



## **Sermon Series: The Seven Last Words of Jesus**

“Today You Will be with Me in Paradise”

Preaching Text: Luke 23:43

9 March 2014—First Sunday in Lent

FUMC, Arlington, Texas 76011

Today we encounter the second of Jesus’ last seven words from the cross. Some of texts of the “Last Words” come from Luke, while others come from John and Mark. On Ash Wednesday we examined the first word: “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.” Today is the second word: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

The most important words a person ever says by popular reckoning would be a person’s last words. A person’s final words carry great weight. Throughout history we find many stories about the final words a person utters. In the world of philosophy Socrates’ dialogue *Apology* is famous because this dialogue recounts Socrates’ final words before he drinks the hemlock potion that eased him into death. Who can forget the moving scene in “The Pride of the Yankees?” This motion picture tells the story of Lou Gehrig who dies at the age of 37 of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a disease later bearing his name. He remarks at his Yankee stadium farewell: “Today I am the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

What is true for our culture is also true for the Bible as farewell speeches are important among biblical texts. Indeed the “farewell speech” is a biblical form or genre like a parable, a letter, a psalm, or a proverb. Charles H. Talbert writes:

A farewell speech form was frequently used in ancient Judaism (e.g., Gen 49; Deut; Josh 24; 1 Sam 12) and in early Christianity for Jesus (Mark 13; John 13-17; Luke 22:14-38) and for apostles (2 Tim; 2 Pet). In Acts 20 one meets a farewell speech put into the mouth of Paul. Farewell speeches are alike in that the hero knows he is about to die, so he calls his primary community to him and gives them a speech that includes both a prediction of what will happen after his death and an exhortation of how his hearers are to behave after his departure (*Acts: Atlanta: John Knox, 1984*).



A person speaking near death usually speaks moving words. Today's lesson relates one of Jesus' last seven words to the thief on the cross. Hear today's lesson:

[39] One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? 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 have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." [42] Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [43] He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:39-43).

What is unique about Jesus' word, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" is that Jesus speaks as one who knows these are his last words and speaks to those who are uttering their last words as well. Both thieves know that not only is this the end of Jesus, but it is their end as well. In a sense, none of the three hanging on crosses have any hope of escape. This is the end and each of them knows it.

Yet when people become trapped they often reveal their basic nature. On the cross this is obvious. The first thief displays his nature when he mocks Jesus and says, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Some people's only use for others is to feed self-interest. Like the young man who was on a date and said, "Well enough of my talk about me. What do you think about me?" The first thief only saw Jesus as his last hope to escape the fate he probably richly deserved.

The second thief, however, emerges heroic compared to his cohort, rebuking the first, and saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done



nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Here the criminal is at the end of his life and he knows it. Yet, even in his moment of final tragedy, he still speaks the truth. He also sees Jesus regal spirit and asks, “Jesus remember me.”

The situation of this final conversation between the two thieves and Jesus emphasizes a conspicuous Lucan theme. Luke often describes in Jesus’ life divided opinions about him. Mary and Joseph had a disagreement when Jesus stayed behind in the temple. Luke relates that “When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, ‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety’ ” (Luke 2:48). We can only image the conversation between Mary and Joseph as they retraced their steps back to Jerusalem. Other examples exist, but suffice it to say that Luke demonstrates in Jesus a division of opinion. On three crosses on Good Friday it was no different.

Oddly, Jesus does for the first thief what he asks by saving the second thief and he demonstrates several other key Lucan themes. First, he declares Jesus’ innocence. Second, he accepts Jesus royal status by seeking his kingdom. Third, as a faith act he asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus enters his kingdom. An outcast thief now accepts salvation at the last hour when many have missed the opportunity. Jesus, in his own suffering ministers to those on the fringes of polite society. He continues his ministry to “seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

What does “today” mean in the phrase, “Today you will be with me in Paradise?” Luke uses “today” as a moment of special revelation or salvation. For example, an angel says “to you is born this day in the city of David a



Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Also, when Jesus speaks in his Nazareth synagogue, he informs those gathered, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

In two of the three places we find the word “Paradise” in the NT, it refers to the garden God prepared for Adam and Eve. But even more commonly Paradise is the abode of the righteous. This is the place where Jesus suggests that he and the second thief will be “today.”

From the cross things looked grim to the second thief and perhaps we see our lives as hopeless. Yet, where the spirit of the Lord is there is both truth and justice. While we may not think about looking for hope on a hill of death, wherever Jesus is, there is God and God’s righteousness. Listen to this example of someone who was in dire straits similar to the thieves next to Jesus on the cross.

Henry F. Lyte was a pastor who came up with the adage: “It is better to wear out than to rust out,” and this particular sentiment well described his life. During his last 23 years he pastored a poor English church. Lyte suffered from poor health and now his health declined even more. On 4 September 1847 he preached his final sermon. He needed a warmer climate and was departing for Italy. His sermon made an impression on his church and he nearly had to crawl to the pulpit. He said that he desired to “induce you to prepare for the solemn hour which must come to all by a timely appreciation and dependence on the death of Christ.”

In fact, Lyte never completed his trip to Italy, for he died on the journey. Shortly before preaching his last sermon he wrote the words to the hymn, “Abide With Me.” He based his hymn on the text which tells the story of



Christ on the way to Emmaus and the disciples' statement, "Abide with us: for it is toward evening and the day is far spent" (Michael Boutot's Blog, 26 October 2012).

Emory Austin once said: "Some days there won't be a song in your heart. Sing anyway." Hear verses one and five of Abide With Me:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;  
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Today is a day of decision. Are we going to mimic the first thief and mock God with our lives? Or are we going to be like the second thief who not only recognizes Jesus, but also asks to be with him? Wherever we are with Jesus, then we are in Paradise. Whenever we are with Jesus then it is today in the Paradise of God.