

"Two Crooks and a King"

John 19:18-22

Introduction

Do you have any regrets in life? A regret is a *sorrow aroused by circumstances beyond one's control or power to repair.* (Something you wish you could do over, but you can't.) It is possible to regret that you didn't pursue a better relationship with someone while they were still alive. Or to regret that you didn't spend the days of your youth pursuing things of eternal value. Or to regret some action that caused another person harm or embarrassment. And while godly sorrow is a good and right attitude, there is a difference between regret and carrying around the burden of your guilt.

Guilt is the condition a person is when he has committed an offense. We should rightly *feel guilty* when we are bearing our sin. But if we are in Christ, He has born our sins. He has taken away the guilt of our iniquity. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us.* Guilt can be washed away by Christ. Regrets can be muted by the sovereignty and grace of God.

So why do so many Christian still feel guilty long after they have turned from their sins? The answer may well be that they have a faulty view of the atonement of Christ. Today we are going to see that no matter what you have done, the work of Jesus Christ is sufficient to cleanse you of all guilt. You may regret certain aspects of your past – and if you could you would do it differently – but Christ alone removes your shame.

The story of the two crooks on the cross will help us see that we have nothing to add to our being forgiven and set free from our past.

[John 19:18-22]

The story of the two thieves is one of the shortest stories in the whole Bible. John gives it less than 15 words in the English. And yet from these two men the church has learned profound lessons that have helped encourage the saints and clarify her doctrines.

As we take a look at these two men this morning, there are a couple of general observations that can help set us in the right direction.

First of all, there is a sense in which these two men represent all of mankind. And no where could that be seen more clearly than in the contrast between the sinless Christ and these two criminals. It was appropriate that Jesus was crucified with two sinners. For those with eyes to see, the picture couldn't be clearer. Jesus died to save those who were lost.

These two men are described as robbers or thieves. Their exact crimes are unspecified – but to receive the harshest of all judgments and sentences, we can assume their crimes were heinous and worthy of death.

One of the lessons we learned last week is that the starting point for conversion is recognizing our sin. I think one of the greatest obstacles men face is believing that their sins are worthy of death. I heard the story of a woman who heard the gospel preached and she found herself longing for heaven. When she went and talked to the pastor. He talked to her about confessing that she was a rotten sinner.

She objected to this stating that she was not a rotten sinner – that her sins were not too bad.

And that's the view that we can easily adopt. We don't want to be lumped in with condemned criminals and thieves. We don't want to think of ourselves as rotten sinners. We want to soften our sins and excuse ourselves. But these thieves give a better picture of our condition apart from Christ than anything else.

They were condemned to die. And they were completely unable to rescue themselves. Nothing they could say or do would undo the nails driven into their hands or feet. And somehow we need to understand our own spiritual condition in such stark terms.

But these two thieves have represented something else for the church down through the ages. These two thieves represent the two types of people in the world. They represent those who believe in Jesus Christ and receive His promises; and those who remain steadfast in their independence from Christ and ultimately reject Him. It is not an over-simplification to say that you can put every person in one of two categories – those who belong to Jesus and those who do not. This is precisely what Christ Himself will do on the day of the final judgment. He uses the analogy of the sheep and the goats. One group will go to His left and the other to His right and there won't be anything in between.

The interesting thing about these two men is how much common ground they shared.

- Both robbers
- Both caught – couldn't hide their wrongdoing.
- Both condemned and found guilty

- Both shared a common alienation and hostility toward God
 - Mt. 27:39-44 – People, chief priests, scribes, elders all mocking Him. *The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words.*
 - Isn't it interesting how easily we follow one another into sin? "Protection in numbers?"
- Both saw and heard the same things
 - Read Luke 23:33-38

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." What did the thieves see? What did they hear?

1. *Father, forgive them.*
 - a. contrast to their own hearts
2. *He saved others . . .*
 - b. Words of hope (Did they know the stories of healings, power, resurrections?)
3. *Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.*
 - c. Authority and a Kingdom

They saw and heard all the same things. And yet their responses were so vastly different.

I. The First Thief

The first thief remained in his sin. Luke records his response. *One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"*

Notice three revealing aspects of his response.

1. He assumed that if Jesus was really the Messiah He would want to save Himself. He clearly had no sense of the purposes of Christ. Natural man does not understand that some things are worth dying for. All that we studied last week about Jesus bearing His own cross to save others was hidden from this man's mind.

2. He assumed that if Jesus was really the Messiah He would save the thieves from the cross too. This man was filled with pride. His attitude was that he deserved to be delivered – and surely God would not will for him to die. He didn't understand that God is the author of death and has set it as the penalty for sin. He knew very little about his own nature.

3. He assumed that his greatest need was deliverance from physical death. This thief had no sense of his own sin and guilt – no understanding that he deserved death and might face a yet greater judgment to come. All he knew was his present pain. He was blinded to the harsh realities of hell and what awaited him.

And so this first thief died in his sins. He never knew Christ as his Savior. His heart remained hardened to the One who hung a few yards away – the One who could have granted him life.

This thief was like so many today. Men and women who are blinded to the identity of Christ. No

matter how often they have heard the words of life, they cannot and will not understand. They assume they deserve life. They see life only in terms of the physical. They are oblivious to their sin and separation from God. And although the gospel is near, they remain far from God.

II. The Second Thief.

Again, it's Luke that gives us the details.

Luke 23:40-43. *But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."*

Something happened. Was it the gentle word of forgiveness spoke by Christ? The hope that he could be saved? The idea that Jesus was truly the Messiah? Whatever it was, you can follow the progression of his heart by listening to his words.

1. Fear – *Do you not even fear God, since you are under the sentence of condemnation?* Clearly this thief was beginning to think about facing God in a few hours. And he was worried about. To fall into the hands of the living God is a dreadful thing.

2. Confession – *We are indeed suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds.* There is a humility here that was clearly not present in the demanding words of the other thief who believed he deserved to be saved.

3. Understanding Jesus – *this man has done nothing wrong.* Moments earlier he had been mocking Jesus along with everyone else. But now his eyes were open. How can you explain this?

What changed? We can only conclude that the words spoken by Jesus and the testimony and evidence of His identity finally made sense. This is what grace is. A dead mind and heart is awakened. The Spirit of God, like the wind, had blown through his soul and he knew this was the Christ.

4. Faith – *Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.* The word tells us *with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.*

This simple request was a profession of faith - a plea for salvation. *Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

5. Promised granted – *Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.* What words of comfort those were to this man. But they were words that can only be understood by faith. There was no dissolving of the cross. No turning back the clock on crimes committed. No removal of the nails. But there was forgiveness. There was the removal of guilt before God.

And this is the point of the thief.

- God's grace was sufficient to forgive his greatest sins. Was he sorry he'd lived a life of rebellion and crime? No doubt, he regretted it. But was He any longer guilty before God of his sins? Absolutely not.
 - The work of Jesus – the atonement was sufficient to cover his sin.

And that's just how it is with you. You may well regret things you've done in the past. But in Christ you may be cleansed.

Confess your sins to God and one another.
 Make things right as much as is possible.
 Receive the forgiveness of God.

In the story of the thief, we can learn that there is nothing we can add to the atonement. He could not work for forgiveness. His forgiveness was dependent on Jesus and His work alone to assure Him of his cleansing. And so is yours. May you find rest and peace as you place your hope in Christ's work.