

Sermon for February 10, 2016 – Ash Wednesday
(Series theme: Ironies of the Passion)

Luke 23:39-43 (NIV84)

Theme: Don't you fear God?

- 1) *Confess your sins to Him.*
- 2) *Trust in His mercy.*

³⁹ *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* ⁴⁰ *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"* ⁴¹ *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴² *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* ⁴³ *Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

"Don't you fear God?" What a question, one that we would do well to ask ourselves. Don't you fear God – when you are tempted to tell someone a story about someone else that would make them look silly, stupid or sinful? Don't you fear God – when you are tempted to linger on the internet late at night, looking at inappropriate pictures instead of just going to bed? Don't you fear God – when your alarm clock goes off on Sunday morning, but you go back to sleep instead of accepting the LORD's invitation to meet him in church? Don't you fear God – when you grumble and complain about people and events in your life?

"But," someone might ask, "What, exactly, does it mean to fear God?" It means having a proper respect for who the LORD is and our relationship with him. It includes recognition of his absolute holiness and hatred of sin (facts that should make us afraid to disobey him, just as a child is afraid to disobey his parents out of fear of being punished). More importantly, a proper fear of God includes faith in his divine forgiveness, mercy and love (truths that move us to want to obey him, just as little children want to please their loving parents). Is it any wonder, then, that Luther's Catechism starts every explanation of the Ten Commandments with the phrase: "We should fear and love God. . . .?"

Now, here is the irony of the question "don't you fear God?": the man asking it in our sermon text is not Jesus or some angel from heaven; but a greedy robber whose entire life seems to have been lived in opposition to God. And yet, in all earnestness, this criminal calls another to repentance – asking him that soul searching question.

"Don't you fear God?" Let us also ask ourselves this question this evening – learning from the example of the criminal on the cross that true fear of God will move us to *confess our total sinfulness* and make us bold to *trust in God's mercy* for forgiveness.

Part One: Confess your sins to Him.

What kind of man was the criminal who confessed Christ from the cross? The fact that he was crucified indicates that he was more than just a petty thief, but a violent, selfish robber who hurt people to benefit himself. I imagine him to be a man who may have had some religious instruction in the synagogue schools (as most Jewish boys would have had) but never took his religion all too seriously. He didn't fear God – that is to say, he wasn't concerned about his relationship with the LORD. His main concern was looking out for himself.

I can imagine this thief being like a man I once sat next to on an airplane – someone who (if my other cabin mate was correct) was a member of the Russian mafia. When I told him I was studying to be a pastor, he pulled out his pocket icon of Mary and Jesus, and kissed it.

“What hypocrisy!” we might think . . . and yet aren't you and I just as guilty as he is – willing to kiss Christ on Sunday, but living as if we don't know him the rest of the week.

“What?” you might be thinking, “How am I in any way like the thief on the cross or the mafia guy you mentioned?” Because, like them, we don't always live in the fear of God. Don't we, more often than not, live for ourselves – doing all that we can to make our earthly lives better without thinking about how we might use the gifts and talents God has given us in service to him? All too often we go through the motions of our religion on Sunday but use our energies the rest of the week to consume the things of this world. Isn't it true that we sometimes live as if there is no God or heaven, but that all that matters is what we can touch, taste, see, hear, smell and experience on this earth?

This is how the criminal on the cross lived – until he came face to face with death. All the things he held dear in life - his wealth and health, his freedom and physical comfort – were now taken away. Great pain replaced them all with the threat of greater pain after he died. Even this, at first, did not change this criminal's heart towards God. He continued living defiantly – mocking Jesus with the other thief.

But then something happened. We don't know exactly what caused it, but this criminal started to think about his impending death and what got him there – and it terrified him. He had lived his whole life as if the LORD didn't matter; and now he was about to die and stand before the God he cared so little for in life. What comfort was the wealth he stole? What kind of eternity could he expect?

As thoughts like these went through his mind, he saw Jesus who was crucified for being the Messiah. “Could he be the Christ? A normal man, let alone a criminal, doesn't pray for his enemies like Jesus did – asking God to forgive them. And look at how he addressed God in that prayer: as his Father . . .”

We don't know how it happened or what caused it, but all of a sudden, the Holy Spirit awakened a true fear of God in the heart of this criminal – one that recognized his own sin and looked to Jesus as the Savior.

Therefore, when the other criminal *who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”* This one replied: *“Don't you fear God . . . 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.”

Make no mistake about it: the robber’s rebuke of the unbelieving criminal was an act of repentance. He didn’t try to defend his life or ignore his sin. He didn’t bargain with God saying: I have done more good than bad so you have to let me into heaven. No, he lays the truth out in the open for both Jesus and the other criminal to hear: “There is no excusing my sin. I am getting the punishment I deserve.”

This, then, is the first action of the man in whom a proper fear of the LORD has been created: he will not make excuses for sin - belittling their seriousness or trying to hide them. No, rather, he accepts what God says about the damning nature of sin and, in spite of how scary it is, lays the truth before God. “I have sinned,” he says, “and deserve your eternal wrath and punishment for them. I am completely wrong and am sorry that I have sinned against you. But, trusting in your mercy, I ask you to forgive me for Jesus sake.”

Part Two: Trust in His Mercy.

Now it’s one thing for this criminal to rebuke the other and confess his own sinfulness, but look at what happens next:

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Understand this verse correctly: the criminal is not saying, “Jesus, have fond thoughts about how I defended you when you get to heaven.” No, he is being far more audacious than that. He is in effect saying: “Jesus, think about me as you accomplish your work: forgive my sin and bring me to heaven.”

Now, what gives this criminal, who lived his entire life apart from God, who mocked and blasphemed Jesus up to just moments before now. . . the right to ask the LORD for mercy, let alone expect it? Actually he has the same right we have: none.

You heard me correctly, just like the criminal, we have no right, in-and-of ourselves, to expect mercy from God. He is holy and sinless. We are not. So why, then, did the thief ask for salvation – expecting to receive it?

Because when he looked at Jesus, he saw the Savior and remembered the Scripture’s promise of unconditional mercy, forgiveness and love for everyone who looks to the Christ in repentance and faith.

Where did the thief get this knowledge? We can’t know for certain, but if he grew up as an average Jewish boy, we can imagine that he learned about the promised Messiah at school. (And if this is the case, what does this tell us about the importance of Christian education today – even for those who fall away after receiving it!)

Perhaps the Holy Spirit used the memories of what the criminal had learned as a child and combined them with reports he heard about Jesus in order to awaken the conviction in his heart that Jesus is the Christ. The robber may have reasoned: “The LORD said that the Messiah would suffer and die for the sins of all - promising to forgive all who turn to him in repentance and faith. This, then, is what I will do. . .” And so he said, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,*” that is to say: “Jesus save me from my sins because I am convinced that you are the Christ, the innocent Lamb of God who is not suffering for any sin of his own, but for mine.”

⁴³ *Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Look at Jesus' reply and marvel! There is no hint of: “Why should I forgive you since you blasphemed me?” or, “How do I know you're truly sorry?” or, “I'll forgive you when you do something for me first.” No. Jesus offers the criminal complete forgiveness without charge – treating the man as if he had never done any wrong; welcoming Him to his Father's side in heaven.

And do you know what? When we, like the criminal on the cross, have a proper fear of God - humbling ourselves before the LORD in repentance and trusting in his mercy to forgive, God opens heaven to us too - treating us as if we never did any wrong.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Do you fear God - understanding that he is your almighty, holy Creator who hates sin? Do you repent of your sins – confessing that you not only deserve every bad thing that happens in your life but also an eternity in hell because of them? Are you bold to both ask for and expect God's forgiveness – not because you have earned or deserved it, but simply because he promises to be merciful to you for Christ's sake? Do you, in the peace of this forgiveness, intend (with God's help) to make every effort to stop living for yourself, but to live for his glory?

If you answered yes to all these questions, then rejoice, because the Holy Spirit has awakened a proper fear of God in your heart – one that sees the LORD for who he truly is: your righteous God, who hates sin, and your loving Father, who has done everything to save you from it. Rejoice, because then the words Jesus said to the criminal on the cross will one day be said to you: “*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*” Amen.