

Famous Last Words: Promise of Paradise

Luke 23:39-43

Last Words

In conversation, last words are sometimes the most important words. We tend to hang onto them longer. They're not easily forgotten.

That's particularly true when it comes to the last words of someone about to die. I have had so many people down through the years comment about the last words of their loved one who may have just passed. What that loved one said means everything to them.

I have even had some who lament that such words were never spoken and they live in the anguish and guilt of that.

Speaking of last words, I understand that the day of his death in 1883, Karl Marx was asked by his housekeeper if he had any last words. *"I'll be glad to write them down for you,"* she said.

Marx didn't take that very kindly at all. *"Last words,"* he said, *"are for fools who haven't said enough."*

Not so for Jesus. He still had a few things to say, seven things to be precise and he shared them, from all places, from the cross.

What he shared there were some of the most revealing, most powerful last words ever spoken.

We'll be studying them as we gather for worship during the Sundays of Lent. I hope you make every effort to be here to hear what Christ says.

On the Right and On the Left

A lot is made these days about who's on the *"right"* and who's, on the *"left."* That's certainly the case when it comes to politics, social issues, and even religion.

We'll even split hairs and claim that we are *"right"* or *"left"* of center, whatever that means.

During the days of Christ, *"right"* and *"left"* took on a different connotation. To be seated directly to the *"right"* or to the *"left"* of a guest of honor was a place of prestige and power.

James and John were so bold to ask Jesus if they could be seated one at his right and the other at his left when he came into his Kingdom.

Jesus went on to teach that *"whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."* (Mark 10:43-44)

Humility goes a long way in the Kingdom of God.

“Right” and “left” also plays an important role in the death of Jesus. Scripture records that Jesus was crucified between two common criminals, one to his left and the other to his right.

The place was Golgatha, the Place of the Skull.

The photo you see on the screen might very well be that place. It’s just outside the city wall of old Jerusalem. Ironically, the base of it is paved over and serves as a tour bus parking lot.

The image of the three crosses there is emblazoned on our hearts and minds.

It’s sobering to think that Jesus was crucified between two common criminals, yet if you dig deeply enough and take the time to hear what transpired there you get a clear view of the world and those who make it up.

I have always considered the image of the three crosses as a microcosm of the world. If we look hard enough we even see ourselves.

Standing at the foot of the cross were those who saw fit to bring derision to Christ. They hurled their insults one right after another, all along questioning his power and authority.

“He saved others,” they screamed, *“let him save himself if he is Christ of God, the Chosen One.”* (Luke 23:35)

One of the criminals even joined them. We don’t know whether he was to the right or to the left. It really doesn’t matter, does it? Whether we are “right” or “left” doesn’t really matter when it comes to such things.

“Aren’t you the Messiah?” he said. *“Save yourself and us.”* (Luke 23:39)

Leonard Sweet in writing about this first thief says that he was *“a criminal whose bitterness and unrepentant spirit stiff-armed the very Savior of the world.”* There are multitudes of people doing that today.

The other criminal began to defend Jesus.

His heart was at a much different place. He had been humbled by what was happening and was ready to make amends for what he had done.

The hearts of the two men were starkly differently. One gets it and the other doesn’t. One heart is hard, the other is soft. One is closed, the other receptive. One is haughty, the other humble. Again, I think we see the world in these two guys and not to be lost is the fact that Jesus is right in the middle of it all.

As you know there are so many people these days hardened to the love God so longs to offer them and, then again, there are those who are receptive beyond measure.

I think we not only see the world in these two guys, but we even see ourselves. If you and I are honest with ourselves there are times when our hearts are receptive and times when they are not, times when we honor Christ and times when we don't.

The one criminal was quick to join the crowd in offering his insults. He was quick to look out for himself.

"Save yourself and us," he said, which is code for save yourself and while you're at it save me as well.

I can't get this question off my mind in thinking about this guy. I have to ask myself about how I may be making a mockery of Jesus by what I say or do?

Am I consistently honoring him or not. I think you could ask the very same question of yourself.

The second criminal was quick to chime in, recognizing that he and the other criminal had gotten what they deserved. Soon though he would be offered something he *didn't* deserve.

This second criminal recognized the wrong he had done and admitted the same. Regrettably, some never do that and miss the opportunity to come clean.

As I studied this scripture this week the more I became convinced that Christ's second word was very much like his first. "Father, forgive them."

Jesus is all about bringing forgiveness.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

What a wonderful prayer—a prayer spoken in all humility, in all faith, and in all trust that Jesus has the power to save.

And when it comes to salvation Jesus is always ready to oblige. He's always ready to extend grace, even though we don't deserve it.

Even though the second criminal by no means deserved it, Jesus extended grace and the man was saved. Sure the man died that day, but the promise of eternal life more than made up for it.

Hear again what Christ said to him, *"Today, you will be with me in paradise."*

This second word from the cross proves that Jesus is all about salvation, even in the worst of circumstances.

Even as he hung from the cross facing his own death, Jesus sought to bring life to another who so desperately needed it. Jesus was not so pre-occupied that he failed to hear the man's cry.

What he offered was offered then and there. There was no waiting, no let's talk about it later, no delay. Jesus acted decisively and sealed it with the promise, "*Today, you will be with me in paradise.*"

There in that scene fraught with death and destruction, Jesus did what he had come to do.

He brought salvation to that second criminal and he brings salvation to us.

We Preach Christ Crucified

Later the message of Jesus dying on the cross and the new life that was possible because of that became the central message of the church.

The Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:23, "*We preach Christ crucified.*"

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Corinthians 1:18)

The cross was nothing more than foolishness to the first criminal and all those who stand hard hearted before the Lord.

But to the second, the cross paved the way to salvation and eternal life, just as the cross paves the way to salvation and eternal life for those who repent of their sin and put their faith in Jesus.

The message is still the same as it was that dark day when Jesus was crucified between two criminals.

It's the same, because the world is still the same and God has not given up on us.

There are still those who in their hard-heartedness refuse to accept and still others who with faith receive the news and their lives are never again the same.

We see them all over the highways and bi-ways of our land, those crosses that sum up the message right well, "*Jesus Saves.*"

Many pass right on by. Others think about things for a bit and then dismiss them. Still others consider the offer and make it a part of their lives.

There is no time like the present to turn from the wrong of your life and open yourself to the very thing Christ came to offer.

Christ alone sets us free from the very things that hold us.

What Jesus offered that criminal on the cross is proof positive that it is never too late.

During our Holy Land trip a few years back we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. We stood in long lines to get to the place where it is thought Jesus was buried.

Once there you could go in and kneel to contemplate what Jesus had done.

Just as the power of the cross began to wash over me I was rudely interrupted by a priest wrapping the door facing of the crypt with a ruler signaling it was time to go. How rude!

There is no rush today. No need to go until business is settled.

The prayer is really quite simple.

“Remember me, when you come into my Kingdom.”

Repeat it over and over again. Make it your own.

Christ will not fail you. His every desire is to offer life now and forever more.