

March 14, 2010

WHAT OTHERS SAID AT THE CROSS

“Hey, How About Me?”

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’” Luke 23:39

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. Lent is the six-week period of repentance, renewal, and preparation preceding Easter. It is a time when Christians remember in a special way the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Our Sunday worship services during Lent are centering in on the words which were spoken to Jesus as he died upon the cross. On previous Sundays we have considered the insults of the mob who gathered at the foot of the cross and the intense ridicule of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. This morning we will examine the insult which came from one of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus.

As you know, Jesus was crucified between two criminals. This arrangement was by design. If three men were crucified, the one in the center was considered to be the worst of the three. The leaders of the Hebrew people, together with some of the Roman soldiers, wanted to do all that they could do to discredit this teacher from Galilee. And so, they deliberately arranged to have Jesus placed in the position as the worst of the three criminals.

As the crucifixion progressed that day on the hill called Golgotha, some people in the crowd began to insult Jesus. One of the criminals joined the attack. He cried out, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” These words were not a plea for mercy. The Scriptures say that the criminal spoke these words for the purpose of insulting Jesus. That this is true can be seen by the fact that Jesus did not answer this insult, even as he did not answer the other insults that were thrown at him that day. He did, however, answer the honest plea for mercy which came from the other criminal. And that word to the cross will be considered next Sunday.

Now then, from time to time, I encounter people – as I’m sure you do too – who are interested in a particular enterprise only because of what is in it for them. Many people approach all of life in this way. Such people as quick to say, “I’m glad you asked me to do this, but what’s in it for me?” This was the attitude of the criminal we are considering this morning. He did not want Jesus to save himself. He wanted Jesus to save himself only so that Jesus would save this criminal. His

plea for mercy was no more than the desire for a self-centered kind of salvation. Let's look at this more carefully.

FIRST, THE SELF-CENTERED PLEA FOR SALVATION FROM THE CRIMINAL WAS A PLEA WITHOUT REPENTANCE. He did not seek repentance for his sins. He did not even acknowledge the fact that he had sinned. He did not seek human or divine forgiveness.

I have seen many people who want salvation without repentance. All of us have known individuals who have wronged another person and want to enjoy the advantage of the relationship without acknowledging their sin and asking for forgiveness. No healing can come to these people. No salvation will be found for the relationship until they have repented of the wrong they have done.

This behavior is seen especially in the marriage relationship. I have known husbands and wives who have sought to save their marriage without repenting of the wrong things they have done. I believe complete healing of broken relationships is impossible without repentance. When we have been wrong, when we are guilty, when we would desire forgiveness, we must be willing to admit our wrongdoing. So, if you have wronged someone in the office, classroom, church, or home, you must be willing to admit your guilt, if you expect to restore the relationship.

Yes, without repentance, there is no salvation. Jesus did not answer the insult of the criminal because it was a plea for salvation without repentance. If we would be saved, we must repent of our sin.

The criminal cried, "Save yourself and us!" Yes, he was asking for salvation, but he was not asking for salvation from his sin. **HE WAS ASKING FOR SALVATION FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS SIN.** Many more people want salvation from the consequences of their sin than want salvation from sin. I have never met anyone who did not want to be saved from the consequences of his misdeeds and mistakes. The crucified criminal, who hurled an insult to Jesus, was asking to be saved from the consequences of his sin.

One of the most difficult lessons of life for many people to learn is that God has never promised to save us from the consequences of our sin. For example, we may ask for forgiveness for drunkenness, and we will be forgiven, but God's forgiveness will not take away our morning hangover. Or, we may ask for

forgiveness for drunken driving, but God's forgiveness will not repair the damaged car or restore broken lives.

Friends, the salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ brings us divine pardon, but it does not undo the consequences of our sin. The person who would seek divine salvation must not come seeking to avoid the consequences of his sin. She must not believe that faith in Jesus Christ will save her from the consequences of her sin. If it did, our jails would be empty. The salvation that Christ came to offer is a faith to set men and women right with God and to bring an inner, lasting peace with God.

The criminal was not asking for this kind of divine salvation. He was asking for salvation from the consequences of his sin. His foolish request was not answered by Jesus. Likewise, our attempts to receive answers to such requests will also be ignored by God.

And so, as we have seen, the crucified criminal wanted salvation without repentance and a salvation from the consequences of his sin. **FINALLY THIS MORNING, HE ALSO WANTED A SALVATION SUGGESTING, "IF YOU DO THAT, I'LL DO THIS."** If Christ saved himself and the criminals, then and only then the criminal would believe in him. Jesus had to perform before the criminal would perform. He was really saying to Jesus, "If you save me from death, I'll be a better person." "You do this for me, and I'll do that for you." "If you give me this, I'll give you that." "Scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours."

Belief in this kind of salvation is commonplace. Many people pray, "Lord, if you heal me from this illness, I'll be a better person." Or, "Lord, if you will get me out of this mess, I'll be a good Christian for the rest of my life. I will go to church every Sunday." Or, "Lord, if you will let me get that high-paying job, then I'll be happy to give you one-tenth of my income."

Jesus never did answer the criminal. He does not offer that kind of salvation. There is no salvation without repentance. There is no salvation from just consequences. There is no "If you do that, I'll do this" salvation from God. I believe, in fact, that we insult God when we seek this kind of salvation. It becomes a selfish kind of salvation, a "what's in it for me?" salvation. The salvation that God offers is a salvation which requires a personal relationship with him.

Yes, I believe that we insult God, our family, and our friends when we seek salvation in the same way that the crucified criminal did. If there is to be salvation

for broken relationships, it will not come without repentance. If there is to be salvation for the mistakes and sins of life, we must face the consequences. For example, if you were out in the street playing catch with your son and broke my living room window with an errant throw, our relationship would not be right until you replaced the window. And it is always difficult to find salvation on a “if you do that, I’ll do this” basis in the relationships of life. Few can agree on acceptable terms. It is like trying to negotiate an arms reduction agreement with the Taliban. The relationship cannot be healed on the basis of the selfish question, “What’s in it for me?”

Yes, the cry for salvation from the criminal on the cross next to Jesus went unanswered and unnoticed. For our salvation demands a personal, loving relationship with God.

In the words of the well-known hymn – “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” So, my friends, repent of your sin and receive the gift of salvation. Give your life completely to the Lord Jesus Christ and live the full and abundant life that God wants to give you.

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