



2021 Weekly Devotions

Week of: March 29th - April 4th

Sermon: March 28th



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
building community • equipping believers • serving Jesus

March 29

Romans 6:23a

Have you ever stopped to consider that the very first sin ever committed among humans caused death? When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, in order for their sin to be “covered” by God, animals were killed, and their hides used as garments of clothing (Gen. 3:21). Sin causes death and requires the shedding of blood for atonement. It is important that you know that was a foreshadowing of what God the Father was going to do by offering a sacrifice in our place because of our sin. You see the connection? We sinned and God covered our sin and shame with a sacrificial substitute. Like Adam and Eve, our sin results in death too.

Brothers and sisters, sin is an unpopular topic in our society today. Even in churches scattered all over the landscape of our nation, sin is rarely mentioned from the pulpit because preachers cower to the whims and wishes of the congregants hoping to keep the peace. What they should be proclaiming vociferously is that there is no peace between man and God because of sin. Sin is the root cause of all the problems that we face as individuals, as families, and as a society. Far too often people behave as if the Gospel is a side issue that doesn’t really address the “real” problems in our world. For example, can you imagine someone arguing that we should be focusing on “bigger” issues like greed, racism, political corruption, and the like rather than a person’s sin? Humanity, time and time again fails to see the direct link between sin and all of the above-mentioned sins. We aim at the symptoms and totally miss the root problem – SIN!

In today’s text, one of the thieves on the cross recognized, by God’s grace, his sin. He proclaims, “And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds” (Luke 23:41). One could certainly argue that he is referring only to the judgment and sentencing of their court system but regardless, their crime (sin) led to death and we know from the full counsel of God’s Word that it led to God’s judgment and sentencing to hell. Paul wrote in Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death.” Friends that means the payment for sin is death. The end result of sin is death. It is the fulfillment of what God told Adam in the Garden of Eden when He instructed him not to sin because it would end in death. Why does this matter?

If we take the sting out of sin, apart from Christ, or the wrath from God we are left with a false sense of security. We are left believing that we are safe when we are not. If we live as though sin is insignificant and carries no real consequences, we are much more likely to remain in it and have no fear of God’s wrath. The reality however is that we need to hear about our sinfulness and our sin nature. If we are not cognizant (aware) of our sin and desperate need of forgiveness, then the Good News will seem unimportant. A major step in the thief’s salvation experience on the cross was his recognition of his sin and his agreement with Jesus that he deserved death. Do you see the honesty and the humility? This man admitted that he deserved to go to hell because of his sin. We all do but praise God that was not the end of the story and it was not the end of Romans 6:23. As Paul Harvey would say, “And now for the rest of the story.”

March 30

Romans 6:23b, Ephesians 2:8-9

The other half of our Text says, “BUT the free gift of God is eternal like in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Oh, how beautiful is this passage. Ponder this amazing truth today my friends. First of all, you read that it is a gift from God. Like any gift, it is neither something that you pay for nor earn. A gift is given to us. If we had to pay for it or earn it then it would no longer be a gift but a payment. If you work all week at your workplace and at the end of the week the boss hands you a check, you don’t think of that as a gift. Your paycheck is your just and due wage for the work that you performed. Our salvation is a gift – a free gift as a matter of fact. Paul adds the word “free” for more emphasis on the fact that you do not have to, nor can you work for it.

I believe you would be hard pressed to find a better example of this biblical truth than the thief on the cross. Here is a man who was receiving his just punishment for a life of crime and disobedience toward God. By the grace of God, his “eyes” are opened, and he sees Jesus for who He really is while at the same time seeing the reality of his own hopeless and helpless estate as a sinner before a holy God. This man, **from genuine faith and repentance**, cries out to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. Beloved, you cannot miss the fact that he did nothing to earn salvation. He had no chance to work for it, to make amends for it, or to add anything to it. The truth is that it doesn’t matter if you have 10 seconds to live once you are redeemed or 10 years. Regardless, you can never add anything to what Jesus has already done to save you. The idea that some espouse that you have to be baptized in order to be saved is equally fallacious and erroneous. Just for the record, I strongly believe that every believer *should be* baptized as a step of surrender, identification, and obedience but it is completely wrong to believe that one must be baptized as if that adds something to the cross of Christ.

This redeemed criminal had no time to make up for a wasted life and yet he heard Jesus say, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” We are not left to wonder if Jesus forgave him. We are not left to wrestle with thoughts of his acceptance into the presence of God. This man was completely and immediately forgiven and declared righteous. Why? How could this be? The only answer is God’s sovereignty in election and His amazing mercy and grace toward sinners. Friends, that redeemed thief on the cross was left with no room to boast. He did not have to struggle with thinking that he somehow merited God’s favor. There was no room for pride or arrogance toward others who were not yet saved. We don’t have any problem thinking that way about him, do we? But what about us? I imagine the level of gratitude and thanksgiving this man felt towards Christ was off the charts. Shouldn’t ours be too?

Folks, it would serve us well to meditate on our own sin just a bit today and pause to thank God for covering ALL your sins too. “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died...were every realm of nature mine, my gift would still be far too small. Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.” Isaac Watts was taken by the beauty and love of the cross and of God’s salvation of sinners. Oh, that we too would be. Rest and rejoice dear church family in the free gift of salvation. We deserve death and He gives us life.

March 31

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

I realize that this is a passage that we have emphasized on many occasions but the connection to Sunday's passage is undeniable and highly revealing. Again, we read of two thieves hanging on either side of Jesus on crosses of their own. Of course, by now we understand that they deserved to be there while Jesus Christ most certainly did not. How do we explain the obvious differences between the men's responses to both Christ and their circumstance? We could stay in the unfortunate Arminian camp of free will and simply say that one of the men chose, all of a sudden, to put his trust in Jesus and the other one did not. We will not waste our time with the incorrect thought that one of them was simply scared straight and the other was not quite so weak. Our time will be spent, as we are learning to do more and more, around discovering what the Bible has to say about the situation and allow It to provide us with truth.

Luke writes that one of the criminals continued hurling insults at Christ even while on the cross (Luke 23:39). We are given no indication anywhere that he changed his attitude or his ways before dying on that cross. These guys were likely partners in crime and were very much of the same nature. I find it interesting that Matthew writes in his account of this scene that both of the criminals were insulting Him at first (27:44) as does Mark's account (15:32). But, as the hours passed, one of the criminals began to feel conviction and remorse and ended up turning to Jesus in faith and repentance. We see that the thief who suddenly began to "see", changed his ways on the cross and rebuked his friend for insulting Jesus. What in the world happened to him?

Brothers and sisters, this was a supernatural move of the Holy Spirit in that man's life. He went from mocking Christ, from bitterness and anger, from unbelief and cynicism to genuine faith and repentance. When he made the declaration that "Jesus had done nothing wrong," this was a dead giveaway that God had given him eyes to see. This was a divine proclamation that Pilate knew, that Herod knew, that the hypocrites in the Sanhedrin knew. This man was stating that an innocent man was dying for the guilty. There was no way he could have known the depth of his statement beyond the miracle of "spiritual sight" from God. How he looked over at Jesus and saw the true Lamb of God dying for the sins of the world is remarkable. The only explanation is what I have chosen for you to ponder today from 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. It is in that passage of God's Word that we come to understand that He removes the blinding scales from a person's eyes so that they can see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Friend do you understand the magnitude of that moment on the cross?

God, in all of reality, opened that criminal's eyes and he beheld the glory of the Lord. The veil was removed from his heart and his eyes and he saw. This gives me chills even as I sit here and type these words. The same thing can happen in the lives of others. Pray for God's mercy and grace to be extended to your loved ones like it was to this thief on a cross.

April 1

Romans 10:9

The question that is sometimes raised concerning the salvation of the thief on the cross is, "Did he get a free pass?" Was this an exception to the rule of Scripture that says you must profess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead in order to be saved (Romans 10:9). I know that I covered this to a degree in the sermon, but I wanted you to have it written down on paper in case you forget what I said on Sunday. The answer of course to the question is a resounding no. This man was saved in the same way that anyone else is saved. Let me show you why I believe this to be true.

At the point when God removes the scales from his eyes and he is able to behold who Jesus really is, He literally walks through the Gospel while hanging on the cross. Notice that he comes to understand the wisdom and necessity in fearing God's wrath (Luke 23:40). From that we can surmise that He believes in God and the fact that God is justified in condemning and punishing sinners. He moves on with a profession of his own sinfulness (v.41). He actually goes so far as to admit that he is getting what he rightfully deserves. So already we see a belief in a Creator God who has the right to judge fallen man. But the old boy is not done yet. He then looks to Jesus as the One who can make atonement. He sees in Christ the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He states that He believes Jesus to be perfectly innocent and undeserving of death. I think we would all agree that so far, he is walking through the gospel beautifully. Let me recap for just a moment.

The Bible teaches us that there is a God who created everything including us. As our Creator, He has the right to rule and reign over His creation. He has the right to demand obedience as the One who has sovereign authority over us. With that being understood, we have a duty and obligation to obey our Creator and to live under His rule and reign. We all know that mankind failed in that obligation (Romans 3:23) and as a result deserves His wrath which leads to our death (Romans 6:23). For a person to be saved we must come to believe these things are true and that we are in a helpless situation. That is the bad news but then we know there is the Good News.

The thief on the cross then takes the final step of salvation by responding to the Truth of who Jesus is and who he is as a lost sinner. He looks to Christ as his only hope for eternal life. He recognizes Jesus as a King as he says, "When You come into Your kingdom." He also reveals that He believes in the resurrection of the King who is dying there beside him. He believes that Jesus was the perfect Lamb of God who was dying for sinners, that He would be resurrected, and that He would come into a kingdom where He would reign as King. Friends, surely you see that this man was saved in the same way we must be. As Romans 10:9 states, he believed in his heart that Jesus was dying, would be resurrected, and reign as Lord over all. This man humbly bowed before Jesus as Lord and professed with his mouth his faith in the person and the work of our, and his, Savior the Lord Jesus.

April 2

Philippians 1:23-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-8

Jesus told the regenerate thief on the cross that, "Today you shall be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This verse alone should serve to steer us away from the false teaching of "soul sleep." This predominantly Roman Catholic teaching holds that when a believer dies their soul goes to a holding place in a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection. This false doctrine was developed and advanced for the sole purpose of swindling people out of their money so the papacy could get rich and build extravagant cathedrals as poor people were manipulated into believing they could pay indulgences to quicken their loved one's release from purgatory. We do not hold to this teaching for many reasons, but one is the verse aforementioned. Jesus said "today." Paul wrote that to be absent from the body, because of death, is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). He also wrote, "But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and *be with Christ*, for that is very much better" (Phil. 1:23). Friends, I am encouraged and hopeful when I think of our beloved brothers and sisters who have already passed from this life. There is great comfort in knowing that as they take their last breaths like the thief on the cross, they are welcomed into the presence of the Lord immediately.

Now, if I am going to be true to what we believe the Bible teaches, I have to tell you that we believe in what is historically called the "intermediate state." There does appear to be a difference between the state of our being immediately upon death and our being after the resurrection. What we believe and teach is that our souls go immediately upon death to be with Christ, but our bodies remain in the grave until the resurrection which will be the time that our glorified bodies will be reunited with our souls. Please know that even as disembodied souls, there will be a continued consciousness of our personal existence. It appears that we will be "robed" (Revelation 7:13) in the righteousness of Christ until the resurrection, and then we will receive our resurrected bodies as they are described in 1 Corinthians 15.

Back to Paul! When he wrote about departing to be with the Lord which is far better, he used the term *departure* meaning from the body not to a temporary state of nothingness. He went on to say that the state that we will be in immediately in heaven is "far better" than our current state. Surely that does not mean unconscious or out of existence. Paul had already written that he considered knowing Christ better than anything else (Phil. 3:1-10). He surely would have felt it better to stay alive and to be aware of Christ than to fall into some state of not even being aware of the existence of Christ much less to not be in His presence. It is clear to me that Paul is telling us that we are momentarily apart from our bodies but that is a far better state than our current state.

Remember that the thief had just said to Jesus, "When you enter your kingdom remember me." Jesus in response to that says "today" that will take place. Finally, if you recall what John wrote in Revelation 6:9 you will see that the individuals who were already in heaven were talking to Jesus and were completely aware of what was going on in heaven and on earth. So, upon death, we will not be in the final state of heaven nor will we be in our final glorified bodies. But what we will be experiencing in heaven prior to the consummation of Jesus and His bride will still be heaven and it will be glorious and better than anything we've ever experience on this earth.

April 3

Isaiah 53

The thief on the cross that remained unrepentant and therefore unregenerate, made this statement, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us" (Luke 23:39). Beneath this statement is disappointment. What I mean by that is a frustration that Jesus was living up to expectations. Like so many of His day, and frankly ours, this man thought that the Messiah would show up as conquering king who would overthrow an oppressive and tyrannical government. In the process, He would set up His kingdom and the "good guys" would be in power. It is not unlike so many today who see salvation as the restoration of the United State of America and the implementation of a conservative government. I would like to see those things too, but that is not what Jesus came to do.

Back in the year 313 A.D., the Roman Emperor was a man named Constantine. In that year he ended decades of persecution against the Christian church. That sounds great and in so many ways it was. The problem however is that by the year 381, Christianity had become the "state" religion. Emperor Theodosius I **enforced** Christianity to be so. You might be tempted to think that was wonderful, but it was not. Folks, nowhere in God's Word does He say we are to force people to be Christians. To believe that is to totally misunderstand conversion, lostness, and the nature of the heart of human beings. You cannot force a person to be a Christian and neither should you.

When Christianity became the official state religion and people were just swept in, it opened the way to catastrophic confusion and it still does today. Good government is a good thing. But the idea of state enforced Christianity is a terrible idea. It has caused great confusion between loyalty to a state or nation and loyalty to King Jesus. It has caused great confusion between patriotism and being a true Christian. Like the unredeemed thief on the cross, many today are disappointed with Christianity and Christ because He is not, and we are not, taking over the nation in a political upheaval like so many desire. Even if we don't say it, many live as if our only hope is political power so we spend little to no time dealing with the root problem in our nation. The problem in our nation is not who is in charge in politics, but that people are sinful by nature and need to be born again. So, what did Jesus come to do?

Christ came to die as a substitute for sinners like you and me. Sin demanded death and the One who died had to be worthy – sinless. Jesus came to save us, but He came to save us by dying. He was not weak of that cross. He was incredibly strong. Someday He will set up His Kingdom on earth and rule and reign. But first, He had to go to the cross and die. Isaiah 53 is known as the "Suffering Servant" chapter of the Bible. It is there that we clearly see God's plan to send a spotless Lamb to die for the sheep who have gone astray. The thief on the cross viewed Jesus as weak and as a failure; so many did. They didn't like God's plan of redemption; many don't today. I hope that you see past the "foolishness" of the cross to the power and beauty.

April 4

Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:13-20

Have you ever pondered the importance of believing that God cannot lie? Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you..." (Luke 23:43). What would it mean to you if He was not trustworthy? What if we couldn't take Him at His word? We live in a time when it is hard to trust anybody. So, I think it is reasonable to ask the question, "Who do you trust?" In our world today, promises are given that mean absolutely nothing. Is this something that even matters to you? It should! If we aren't careful, we can easily become cynical and doubt even the trustworthiness of God and His Word. When Jesus told the redeemed thief that he would be with Him in paradise on that very day, you better believe that honesty mattered.

My chosen texts for this final devotion contain this statement, "In the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago" (Titus 1:2). The author of Hebrews says that same thing as well. Friends, there are so many precious promises in God's Word that are completely dependent upon His faithfulness and power. We can stand today knowing that, since He cannot lie, we can take His Word as Truth and rest with great hope as the "anchor of our souls" (Hebrews 6:19).

Jeremiah said, "Trust not in lying words." The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," and that's the answer. Proverbs 29:25 says, "Whoever puts his trust in the Lord shall be safe." David gives such wonderful testimony. For example, in Psalm 31, he says in verse 6, his own testimony, "I have hated those who regard lying vanities: but I trust in the Lord." And then in Psalm 37, he makes that wonderful statement, "Delight yourself in the Lord: He shall give thee the desires of your heart. Commit your way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass."

Church family, if God says for example, "You're safe with me," then you better be safe with Him, or His word is worth nothing. If His word is worth nothing, then He's worth nothing. So, the character of God is at stake in the question of protection, provision, safety, and salvation. Can you give your life to God? Take Him at His word? Can He keep you from falling? Can He finish the work He begins in your life? Will He lose you at some point along the line? Is there real security with God? Men and women of faith in the Bible believed there was (Hebrews 11). The Bible says there is.

When I stand beside gravesides and speak God's words of comfort to grieving families, all I have is His promises. We stand grieving but hoping because He says this is not the end. He says that He won the victory over death and the grave. He says that we will meet again someday. All of these things are true because God is Truth and cannot lie. So, when He says He is coming again, when He says He will see us through to the end, when He says He will never leave us – we can take that to the bank. "Truly I say to you..." seals it for me and I hope for you to.