

# The Penitent Thief

by J.C. Ryle

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*The sermon teaches that Christ's power to save sinners is mighty, and that repentance and faith are the gifts of God, not in a man's own power.*

**Scripture:** Luke 23:39

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Salvation"

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## Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the profound lessons from the story of the penitent thief, illustrating Christ's power and willingness to save even the most hopeless sinners. The thief's transformation from blasphemy to faith highlights that salvation is possible at any moment, yet it is not guaranteed for all, as evidenced by the other thief's hardened heart. Ryle warns against presumption regarding repentance, urging listeners to seek God earnestly rather than waiting for a deathbed conversion. He also points out the thief's strong faith, acknowledgment of sin, and love for others as evidence of genuine repentance. Ultimately, Ryle reassures believers that they will be with Christ in paradise upon death, encouraging those who feel lost to follow the example of the penitent thief.

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## Transcript

"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us. But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong. Then he said to Jesus, Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom. And Jesus said to him, Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Reader, I wish to speak to you about these verses. Listen to me while I try to unfold the leading lessons which they are meant to teach. I cannot see the state of your heart before God, but I can see truths in this passage which no man can ever know too well.

First, you are meant to learn Christ's power and willingness to save sinners. This is the main doctrine to be gathered from the history of the penitent thief. It teaches you that which ought to be music in the ears of all who hear it: Jesus Christ is mighty to save.

I ask you if any man's case could look more hopeless and desperate than this man's? He was a wicked man, a malefactor, a thief, if not a murderer. He was suffering a just punishment for breaking the law. And as he had lived wickedly, so he seemed determined to die wickedly, for when he first was crucified, he

railed on our Lord.

He was a dying man. He hung there nailed to a cross, from which he was never to come down alive. His hours were numbered, the grave was ready for him. There was but a step between him and death. If ever there was a soul hovering on the brink of hell, it was the soul of this thief. If ever there was a case that seemed lost, gone, and past recovery, it was his. If ever there was a child of Adam whom the devil made sure of as his own, it was this man.

But see now what happened. He ceased to rail and blaspheme, and began to speak in another manner altogether. He turned to our blessed Lord in prayer and asked Jesus to "remember him when He came into His kingdom." He asked that his soul might be cared for, his sins pardoned, and himself thought of in another world. Truly this was a wonderful change.

Mark what kind of answer he received. Some would have said he was too wicked a man to be saved. But it was not so. Some would have fancied it was too late, the door was shut, and there was no room for mercy. But it proved not too late at all. The Lord Jesus returned an immediate answer, spoke kindly to him, and assured him that he should be with Him that day in Paradise. He pardoned him completely, cleansed him thoroughly from his sins, received him graciously, justified him freely, raised him from the gates of hell, and gave him a title to glory.

The second lesson you are meant to learn is this: if some are saved in the very hour of death, others are not. This is a truth that never ought to be passed over, and I dare not leave it unnoticed. It is a truth that stands out plainly in the sad end of the other malefactor, and is only too often forgotten. What became of the other thief who was crucified? Why did he not turn from his sin and call upon the Lord? Why did he remain hardened and impenitent? Why was he not saved? It is useless to try to answer such questions. Let us be content to take the fact as we find it, and see what it is meant to teach us.

We have no right whatever to say this thief was a worse man than his companion. There is nothing to prove it. Both plainly were wicked men. Both were receiving the due reward of their deeds. Both hung by the side of our Lord Jesus Christ. Both heard Him pray for His murderers. Both saw Him suffer patiently. But while one repented, the other remained hardened. While one began to pray, the other went on railing. While one was converted in his last hours, the other died as bad a man as he had lived. While one was taken to paradise, the other went to his own place, the place of the devil and his angels.

Now these things are written for our warning. They tell me that though some may repent and be converted on their death-bed, it does not follow that all will. A death-bed is not always a saving time. They tell me that two men may have the same opportunities of getting good for their souls, may be placed in the same position, see the same things, and hear the same things, and yet only one shall take advantage of them. Only one will repent, believe, and be saved. They tell me, above all, that repentance and faith are the gifts of God and are not in a man's own power. If any one flatters himself that he can repent at his own time, choose his own season, seek the Lord when he pleases, and, like the penitent thief, be saved at the very last, he may find he is greatly deceived. Beware of presumption. Do not abuse God's mercy and compassion. If you would be wise, put nothing off that concerns your soul.

The third lesson you are meant to learn is: the Spirit always leads saved souls in one way. This is a point that deserves particular attention and is often overlooked. Men look at the broad fact that the penitent thief was saved when he was dying, and they look no further. They do not consider the evidences this thief left behind him. They do not observe the abundant proof he gave of the work of the Spirit in his heart. And

these proofs I wish to trace out. I wish to show you that the Spirit always works in one way, and that whether He converts a man in an hour, as He did the penitent thief, or by slow degrees, as he does others, the steps by which He leads souls to heaven are always the same.

First, see how strong was the faith of this man. He called Jesus, "Lord." He declared his belief that He would have a kingdom. He believed that He was able to give him eternal life and glory, and in this belief prayed to Him. He maintained Christ's innocence of all the charges brought against Him. When even Christ's own disciples had forsaken Him and fled, when He was bleeding and dying on the cross, this was the hour when the thief believed in Christ and prayed to Him.

Second, see what a right sense of sin the thief had. He says to his companion, "We receive the due reward of our deeds." He acknowledges his own ungodliness and the justice of his punishment. He makes no attempt to justify himself or excuse his wickedness. He is a man humbled and self-abased by the remembrance of past iniquities. This is what all God's children feel. They are ready to allow they are poor hell-deserving sinners. They can say with their hearts as well as with their lips, "We have left undone the things that we ought to have done, and we have done those things that we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us."

See what brotherly love the thief showed to his companion. He tried to stop his railing and blaspheming and bring him to a better mind. There is no surer mark of grace than this. Grace shakes a man out of his selfishness and makes him feel for the souls of others.

In one word, you see in the penitent thief a finished work of the Holy Ghost. Every part of the believer's character may be traced in him. Short as his life was after conversion, he found time to leave abundant evidence that he was a child of God. His faith, his prayer, his humility, his brotherly love, are unmistakable witnesses of the reality of his repentance. He was not a penitent in name only, but in deed and in truth.

You are meant to learn from these verses that believers in Christ are with the Lord when they die. I cannot describe what kind of place paradise is, but I ask no brighter view of it than this--that Christ is there. Let me only see Christ in paradise when my eyes close in death, and that suffices me.

Reader, the day that believers die they are in paradise. Their battle is fought, their strife is over. They have passed through that gloomy valley we must one day tread. They have gone over that dark river we must one day cross. They have drunk that last bitter cup which sin has mingled for man. They have reached that place where sorrow and sighing are no more. Surely we should not wish them back again. We should not weep for them, but for ourselves.

This tract may fall into the hands of some humble-hearted and contrite sinner. Are you that man? Then here is encouragement for you. See what the penitent thief did and do likewise. See how he prayed, see how he called on the Lord Jesus Christ, see what an answer of peace he obtained. Why should not you also be saved?

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