

“Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise”
by Rom A. Pegram (3/8/20)

I love all the gospels, I guess, for a variety of reasons. The Gospel of Luke is special to me in this sense: *His Gospel highlights Jesus’ concern for the meek and the lowly of our world.* I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about this or not, but consider these things...

- The Gospel begins by highlighting *Jesus’ lowly position in society*—born in a stable with a feeding trough for a crib...
- In Luke’s description of Jesus’ ministry, *we find Jesus consistently concerned for the sinner*—the outcast, the unclean, and what society would consider ... the ‘nobody’...
- In the Gospel of Luke, *Jesus clearly defines his mission as coming to ‘seek out and to save the lost’* (Luke 19:10)...

It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that *only Luke’s Gospel records a conversation between Jesus and two thieves* ... as they all hung on crosses on either side of him. As we consider this conversation today, we’ll focus on Jesus’ words here and discover what we can learn from them—helping us walk closer to him. Listen (Luke 23:32, 39-43, NLT)...

Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. ... ³⁹ One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? ⁴¹ We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” ⁴³ And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Now, let’s hear—once again—from one who was there (The Thief on the Cross)...

He looked at me with compassion.

It had been a long time since I had felt anyone’s compassion. My mother died when I was seven. My father was a drunkard whose idea of encouragement was to call me an idiot and to tell me to leave him alone. So I did. I began committing petty crimes when I was ten. I’d committed armed robbery when I was fifteen. And I killed a man before I was twenty. I was a hopeless cause.

And here I was, 47 years old, carrying my cross on the way to Calvary. It was amusing to me that Jesus of Nazareth was being crucified with us. I knew of him. Some among my friends had gone to hear him. Jesus had even eaten with them. I knew some of the girls who had found religion by listening to him. They claimed he was God’s Messiah.

‘Strange Messiah—befriending sinners and prostitutes. If I believed in God, that’s the kind of Messiah I would want. But I didn’t, and so I was sure he wasn’t.

Yet I can tell you this: I could not take my eyes off of him.

A huge crowd came out for his crucifixion—the moneychangers, the religious leaders, the Romans, and all those religious hypocrites. They stood around him, hurling insults at him. I joined in at first, glad they weren’t insulting me. But even I didn’t have the stomach for it. It was then I heard him praying from his cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” I was stunned—this friend of sinners prayed for mercy for his enemies.

He turned and looked at me as if he could see right through me; once more he looked at me with compassion. Even in my pain, I found myself drawn to this man. If, as some said, he was sent from God, and if God was like this man, showing mercy to sinners, then perhaps there was hope for me. Levi, my partner in crime, began to hurl insults at Jesus once more. I shouted, “Levi, stop it! Don’t you see? We’re getting what we deserve. He’s done nothing wrong.” And then, for reasons I still don’t understand, I turned to Jesus and said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

So, what does this scene teach us about Jesus ... and what does it teach us about ourselves? Let’s get right into it, shall we? First...

JESUS ASSOCIATED WITH SINNERS. That was his standard M.O., wasn’t it? It’s said that ... a person is known by the company they keep! Well, in both life and in death, *Jesus associated with sinners...* And Jesus’ associations bothered the religious people of his day; just listen to these examples:

- Luke 15:1-2 (NLT) – “Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!”
- Some others examples would be: 1) Jesus allowing the prostitute to wash his feet with her tears, 2) calling tax collectors and garden-variety sinners to be his disciples, and 3) he touched lepers and ate with unclean people...
- And even at the end of his ministry, just before he was crucified, he invited Zacchaeus down from the tree (Luke 19:5) and went to his house to eat...

Eating supper with someone in the Middle East in biblical times meant you were willing to call that person your friend. So, when Jesus said that he wanted to eat at Zacchaeus’ house, the religious people couldn’t believe it! Why would Jesus call someone like that ‘friend?’ Why would he stay with a known degenerate like Zacchaeus?

And, to top it all off, Zacchaeus invited all his sinful friends to dinner, too—prostitutes, tax collectors, and *thieves* (the cross probably wasn’t the first time this

happened). I can just picture Jesus eating with them, laughing, and telling stories about the kingdom of God ... in such a way that people wanted to know more. And I picture the religious elite ... outside ... waving their fingers and saying things like, “Why does he eat with people like that?” And that’s when I imagine Jesus getting up from the table, going over to the religious folk, and saying, “You just don’t get it, do you?” And then he gave them his personal mission statement (Luke 19:9-10): “... ‘Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.’”

Folks, as Jesus lived, so he died... Even as he was being crucified, Jesus was carrying out his mission statement and associating with sinners. Jesus did not die alone. His companions at Golgotha (place of the skull) were ... two known criminals. DO YOU SEE HOW IMPORTANT REACHING LOST PEOPLE WAS—AND IS—TO JESUS? It’s really the very thing that drove him to the cross, so that in his dying he might save the whole human race from self-destruction & self-worship—sin, actually; and so in his resurrection he might conquer death and save us from that as well...

If this is what mattered most to Jesus—*reaching people who were lost*—what does that mean for us as his followers today? If Jesus wasn’t afraid to associate with criminals, prostitutes, and people who were considered unclean, what’s about us?

Let me make this personal now: Do people who do not know Jesus feel comfortable around you? Do they feel small ... or valued & accepted, after a conversation with you? Are you willing to associate with people others might consider riffraff? Do you get the idea? Reaching those who are lost was the driving mission of Jesus—all the way to the cross. It’s meant to be our driving mission, too! Here are a couple more things I need to share from Jesus’ words today: There were...

TWO CRIMINALS, TWO RESPONSES. Did you notice that? And there are two possible ways we might respond to Jesus, too!

Both criminals witnessed the same event that day—a man who claimed to be the Messiah, abused and crucified. They saw the cruelty and hate heaped on Jesus by the crowd. They heard him cry out, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34)! But, they responded differently, didn’t they? From the conversation they had (*only in Luke*), we see...

- *The one man’s heart was HARD...* Even as he hung on the cross himself, naked and dying, he attempted to validate himself by joining in with the crowd as they insulted Jesus—trying his best to make Jesus feel small (making himself feel ‘big’ in the process—a bully’s way). He looked at Jesus and saw a failed Messiah—one who refused to take up arms and fight the nasty Romans who were killing him. When he heard Jesus pray, it made him mad...
- *But something happened to the heart of the other man*, as he watched/listened to Jesus on the cross. At some point, the light went on; he stopped hurling insults, turned to his friend on the other cross, and rebuked him. Maybe, realizing he’d be dead in a few hours, he needed to find HOPE where he could find it. And he saw

something in Jesus ... something worth following ... and he said (Luke 23:42),
 “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

In this ol’ world, there’re still those of both persuasions—those who consider Jesus a failure ... and those who see HOPE in him. The question we must ask ourselves today is this: Which thief will *I* be? And *this brings me to the final thing I want you to see...* Jesus words were:

A SIMPLE BUT SIGNIFICANT STATEMENT. Look with me at Jesus’ very last statement in this conversation, would you? From this one simple statement (Jesus’ response in Luke 23:43), we can learn important truths about: 1) life after death, 2) God’s mercy, and 3) heaven—all three very relevant topics. Now, let me share the three truths from this statement with you briefly:

Here, we see what some have called ... *the Peace of Jesus’ Words*: He says “Today...” After 30+ years of study, this verse heavily shapes my views of what happens to us when we die. Though there will be some changes *later*, there’s a place called ‘Heaven’ or ‘paradise’ that exists *today*. Heaven, folks, is basically this: *It’s where Jesus is*. And what did Jesus say? “Today...” It’s a place that, if we were to die today, we can go there ... to be with Jesus, if we too will give our lives over to him, just like this second thief on the cross...

Jesus’ use of the word ‘Today’ is reassuring and comforting to us. And, if that doesn’t bring you some PEACE, I don’t know what will! So here, Jesus brings peace to this second thief ... and to all who are listening (including us). Next...

The Point of Jesus’ Words: He says “You Will Be with Me...” The foremost point of Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross are to demonstrate *the great mercy God shows us*. Luke, whose focus throughout his Gospel is on Jesus’ concern for the nobodies of this world, wants us to see that even a criminal on a cross is offered salvation. God’s gift of mercy is open to all; then...

The Promise of Jesus’ Words: He says, “In Paradise!” This Greek word for ‘paradise’ is a transliteration of a Persian word that refers to ‘the king’s garden.’ It’s as if we started in the Garden (Genesis) ... and to the Garden we return ... to be ‘In Paradise’—*the one Jesus restored on the cross...*

These final words of Jesus point us toward *his mission*. And, the truth is, it’s *our mission* too—to seek and to save *the lost!* And this includes those who may seem *hopelessly lost*. But, no one is beyond God’s grace, folks, if they’ll simply pray as the thief did, “Remember me, Jesus...” ... and he will!