

Most of us have a list. There is a purpose for the list: to prove we are good. But there is a problem with the list: none of us is good enough.

Paul made this point when he placed two short-fused sticks of dynamite in the third chapter of his letter to the Romans. The first is in verse 10. "There is no one who always does what is right," he wrote, "not even one." No one. Not you. Not me. Not anyone. The second explosion occurs in verse 23. "All have sinned and are not good enough for God's glory."

Boom. So much for lists. So much for being "basically good."

Then how do you go to heaven? If no one is good, if no list is sufficient, if no achievements are adequate, how can a person be saved?

No question is more crucial. To hear Jesus answer it, let's ponder the last encounter he had before his death. An encounter between Jesus and two criminals.

All three are being crucified.

One might like to think that these two thieves are victims. Undeserving of punishment. Good men who got a bad rap. Patriots dying a martyr's death. But such is not the case. Matthew dispels any such notion with just one verse, "The robbers who were being crucified beside Jesus also insulted him" (Matt. 27:44).

Tragedy reveals a person's character. And the tragedy of this crucifixion reveals that these two thieves had none. They slander Jesus with their last breaths. Can you hear them? Voices—husky with pain—sneer at the Messiah.

"Some king of the Jews you are."

"Life is pretty tough on Messiahs these days, eh?"

"How about a little miracle, Galilean?"

"Ever see nails that size in Nazareth?"

You'd expect it from the Pharisees. You'd expect it from the crowd. Even the mocking of the soldiers isn't surprising. But from the thieves?

Crucified men insulting a crucified man? It's two men with nooses on their necks ridiculing the plight of a third. Two POWs before a firing squad taunting another's misfortune.

Could anyone be more blind?

Could anyone be more vile?

No wonder these two are on the cross! Rome deems them worthy of ugly torture. Their only value to society is to serve as a public spectacle. Strip them naked so all will know that evil cannot hide. Nail their hands so all will see that the wicked have no strength. Post them high so all will tell their children, "That's what happens to evil men."

Every muscle in their bodies screams for relief. Nails pulse fire through their arms. Legs contort and twist seeking comfort.

But there is no comfort on a cross.

Yet even the pain of the spike won't silence their spiteful tongues. These two will die as they lived, attacking the innocent. But in this case, the innocent doesn't retaliate.

The man they mocked wasn't much to look at. His body was whip-torn flesh, yanked away from the bone. His face was a mask of blood and spit; eyes puffy and swollen. "King of the Jews" was painted over his head. A crown of thorns pierced his scalp. His lip was split. Maybe his nose was bleeding or a tooth was loose.

The man they mocked was half-dead. The man they mocked was beaten. But the man they mocked was at peace. "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

After Jesus' prayer, one of the criminals began to shout insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Then save yourself and us" (v. 39).

The heart of this thief remains hard. The presence of Christ crucified means nothing to him. Jesus is worthy of ridicule, so the thief ridicules. He expects his chorus to be harmonized from the other cross. It isn't. Instead, it is challenged.

"You should fear God! You are getting the same punishment he is. We are punished justly, getting what we deserve for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong" (vv. 40–41).

Unbelievable. The same mouth that cursed Christ now defends Christ. What has happened? What has he seen since he has been on the cross? Did he witness a miracle? Did he hear a lecture? Was he read a treatise on the trinity?

No, of course not. According to Luke, all he heard was a prayer, a prayer of grace. But that was enough. Something happens to a man who stands in the presence of God. And something happened to the thief.

Read again his words. "We are punished justly, getting what we deserve.... But this man has done nothing wrong."

The core of the gospel in one sentence. The essence of eternity through the mouth of a crook:

I am wrong; Jesus is right.

I have failed; Jesus has not.

I deserve to die; Jesus deserves to live.

The thief knew precious little about Christ, but what he knew was precious indeed. He knew that an innocent man was dying an unjust death with no complaint on his lips. And if Jesus can do that, he just might be who he says he is.

So the thief asks for help: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The heavy head of Christ lifts and turns, and the eyes of these two meet. What Jesus sees is a naked man. I don't mean in terms of clothes. I mean in terms of charades. He has no cover. No way to hide.

His title? Scum of the earth. His achievement? Death by crucifixion. His reputation? Criminal. His character? Depraved until the last moment. Until the final hour. Until the last encounter.

Until now.

Tell me, what has this man done to warrant help? He has wasted his life. Who is he to beg for forgiveness? He publicly scoffed at Jesus. What right does he have to pray this prayer?

Do you really want to know? The same right you have to pray yours.

You see, that is you and me on the cross. Naked, desolate, hopeless, and estranged. That is us. That is us asking, "In spite of what I've done, in spite of what you see, is there any way you could remember me when we all get home?"

We don't boast. We don't produce our list. Any sacrifice appears silly when placed before God on a cross.

It's more than we deserve. But we are desperate. So we plead. As have so many others: The cripple at the pool. Mary at the wedding. Martha at the funeral. The demoniac at Geresene. Nicodemus at night. Peter on the sea. Jairus on the trail. Joseph at the stable. And every other human being who has dared to stand before the Son of God and admit his or her need.

We, like the thief, have one more prayer. And we, like the thief, pray.

And we, like the thief, hear the voice of grace. *Today you will be with me in my kingdom.*

And we, like the thief, are able to endure the pain knowing he'll soon take us home.

Lucado, M. (1999). *He still moves stones*. Nashville: Word Pub.