

**39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

### Jesus, Remember Me

When you think about famous people in history, they are sometimes remembered for good, and other times remembered for evil. Hitler, Stalin, Truman, Reagan, all bring different memories. Michael Jackson has been in the news a lot lately. He used to be remembered for his music. Now his reputation is being tarnished as a possible child molestor. How will he be remembered? We’ll have to see. Truth be told, most people aren’t remembered for much at all. Their lives aren’t worth remembering. Ours probably aren’t either.

There’s a man in the middle of three crosses who is worth remembering. He is remembered for His sacrificial death. He’s the one that we want to focus on and remember. He’s more than just a man. He’s our God and our Savior. He deserves to be remembered.

But this one thief has the audacity to say to Jesus, “**Remember me.**” What in the world would he want Jesus to remember about him? Has he forgotten who he is? You would think that he would say the exact OPPOSITE to Jesus. “Jesus, forget about me. Don’t raise me to stand before you on Judgment Day. Wipe me out of existence.” That’s actually the way a lot of people will react on Judgment Day from fear of facing God. Jesus said that they would pray to the rocks and the mountains, begging them to fall on them and hide them from Jesus on that Great Day. Their prayer would be to be wiped off the face of the earth. But this thief has the audacity to say, “Jesus, remember me?” Who does he think he is?

Well, listen again to what he said to the other criminal. It’s not a prayer of pride. It’s far from it. How do we know that? Listen to his confession just prior to this. “**Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.**” It seems rather harsh, doesn’t it? I suppose many people would argue with him. “How does stealing something justify death? Why not just some jail time or maybe chop off a hand if you want to be harsh? It’s not like he murdered someone.” But this thief was thinking from a higher perspective. His sins had struck him deeply. He said, “**We are getting what our deeds deserve.**”

How do we know he was thinking deeper? Listen to his question. “**Don’t you fear God?**” When you read the Word of God you quickly realize that God holds us to a higher standard. He doesn’t take sin lightly. The Old Testament lesson for the first Sunday in Lent shows how God put Achan and his whole household to death just because he took some items home from war instead of destroying them. And God says we even deserve worse than death. We deserve hell. This man was suffering. He didn’t make excuses for his sin. He was brought to his knees when he couldn’t even kneel. He knew they were getting what they deserved. He got it loud and clear.

Isn't that the main issue with our society? **Don't you fear God?** Now, they don't! We live in a society whose God is toleration and acceptance. They know nothing of the holy God who condemned millions in the Flood, demands perfection, and threatens hell. We forget that God's Word says the road to hell is WIDE and MANY enter therein. We just assume that most everyone ends up in heaven, and no matter what they do we refer to them as "good people" because they might be nice people. We treat God more like a heavenly grandpa than a Holy Father. Fear is a good thing. Moses and the Israelites felt it at the foot of Mt. Sinai when God was speaking to them, and that's how God WANTED it. My wife told me about how she used to be afraid of her dad growing up, but that was a good thing. It kept her from doing a lot of stuff that she could have done. We have a sinful nature that needs that kind of fear, and we've forgotten that God still hates sin and it still makes Him angry. **"Don't you fear God?"** Why poke fun of someone else when you are under the same sentence?

Mockery is a way of trying to avoid your own pain and guilt to a point. Comedians try to lessen their pain with laughter. Christopher Hitchens was a well known and popular atheist. He was asked, "If God does not exist, then what is the purpose of life?" He answered, "What cheers me up is mainly gloating over the misfortunes of other people. Mainly crowing over the miseries of others. It doesn't always work but it never completely fails." There you have the answer of the atheist, when you are suffering, at least make fun of other people who are suffering too. Isn't that what hell will be like? A bunch of unsympathetic and angry people, still blaming everyone else for their own damnation. Their remedies will do nothing to lessen their pain.

Jesus wasn't making fun of anyone from the cross. He wasn't trading barbs with all of those who ridiculed and made fun of him. Nor was He cursing at them or damning them all to hell. He wasn't bitter at all, even as they were mocking Him. The ironic thing is that as people were trying to mock Him and make fun of Him, they were witnessing to what Jesus actually did and who Jesus actually was. They said, **"The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.'**" What were they inadvertently admitting? That Jesus actually saved other people from dying! They also professed that Jesus claimed to be the Christ, the Chosen One to save the world. As the night dragged on, the one thief was LISTENING to the testimony about who Jesus actually claimed to be.

But then when Jesus spoke, the proof was even greater! He asked God, **"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."** Who would be so full of mercy that He would actually pray for the people who were crucifying Him and making fun of Him? But that is what Jesus did! And if Jesus would be so bold as to pray for their forgiveness, then that would mean that Jesus is a forgiving person and that He wants to forgive. If He really was the Messiah and He was willing to forgive them, then maybe He would also be willing to forgive the thief by His side as well.

So the thief addressed Jesus by name. He called Him **"Jesus."** He's the only one in this whole story who is recorded to call Jesus by name. Do you remember what Jesus name actually means? It is the same as the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "the Lord saves." He reached out to Jesus - the Lord saves - and said **"Remember me."**

What does this mean? Is it simply a request that Jesus would think back to this moment and recall the thief with a good memory and a smile? What good would that do the thief? That term, **"remember me,"** is used throughout the Old Testament. When Rachel couldn't have children, she was sad and jealous of Leah. She

prayed and prayed that God would give her a child. Finally it says in Genesis 30:22, “**Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb.**” What does that mean? It doesn’t mean that God had forgotten about Rachel. He didn’t say, “Oh yeah! I forgot that she wanted a baby.” It means that the Lord decided to do something about Rachel’s dilemma. He decided to deliver her in her time of need. David also prayed in Psalm 25:6, “**Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.**” He wasn’t praying this because he thought that perhaps God forgot that he was merciful. God primarily described Himself to Moses and the Israelites as, “**abounding in love and faithfulness.**” No, David was praying that God would act upon His mercy. So when Jesus had prayed for the forgiveness of His enemies and proven Himself to be the Messiah, the thief was asking Jesus to remember him in mercy, to do something for Him in mercy.

But that wasn’t all he said. Listen now to the last portion of this prayer. **Jesus - remember me - when you come into your kingdom.** It comes from the Greek *elthes* - which can mean come or go. But I like the translation “come.” Come is different than going. We COME to places that we are invited to or where we belong. We GO away. If Jesus was COMING into His kingdom, it seems to infer that He had been there before, and He would be welcome back. Notice also that he calls the place that Jesus was coming to YOUR KINGDOM. This meant that the thief now seemed to believe that Jesus was the King which was posted over His head. He wasn’t leaving this world in defeat. He was going back to the place He belonged - into the kingdom of heaven. This wasn’t the end of Jesus’ existence. Jesus was going to a greater kingdom to rule in power. So the thief asked Jesus to remember him. How? Why? So that he would be saved from his sins. Why? Not because he deserved it. That couldn’t be. He prayed this only that Jesus would be merciful - in hope that he would be brought to heaven.

Can we be so bold as to say such a prayer to Jesus? What would we want Jesus to remember about us, when all of our righteous acts are like filthy rags? How about this, “Jesus, remember that I am one of the sinners you died for on the cross. Jesus remember that I am baptized in your blood. Remember that you adopted me graciously into your family. Remember that you promised me salvation through faith in you. Don’t abandon me, Lord. Remember your promise to me.” God loves when we remind Him of His reputation, who He is. Think of Moses. When the Israelites were at the foot of Mt. Sinai and worshiping the Golden Calf, God was going to wipe out the Israelites. He told Moses, “I’ll start over with you.” But Moses pleaded to God on behalf of the Israelites. They were guilty as could be. They deserved to die. But Moses reminded God of His promise to take them to the Promised Land. He reminded God of who He was as a merciful God. He held God to His reputation, and God loved it! He answered His prayer. When we pray to Jesus, and remember who He is, “the Lord saves,” He holds to His word, and He loves doing it.

Sometimes when people head into surgery or have a health scare they fear that God will send them to hell for something they’d done in the past. They fear that God has been holding a grudge and is going to damn them. They only seem to remember their sins. I say to them, “Think about it. If God went through the hassle of coming to this world, dying on the cross for your sins, rising from the dead, writing the Bible, sending the Holy Spirit, adopting you into His family through baptism, and then keeping you in the faith through Word and sacrament, why would He then abandon all of that just to damn you at the end? Do you really think that God is looking for a reason to damn you, when He has found a reason to save you? Why would He now abandon you after all He’s gone through to save you and go back on His Word? Remember who He is, a God of grace and mercy who wants ALL men to be saved.”

It's kind of ironic if you think about it. The one criminal on the cross mocked Jesus by saying, "**Save yourself and us.**" Unfortunately, he didn't really want to be saved at all. But the man who didn't pray to be saved, ended up getting saved. Jesus didn't save him from dying, but he saved him from hell and God's wrath. He saved him from despair. He saved him by just staying on the cross to die for him and the sins of the world. How do we know this? He said, "**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.**" This was Jesus' promise to him, and it is also Jesus promise to us. Usually our ears are drawn to that word "paradise." But the paradise comes right before it. Jesus says that you will be "with me." He is the Lamb at the center of every picture of paradise in heaven, the One who died for the sins of the world. Think of what a wonderful sound it will be when Jesus calls you by name and says, "Welcome home!" He will not forget who you are. You are His baptized child.

Remember me. I only have two daughters, and you would think I could remember their names. My one daughter's name is Maia and the other is Rylee. But both of them now realize that I call them by different names. One is called MiRylee, and the other is RyMaia. I can't seem to get them straight, so I have to change halfway through the name. It's a sad state of affairs, since I'm their father and I can't even keep their names straight. My memory is terrible. I often have to now put dates and times in my calendar on my phone with bells to go off so I don't forget things.

Nobody likes to be forgotten. We want to be remembered. If you live to be old enough, most of the people who knew you well will be dead. There may not be many who remember you at all. That's the way of life. You will be a forgotten piece of history one hundred years from now. Not many will care whether you lived or died.

But that doesn't matter. What matters is if God remembers you. The thief had the audacity to ask Jesus to remember him in tonight's text. May God give you the same audacity, based on Jesus merciful death for you. Jesus remembered the thief, and Jesus will remember you. Thankfully, God has a much greater memory than I do. He's etched you into His mind through the blood of Jesus, in your baptism, through faith. He isn't going to need a reminder of who we are. Isaiah 49:15 says "**Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!** Remember me! So it sounds almost foolish to make such a prayer, when God has a perfect memory. He could no easier forget who we are than He could forget who He is. Nonetheless, God loves it when we pray this prayer in faith, knowing exactly who Jesus is. "Jesus, remember me. Remember me as your adopted and forgiven child. Remember me in grace and mercy." Amen.