

# Which Thief Are You?

by Brad Jersak

## Mark 10:35-40

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

## Luke 23:32-43

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the

king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

**W**hen will we face the final judgment? Historically, people of virtually all faiths have looked forward to a day in the future, a final accounting where God examines our lives and renders a final verdict and sentence. Christianity is no exception, for the Scriptures (and Christ himself) foretell such a day (though Scripture does not support specific expectations and assumptions many have).

And yet in John's Gospel, Christ says the Father did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17). He doesn't say that Father will sentence unbelievers to perish. He says he came to save a world already perishing. He says that the Father renders all judgment into his hands and he himself judges no one. Seek

the Scriptures and you'll see for yourself.

The Jesus of John's Gospel also says that the judgment has already come and the verdict is already rendered BY US! By our orientation to the Light. And this comes into clearest focus when Christ is lifted up, glorified and enthroned **on the Cross!** (John 12:32). The prince of this world is driven out and the world system stands condemned (John 12:31; 16:8-11).

The Cross becomes, for John, Christ's judgment seat and our response is our sentence. Choosing Light is life and rejecting the Light is death. It's not that one leads to the other. Any judgment is intrinsic to our choice regarding divine Love.

That's why some stylized versions of the Cross have a slanted footrest at the bottom. This represents the Cross as a scale of justice. The side that points up represents a willing "Yes!" to redemption and the side that leans downward represents a willful "No" to salvation. At the Cross, we become our own judges.

Historically, the two thieves crucified with Christ became archetypes of those choices. They are the first to pronounce their own judgment, one through a saving plea for mercy and the other through his damning mockery of our Lord. The story is framed to challenge us: **"We are all one of the two thieves—which thief are you?"**

## Refracted through the All-Merciful Judge

As I meditated on this passage, I began to refract the words, spoken and unspoken, through the pure prism of Christ the All-Merciful. I slowed my pace to read between the lines and beyond my assumptions. What follows are not conclusions and still less “doctrine.” They are prayerful observations and nothing more, held before *Abba* with open hands.

I’ll call the penitent thief “**thief #1**” (though he doesn’t speak first). Notice what Jesus actually says to **thief #1**: “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” I’ve always wondered how that could be since on Easter Sunday, he tells Mary Magdalene, “*I have not yet ascended to my Abba.*” I’ll leave that riddle with you for now. Enjoy the mystery!

Here’s my first point, refracted through mercy: just because Jesus said to **thief #1**, “*Today you will be with me in paradise,*” does that automatically mean he’s implying to **thief #2**, “*You will NEVER be with me in paradise*”?

Just because **thief #1** asks Jesus, “*Remember me,*” does that automatically Christ will remember **only** him and not **thief #2**? What if Jesus’ deepest desire is for *Abba* to remember and forgive *everyone* at the Cross? In fact, isn’t that exactly what Luke 23:34 says, immediately after we were first introduced to the thieves?

Now we come to the actual words of **thief #2**: “*Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!*” Given his predicament, I’d say that’s not a bad prayer. If we hadn’t heard the words filtered through Luke’s report (“he hurled insults”), we might be less inclined to pick up on the snotty tone. Still, refracted through the All-Merciful One, I imagine Jesus’ answer: “*I AM. And I will.*”

Which thief do you see? After all, Christ has already said of himself, “*No one takes my life from me. I lay it down and I take it up of my own accord.*” And he says of all those there that day and across all time, “*If I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself.*” Even **thief #2**? Even me?

We tend to default so quickly to dualist binaries that the two thieves become the perfect image of us and them (and I’m somehow always in the “us” group). I can identify with the penitent thief, humbly asking for mercy (because I do, a lot) or with Peter, tearfully confessing his three-fold denial.

But we so seldom identify with **thief #2** in his desperate, rude cry for salvation or Judas the betrayer, despite his grief and return of the blood-money. That’s because we see them so clearly in the “them” camp, even through the Evangelists’ eyes. Because of that, we may fail to see love for him in Christ’s eyes.

But wasn’t the Cross the ultimate negation of us-them enmity? Wasn’t it exactly on that Good Friday when Christ forever tore down the “wall of partition” between insiders and outsiders, the righteous and the damned, the enlightened and the ignorant? And don’t we regard it as a day of hope for all sinners?

Maybe not. Maybe **thief #2** is the one man so offensive that Christ used his final energy to turn his face from him. Maybe **thief #2** and Judas really are just “toast,” our permanent images of those who are eternal hopeless. Maybe **thief #2** is our sure proof that death can, at the end, separate “them” from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, Paul’s convictions notwithstanding (Romans 8:38-39). I sure hope not. □

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