

To God Alone Be The Glory

How would you define grace? Survey a thousand confessional Lutherans and most will answer: grace is God's undeserved love for sinners. No wonder so many of our pastors like to begin sermons with the greeting "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor 1:3).

Sometimes when people are stating the definition of grace, they stress the undeserved part (the law part) instead of the "he loves us anyway" part (the gospel part). If there was ever a person who did not deserve God's love, it's the criminal on the cross. Yet in the last few hours of his life, we see him receive God's grace anyway. His story preaches to us A MESSAGE OF ETERNAL HOPE.

What an excellent account! I love the contrast between this criminal on the cross next to Christ and all the other people who ridiculed the Lord. We hear the rulers sneering at Jesus, and the soldiers following suit. At first both criminals join in on the mocking of Jesus. But apparently the mockery sounds hollow in the ears of the second criminal. The Holy Spirit is working in his heart to convert him. This criminal knows that he is guilty and, as a result, he is worthy of punishment. Before God he has nothing to boast about. And he doesn't boast.

A little later the first criminal again barks at Jesus: ³⁹"*Save yourself and us too.*" Do you think he really expects Jesus to help him? Or does he just showing contempt for Christ like everyone else on Golgotha that day—as many still do today. The way most of the world treats Jesus, it's easy to conclude that they take offense at his cross and regard him as nothing important. He's certainly not anyone to stand up for. By this time even the disciples have deserted Jesus, all except John. There's no one to stand up for Jesus.

But the second criminal... he breaks through this wall of unified contempt. He no longer cares what others think. ⁴¹"*We are being punished justly,*" he tells his fellow criminal; "*we are only getting what our deeds deserve.*" Such honesty! He has good reason to be afraid of God. Yet he forthrightly owns his guilt for all to hear. And he will speak up for the Christ: "*This man has done nothing wrong.*"

Then he treats the Christ with respect, like the Savior of sinners that Christ is, like the king He is. Listen to the criminal's words: ⁴²"*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" He doesn't expect to live much longer, and yet he clamps onto hope for another life. What a glorious confession of faith!

But wait. Where did this criminal get such a clear understanding? We don't know. And when the Bible has gaps in its information, people are all too quick to fill in the gaps. There is a very old legend in the eastern church about this criminal. The legend says that he was born to a daddy who was also a thief. Daddy and Mommy Thief lived in the caves along the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. But their baby was sickly and close to death. One day another young family with a baby came along the road and sought shelter in the cave where the thief and his wife and sickly son were living. The traveling husband, Joseph, explained that they were on the run from King Herod, who wanted to kill their son Jesus. When the robber's wife saw Jesus in Mary's arms, she supposedly recognized him as the Messiah, rushed forward crying, and pointed to her own child wasting away on a pile of sheepskins further back in the cave. While the two mothers were talking, the infant Christ is said to have stretched out his hand toward the dying baby, whereupon health came back into the body of the sickly child. His cheeks grew rosy once more. How happy the mother of the future thief was! Thirty-two years later the two children met again, but now they were men hanging on two crosses. Legends often limp, and they can't stand up straight either.

I prefer Luther's thoughts about the possibilities, even though these also are

speculation. Luther imagined that as a boy, this criminal went to the synagogue and learned the messianic words we spoke earlier from Isaiah 53, about how the coming Messiah would be numbered with the transgressors. The criminal had also heard Jesus pray earlier, ³⁴*"Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing."* Let's just say that the criminal laid hold of that one word "Father." This was not a common way of addressing God. But God's Son could refer to God as Father. Did this criminal know that Jesus had taught his disciples to pray to God as *our Father*? We don't know. But Jesus had also just prayed for sinners who didn't know what they were doing—a rather Messianic thing to do.

We don't know how, but the Holy Spirit connected enough dots in the criminal's mind to enlighten him with His gifts. The man couldn't keep his faith silent any longer. He had to confess with his mouth what he already believed in his heart: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* He might as well have said, "I see you suffering there for me, Jesus. But after this you will rise and be Lord over all your kingdom. I will die soon, as I deserve. But don't leave me behind." That is a wonderful profession of faith, A MESSAGE OF ETERNAL HOPE!

Do you see the other truth we can glean from this account? God will always

preserve his Christian Church. Even if all the seemingly strong Christians should crumble and fall silent, God will still preserve a little flock who will have his Spirit and confess Christ before the world without fear. When the disciples who had been with Jesus for three years deserted him, a criminal had to step forward, confess Jesus to be the Christ, preach about him to all who could hear his words, and teach people how to find comfort in him. You see? The Lord God will not leave himself without a witness, even if it has to be one whom everyone else considers scum.

What a comforting account this is for us! No matter how bad you think you are, confess your sins and you will find mercy and compassion, as did this criminal. By this we know that Christ wants us to believe and never doubt that the sacrifice he offered up on the cross is not for the sake of holy and pious people, but for sinners. So if we don't want to think of ourselves as sinners, then we don't need the Lord Jesus Christ in any way, because he didn't die for his own good, but for us sinners. To say, "I have sinned," leaves an awful taste in our mouth. But the bad aftertaste in our mouth is washed out by the sweet message, "All sins have been erased from our records through Jesus' blood, shed on the cross."

It's unfortunate, but sometimes people twist this beautiful message into

something ugly. You'll actually hear people say that if you aren't as bad as the criminal, you might as well do a few hundred more sins because, well, he still got in. Or if Christ forgives sinners, then maybe you don't have to change and can just stay the same. But here again the criminal preacher shows us this is not the way our Lord would have us think. As soon as he recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, what does he do? He stops mocking Jesus, he defends his Lord, he condemns himself and his neighbor (—how intolerant!), and immediately he hopes to find joy in Jesus, knowing that his sins can't harm him before God any longer. In this way the Holy Spirit turns him around, and the criminal becomes a different person. His death will still happen later that day, not as a criminal any longer—not in God's eyes—but as a true saint with sincere confidence in God's grace alone.

May the Holy Spirit daily do for us what he did for this formerly wicked man through this MESSAGE OF ETERNAL HOPE. Your sins are forgiven because of Jesus. *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*