

West Valley Presbyterian Church
Jesus, Remember Me
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What do you see when you look at this picture – a young girl or an old womans face?



What about this one? What do you see? A musician or a girls face?



What you see in both of these pictures depends upon whether you are looking at the black or the white.
Isn't it something that someone can look at the exact same picture and see something completely different?

This different reaction to *the very same thing* is happening in our text this morning.

Scripture tells us that Jesus was crucified between two thieves.

There was so much that both of them were looking at that day, that was exactly the same for both of them.

- 1.They were both condemned to die
- 2.They were both being crucified on the same day, at the same time, for the same offense on the same hill...
- 3.Both of them had Jesus hanging right in between them

But their reactions to Jesus were completely different

They saw the situation they were in that day from completely different perspectives

They attributed different meaning and had completely different reactions to the same Lord who was right next to both of them

One thief rails at Jesus...

He is angry at circumstances, and sneers at the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah

Obviously things hadn't gone his way, and he is mad about it.

The first thief reacts with cynicism.

“If you are the Son of God get us down from here! He demands...Do something! Save yourself and us!”

He jeers, and taunts...and joins in the mockery of the crowd below him
Sometimes people who have suffered a lot blame God.

They curse him. You aren't real! These people say. If you were real you'd do something! And they grow hard and cynical like this thief. They may even be people who say they are Christians, but because of their plight in life, because they are bitter, they have never really asked God in. They might say “save me”, just like this thief, but they don't really come to God with a repentant open heart.

The other thief, also a condemned man, with the **exact same circumstances,**

Next to the exact same Jesus

Has a completely different reaction,

He too is a bandit, a thief, a criminal

He like the other guy is considered to be the lowest of the low

Crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals

And yet this thief **is the one and only person in any of the accounts of the crucifixion anywhere in Scripture, who actually defends Jesus – speaks up for him – counters the injustice**

He looks over and sees Jesus and he responds with faith! He stands up for what is right

Just like some people today, who are experiencing suffering and might have the exact same circumstances as someone who pushes God away...instead they move toward God. And I am here today to tell you...moving toward God despite your mistakes of the past, despite what has happened to you, despite not understanding your circumstances whatever they may be...is the way to go...

Now, I don't know what causes the second thief to turn towards Jesus

Maybe he'd been studying Jesus for a time.

Maybe he is thinking something like:

If Jesus were insane, they would ignore Him... And if He had no followers, they wouldn't care about killing Him. If He was nothing to fear – why crucify Him? You only kill a king if he has a kingdom. Could this be the Son of God?

God touches this criminal.

Of all people to speak *for* Jesus...its him!

Matthew and Mark use the word **lestai** to describe these thieves; that word means *armed robbers*.

Essentially lestai are the kinds of criminals who would use violence to take what they wanted for themselves.

And ironically now, as both are crucified, their lives are being violently being taken from them. It seems a fitting punishment.

But for some reason, the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon this second thief.

He stands up for Jesus; he says to the other thief **“Don’t you fear God? We deserve the punishment we are getting, but this man has done nothing wrong.”**

Maybe he had heard Jesus say “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” from the cross...and maybe he was moved by those words

Or maybe he knew of someone who had been healed by Jesus’ touch – or was there when Jesus fed the hungry

Maybe he had heard Jesus speak once, or twice, and the words of this man had stayed with him and burned in his heart the next time he took something by force that wasn’t his own – stole something

Maybe the Holy Spirit just simply got ahold of his heart that day and out came the words of someone who was contrite, and desperate and knew he needed help–

“Jesus,” the thief gasps out. “Jesus remember me...when you come into your kingdom.”

Remember is a loaded word

In scripture **it meant help me...deliver me**

In the Old Testament when God remembered people, he delivered them

In Genesis 8:1, God remembered Noah and saved him from the flood

In Genesis 19:29, God remembered Abraham and spared his nephew Lot from destruction

In Genesis 30:22, God remembered Rachel and opened her womb so she could have a child

In Exodus 2:24, God remembered his covenant with Abraham and delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

When the thief on the cross says, **“Jesus, remember me, he is saying... Deliver me from the place of the dead. Deliver me from the prison I am destined for.”**

Notice...both thieves ask Jesus to save them...again they are so similar in so many ways

The one thing that distinguishes them is that one thief approaches Jesus from a place of arrogance and unbelief declaring with sarcasm **“What’s**

wrong with you? If you are the son of God, Save Yourself and Us!”

He blames God for the circumstances of his life...

The other cries out for help, from a place of humility, sorrow, and tentative belief.

Hoping desperately that...*Maybe, just maybe, there is a God who loves me. Maybe just maybe there is a God who cares for the hopeless. Maybe, just maybe, there is a God who gives people another chance.*

Jesus remember me. Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Sorrow, suffering, mistakes, pain, sin...pulls some away from God – pushes others toward God. I want encourage you today – if you’ve been hardened toward God because of something that has happened to you, try looking again at the cross. And try letting Him in instead of distancing yourself...

Because Jesus’ response to the second thief that did let him in is absolutely phenomenal...one of the last words of Jesus on the cross was to a thief... Jesus said to him...

TRUE OR FALSE.... *“Well, ...If you hadn’t noticed...just want to remind you that it is kind of late in the game, don’t you think? ...*

Turning to me at the last minute is kind of a cop out...So before I can do anything for you...actually... I need to ask, ‘Do you believe in the Trinity? In the virgin birth? Do you believe that scripture is the inspired inerrant infallible Word of God? Do you ascribe to the essential tenants of the reformed faith?

TRUE OR FALSE folks?

False. None of that. The thief did not have a well developed theology. He did not understand much about God – he really had nothing ...except that he knew he needed help, and in desperation looked to Jesus to deliver him as his last hope.

And this is the unprecedented grace of the cross...*Immediately* Jesus responds to him. **“Today you will be with me in paradise.”**

No holds barred. You turn to Jesus, he is there...he is with you immediately, and he will deliver you.

There are three points I want to highlight here...

1. First off, **the word TODAY is very comforting**

It means there is no delay between our death here, and when we go to be with the Lord

There is no limbo...no grey place where we float for awhile in an eery gloom of disembodied spirits before being taken up to be with Jesus
Rather, it happens right away...as soon as we leave this place; if we know Jesus, we go directly to be with him when we die

I have stood by the bed of countless Christian people who are making the transition from this life to the next; and it is a sacred journey...on several occasions the words from their lips have been something like, "It is so beautiful"...or "do you hear that music? Its glorious" Even in one case, "I see him...I see Jesus." Friends, we go right away...That's the first thing to know beyond a shadow of a doubt. As soon as we die, we will go to be with the Lord.

2. Second, **the words "you will be with me in paradise" is a reversal of the curse/the fall that happened in the Garden of Eden**

Adam and Eve lived in a garden scripture says in Genesis, where God was with them

They walked with God in the cool of the day – because from the beginning, we have always had an "I want to be with you" God

When humanity rebelled against God, they were thrown out of the garden

There was a separation now between us and God...sin got in the way

Now Jesus is hanging there, to restore our relationship with God

To forgive our sins, so that we can experience closeness to God again

So people have often asked me, "What does the word paradise actually mean? Where is the thief going?"

The word paradise here is a transliteration of a Persian word that was used in ancient times to refer to the kings garden.

The kings garden was a place of profound beauty. This kind of a garden made for kings and the very wealthy was walled in – there might have been a wooden door to get in and out, with walkways through the garden...there was sometimes a menagerie in the garden – a sort of zoo - with different

kinds of animals in it. The garden would also have fountains, exotic flowers of bright colors, trees and shrubbery. Grape arbors and vines... When someone was honored in ancient times, they were invited into the king's garden to enjoy its richness and beauty.

Now I come from a place that is called "The Garden State" – New Jersey. It's a stupid place to live. There is no way that New Jersey is a garden state, and you know that after you've traveled for ten minutes down the New Jersey turnpike. (IMAGE OF TURNPIKE) There is something on that turnpike that smells just terrible... like melting tires, mixed with factory glue, smoke and turpentine – best way I can describe it. Not a garden state.

But then there's this other place called the Garden Island... the island of Kauai. (GARDEN IMAGE KAUAI)

As a family, it's been our favorite place for years, up there on the North Shore... and I think it's just like that king's garden must have been in certain places – . I can't believe how beautiful it is there, with the nodding hibiscus, the dark blue ocean, the thick tropical vegetation and the white smooth sandy beaches. Spending eternity in a place like that, with the people I love, with no pain, or sorrow, or hate, or sickness ever again... no anxiety or stress or hatred... sounds like a paradise to me.

Isn't that a wonderful image? Through Jesus Christ we are invited back into the garden, back into a close relationship with him, to savor and enjoy his paradise.

In essence Jesus is saying to the thief on the cross **"I will deliver you...and I have delivered you. You cry out to me, with faith as a grain of mustard seed, and you will find yourself back in the king's garden with me where you belong."**

The curse, the fall, that happened in Eden where we were cast out of the garden, has been reversed by the power of the cross.

3. Finally, Our response to Jesus Christ is critical. What side of the cross are you on?

Remember where we started? Two thieves, exact same circumstances, yet completely different responses to the same Jesus.

Yet Jesus responds, "Today you will be with me in paradise!" to only one of them. Only to the one who asked for mercy and reaches out toward Jesus – despite his wretched life and desperate circumstances, he moved toward God...not away

What side of the cross are you on today?

What is your response to Jesus?

You may have already said yes to Jesus Christ long ago, but have circumstances and heartache and your own choices caused you to keep God at arms length recently? Caused cynicism to be your companion, rather than the forgiveness and grace of Christ.

Because we are all thieves, and each one of us needs to decide how we will respond, daily to the Lord...with distance and anger...or with surrender and humility...

Now you may not think of yourself as a thief.

You may not really relate to these two criminals hanging there

I don't think of myself as a thief...

I don't think of myself that way at all.

I don't go into people's living rooms at night and steal their TV sets, most of the time.

I don't even eat a grapes off the bunch in the produce section anymore.

I used to pop grapes...but I got walloped for that by one of my kids who when they were young...we were in the grocery store (IMAGE) and I had grabbed a grape off a bunch of grapes and popped it into my mouth...and one of them with that shrill elementary school voice – so concerned with rules at that developmental stage - yelled out across the store at me :

Mom...You are stealing! You didn't pay!

Every eye in the produce section was on me at that moment, as I loudly swallowed that grape.

Despite this traumatic incident and being caught red handed, I don't think of myself as a thief. It is a kind of foreign concept. But when I ask myself:

Do I see my life as a possession that I own?

That I feel compelled to use for my own ends?

Or do I participate in life as a gift from God...and live surrendered to God's purpose and will for me?

Then it all starts to hit home...

Bc I think Jesus being crucified between two thieves is more than a coincidence

I think the two thieves are meant to represent us....our human condition
Think about it.

Thieves are people who steal what doesn't belong to them by force - lestai

Thieves are people who take what

belongs to another and then they act like it is their own.

But it never really does belong to them, does it?

And they know it.

If I don't see my life as a gift, and use my life to serve and glorify the Lord, I have stolen my life away by force- the life that God has freely given me to use for him- and taken it for myself.

And that is what causes cynicism and anger toward God to rise up in me.

My life didn't work out the way I wanted...God...whats wrong with you?

But the truth is...

My life – – was never mine to keep for me to begin with.

Never.

My life has been given to me, by God, for a purpose that is not my own

My life has been given to me in order that I might live for God's glory...

serve him, obey him, follow him...

This is what it means to give your life to Christ...you are giving your life back to the true owner of you...

If I don't do this I am in essence using what

belongs to God (the Author and giver of life) for my own ends...not God's ends.

In this way I live

what I call "my life", as a thief.

And I can be a thief of the most subtle kind. I steal credit from people, and pretend it was my idea. I

steal time that belongs to my children and give it away to things far less important.

I steal by spending money

on things I don't really need and that others could use.

I steal from relationships by pursuing my own pleasure
and ignoring the command to show sacrificial love.

I steal joy from those who have experienced success and do
a one up-man-ship game.

I steal by keeping my faith to myself, for myself, and my own spiritual high
- not sharing it with others

Underneath all of this stealing is the false assumption that my life belongs to
me and I am the focus of it all.

I steal to make myself happy, secure and content. But I am not secure; I stay
empty, and once I have stolen, I
simply want more –

So...today...

We can respond to Jesus in one of two ways

We can say in essence like the first thief, *“My life didn’t turn out the way I
wanted it too. Do something if you are God! Change my circumstances...
take me down from this cross. Its my life, and I want to keep living it my
way...so fix it up will you God?”*

Or like the second thief we can throw our lives on the mercy of Jesus and
move towards him rather than away... we can ask Jesus to save us...from
being a taker of our own lives by force...to being a giver by grace...no
matter what our circumstances, our life belongs to him.

Jesus, we can pray, Remember Me, When You come into your kingdom

Save Me from living my life for me, and not for you

Save Me from my anger at life and at you and at others because things did
not go my way; help me to surrender my cynicism anger and doubt, and
give my life back, and trust you to take care of me...

Jesus Remember Me...Save Me...Deliver Me

Let’s prayerfully and meditatively sing those words that we sang earlier –
the words of the penitent thief on the cross

Surrendering to the Lord those things that we have considered our own

That we have monopolized and tried to control – stolen away

That really belong to him

And in whatever way you need to today...give your life back to the one who
gave it to you in the beginning...

Let's sing the words – together.....and as we do be aware or see Jesus' immediate response to you...of forgiveness, deliverance and a restored relationship with him...