

# The Man in the Middle

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Preacher: Mike Scrivani

[ 0 : 00 ] Good evening. Glad you're here.

We remember the greatest sacrifice ever made by the greatest person who ever lived, Jesus Christ.! From the cross, Jesus said, many things, but tonight I want to look at Luke chapter 23, verses 39 through 43, the conversation he had with one of the criminals who was crucified next to him.

If you have your Bibles, turn there with me, Luke 23, 39 through 43. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the pews that you're welcome to use and keep. If you don't have a Bible, take it home with you, please, and our hopes you'll continue to be reading God's Word.

Would you stand with me as we honor the reading of God's Word together, Luke 23, 39 through 43? One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said to him, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. May God add a blessing to the reading of his Word.

Lord, would you please be seated. During his ministry, Jesus often said things and did things that astounded those who both believed in him and those who hated him. Luke 19, verses 1 through 10, record Jesus' visit to Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He worked for the Romans.

[ 2 : 26 ] He collected whatever the Romans asked. And then he had their authority to help himself to even more from the Jews whom he collected taxes from. And as a result of that, the Jews hated him.

They viewed Zacchaeus as a traitor and as a thief. He was a little man with a whole lot of sin. He was also a man interested in Jesus. When Jesus came to Jericho, the town where Zacchaeus lived, he climbed up into a sycamore tree to get a view of Jesus because the crowds were large and no one was going to let Zacchaeus in. No one was going to make room for him. They didn't like him. But Jesus looks up into the tree. He sees Zacchaeus and then he invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house. And this astounded the Jewish people who were there witnessing all of this. Verse 7 records their shocked reaction. And when they saw it, they all grumbled. He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner. Many of you know what happened next. Zacchaeus was transformed by that visit. Jesus changed him. This man, others viewed as a hopeless cause, found hope in Christ. And as a result, he paid back four times as much as he stole. This reaction is the fruit of salvation.

Prompting Jesus' response recorded in verses 9 through 10. Jesus said to him, Zacchaeus, today salvation has come to this house since he also is a son of Abraham. For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost. In verse 10, that verse is what I want to focus on right now. In that verse, Jesus clearly and concisely summarizes his mission. The reason that he emptied himself, leaving heaven behind, coming to earth, taking the form of a servant and dying an excruciating death on the cross.

He came to seek and to save the lost. And even as he was bruised, beaten, stripped of his clothes, stripped of his flesh, suspended on a rugged cross by nails hammered through his wrists and his feet, Jesus continued his mission to seek and to save the lost. Crucifixion was designed to take as long as possible to inflict as much torture as possible. It would usually take two or three days for someone to die on the cross, often from asphyxiation, as the muscles used to breathe grew weak. And since crucifixion was slow, there was time to talk. Now, Scripture tells us that the Jewish leaders who conspired against Jesus asked Pilate to order the legs of Jesus and the two men crucified with him to be broken so that their crucifixion wouldn't ruin their observance of the Sabbath.

[ 5 : 46 ] We know from Scripture Jesus was already dead by the time that order was given because he had willingly given up his spirit knowing that he had sufficiently atoned for our salvation.

But prior to that order, the Gospels record many of the things Jesus said, including the conversation of the men who were crucified with him. Matthew and Mark record that the two men crucified on either side of Jesus began their time on the cross, both of them mocking Jesus. Matthew 27, 39 through 44 says, and those who passed by derided him, Jesus, wagging their heads and saying, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days? Save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.

So also the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him saying, he saved others. He cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel. Let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now if he desires him. For he said, I am the Son of God.

And the robbers who were crucified with him, Matthew says, reviled him in the same way. But as time grew on, so did the reality of the excruciating, mind-numbing torment of the cross.

These two criminals were hearing Jesus. They heard him pray to God the Father just as he did in life. So Jesus in death spoke words that I'm sure astounded everyone who heard him. Jesus didn't pray for God to send angels to help him. Jesus didn't pray for the Father to smite his enemies. He didn't pronounce curses on those who cursed him, saying that he would get the last laugh. Jesus asked for something totally different. Luke 23, beginning of verse 34 says, and Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. The two criminals were taking all of this in.

[ 8 : 06 ] The first criminal speaks to Jesus again in verse 39. Sarcastically, he rails at him and he asks him, are you not the Christ? Save yourself and save us. This man didn't believe that Jesus was the Christ, but he knew Jesus believed that he was. And what he wanted was a Christ, a Savior who could save him physically. He didn't understand that it was precisely by staying on the cross and not saving himself. If Jesus did not stay on the cross, we would have no hope because the wrath of God would not have been satisfied and we would all still be dead in our sins. Jesus' death on the cross didn't disprove he was the Christ. It proved he was the Christ. Pastor Tyler already read from Isaiah 53. I want to read Isaiah 53 verses 1 through 6 again. Again, the prophet receiving this vision, this word from God of this future event, which we see become a reality in the life of Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross.

Who has believed what he has heard from us and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no form or majesty that we would look at him and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way.

And the Lord has laid on him, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the iniquity of us all. The second criminal who earlier had joined in mocking Jesus begins to undergo a change.

[ 10 : 45 ] In verse 40, we hear him saying to the other criminal, Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

This second criminal observes that he and the other criminal and Jesus all share something in common. They are all men condemned to die. However, in verse 41, he makes a crucial observation that communicates a difference between him, the other criminal, and Jesus. In verse 41, he says, And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong. Even though Jesus was suffering the same judgment as them, they are guilty. They are deserving of death for the sins that they've committed. But Jesus is innocent. He's done nothing deserving of death. In fact, he never sinned. As the second criminal heard and observed Jesus, as he saw how he responded to the jeers of the onlookers, he began to realize who Jesus was. We have the full revelation of Scripture, and we know that while he suffered the same death, Jesus did, his condemnation came from a higher power than Rome. As Isaiah 53 says, he was smitten by God, and it is the Lord who has laid on him the iniquity of us all. The Apostle Paul captures the reality of the condemnation Jesus endured on the cross in 2 Corinthians 5.21. There

he says, For our sake he, God the Father, made him, God the Son, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. God the Father, using the principle of imputation, treated Jesus as if he were a sinner, though he wasn't, a sinner on the cross. He was a sinner on the cross, as some have wrongly suggested.

He remained as holy as ever, but he was treated as if he were guilty for all the sins ever committed by those who would ever believe in him. The wrath of God the Father was unleashed on him, exhausted on him, until, as Jesus said, it was finished. Conversely, just as Jesus was treated as if he were a sinner, so those who trust in him for salvation are treated as if they are righteous. Jesus bore our sins so that we can bear his righteousness. God the Father treated God the Son on the cross as if he committed our sins, and in salvation he treats those who believe in him as if the righteous life of the sinless Son of God is the life that they've lived. I doubt the second criminal was aware of the theological principles of imputation. What he knew was that he deserved to die, and he knew that he was a guilty sinner, and he knew that Jesus was a sinless Savior. So in verse 42, again, it says that he said to Jesus,

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. This is a plea, a prayer for mercy. This criminal knew that though the body dies, the soul continues to live. He knew that the only thing that could help him, could save him, was divine intervention, divine mercy. And so he turns to Jesus as the source and the dispenser of divine grace. Verse 43 records our Savior's response to him, truly I say to you, you will be with me today. You will be with me in paradise.

[ 15 : 21 ] Jesus doesn't say it's too late for you. He doesn't say you're too sinful. He doesn't say you're not the type of person that I'm interested in saving. He doesn't even give him a hard time either, saying something like, weren't you just mocking me? Weren't you just making fun of me? And now you think you know who I am? Now that you realize my innocence, now that you are so close to death, you expect me to just wipe the slate clean and forgive you? Jesus doesn't say any of those things.

Being omniscient, he knew this man's sin, but he also knew that this man was repentant. The criminal acknowledged that he was a sinner, acknowledged that his sins warranted death, acknowledged that Jesus was innocent, and acknowledged that Jesus was his only hope for salvation.

And so friends, this is the kind of Savior Jesus is. And the conversion of this thief is another proof that salvation is not based on works, but it's based on God's grace and God's grace alone. The thief couldn't be baptized. He couldn't do good works.

All he could do was continue to hang there from a cross and die and acknowledge his sin and his need to be saved from the punishment that he knew he justly deserved. Jesus decides who goes to heaven.

Jesus died so that people like that criminal can live, people like you and people like me. And I love the personal nature of Jesus' gracious response to the criminal.

[ 17 : 20 ] He doesn't say, today you will be in paradise. That would be good, for sure. But Jesus adds something better that maybe you sometimes miss when we read this.

He says, today you will be with me in paradise. In other words, the criminal isn't getting a spot in the standing room only section of heaven, or in the overflow room on the outskirts of heaven.

He's not getting a cheap seat in heaven's back row with an obscured view of Jesus. No, he's going to be with Jesus in his presence with him that day and forever.

And so three final observations from this passage about the men who are dying on the cross. The first criminal is guilty, and he bears Roman condemnation on the cross.

But worse than that, though he died right next to the Savior, hearing him pray, witnessing the salvation of the other criminal, seeing the supernatural darkness that filled the place where the three men were crucified, feeling the earthquake reverberating through the cross he was suspended on.

[ 18 : 41 ] As Jesus gave up his spirit, he remained unrepentant, unchanged, and unsaved. And as a result, he, like all those who reject Jesus as Lord, received God's eternal condemnation.

Condemned by Rome, condemned by God, and deserving of both. The second criminal is also guilty. He was also deserving of Rome's condemnation and God's condemnation.

He receives the first, but he was graciously set free from the second, having turned from his sins in repentance and looking to Jesus for salvation.

The second criminal was every bit as guilty, every bit as undeserving of the free gift of eternal life as the first criminal. But in turning to Jesus, and acknowledging his sin deserving of punishment, and asking Jesus for rescue, and for salvation, he received it.

Now, Jesus did not deserve Rome's condemnation or God's condemnation, but he willingly endured both on the cross because that was his mission. That's why he came.

[ 20 : 12 ] To seek and to save the lost, and to save the lost, he must die on the cross. To take their sins upon himself. To bear the wrath of the Father for the sins that we have committed so that we are saved through simply turning to him and acknowledging, I'm a sinner.

Jesus, you're the Savior. Will you save me? And his answer is yes. Today, you'll be with me in paradise.

Has he saved you? Have you, like the saved criminal, acknowledged your sin and your need to be saved? Do you know that Jesus died the death that you deserved to freely give you what you don't deserve?

And if so, then rejoice. The Friday Jesus died was truly a good Friday. because on the cross, we see the goodness of God, the graciousness of God, the love of God to save people from his wrath by pouring it out not on them, but on his son.

Jesus died so that we can live and be with him eternally in paradise. If you haven't been saved, then friend, you've seen from God's word the example of the second criminal.

[ 21 : 52 ] You've heard this message and here's what I hope that you don't come away thinking. Well, I'll be like that guy. I'll just wait until I die or I know that I'm close to death.

If that's what you think, then you've completely missed the point. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, few are ever saved on their deathbeds. One thief on the cross was saved that none should despair, but only one that none should presume.

And so Jesus today offers you eternal life. He's willing to forgive you of your sins.

He's offering you paradise with him in all eternity, free from sin and suffering and all that goes on in this sin-cursed world and all you have to do.

Like that thief on the cross is just turn to Jesus and ask him to save you. and he will because he's good and he's gracious and we're thankful that God would send his son to live the sinless life that we could never live, to defeat the enemies that we could never defeat, dying on the cross for our sins, but that's not the end of the story because on the third day he arose and he lives and he continues to seek and to save the lost.

[ 23 : 35 ] Let's pray. Lord, it is a good Friday.

It's a good Friday, Lord, because you know, as Christians we should reflect on this all the time but especially today we just think about what you willingly endured to save us.

What it took to save us. That you willingly came, that you willingly gave your life, that you willingly endured the wrath that we deserved and you did it in love.

You did it in obedience. You did it so that, Lord, we can live with you in paradise, in heaven, eternally, a place without sin and without death.

Lord, we rejoice in who you are. We rejoice in what you have done. thank you that you are a God who seeks and saves the lost. Thank you that you are so gracious to people who are so undeserving.

[ 25 : 00 ] God, I pray that we as your people would continue your mission, seeking and saving the lost, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, that though you died, you live and those who trust in you live too.

Thank you, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.