

**+ Luke 23:39-43 + Ironies of the Passion: Don't You Fear God?¹ +
+ Lenten Midweek #6 + 16 March 2016 +**

Do you know who Chester A. Arthur and Julia Sands are? Chances are pretty good that you don't. Chester A. Arthur was the 21st president of the United States. He took over after President James Garfield was assassinated in 1881. His career took an ironic twist when he inherited the presidency. You see, no one ever expected him to be president. In fact, he was only put on the ticket to heal a split in the Republican Party.

Even though Arthur had been a member of the Republican Party for years, the president had fired him from his job as the collector of customs in New York City. That was the richest government job in America at that time, yet also considered one of the most corrupt government jobs in America. Arthur didn't do anything strictly illegal, but he made lots of money and hired a lot of his cronies to unnecessary, well-paying jobs.

So when Garfield died, many people thought the best thing Arthur could do for America would be to resign. However, a young woman named Julia Sands wrote him a series of letters urging him to defy everyone's expectations and do the unthinkable—actually be a good president. Arthur took her letters to heart and persuaded Congress to pass reform legislation that included his old job. Then he vigorously enforced that legislation. He shocked friend and foe alike by permanently changing the way American government ran.

This evening another man speaks whose words would've shocked anyone who knew him. Unlike President Arthur, the words of the criminal are well-known, even though we don't actually know his name, but don't let familiarity blind you to the irony in these words: ***"Don't you fear God?"***

The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had finally condemned Jesus to die, so Roman soldiers marched him out to Golgotha. Crucifixions required serious logistical support. You needed poles, cross beams, nails, ropes. You needed soldiers to guard the prisoners and to keep order, because crowds gathered to watch crucifixions. Ordinarily there was a delay between the time when the sentence was passed and when it was finally carried out, but the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead that day.

More importantly, God wanted his Son to die on that Friday. So Jesus went immediately to the cross. On that day there were two other criminals awaiting execution. Since the Romans were going to all the trouble to crucify Jesus, they went ahead and crucified the two criminals as well. It was, after all, the most efficient thing to do.

As soon as he was nailed to the cross, Jesus' enemies began to mock him. ***"If you are the Christ, save yourself!"*** Then both criminals joined in. ***"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*** Both men started out mocking Jesus. What better way to mock Jesus than to throw his own words back in his face? "Come on, Christ! Use that miraculous power of yours and save yourself and us!" Jesus was certainly the Christ, the promised Savior of Israel, and he could have come down from that cross, but he had come to save sinners like those men who were dying with him.

What kind of men were those criminals? The Bible doesn't tell us much, but it seems that they not only were guilty of stealing, but also violence and maybe even murder. These men were habitual offenders. They deserved the death penalty, but without any warning, one of them asked the other, ***"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."***

Don't you fear God? Where did that question come from? If either man feared God, they wouldn't have lived the way they did! They were about to die. God has written in the heart of every human being a knowledge that God is going to judge us all when we die. So even in a hardened criminal, fear of facing the holy God isn't that unusual.

What's really surprising—and ironic—is that the criminal wasn't finished confessing. He trusted in Jesus to take him to heaven when this horrible experience was over. How did he come to know Jesus? Well, Jesus had been the most famous man in Israel during the three years of his ministry. The criminal had probably heard about some of what Jesus was teaching. He heard Jesus speak to the people on the way to Golgotha and even ask God to forgive the soldiers who nailed him to the cross.

It didn't seem like any of it had sunken in until, as he was hanging from a cross, the Holy Spirit worked through

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the Gospel that this criminal had heard and seen as he walked with Jesus to the cross. Through that Gospel, the Holy Spirit planted faith in his heart right there on his own cross.

God has actually done the same thing for you and me. When you see that criminal dying for his crimes, do you see yourself or do you think that you're not "that kind of sinner"? Well, you are. All of us are sinners from birth. The greatest lie of our age is that I'm good by nature. Our culture believes that there's a little good in all of us. If there are really bad people out there, they are limited to child molesters and drug dealers.

The truth is, it's all an illusion. Even though you haven't murdered anyone, have you ever had hateful thoughts about someone? Were you ever glad to see someone get what you thought they had coming or hoped they would get it? Even though you haven't stolen anything, have you ever been lazy at work? Have you ever been envious of what others have? Have you ever resented God's generosity towards other people?

To God, those sins of the heart are just as evil as the sins you act out. By nature, we are all robbers and all murderers. The sin in your heart contaminates everything you say and do. You and I are just as guilty as those criminals, and we all deserve the death and the hell they deserved.

Nevertheless, God has been every bit as generous to you as he was to that criminal. Jesus paid for all your hatred and murder, for all your greed and robbery, for all your sin. His blood washed it all away. He promises you what he promised that criminal—paradise with him. The same Holy Spirit worked through that same Gospel to give you the same faith in your Savior as that dying criminal. No one who knew that criminal would've expected him to make that confession. No one who truly understands how sinful your heart is can fail to be surprised by God's grace when he gave you faith.

Now that criminal knew he was dying, and without that realization, he might never have come to see what God had promised him. Do you ever wonder how you would feel if you knew exactly when you were going to die? Would it show the faith that man showed when he asked, ***"Don't you fear God?"***

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. It's the reason we have the word "excruciating" today. Do you know what usually killed the person? Suffocation. It was a slow, excruciatingly painful form of death that could take days. Thirst tortured them. They were exposed to heat and cold. That's why Pilate sent soldiers to break their legs. If those being crucified couldn't push up with their legs, they suffocated faster. That's why Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was dead after only three hours.

However, the soldiers did have to break the legs of the other two men. So from the moment it all started, this criminal knew what coming. Yet in all that pain, he found strength and comfort in Jesus. He didn't ask to be rescued from the cross. He didn't try to bargain with Jesus and promise to turn over a new leaf. He didn't even ask Jesus to spare him some of the pain. He simply asked only one thing: ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*** He asked Jesus to bring him home to heaven.

What's amazing is how Jesus responded. ***"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*** That very day that new believer would leave behind sin and all its consequences. He would be with Jesus at home in heaven. That's really the greatest joy of eternal life, and that promise of the Gospel kept his faith alive until he went home. That same Gospel led this new Christian to call another sinner to repent while he still had the physical strength to do so. That's perhaps the last irony of this account. Who would ever expect a man in this situation to witness to Christ? But God does wonderful, unexpected things even in the darkest moments.

In this man's final confession, we have a reminder that we too have our crosses. There is so much pain in this life. Many diseases can be as painful as crucifixion. Even if we don't face a horrible death, some of us may face pain that seems just as bad—spouses who are unfaithful, children who abandon us, abuse from parents, addiction to drugs or alcohol. All the pain and sorrow of this life attack you and your faith.

Now God never promised that we would avoid the crosses he lays on us, but he did promise to give us the strength we need to endure them. As we meditate on Christ dying for us and hear his promise that on the day this life ends you and I will see him in paradise, God works in our hearts. He comforts you with his love. He even gives you the strength to share your faith with those around you. When the time comes, those you love can take great comfort in hearing your confession that you are going home to Christ. There's nothing more important that you could share with them that will last long after you're gone. Between now and then, God gives you the strength even in the most painful moments to point others to your Savior.

What our God does for us is nothing short of amazing. No one who followed Jesus that day expected to hear the confession that criminal gave. He didn't expect to give it himself when he began that last walk to the cross.

Yet our God takes sinners like us and makes us his children. He even carries us through death to eternal life. Like that criminal, my friends, trust in Jesus to the end. Amen.