

These are not just two criminals on either side of Jesus, but all of humanity. It is as Jesus tells it in Matthew 25: *“When the Son of Man comes in His glory...then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left.”*

The soldiers placed the criminals on Jesus’ right and left on Golgotha. And even though we were not there to see it, we know that the criminal who repented was placed on Jesus’ right, and the other criminal on His left. And it’s because the one was a sheep and the other a goat.

This is a preview of the Last Day when Jesus will come in His glory. For truly, when Jesus was placed onto the cross of Golgotha, He was seated there on His glorious throne, and wearing His royal crown, the crown of thorns. And on the Last Day, all nations, every man, woman, and child will either be in the place of the criminal on Jesus’ right, or in the place of the criminal on His left.

There is no other place with Jesus. His right side or His left side. There is no place before Him or behind Him. On the Last Day there will be no multitude of mourners following Him as we see in our text. No rulers scoffing at Him from beneath the cross. No soldiers mocking Him with sour wine. On the Last Day there will only be the places on His right and His left. There will be the sheep and the goats.

What this means for you and for me is that we must place ourselves now with one of these two criminals. To be placed next to Jesus is to be a criminal; to be a thief, an adulterer, a liar, a murderer. *“He was numbered with the transgressors,”* Isaiah wrote of Him. All are transgressors. Jesus is not the king of people who are without sin. He is the King of sinners.

But the goats do not see it that way. The one criminal railed at Jesus: *“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”* This one was unwilling to accept his fate. He did not embrace his place next to Jesus. He deserved better. No repentance over his sins. He was living, and dying, in utter denial.

Jesus gave no word to this man. No word of condemnation, no word of promise. And yet, His silence speaks volumes. This criminal heard Jesus pray. He heard Him say: *“Father, forgive them...”* But the man was a goat. He did not accept the truth, either of his own sinfulness, or of the words that came from Jesus’ mouth – words of pure pardon and mercy.

This criminal heard no word of judgment from Jesus on that day. But on the Last Day he will hear Jesus say: *“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!”* Oh, if only he had listened, truly listened to Jesus when He spoke from His cross.

This is not the fate that Jesus wants for you. When He speaks, He wants you to listen. Do not be like the goats who think nothing of their sinfulness; who do not embrace their place here with Jesus; whose ears are not open when His words are preached from the pulpit.

If this has been you in the past, let it not be you in the future. Your place is not on Jesus’ left. It is on His right. Yes, it is the place of a criminal; one who is a wretched sinner. But it is also the place of Paradise. The place of mercy and forgiveness.

The criminal on Jesus' right acknowledged his sin. He did not deny his wretched life. He knew what he fully deserved, and he accepted it. But his ears were open. He, too, heard the words of pardon from Jesus' mouth. And this one believed that this mercy was for him. He turned to Jesus and asked to be remembered. Not for Jesus to remember his goodness. Not to remember his good intentions. "*Remember me,*" he asked. "*When You come into Your kingdom, remember me.*"

On the Last Day, Jesus will say to the sheep on His right: "*Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...*" And truly, these are the words this criminal heard from Jesus' mouth when he was dying on the cross: "*Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.*" "*Come,*" Jesus was saying to this criminal. "Come, the kingdom is yours right now. It was prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

No sweeter words have ever been spoken. And it is my privilege to announce that these same words are spoken to you. Your baptism does not lie. It is God's truth, His truth for you. And on the day of your baptism Jesus spoke to you the same words He spoke to this criminal. "Today, Paradise is yours. Today, the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to you."

Jesus is the King. And He gives His kingdom to those whom He chooses. Not to the best and the brightest. Not to those who live better than others, who avoid sin and are examples for the rest of us. Jesus gives the Kingdom of Heaven to criminals, such as the man dying next to Him. A man whose life was of no value. Who was a taker and not a giver. A man, most would say, especially his victims, who deserved a special place in hell.

Is that the place you deserve? Are you, as the apostle mourns, the *chief of sinners*? Then hear Jesus' words, "Today, Paradise is yours." Jesus claims you for Himself in your baptism. There in these waters is His choice, and it is you, for there He exchanges His innocence for your sins. He takes your wretched sinfulness to His cross, and in your baptism He covers you with His holy life.

You are forgiven, my friend. Not for some of your sins. For all of them. Because Jesus died for all of them. And He died for all of you. Not for the best among you. Jesus shed His precious blood for criminals, for lawbreakers, yes, for the worst of the worst. He shed His blood for you.

When the criminal on His right heard this sweet message, he was unable to live the rest of his life in love and service to Jesus because, in a few hours, he would be dead. In heaven, yes, but dead in his body. But perhaps, for you, this is not the case. Perhaps you have many days ahead of you. And so, as I look out upon all the criminals in these pews, and you look at this criminal in the pulpit, we who have heard the same sweet words from Jesus' mouth, will those words change us, or will they do nothing within us? It was the criminal on Jesus' left who heard these words of Jesus, and they did nothing within him.

But are you not the criminal on Jesus' right? And so, the sweet message of forgiveness, life, and salvation that is yours in Christ Jesus, it will work within you, it will change you, and you will show yourself to be that criminal on Jesus' right by how you live.

"*Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.*" You will hear these sweet words on the Last Day from the mouth of Jesus because, today, you hear and believe His words of pardon and mercy for you. Amen.