

Six Feet to Eternity

Luke 23:26-43

Covid-19 has changed many things in our society including how we buy groceries and even worship. We have been introduced to a new term; "Social Distancing" which means you should stay at least six feet apart at all times and wear a mask.

For those who haven't been to the grocery store in the last ten days let me share with you the new normal. Store managers are posted at the entrance and alternating arriving and departing shoppers to make sure they stay at least six feet apart even entering and exiting the store. Each aisle has been marked with an arrow or an X to indicate that the aisle is one way so you can maintain at least six feet from the other shoppers.

As I was preparing this message I came across a comment from a biblical scholar that caught my attention. The scholar believed that the two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus were approximately twelve feet apart. Jesus was crucified between them so they were six feet from Jesus!

Over 20,000 Americans and 110,000 world-wide have died from Covid-19. Most of them died alone without the presence and love of their family and friends. Three months ago none of them expected to step into eternity.

Almost 2000 years ago, three men were nailed to a cross, six feet apart. Both men had the opportunity to change their eternal destiny but only one made the right choice. For six hours both men were SIX FEET FROM ETERNITY.

At the end of today's message, I want to give you the opportunity to make the right choice and spend eternity with Jesus.

One of the most amazing things about this man named Jesus is the fact that He gravitated toward the people we run away from. The people that repel us He was drawn to like a magnet. The people we overlook are the people He looked over. The people we wouldn't give the time of day to He gave almost every day of His time to.

The way Jesus dealt with the outcasts of society will both encourage us, who have been there, and enable us to perhaps, look at other people in a completely different way.

It is very fitting this Easter Sunday when we celebrate what is, without question, the greatest event in the history of the world that we look at an encounter that Jesus had with one of those people, we call failures. It is fascinating that the last earthly encounter that Jesus ever had, before He breathed His last was not with the CEO of a Fortune 500 Company. It was not with the president of a powerful country, the king of an empire, or even a well-respected religious leader. His last encounter was with a failure. There are very few (if any of us) in this room listening to this message that are not haunted by the ghost of failure.

Many of us still carry the regret, the guilt, and the heartache of an area in our life in which we simply failed. You've been there. You intended to finish college, but you quit. You feel like a failure. You intended to be married until, death do you part, but you divorced and you feel like a failure. You intended to remain a virgin, but you lost your virginity. You feel like a failure. You invested in a business, convinced you would strike it rich, but you lost it all and you feel like a failure.

If you have ever failed in anything and feel like you are a failure in any way, this Easter message is made for you. We are going to learn today about a man who was the ultimate failure, but when he encountered Jesus he gave us one of the greatest principles that we can ever remember in dealing with failure.

Key Take Away: You can have failure in your life without being a failure with your life.

[Turn to Luke 23].

“Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.” (Luke 23:32-33, ESV)

It is interesting that Jesus is being crucified between two criminals. Normally, the centurion in charge would have put the two criminals next to each other and Jesus off to one side, but the Roman soldier did not realize, even at that point, he was fulfilling an ancient prophecy. Isaiah said that he would, ***“Be numbered with the transgressors.”*** This was the only crucifixion in history that was ever prophesized.

What makes it even more unusual is that three men are being crucified for a crime, but there is one big difference. Two were dying for crimes they did commit and One was dying for sin He didn't commit.

Therein lies the word that all of us who have ever failed need to here. No matter how badly you have failed in the past, and no matter how great a failure you think you may be today...

I. Jesus Will Take Us Under Any Condition

You would think that Jesus would at least be crucified with people who were guilty of what we might call today “white-collar crime.” Not so. Luke calls them “criminals.” The better word would be “evil-doers.” Matthew and Mark use a different term that literally means “violent robbers.”

These men had a rap sheet a mile long. They were bad-to-the-bone. The only reason they were caught is because someone saw them on Jerusalem's Most Wanted. They were most likely paid assassins, without question guilty of multiple-murders in the first degree.

Today they would be a part of a common street-gang who kills just for fun. In other words, there wasn't one redeeming quality about these thieves. The word from the time they came out of their mother's womb to the time they were nailed to a wooden plank you could write “failure’ over their lives. They were so inconsequential we don't even know their names. They had failed at doing anything right and succeeded at doing everything wrong. It looks like they have lived a wasted life and they are going to die a wasted death, but then something changes.

“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’” (Luke 23:39-41, ESV)

You wouldn't know this from reading Luke's account, but Matthew tells us that at first, both criminals mocked Jesus. Both of them reviled Jesus. The first criminal didn't just insult Him. The word that Luke uses is the word from which we get the word ***“blasphemy”***. It was a word that would describe the most unspeakable obscene things you could call anybody.

Then, the second thief miraculously has a change of heart. A light comes on – his eyes are open – he gets it. He is getting what he deserved while Jesus is not. To me, it may be the greatest single story of a conversion in the entire Bible, because the same mouth that was cursing Jesus just moments before now is defending Jesus. What could have possibly happened? He didn't see Jesus perform a miracle. He didn't hear Jesus preach a sermon.

According to Luke, all he heard was one thing Jesus said, ***“And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34, ESV)***

When he saw a man respond to people who were crucifying Him, condemning Him, and cursing Him the truth flashed before His eyes like lightning through a summer sky. I deserve to die. Jesus deserves to live. I am a sinner. He is the Savior. Forgiveness is exactly what I need. I wonder if what He offered them He would offer me? Probably with not a lot of confidence, with fear and trembling, probably not even being able to look Jesus in the eye, he makes this simple request, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42, ESV)***

He didn't say, “Lord, I want to be honored when you come into your kingdom”, or “I want to be blessed when you come into your kingdom” or “I want to be rewarded when I come into your kingdom.” He just said, ***“I want to be remembered.”*** Lord, will you remember me when everyone else has forgotten me? Look at me – the ultimate failure.

Here at my own death with no friends and no family. My enemies didn't even bother to show up. I have failed at life and now I am even failing in death. Jesus, will you remember me? Will you give me what I need the most and what I deserve the least? Would you give me forgiveness and a place in your kingdom?

If you know the story you already know the answer. Even if you don't know anything about Jesus you can figure it out. This man needed what Jesus had to offer, but he couldn't offer anything that Jesus either needed or wanted. He had no leverage, no bargaining chips, and couldn't make a deal. What is he going to say? “Jesus, if you will remember me when you come into your kingdom I promise you I'll go to church. I'll be a better husband and a better dad. I won't cheat on my income taxes anymore. I'll even start tithing.” No, he realized he needed what Jesus had to offer, but he had nothing to offer Jesus.

If you are out there right now listening to me and you are the failure, you are the one that has blown it and you feel like there is no way that God would ever accept you, what you are about to witness reminds us that there is more grace in God's heart than sin in our past. Jesus will take us under any condition.

II. We Can Trust Jesus At Any Moment

Listen again to the statement this criminal makes. ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42, ESV)***

Interestingly, even though Matthew and Mark both record Jesus dying between these two criminals, Luke is the only one that records this conversation. I'm glad he did, because it is the only recorded deathbed conversion you find in scripture.

You won't find anybody in the Bible or even an experience in a more desperate situation. Brutally crucified, dying in agony for crimes he committed, a guilty man justly punished deserving to die and knowing that death is just a little while away with no stay of execution, no last minute reprieve, the sand in his hourglass only has a few grains left and soon he will be dead. He is as close to death as you can be and still be living.

At the last moment, most probably with his last breath (because we are not told that he ever said another word) he makes one final appeal to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Universe and I submit to you in my opinion he is the most amazing example of faith in the entire Bible. In an instant, just before this man slips off the clothes of earth and puts on the clothes of eternity Jesus answers this man's request and makes a reservation for him in heaven.

All the man said was, **“Remember me”**, because all he had to offer was himself. He couldn’t say, “Remember my good works” because relatively speaking he didn’t have any. He couldn’t say, “Remember my church attendance” because he never went. He couldn’t say, “Remember my offerings”, because he never gave. All he could say was “Remember me.”

It is what he said next that is mind-boggling. **“Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** No man ever looked less like a king than Jesus did at that moment. Beaten to a pulp so badly you couldn’t even recognize Him his only thrown was a cross. His only crown was made of thorns. He wasn’t even covered with the robes of royalty. He was crucified stark naked.

He had never even met Jesus until that day. He had never heard Jesus teach by the sea. He had never seen Jesus heal the sick or raise the dead. He had never heard Jesus tell one parable. He had never seen Jesus perform one miracle, yet He knew that this suffering Savior was not just a king, but the Kings of all Kings.

Don’t miss this. This man was never baptized, never took the Lord’s Supper, never went to confession, never joined a church, never went to church, and never gave one penny to the Lord’s work, but robbed a lot of money from the Lord’s workers. There wasn’t one thing this man had done for Jesus and there wasn’t one thing this man could do for Jesus. The only thing he had left was to accept what Jesus was doing for him.

What does Jesus say? **“And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43, ESV)**

I did something that fascinated me. I took a stopwatch and I timed how long it would take for those two men to make those two statements to each other. What the thief said takes less than four seconds. Jesus’ reply takes less than six seconds.

In less than ten seconds, this man went from being a criminal to being a Christian. This man went from being a failure to a success. This man went from being on the outside looking in to the inside looking out. You say, “That’s impossible!” “With God, all things are possible.” If God can say, “Let there be light” and turn on every sun, every moon and every star in the universe, He can say today, “Turn life on” instantaneously.

If you had been there that day and somebody said to you, “What chance do you think that criminal has of going to heaven?” You would have said, “He doesn’t have a prayer.” In fact, a prayer is all he had and a prayer is all he needed. There is one thing we learn at this moment. Anybody can call on Jesus at any time and He will always answer. You won’t get a busy signal and you won’t get put on hold if you just say, “Remember me” and He will say, “I will.”

It is never too late to trust Jesus. This man was out of options. Too late to turn over a new leaf, too late to pay everyone back, too late for a new beginning – for this man it was too late to get married, raise a family, get a job, be responsible, live a decent life, but it wasn’t too late to be saved. It never is, because we can trust Jesus at any moment.

III. Jesus Will Transform Us In An Instant

Listen again to what Jesus says to this thief, “And he said to him, **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43, ESV)**

The word **“truly”** is the Greek word **“Amen.”** That word guarantees the truth of what is being said. Those were the last words that thief ever heard. That thief died and he had only one thing to base his assurance on that he was going to heaven and that was the word of Jesus.

The only way that thief had of being sure that his sins had been forgiven, that he was right with God, and he was going to heaven was because Jesus said that he would. I want to say something to all of us. That is the only way we can know for sure that we are going to heaven.

One of two things is true: either that criminal is in heaven or Jesus lied. If Jesus lied, and that thief died and he didn't make it then neither are we. Here is the good news. When Jesus says something is going to happen you can take it to the bank. He never lies.

It still amazes me that this thief believed before the world went dark. He believed before the earthquake tore the veil of the temple in two. He believed without ever seeing the empty tomb or the ascension. He believed without seeing Jesus walk on water, feed the multitudes or turn water into wine. All he did was simply paint faith over his failure and he received forgiveness, because he took Jesus at His word. The moment he did he was transported from death to life, from darkness to light, and from failure to forgiveness.

Let's review as we close and think about what happened. Here are two unrighteous men who are rightly suffering and here is one righteous man who is wrongly suffering. Two criminals are getting what they deserve and one King is getting what He doesn't deserve. Jesus got what He didn't deserve, the judgment of God, so He could give that criminal what he didn't deserve, the grace of God.

What a day it turned out to be for this criminal. What he thought was going to be the worst day of his life turned out to be the best day of his life. In the morning, he is in prison, at lunchtime, he is hanging on a cross, and at dinnertime he is sitting in the V.I.P. section of the Kingdom of God right next to Jesus.

I want to ask a question. Have you ever wondered why there were two crosses next to Jesus? Why weren't there six or ten? Have you ever wondered why Jesus was in the center? Why wasn't He on the far right or the far left? I believe it was God's way of illustrating to all of us in this room that just like those two criminals you have a choice.

Those two men had so much in common. They committed the same crime, were convicted by the same court, condemned by the same death, castigated by the same crowd and both of them were the same distance from Jesus. They each had the same opportunity to make the same choice.

There are a lot of things in life that we don't get to choose. You didn't choose your gender, your family, your race, or where you were born. You didn't choose your IQ or your athletic ability. Basically, when it came to your life on earth you weren't given a voice or a vote, but when it comes to your eternal destiny you do.

You will have failure in your life, but you can choose not to be a failure with your life. This criminal made a lot of bad choices in his life, but he is not spending eternity reaping the fruit of those bad choices. He is enjoying the fruit of the one good choice that he made. In the end, if you make the best choice, which is trusting Jesus, He can wipe out all the bad ones. If you are sitting here today saying, "I wish I could make up for all the failures in my life" you can. One good decision for Jesus can cancel out every other bad one you've ever made.

What is it going to be? Before death, these two criminals were separated by about 12 feet. After death, they were separated by eternity. What separated them was not the degree of their wickedness and not the magnitude of their failure, but what separated them was simply this – one rejected Jesus and one received Jesus. Every one of us is going to die just like one of those two thieves. We will either die with a clenched fist in the face of God or an open hand to the heart of God.

You have a lot of advantages this Easter Sunday that that thief didn't have. You live in a gospel-saturated country. You have access to the Word of God. You know the entire world today is celebrating, not just the

death of Jesus on the cross, but the empty tomb of the resurrection. Easter Sunday tells all of us that you may live with failure, but you don't have to die with failure, because the Jesus that died between two criminals now sits on a throne in heaven next to the repentant one.