

## **Gospel of Luke 23:39–43**

### **“The Ego that does not Bow to the Cross”**

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Pastor Hikaru Kumon

Hymn 258 *Precious Lord God*

Sacred Song 402 *On the Hill Stands the Rough-hewn Cross*

What is the salvation that the Bible teaches? Today's passage is short, but in it the very essence of salvation is taught. Here, two criminals appear, but in the short time that they were hanging on the cross, a decisive difference between the two was revealed.

One continued to blaspheme Jesus. The other was able to go to Paradise. Though they were in the same situation, they arrived at a completely different conclusion. Why was it that one went to Paradise, and the other could not? I would like to look into this. Verse 39.

#### **Verse 39**

**“One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, ‘Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!’”**

We know very little about the background of the two criminals crucified next to Jesus, but since they were crucified, we should see them as having done something terrible. It would not be surprising even if they had committed murder.

Before entering into the content of the statements of the two criminals, let us briefly confirm about this crucifixion penalty.

In ancient Rome, the death penalty took various forms. For example, aside from the cross, you may have seen depictions of Christians being eaten by wild beasts in the theater. There were other execution methods as well, and each had its own unique characteristics.

Speaking of the cross, its purposes were two: “to inflict much pain” and “to shame as much as possible.” It served as a public deterrent.

In the Gospels, although it is assumed that crucifixion accompanied intense pain, the aspect of “shame” is even more emphasized. In the case of Jesus, He was brought to a place where people gathered, stripped naked, and above His head was hung a mocking inscription: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” And passersby looked at it and mocked Him.

A person crucified had to endure pain and shame until death, which could last several hours or sometimes several days. Today's passage is an event occurring while they were enduring such pain.

Now, concerning the two criminals—when Jesus was crucified, not only He, but also two criminals were crucified with Him. In this verse 39, the words of one of them are recorded. One of the criminals, together with the bystanders, mocked Jesus, and ended his life in that way.

The mocking words were, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us.” But these words seem to have imitated what the bystanders had said: verse 35, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.” Verse 37, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.”

It seems that this criminal, astonishingly, placed himself mentally not on the side of the executed, but on the side of the bystanders. He was not seeing himself objectively at all.

Objectively speaking, it is completely irrational and foolish behavior. Yet strangely, this behavior does not feel like Luke's fiction. Because, looking at reality, we find similar petty words and actions everywhere in daily life. This man was not an extreme case, but rather, we could say he directly revealed the true nature of fallen humanity.

In fallen humanity, there works a powerful force to turn away the eyes from one's own shameful reality. One can discover such a trait in others, but not in oneself. One does not even have the awareness that one is turning away from one's own shame. Within self-consciousness, one covers up one's true nature with an idealized image.

How powerful this “strong self-consciousness” is, is clearly seen in the figure of this criminal. Even crucifixion, which the Romans devised with difficulty in order to give extreme mental suffering, could not break this criminal mentally. He must have suffered shame. He must have lost much socially. But the very thing that could be called his spirit itself, this “strong self-consciousness,” remained intact, and it worked to protect himself. The core of his pride was unshaken, and he went to death with it. Such is the toughness of the human heart.

However, the other criminal crucified together with him reacted in the exact opposite way. He actively accepted the shame, and acknowledged himself as he was, hanging on the cross. Let us read verses 40–41.

#### **Verses 40–41**

**40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”**

**41 And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.”**

In Matthew's Gospel it is recorded that both criminals at first mocked Jesus. If so, then this second criminal, while hanging on the cross, realized that Jesus had truly done nothing wrong, and repented. We can surmise how he came to realize that Jesus was truly innocent.

It is highly likely that this criminal had already heard rumors about Jesus. And from the words of the bystanders mocking, he would immediately have understood that Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah. But that was not decisive for him, since at first he too mocked.

Ultimately, it seems that what was decisive for him was “the conduct of Jesus after being crucified.” As he watched, it became clear that the one hanging there was not some kind of fraud. The terrifying fact dawned on him—that it was not Jesus who was speaking lies, but the mocking bystanders.

Thus this second criminal, though mocking with his mouth, was unconsciously seeking salvation in his soul, and with his eyes was watching the conduct of Jesus. That was the decisive difference from the other criminal, who concentrated his awareness on protecting his pride. And this difference greatly divided the two criminals.

Luke describes the inner condition of these two criminals through the words that came out of their mouths. Let us pause here and confirm what can be read from the conduct of this second one.

First, verse 40 should be seen as words spoken after he had already had a change of mind. He saw the other criminal persistently mocking, and rebuked him. This word “rebuke,” in the original language, seems to mean “to show displeasure and cause to cease.” That is, he was not scolding from above, but simply felt displeasure and could no longer endure it.

The rebuking words begin, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same condemnation?” Obviously, the heart of the criminal who said this was already dominated by a deep fear. This fear was not of the fact of dying, but fear of God. It was the fear that “the unbearable pain I am experiencing right now is judgment from God Himself.”

Where did this fear come from? It was not the result of reasoning things out. Rather, once the criminal stopped self-justification, at that moment, naturally, he began to feel terribly afraid. Once a man is deeply convinced that he is one who ought to be punished and ought to die, he becomes terribly afraid of God. This is the state of a broken heart.

This experience was likely the first in his life. He came to be able to see objectively the condition of his own soul, and as a result, at the very end, he felt with his skin the necessity of salvation.

Thus this criminal, as if awakened, came to be able to see everything honestly, and the natural fear for a human being sprouted within him. Therefore, he could no longer understand how the other criminal could continue mocking. Behind his rebuke, “Do you not fear God,” was that sense of surprise: “The fear that naturally I feel—why is it that he does not feel it?”

The following remark was also most reasonable: “You are under the same condemnation.” If said like this, there is no room for rebuttal. He pointed out the very essence of sin—that self-evident facts can be missing from one’s awareness.

The criminal continues: “We are receiving what we deserve for our deeds.” His realization extended not only to the fact of being punished, but even to the fact that it was a just recompense. If one has done evil, then it is natural to accept recompense. So, he was merely stating the obvious.

Yet, as we saw in the other criminal's case, people do not necessarily apply this principle of "recompense is natural" to themselves. In fact, one could say the number who do is nearly zero. Even if they admit their sin, most people admit it with the attitude, "I did wrong, but I will not accept the recompense." A powerful self-consciousness works to protect oneself.

Therefore, we must not lose sight of the fact that, although the criminal's confession was only saying the obvious, for fallen humanity it was in fact a miraculous utterance.

Moreover, this was not something he was saying as a religious act of "confession of sin." These words came out unconsciously in the course of conversation with the other criminal. That is why we know it was from the bottom of his heart. Indeed, to even bring in the expression "he confessed sin" may be mistaken. The criminal himself probably did not even think, "I confessed sin." Rather, he simply got irritated at the other's persistent mocking, and in anger his true thoughts slipped out. Therefore, there is not a trace of hypocrisy in it.

The consciousness of this criminal then turned to Jesus, contrasting Him with themselves, and he said: "But this Man has done nothing wrong." In the eyes of this honest criminal, awakened and able to look straight at his own fault, he could not see any fault in Jesus. And it was not merely that Jesus did not deserve crucifixion. Astonishingly, he was saying that the One hanging on the cross is God. Verse 42.

#### **Verse 42**

**"And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom.'"**

Here the criminal clearly sees Jesus as God. He realized that all authority belonged to this very One hanging on the cross.

What we must note here is the fact that at this place, only this criminal, in the depths of his being, realized that Jesus is God. Why did not the other criminal, the Roman soldiers, the Pharisees, or the other bystanders realize? Why only this criminal?

In answer to this, some say that it was because the Holy Spirit worked, and so this criminal came to understanding. We should not deny that such an aspect is present. But perhaps that is a little off from the essence.

When we look at what Luke recorded, another kind of logic comes into view. As I said earlier, Luke is contrasting the criminal who realized that Jesus is God and the one who kept on blaspheming. The one who kept on blaspheming had that strong self-consciousness working, refusing to look at his own condition. But the other, as if his eyes had been opened, came to be able to see honestly his own distorted condition.

That this "right" criminal came to be able to see his own distorted condition honestly, and that he understood that Jesus was a righteous man—surely these are not unrelated. If we only read the Gospel record and look at the outcome, we see that in the end, some of the Roman soldiers and bystanders also, seeing the sight of Jesus dying, thought that Jesus was God. In fact, those who were there had been vaguely sensing this all along. But

the understanding of the Roman soldiers and bystanders remained at the intellectual level. They did not come to Jesus as those who needed salvation of the soul, but only knew Him as God while looking upon themselves as righteous, arrogant people. Therefore, their realization that Jesus was God remained as an intellectual fact unrelated to themselves. No—in terms of recognition, it may not even have been that they thought Jesus was “God.” In substance, it may have been only at the level of thinking, “He is a pitiable man, just like us.”

But the “right” criminal approached Jesus with a completely different attitude. Awakened from the false daily life of self-justification, he came before Jesus as a sinner bearing a serious burden. Therefore, only to this man, the fact that Jesus is God had a different meaning. As one sinner, he realized there was no hope apart from this One.

Let us move to the content of his statement. The criminal said as follows: “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom.” From the shortness of this statement, and the fact that all he could say was “remember me,” we can read the distance this criminal felt between himself and Christ. It reveals a self-awareness that he was one far away from God. Just as he did not wish for forgiveness when looking at other people’s crimes, he could not easily ask for forgiveness concerning his own evil either. So then—it was fine to leave it all to what Jesus decided. That was the point.

To such a criminal, who approached with such an attitude, Christ responded.

### **Verse 43**

**Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”**

It was declared that this criminal would be with Jesus, that very day, in Paradise. It means that without waiting for the Last Judgment, immediately after death he would be there.

This criminal was the kind of man who very likely had committed murder, but God did not consider that to be something that barred him from going to Paradise. No—he did not escape recompense. While alive, he went through torture so severe that it made death seem preferable. Jesus did not save this man from the cross. Even the criminal himself thought that being taken down from the cross would be contrary to justice, and so he did not ask to be saved from the pain of the cross. He admitted that it was something he ought to receive.

Therefore, whether one is a Christian or not, concerning the evil deeds one has committed, one must bear responsibility. That is only natural. People do not forget the evil they have done, nor do others forgive it. One must bear that responsibility. And in the case of this criminal, the recompense for what he had done was fittingly the penalty of crucifixion.

However, the responsibility one bears is in the interpersonal realm. The responsibility before God was forgiven through Jesus. That was because he repented.

Now, let us move to conclusion and application. This morning, through the contrast of the two criminals who appeared in this passage, we have seen where lay the decisive difference between the one who went to

Paradise and the one who did not. If we were to summarize it in one word, it was whether or not that “powerful self-consciousness of self-justification” remained intact. One, even while hanging on the cross, had that powerful self-consciousness at work, and to the end never faced his own condition. The other—his very powerful self-consciousness was shattered, and he ceased to justify himself. Therefore, in the second there was the fear of God, there was the realization that Jesus is God, and there also sprouted the heart that seeks salvation. But these were only secondary. If self-consciousness is shattered, such things naturally arise. The decisive matter is whether or not the ego has been shattered. In the end, it is not whether one made a confession of faith, but what attitude lay in the background of that confession that is called into question.

Concerning whether this self-consciousness is shattered or not, we must note that this is not identical with confessing sin. What is at issue here is not a rational confession, but something belonging to the realm of attitude.

In Japan, apology press conferences by individuals often become news, but even there, what is questioned first is not the content of the words of apology spoken, but the attitude. Whether there is sincerity in the apology, whether there is the intention to return, what kind of recompense one intends to take—all are pursued strictly.

Even if the person apologizing thinks it is a wholehearted apology, most of the time people see arrogance peeking through the apology, and instead it pours oil on the fire.

If we apply that to these criminals: one had a bad attitude, with no sign of repentance. But the other, even while suffering pain on the cross, even while exposing himself in shame, said that it was only natural, accepted death, and remained silent without excuses. He was not thinking about returning to this world, nor was he seeking restoration of honor. He had completely let down all defenses, and was in a state of admitting everything. Of such a one, though forgiveness may not come, could it not be said that as a perpetrator he at least took the proper attitude?

Then, what about us Christians? Was our confession of sin such that, even under the strict eyes of society, it would be recognized as genuine? Was it such that, truly admitting “I was wrong,” even the people of society would nod? Was it a confession that would not be shameful even if presented at a press conference?

If it was of a kind that people would not nod to, then would it not also mean that in the eyes of God, whose standard is much higher, such a confession had almost no meaning? Then we begin to see how sincere the attitude of this criminal was. Before God, far stricter than man, his way of facing his sin and his attitude toward Christ were acknowledged there on the cross.

As for the other criminal, it was not only that he kept his pride to the end. We can say that his whole life itself had been in opposition to God, a life of keeping his pride. That pride is truly worthless, but that man could not stop it. Arranged in this way, we can see clearly why it is that the ones who enter the Kingdom are so very few.

And what of the church? Has it been sufficiently teaching about the attitude when acknowledging sin? We must say, not sufficiently. Christianity has been fixated on the “words” of confession of sin and the “doctrine” behind

them, but has hardly taught about the attitude. And looking at the way evangelism has been conducted within the church, has it not often been considered excellent not to bring the other to a true confession of sin, but rather to be able to lead the other to confess sin “without wounding their pride”? Saying not “You” are a sinner, but “all people” are sinners, shifting it to a problem of all humanity. And instead of teaching to seek God with the humble attitude of “remember me” like that criminal, saying “Will you receive Christ?”—as if it were correct that man from a superior position only needs to accept Christ if he wishes.

That is to say, the doctrine has not worked in the direction of exposing man’s sin, but has instead worked in such a way as to accompany people’s powerful self-consciousness. By knowing doctrine, people have been all the more convinced of their own rightness, and fallen into that nearly incurable “religious hypocrisy” like the Pharisees.

Still, in the end, one cannot shift responsibility to another. In the Last Judgment, it will be asked: how did I, as an individual, face the problem of sin?

Then, what should we do concretely? Even if one tries to confess sin as honestly as possible—it is in vain. In most cases, even if the person thinks the confession is honest, when others hear it, it sounds full of falsehood.

Even if one punishes one’s body, that has little effect. The self-consciousness of man that justifies himself is so strong that it does not yield even to the torture of the cross.

Even if one arranges matters doctrinally, if the person has not recognized sin deeply, he will only use that doctrine as a tool of self-justification.

Therefore, when aiming at the right attitude before God, what is needed is only a small step. Yet the more one strives, the more it seems that for fallen humanity there is a wall before salvation that cannot be crossed. Still, until one is convinced that one’s own efforts are useless, it is necessary to go on making all sorts of useless efforts.

Since this has become a bit abstract, let me end with something more concrete, something you can do starting today. There are countless things that could be said, but one only, in connection with this morning’s passage.

God put this criminal to the death of the cross, but in the end it was good for the man’s soul. Because he could come to terms with his sin.

God works with us in the same way, seeking to persuade us. This does not mean He acts on the heart to make us pliant suddenly. Rather, His working comes upon us in a way resembling the cross.

The specific form differs for each, but there is one more universal form given to all. It is through the people around us. God places family around us, and neighbors, friends, people at work, people in the church, pastors. And as the relationships grow long, from almost all of them we receive criticism several times. Among them, God

Himself places even those who nag at us day by day, those who never overlook even one of our faults. Though they themselves have countless faults, they nag without shame.

Much of that nagging goes too far, but there is always “some truth” in it. Through such nagging people, day after day God sends words of criticism and is working upon us. That is, no matter how in our self-consciousness we think we are righteous people, in fact God is persuading us that our heart is full of filth. For the fallen soul, is this not an even more effective power of persuasion than being mocked on the cross? But in the end, it depends on whether we listen to that voice.

We must not easily brush aside the critical words around us, but examine them, and acknowledge the part that is right. Just as that man who hung on the cross beside Jesus did, in the end we too must reach the level of defenselessness, admitting, “I was a terrible person, I was one who deserved recompense.”

Day by day, over years and decades, when we receive criticism, we must not be people who impulsively defend ourselves and tally up the faults of the other. That is the same path as the criminal who mocked Jesus. Rather, when criticized, we want to be people who recognize there the working of God, and quietly reflect on where our own problem lies. This is the same path walked by the “right” criminal, and it is the very path of taking up our cross and following Christ.

**Prayer:** Merciful Father God,

When we look at our own hearts, we cannot but admit that there has been a heart of self-justification.

We thank You that, concerned for such as us, You are already at work in our lives. When we receive criticism from those around us, we desire to accept it as the rightful recompense. Please continue to place Your guiding hand upon us, until we come to fear You.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.