



June 21, 2017

Pastor Ben Hicks

Lesson 5 – The Thief on the Cross ***The Gospel for Hopeless People***

Text: Luke 23:39-43

Have you ever given up on God getting a hold of someone? Someone who you think is too old, too bitter, or too sinful to change? At what point is there just no hope left? At what point is someone just never going to be saved? How long before we can stop praying for someone's soul?

What about a terrorist? Someone like Bashir Mohammad, who four years ago was fighting for an offshoot of Al Queda in the Syrian civil war, but today is running Bible studies?¹ Or what about a terrorist like the apostle Paul, who spent his whole seeking to destroy the church, before becoming one of the main instruments in building it?

As long as someone is breathing, there is hope!

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/24/world/middleeast/the-jihadi-who-turned-to-jesus.html>

I. **The First Thief Speaks: A Hopeless Situation (vv 39).**

A. **People find themselves in hopeless circumstances.**

1. **People are in hopeless circumstances because of their sins.** Some people just seem too far gone to be helped, so entrenched in their ways that they will never change.
2. **People are in hopeless circumstances because of the consequences of their sins.** But sin brings consequences, and often those consequences can lead to further hopelessness in a person's life.

B. **People find themselves with hopeless attitudes.**

It is not simply the fact that this thief is dying and yet rejecting Christ. He is doing so with arrogance and contempt. The most hopeless cases are those with people who not only reject Christ, but who do so with a hardened heart. Can such a person be saved?

Excursus (Rabbit Trail) Does the Bible contradict itself?

The problem: If the Bible is inspired by God and without error, then it must be without contradiction. Yet there are many seeming discrepancies throughout the Bible that would challenge this, for example, did both thieves mock Christ (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32) or just one (Luke 23:39-43)?

The solution: When we face these apparent differences, we need to begin by asking, "Are these necessary differences or just apparent ones?" For example, is it possible that both thieves blasphemed Christ *and* that one accepted him? The answer, of course, is yes. It is possible for someone to curse Christ, fall under conviction, and then accept Him. So if there is a way to make sense of the details once we study things out, why would we assume there is a contradiction?

II. The Second Thief Speaks: A Humble Response (vv 40-42).

A. Humility is shown in acknowledging guilt.

1. **Acknowledging guilt means fearing God.** Fearing God is crucial because a proper fear of God, who he is and what he can do, puts us in a place where we recognize we need help.
2. **Acknowledging guilt means accepting the consequences.** It's easy to admit wrong but resist the consequences of that wrong. A truly humble person is one who accepts whatever the price for their sin is, because they realize it's earned.
3. **Acknowledging guilt means vindicating God.** The person who is truly humble recognizes that God is right and they are wrong. They admit that God is holy, and they are not, rather than somehow blaming God for their current condition.

B. Humility is shown in asking for help.

Pride is the great culprit for sending people to hell when God stands in heaven with open arms. The humility to simply ask for help is often the hardest part for people in coming to Christ for salvation. It's also often the hardest part for Christians hopeless in their sin. But those who swallow their pride and go to God will find all they need for salvation and godliness.

III. Jesus Speaks: A Hope-Filled Answer (v 43).

A. Christ promises paradise (2 Corinthians 12:4, Revelation 2:7).

The word "paradise" is used three times in the NT: here, by Paul to describe where he went when he was caught up in a vision, and in Revelation to describe where God

will bless those who faithfully serve Him. Here Christ promises this robber being publicly condemned that he, too, will be there.

B. Christ promises his presence.

The greatest privilege of all is to live with God forever. The presence of God is one of the great themes of Scripture, beginning with man's original friendship with God, to the fracturing of that relationship, to God's work in restoring that relationship. The Bible is in one sense the story of God making a way for man to live with him again. Here this common thief is given the great promise that he will not just live in paradise, he will live with Christ in paradise.

I wonder if the mother of this man was present at his crucifixion. What if she was a follower of Jesus, and watched on in horror as her son, dying for his crimes, cursed his last hope of salvation. I wonder if she would have given up hope, not knowing her son, who was hours from death, was minutes from salvation.

As long as someone is breathing, there is hope!