

Which Side of the Cross?

Meditations On the Cross #3 – Pastor Gary Combs – March 24, 2024 Palm Sunday – Luke 23:32-47

INTRO: Good morning church! We're continuing our sermon series today entitled, "Meditations On the Cross." Today, on this Palm Sunday, the day when we remember Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem during Passover week, we want to contemplate the question: "**Which side of the cross?**" Because although Christ entered Jerusalem on a Sunday to adoring crowds waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matt. 21:9), Christ exited Jerusalem on a Friday to an angry crowd shaking their fists and yelling, "Crucify him!"

The crowds in Jerusalem were divided in their response to Jesus. They had different views of Jesus and took different sides. The message of Christ and His cross still divides people today. It still calls people to choose sides.

ILL: Now on this 24th of March, I'm aware that there's a lot of "side-taking" going on. It's March Madness and the NCAA College Basketball playoffs are happening. And some get very passionate about this. What color you wear and which side you sit on and cheer for really matters!

I remember when my sons played football at Fike HS. I would wear my Fike T-shirt and try to sit as close to the 50-yard line so I could see and cheer them on. Then when my daughter came along as a cheerleader, we started sitting near the band where we could see her cheer. You gotta support your kid, right?

Some years ago, a church member named Jeff had season tickets to ECU football. Now this was before my kids attended there and I wasn't yet trained into the ECU Pirate traditions. He invited me to tailgate and sit with him in the Pirate Club section. I wore purple. I got that right. But I soon found myself in trouble when ECU would get a 1st-down and the announcer would say, "Where it is a first-down..." And the fans would jump to their feet shouting "Pirates!" I kept getting caught flat-footed by this. Finally, Jeff looked at me very seriously and said, "If you're going to sit in the Pirate Club section with me ever again pastor, you better learn to stand and shout "Pirates!" When you're supposed to."

It's important to know whose side you're on in life. In the Lord of the Rings, two Hobbits encounter talking trees in the woods called "treebeards." They try to get them to take sides in the war against the evil dark lord Sauron. The Hobbit named "Pippen," asked, "Whose side are you on?" And Treebeard replied, "Side? I am on nobody's side, because nobody is on my side." The long-lived treebeard thought he could avoid taking a side, that he could put off choosing sides because he had all the time in the world. But the treebeard soon discovered that death and devastation was headed his way and he'd have no choice but to take a side before it was too late.

NEED: You may be here today thinking, "I've heard about Palm Sunday and the Cross of Christ. I know it's important. I'm moved by the story of Jesus. But I'm not ready to choose a side. I'm on nobody's side, because nobody is on my side." But the truth is that there is One on your side. His name is Jesus. And that's why he came and died on a cross in your place. He came so that He could take your side and bring you over to the Father's side.

Trans: You and I weren't in Jerusalem when Jesus made his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday 2,000 years ago. Nor were we there when He was hung on a cross between two criminals. We may not have been there, but the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross calls all of us to answer: "**Which side of the cross are you on?**"

BODY: In the gospel according to Luke, he recorded that Jesus was crucified between two criminals, one on the right side and one on the left side. They were both criminals facing death, both seeing and hearing how Jesus faced death. Yet they chose different views of the cross of Christ. They chose different sides. We are faced with the same choice. Which side of the cross will you choose? Let's read the text and see how this decision affected the two criminals and how it still affects us today.

TEXT: Luke 23:32-47 (ESV) ³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." ⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"

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THREE VIEWS OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST:

1. The **TRAGEDY** of the cross.

EXP: (32-33; 39-40) Look at v.32-33. “Two others, who were **criminals**... one on his right and one on his left.” These two men were both crucified on the same hill as Jesus. They were both criminals, both equally sinners, yet they had different views of Jesus. First, let us consider the TRAGEDY of the one who failed to recognize Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Let us consider the TRAGEDY of the one who rejected Jesus.

“**Criminals**” (32,33,39) (κακοῦργος, *kakourgos*) - Lit., “evil-doer.” Criminal, malefactor. In Matthew’s gospel they are called “robbers,” or “thieves” (Matt. 27:38). Both words imply that they were repeat offenders.

Three reasons why the cross was a tragedy for this man: (and for anyone on this side of the cross)

- **He refused to believe that Jesus was Lord.** (39). ‘One of the criminals who were hanged **railed** at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” “**Railed**” (βλασφημέω, *blasphēmēō*) - to blaspheme, revile, to rail at, to speak evil of.
 - **The Jewish leaders didn’t believe.** (35). And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”
 - **The Roman authorities didn’t believe.** (34-38). “And they cast lots to divide his garments ... ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him... ³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” Over the Jews complaint, Pilate had it posted in three languages:
- John 19:20 (NKJV) Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.
- **He remained in his sin.** The other criminal asked, (40) “Do you not fear God?” For he showed no repentance or sorrow for his sin. He was sorry he got caught, but he wasn’t sorry for his sin.
 - **He received no answer from Jesus.** Jesus didn’t respond to the first criminal. As Isaiah said:
Isaiah 59:2 (NIV) “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”



ARG: **The criminal who railed at Jesus treated the message of the cross as foolishness.**

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NLT) I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God.

ILL: In literature this is called a double tragedy, when one tragedy leads to a far worse tragedy. Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet portrays such a double tragedy. For Romeo took his own life thinking Juliet dead, and then she took her life after finding him dead. The criminal who rejected Jesus was already tragically dying on a cross, yet he doubles the tragedy by rejecting the very one who could save him.

APP: How do you view the cross? Which side are you on? Do you see the cross like the first criminal ... its foolishness, it’s bloody offensiveness? What is the cross to you? Surely, you don’t want to compound your sin by rejecting His salvation. We have been given a way out, we don’t have to live a double tragedy.

2. The **TRIUMPH** of the cross.

EXP: (40-43) Notice the different response of the criminal on the other side of Jesus. According to Matthew’s gospel, both criminals first “reviled him in the same way” (Matt. 27:44). But something changed this one’s mind. Something affected his heart. Was it the way Jesus responded to those who mocked him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (34)? Perhaps he had heard about Jesus from his fellow prisoners beforehand? Maybe he’d even eaten the free bread and fish that Jesus multiplied? Who knows? But he definitely took a different view of Christ, rebuking the other criminal, “Don’t you fear God?” (40).

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Three reasons why this man was accepted:

- **He admitted he was a sinner.** “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” (40).
- **He acknowledged Jesus as sinless.** “This man has done nothing wrong” (41).
- **He asked Jesus to save him.** “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (42).

And Jesus responded to him saying, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (43). For this man, the cross of Christ turned his tragedy into a triumph!

ARG: **Jesus canceled the record of this criminal’s sin debt to the Father by paying it Himself.**

Colossians 2:13-15 (ESV) ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by **triumphing** over them in him.

APP: When you look at Jesus on the cross what does it reveal in you? Do you see your own need for a Savior? Do you see that your own sin nailed there? As the second criminal began to understand, do you see your own guilt, but likewise see Jesus’s forgiveness? Do you see the triumph of the cross?

3. The **TRUTH** of the cross.

EXP: (43-47) Look at Christ’s response: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (43). Jesus tells us the “truth” of the cross. He tells us that we can be with Him in heaven as a result of the cross. Then notice the death that He dies (Read 44-46 explain: 6th hour = Noon; 9th = 3pm). He gave His life. No one took it from Him. Notice the response of the centurion: “He praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” (47). In Matthew’s gospel, he was reported as saying:

Matthew 27:54 (ESV) When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

That’s the truth isn’t it? That Jesus, the innocent Son of God died for our sins.

ARG: **For Jesus, the sinless Son of God, has reconciled to the Father by the blood of His cross.**

Colossians 1:19-20 (ESV) For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The truth: We are like the two thieves:

- **We are guilty of sin.** Romans 3:23 (NLT) For all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard.
- **We are under a death sentence.** Romans 6:23 (NLT) For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.
- **We must individually decide about Jesus.** Acts 4:12 (NLT) There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”

ILL: Pastor Allistair Begg: “Think about the thief on the cross. I can’t wait to find that fellow one day to ask him, “How did that shake out for you? Because you were cussing the guy out with your friend. You’d never been in a Bible study. You’d never got baptized. You didn’t know a thing about church membership. And yet—and yet, you made it! You made it! How did you make it?” That’s what the angel must have said—you know, like, “What are you doing here?” “Well, I don’t know.” “What do you mean, you don’t know?” “Well, ’cause I don’t know.” “Well, you know... Excuse me. Let me get my supervisor.” They go get the supervisor angel: “So, we’ve just a few questions for you. First of all, are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?” The guy says, “I’ve never heard of it in my life.” “And what about the doctrine of Scripture?”

This guy’s just staring. And eventually, in frustration, he says, “On what basis are you here?” And he said, “The man on the middle cross said I can come.”

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APP: Now, that is the only answer that we can give. “The man on the middle cross said I can come.” It can’t be because of something we’ve done. We’re like the criminals on the cross. We’re powerless. We’re already dead in our sins.

If the Father asked why He should allow us into His heaven, the only answer must be “Jesus! He said I could come!”

For the seeker: This is the only way to heaven. It’s by faith in Christ’s payment on the cross for our sins.

For the believer: This is why we continually need to apply the message of the cross to ourselves. Otherwise, we’ll begin to think it’s our good works rather than our faith in Jesus that saves and keeps us. As the apostle Paul reminds us:

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV) ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

CONCLUSION: Remember that great hymn written by Robert Lowry (1876), “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus?”

What can wash away my sin?	O precious is the flow
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.	that makes me white as snow;
What can make me whole again?	no other fount I know;
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.	nothing but the blood of Jesus.

You and I weren’t in Jerusalem the day Jesus was nailed to that cross, the day His blood was shed and He died in our place. But it was His love that sent Him there and our sin that nailed him there. The cross of Christ still stands before us today. **Which side of the cross are you on?**

When you look at the cross of Christ...

1. Do you see it as a **tragedy**? Are you on the side of the criminal who rejected the cross?
2. Do you identify with the criminal who recognized his own sin and trusted Christ to **triumph** over death?
3. Will you accept the **truth** of the cross? Will you decide to put your trust in Christ as Savior?

Let’s pray.