding flow out of that.

The third thing we learn here is that: **Third, in making this offer of paradise with him, Jesus demonstrates that he isn't afraid of the yucky and dark parts of our lives.** You can't scare Jesus away with your past. Or your present or your future, for that matter. We see that right here in these verses. These two criminals had a lot in common – both in their past and in their present. Both were criminals. Presumably, both had gone through the court process. Both were convicted. Both were nailed to crosses – right next to Jesus. **Even their sin, and their conviction, and their wrong living could not keep Jesus away from them.** In fact, it was their lives of sinful criminal behavior that brought them into the very presence of Jesus Christ. Think about that! We see this with Jesus all the time: the woman at the well who's sinful past Jesus knew all about and he still extended her grace; The demon-possessed man whom Jesus healed; The woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil at a dinner party and people couldn't believe Jesus let her do that because of her reputation in town; the dinner that Jesus had with Levi, the tax-collector who got wealthy by cheating people out of their money. None of these people, and there are many others, were pushed away by Jesus. In fact, Jesus often sought them out. And, because of their great sin, they recognized their need for redemption and healing and being freed from that stuff, and he recognized their need for a great savior, and he offers himself to them.

And it's the same thing here. We don't need to know the details of their crimes to make some true statements about this: it was their sin...their immorality...their un-neighborliness...their lies...their not "doing unto others as you would have them do to you" ...their unrighteousness...their waywardness from God that brought them into this place on the a hill called Calvary, outside Jerusalem, where they were nailed to their own crosses *on either side of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.* **Isn't it terribly ironic that these two guys led lives were anything but Godly, and they're right next to Jesus in their dying hours?** And this is true for each of us as well. No matter what your life looks like – holy or hellatious – by His Spirit and by his Word, Jesus is next to you, too. He isn't afraid of our sin, and our brokenness. He's not afraid of the pain we've caused others or the pain that others have caused us. He's not afraid of our habits and our hang-ups; he's

not afraid of grief and loss. And, he wants to free you from all that. He wants to heal you and redeem you and bring you into a right relationship with your heavenly father and welcome you into paradise. That's why he died on the cross.

And so the promise that he made to that undeserving criminal he makes to you and to me today as well. **Jesus is here among us just as he was there between the criminals, and he offers to you and me the promise of paradise, of eternity spent with him.** There is incredible assurance in that promise. I pray you'll receive that promise into your life today if you haven't before. If you do, it doesn't mean you're going to get scheduled to pitch in a heavenly baseball game this Tuesday (so don't let that earlier story scare you off!). But you never know when your time will come, right? It's like the ventriloquist I once saw having a conversation with his puppet. The puppet had a fear of flying, because of the low probability of surviving a crash. The ventriloquist said, "Hey, if it's not your time, it's not your time, and God will get you safely where you need to go." When I heard that, I thought "Thank you. I needed to hear that." But then the puppet responded, "Yeah, but what if it's time to go for the guy sitting next to me?"

You never know when it's your time. But when we put our trust in Jesus it means that whenever that day does come, we too will have the assurance that we will be with Jesus in paradise. So these words of Jesus' give us incredible hope, peace, joy, and more for today, and all of our tomorrows – and I pray you have that assurance in your life. Let's Pray...Amen.