

Draw Near: The Two Thieves

Luke 23:32-33, 39-43

INTRODUCTION

You are known by the company you keep.

According to my count while doing a Google search, at least two dozen people are credited with being the first person to say this, so I don't know who to credit for it tonight. All I know for certain is that it pre-dates my parents, but they quoted it to my brother and me a lot. You are known by the company you keep.

Your high school was probably like mine. There were groups – not official groups, but groups nonetheless – and we all knew who was in them. And who was not.

- The jocks: those male athletes who swaggered through the halls, and combed their hair a lot. It's ironic that most of them don't have hair any more.
- The FFA kids: They were easy to spot. They always had their blue corduroy jackets on, even when it was hot outside.
- The band kids: They all clustered in a corner of the cafeteria.
- The cheerleaders:
- The druggies:
- The geeks:

I was never quite sure where I fit in, but I wasn't a jock, or in the band. I didn't cheer or do FFA. And I didn't do drugs. That didn't leave many options, did it?

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The Romans were sending a clear statement about Jesus on that day He was crucified. Even though Pontius Pilate did not really believe Jesus was guilty of anything, he nonetheless had to placate the Jews. So he had Jesus crucified between two men ... men described by our text as criminals:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. (Luke 23:32)

Other translations call them thieves or bandits. But no matter how you label them ...

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We don't know for sure what they did, but those in authority determined they were worthy of the death penalty, and so they were crucified, one on the left of Jesus, one on the right.

They crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. (Luke 23:33)

Just a few weeks prior to this event two of Jesus' disciples came to Him and requested those exact spots. It happened right after Jesus told them about His coming death. Remember?

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. (Mark 10:35-38)

I wonder if Jesus had this crucifixion in His mind when Zebedee's boys made their request. Perhaps it was with a bit of a knowing smile that He told them "You don't know what you are asking."

In another teaching about that same time, Jesus talked again about His left side and His right side. See if this sounds familiar:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Matthew 25:31-33)

The sheep were those who turned their hearts to Christ; the goats were those who did not.

I don't know if either story is related to the Gospel writer's mention of the "right and left" position of the criminals, but it seems to fit. One man did profess faith. One did not.

The Bible doesn't tell us their names, but around the fourth century church tradition assigned names to them. The one who hurled insults was given the name "Gestas." Clearly his heart was hard toward the things of God. Even in the presence of the Savior and even on his death bed (so to speak), he refused to profess faith.

- He knew who Jesus was.

"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39)

- He wanted saved. But the kind of salvation he wanted was not the salvation Jesus came to offer. There was no repentance there. Had Jesus saved him like he wanted to be saved, he would likely have continued his criminal ways and ended up back on a cross in the future.
- The text doesn't tell us, but I'm guessing he was the thief on the left, the side of the goats.

Church tradition calls the other thief Dismas, and it has developed a legend about him. It's a great story, even though it is probably not true. The legend says:

Dismas was sort of a Judean Robin Hood who robbed the rich to give to the poor. One day when Jesus was not quite two years old Mary, Joseph and Jesus had to flee to Egypt to escape the murderous decree of King Herod. Remember that part of the story?

On their way, they were attacked by a band of robbers. The captain of that band was Dismas. According to church tradition, Dismas looked at the beautiful Christ child and could not bring himself to harm this Holy Family, so he set them free, unharmed and without robbing them. As he did, he spoke these words to the infant Jesus:

“O most blessed of children, if ever there comes a time for having mercy on me, I pray then remember me and forget not this hour.”

And, tradition says, that robber who saved Jesus as a toddler did indeed meet Jesus again at Calvary, and this time Jesus saved him.

The stories of these thieves remind us of three truths:

#1: THERE IS A TIME OF SEPARATION

A time when the sheep will be separated from the goats. A time when it will be obvious who is in and who is out. We don't know when that time will be, but it hasn't happened yet. Or at least not completely.

The Scriptures teach that each believer can be assured of his/her salvation. 1 John 5, for example, makes it very clear that ...

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:11-13)

I know whether God considers me to be a sheep or a goat. And you can too.

But it gets confusing when a person tries to survey the entire landscape of Christianity. Is everyone who claims to be a Christian *really* a Christian?

In Matthew 13 Jesus told a parable about a field of wheat that also had weeds growing in it. The problem wasn't noticed at first because in the early stages of growth the two plants looked a lot alike. But how do you respond when it becomes clear that there is non-wheat among the wheat?

- You can't pull the weeds while the wheat is still growing.

... because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. (Matthew 13:30)

- You have to wait until it is harvest time.

Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn. (Matthew 13:30)

Eventually it will be sorted out.

#2: EVERYONE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY

Capital One credit card has a commercial in which two kids are picking sides for a game of basketball. The first captain choose former basketball star Charles Barkley for her team.

That's not the way eternity works. God and the devil are not alternating turns, picking who will be sheep and who will be goats. Here on Calvary, Jesus engaged in conversation with both thieves. Both had the same opportunity to repent. Both had the same opportunity to be with Jesus in paradise.

God would be delighted if everyone was on the sheep side when the time of separation occurs. He said as much:

Instead (God) is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

#3: IT IS NEVER TOO LATE

These thieves were hours away from dying. Maybe less. But there was still time on the clock.

Jeff Stratton is a pastor in Evansville, Indiana. A few years ago he was called to visit a 93 year-old man who had terminal cancer. His name was Adolph Allen and he had been a hard-living, hard-drinking, union ironworker for most of his life. Two minutes into their first conversation, Adolph looked at Jeff and asked, "Is it fair for someone to live their whole life one way and then at the end of their life to ask God to take them to heaven?"

After thinking for a minute, Jeff said, "No, Adolph it's not fair. But luckily for you and me, God is not fair."

Jeff shared the plan of salvation with him and this 93-year-old man bowed his head and asked Jesus to come into his heart.

Four weeks later Jeff preached Adolph's funeral and he talked about how some football games come down to a final play. The team that's behind might have been outplayed the whole game, but on this last play the quarterback fades back and

heaves a Hail-Mary pass into the end zone as time expires. The ball might be batted around but if an offensive receiver catches it, the game is over, and they win. Jeff said, "That's what happened with Adolph. The devil was in the lead for most of his life, but the final score was Jesus 1 and the devil 0!"

APPLICATION

Yogi Berra once said "It ain't over til it's over."

That might be bad English, but it's good theology.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Never give up hope. Keep praying. And draw near to the cross.

Amen.