

to dear listeners.

The painter Rembrandt drew up an image called "The Three Crosses," a portrayal of the three men up passage being crucified beside each other. But pictures only say so much. While the picture is worth a thousand words, it cannot come anywhere close to expressing as meaningfully as our eyes the event it portrays. So in light of Good Friday coming later this week, I want to consider with you at the three crosses of Golgotha, the Lord Jesus promises Paradise for repentant sinners. The mockery Jesus endured on the cross started well before our text. After he was stripped naked and nailed to the cross, after his clothes were divided up by casting lots, the rulers sneered at him. "He is others, let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" (Lk. 23:35) The Jews mocked him, saying, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!" (vs. 37). But now those who were suspended in the air beside him joined in on the insults. They were misled. "In the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, they are called robbers. And both of those men also say that both robbers heaped insults on him. Luke gives us the words of the first criminal: 'You and the Christ? Have yourself and us?' He does not believe Jesus is the Christ, he is mocking. 'C'mon! He who you claim to be! Be the Christ, and save us all!'"

Terrible. These criminals are in the exact same situation as the Lord. This man went about his life not just, but that did not make him stop and think about what he was doing. Sure, he wanted to be safe from death. But not spiritual death. *Physical* death. He wanted salvation from the cross! This man demanded that Jesus save him on the cross row! There was no faith involved. There was no grace at all. He had no change of heart. And that was to be expected from a hardened criminal. That's why what happens next is so startling. There is a change of heart in the second criminal. He asks the first criminal, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same condemnation?" What is saying is, "Soon you will be face to face with the judgment of God. Instead of spending your last moments mocking and insulting, why not use your last breath to humble yourself before God? Fear God with him for forgiveness of your past!"

He continues, "And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." These are the words of repentance. This criminal confesses his guilt, accepts responsibility for it. He knows his sentence is completely just.

What has brought this all about? Why this change of heart? We don't know what particular event did have triggered this confession. But it is the work of God, the power of the Holy Spirit that right this change in the man's heart. There is faith and repentance where previously there was hatred defiance. There is confession. We are getting punished because we deserve it.

This criminal confesses the innocence of Jesus. "This man has done nothing wrong." He admits that punishment all three received was justly inflicted on himself and his fellow robber. But not on us. Christ hanging on the cross because he did nothing wrong. Dear listeners, he hung on the cross because we did everything wrong. This is our deepest shame. Christ did not get what he deserves. He got what we deserve. We should have hung on that cross, under God's eternal curse. It is deserved. But what we deserved, Christ received. Consider your sins and what they all cost. And consider how merciful the Lord is, that those who believe in him do not get what we deserve. We need a Saviour, one who receives what our deeds deserve.

Well, this convicted robber uses his last breath to ask for something he did not deserve: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." By the work of the Holy Spirit, this man is led to that the kingdom of Jesus is not just some temporal kingdom. It is an everlasting kingdom. The

It does not mark the end of this man. The nails that pierce him, and the nails that pierce him, will prevent him from entering his kingdom. The man believed this, that Jesus was the king of a coming plom. That is true faith, dear listener. Confessing your own guilt. And committing your life to Jesus life.

What a difference between this man's plea and the plea of the other criminal. "Save yourself and the one says: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," the other says. Both ask salvation. But what is the difference? One asked for temporal salvation in sarcastic unbelief, the other for eternal salvation in humble faith. "Remember me!" "Think of me, when you enter the halls of your kingdom. I want to be there with you. I know you have the power to grant me forgiveness and mercy. So look upon me in mercy.

Now, we today know Christ is risen from the dead. We have the testimony of God's Word that he declared death on the third day. How much more, then, ought we to beg for God's mercy and grace in Christ? We ought to come in even greater humility than this criminal, and cry out for God's promise, and for eternal life.

And then, leaving this life is something we may look forward to. For Jesus responds to the criminal who says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." "But no," Jesus says, "today you will be with me in Paradise." What a startling declaration this must have to the Lord Jesus will remember this repentant criminal. And he grants this repentant thief mercy he asked for. This blessing will not come sometime in the distant future. That's what the criminal asked for. Remember me when you come into your kingdom. "But no," Jesus says, "today you will be with me. Today you will go from excruciating pain to the refreshing springs of the garden of God." For that is what the Lord has in mind when he mentions Paradise. It's a word that hark back to the dawn of Eden. It is a place where God will dwell with his children who truly believe in him. Paradise closed off in Genesis. But by dying on the cross, Jesus Christ has opened the way again, the access to peaceful gardens. Our passage is clear. The Lord and nothing to the one who invited him. Salvation was for him. Only the repentant thief was saved by Christ. He was a criminal no more. He saved this man out of grace. You will be with me, not because of anything you have to offer. That was of my love. I have come to promise Paradise to those who believe.

Do you see how awesome all of this is? Christ knew his suffering of the agony of hell would bear fruit. That is why he could with all boldness make the promise he did, that the criminal's reward is coming today. In less than six hours, Jesus' promise was fulfilled. After being totally abandoned and when by his Father in those three hours of darkness, after suffering that eternal, hellish agony, he died with a loud voice. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He breathed his last, and entered the paradise of God. He opened Paradise and entered in the thief with him.

Let me now ask, is heaven ever in your mind? In the perfection of Paradise something you think of? Lord God has opened the way to enter Paradise, through Christ's death. Eternal life is for those who believe in Christ. The robber received eternal life. We may receive it as well. But only if we know that we deserve it. If you know what you really deserve, then let it also be clear where you can go to get what you deserve. Seek Christ, in repentance and faith. Not later, not tomorrow. It's until the day of your death to make your confession of faith. Live in God's grace today. He will not turn you aside. You may rest assured in the promise of Christ. Forgiveness of our sins leads to eternal life. In Paradise. Forever. Plead with the Lord to remember you in mercy. For those who love and love the kingdom of Christ, Paradise awaits. And that message is what makes Good Friday very good.