

Abundant Grace for the Humble-Hearted

Ps 22:1-18; Is 53:1-12; Lk 23:39-43 (text)

Good Friday 2 April 2021, Reformed Church Wainuiomata 10:00
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Verse 32 tells us that, “*Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him* (our Lord) *to be executed.*”¹

Now, it makes sense that these two criminals (evil-doers)² had, for some time, been under the sentence of death, and were scheduled to be executed on that particular Friday – the day before the Sabbath of the Passover Feast.

And the execution of these two probably helped to speed up the court hearings of our Lord Jesus, so that He and these two could be executed together, in order that only *one execution ceremony* (instead of two) could be held.³

Thus, on that Friday morning, their crucifixion started (as v.33 says)⁴ at a place called “The Skull”⁵ – in Latin “Calvariae,”⁶ and in Aramaic “Gulgalta.”⁷

So it happened that, there on Golgotha, the Son of God was crucified in the *middle* – between two thieves – *as if He had been the worst of the three.*⁸

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). (Lk 23:32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² κακοῦργοι noun masculine plural nominative of κακοῦργος, *ou m*: one who customarily engages in doing what is bad—‘wrongdoer, evildoer, bad person’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 754). New York: United Bible Societies.)

³ On this, cf. Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (pp. 1907–1908). Peabody: Hendrickson.

⁴ v. 33 in the Vulgate: *Et postquam venerunt in locum qui vocatur Calvariae, ibi crucifixerunt eum: et latrones, unum a dextris, et alterum a sinistris* (Biblia Sacra juxta Vulgatam Clementinam. (2005). (Ed. electronica., Lk 23:33). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.)

⁵ Κρανίον, *ou n*: the bony framework of the head, especially the upper portion—‘skull’ (in the NT κρανίον is used only as a name for the hill of Golgotha) (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 95). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁶ Noun feminine plural nominative of “calvaria,” = “skull” from which we have the word “Calvary.”

⁷ In Aramaic, the language spoken by the Hebrews at the time of our Lord, it is גולגלתא (Gulgaltha), and in Hebrew גולגולת (Gulgolet), “noun feminine **skull, head, poll** (person) (Ba²⁰⁵; Aramaic גולגלתא, Arabic جُمَّة (jumhumatun))—abs. ג 2 K 9:35 + 3 times; sf. גולגלתא Ju 9:53 1 Ch 10:10; pl. sf. גולגלתא Nu 1:2 + 5 times;— **1. skull**, as broken by a stone Ju 9:53; as severed from body 2 K 9:35 1 Ch 10:10. **2. head, poll** (in counting, taxing, etc.; only P and late) ג 16:16 an omer for every man; cf. 38:26 Nu 1:2, 18, 20, 22; 3:47 1 Ch 23:3, 24” (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 166). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁸ cf. Henry, M. (ibid)

Yes, in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53, ***He was numbered with them;***⁹ yes, ***He was assigned a grave¹⁰ with the wicked.***¹¹

There the three of them were hanging in pain on their crosses!

And now, by God's grace, the most remarkable event enfolds – an event which is an example & illustration of how *some* will receive God's abundant grace, while *others* just won't receive Him.

I pray that you & I will receive Him – or receive Him again – today when we hear this word...

Now, imagine you & I were that one thief on the cross – the one who, in the eleventh hour, received an abundance of grace from God. Well, then the following four points of the sermon will be so applicable to us...

- Humbled
- Faith
- Plea
- Gift

Here is then the first (and longest) point...

Humbled

Matthew & Mark tell us that *those who passed by* hurled insults at Him, shook their heads and mocked Him.¹²

Even *the Jewish rulers*¹³ – yes, the chief priests, law-teachers & elders – mocked Him saying, ***“He saved others, but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'*”**¹⁴

Also *the soldiers* mocked Him as they offered Him some sour wine, and, while they were looking at the sign above His head, they said, ***“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”*** (Lk 23:37).

Well, unknowingly, all these mockers – yes even the chief priests & scribes – fulfilled the prophecy of Is 53:3 which says, ***He was despised and rejected by men...*** also the words of Ps 22:7-8 ***All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ⁸“He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him”*** (NIV '84).

⁹ cf. Is 53:12 ***Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.***

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

¹⁰ Yes, the Hebrew does translate to “grave,” but here “grave” includes what leads to the grave – death!

¹¹ cf. Is 53:9 ***He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth*** (וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־רִשְׁעֵיהֶם קִבְרוֹ וְאֶת־עֲשִׂיר בְּמִתָּיו עַל לֹא־חַטִּים עָשָׂה וְלֹא מְרָמָה בִּפְּיוֹ)

¹² cf. Mt 27:39-40 ***Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”*** (Also cf. Mk 15:29-30).

¹³ οἱ ἄρχοντες

¹⁴ cf. Mt 27:41-43 ***In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴² “He saved others,” they said, “but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'*”** (Also cf. Mk 15:31-32).

Thus the passers-by, the Jewish rulers, and the soldiers mocked Him – hurled insults at Him, but...

But here's an incredible thing: According to Matthew & Mark, even the two *thieves/criminals who were crucified with Him also heaped insults on Him*.¹⁵

Is that what also you & I at times do when, perhaps not with spoken words, but with our actions as we treat Him lightly?

Then, surely by a miracle of God, the one criminal had a sudden change of heart!
How did it happen?

I mean, humanly speaking, was it not so that the two criminals of our passage had an equal opportunity when it came to meeting up with Jesus?

You see, it was not so that *one of the two thieves* was crucified in the middle – and was therefore closer than the other thief to Jesus!

No, v. 33 tells us: of the three crosses, *Jesus' cross* was the middle one, because one thief was on His right and the other on His left.¹⁶

Certainly, from where they were hanging the two thieves had an *equal opportunity* to see & hear Jesus!

Yet, they reacted differently to Him!

And we still see that today with those who hear the Gospel! I mean, I know of some who grew up in the church – who had all the opportunity to receive Christ as their Saviour, but, amazingly, they rejected Him!

Well, according to Matthew¹⁷ and Mark,¹⁸ it is indeed so that at the start of their crucifixions – when they *had just arrived* at Golgotha, *both* criminals participated with the Jewish leaders in mocking Jesus!

But now, things have changed – that is, for the *one* criminal!

You see, on the centre-cross this criminal saw the most unbelievable thing happening: he saw Someone reacting to His executioners in a way no-one ever did!

- Yes, this Jesus - instead of plucking His hands away so that the Roman executioners could not nail them to the cross, it was almost as if this Jesus of Nazareth keenly placed them there;¹⁹ indeed, so calm & majestic was this Jesus' behaviour²⁰ that He really looked more like a lamb before his slaughterers!

¹⁵ cf. Mt 27:44. And also Mk 15:32b, "*Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*"

¹⁶ Lk 23:33, *When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.*

¹⁷ Mt 27:41-44 *In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him.* ⁴² "*He saved others,*" *they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.*" ⁴³ *He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'*" ⁴⁴ *In the same way the robbers (οἱ λησται robbers, bandits, rebels, revolutionaries) who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him* (Emphasis mine).

¹⁸ Mk 15:31-32 *In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself!"* ³² *Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."* *Those crucified with him (οἱ συνεσταυρωμένοι σὺν αὐτῷ) also heaped insults on him* (Emphasis mine).

¹⁹ cf. Lucado, Max. 2004. Six hours one Friday. Nashville, TE : Thomas Nelson. ISBN 978-0-8499-1816-2 p.92.

²⁰ Hendriksen (2004:1032)

- Yes, it was exactly as Is 53 said, *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*²¹
- But look, this Man on the middle-cross went even further! You see, instead of swearing/cursing & insulting because of the pain & evil done to Him, this Man on the centre-cross prays: *Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing!*²²
- Then, as he was watching Jesus, this one criminal observed still more: you see, even if this criminal *himself* was unable to *read* the inscription at the top of the centre-cross because of the angle from which he was watching, he could at least *hear* how the scoffers on the ground kept on reading the words, *“Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews.”*²³ (Repeat the inscription's words)
- My brother & sister, if you & I were in this criminal's position, would not *this* have been the very logical way in which we, by God's grace, would have processed the words of that inscription above Christ's head...?
 - “These leaders are mocking this man, Jesus, as a king!”
 - “How come?”
 - “In the *first* place: If this ‘king’ were mentally impaired, they would certainly have ignored Him – wouldn't they?”
 - “And, in the *second* place: if this ‘king’ was perfectly sane, *but had no followers*, then is it not so that these Jewish leaders would not in the least have felt threatened by Him!?”
 - “Thus, if these leaders had nothing to fear from this ‘king’ on the middle cross, then why are they killing Him?”
 - “After all, is it not so that one only kills a king when he has a kingdom by which you feel threatened!?”²⁴
 - “So,....!?”

My brother & sister, whatever way exactly this criminal's reasoning went, it was through what he saw & heard, that *the Holy Spirit worked faith in his heart!*

And, by God's grace, this criminal came to only one conclusion: this Jesus *must be* what the inscription above His head says – He must be “...the King of the Jews!”

And so, *by grace through faith*, this one criminal believed!

Then, what does he hear?

Well, he hears how words of insult left the parched lips of the other criminal!

You see, the other criminal, too, had been studying Jesus. But, as someone has said so well, his study of Jesus was done *through the blurred lens of cynicism*²⁵ – sadly, exactly the same as I have seen with a handful of people who have left the faith after years & years of attending the RCNZ worship services!

²¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version.* (1984). (Is 53:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²² v.34

²³ cf. Jn 19:19-22 *Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”*²⁰ *Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.*²¹ *So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’”*²² *Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”*

²⁴ My adaptation of the thought-process explained by Lucado (ibid:92)

²⁵ Lucado (ibid:93)

Well, according to v. 39, the second criminal's words were effectively...

- "So, you're the Messiah!?" (Said in a sarcastic, cynical way).
- "Well, then, prove it by saving yourself ... and, while you're at it, why not save us, too!?"²⁶

My brother & sister, it was *then* that true faith in the heart of criminal number one changed him into a defender of Christ!

"Don't you fear God?" said he!

Wow! What words from a fellow sufferer –a criminal who only minutes before had also participated in the mocking!

Is the commentator not right when he says, "Hearing these words of defence, every head on Golgotha's hill was now looking at this repentant criminal!"²⁷

And in heaven? What happened in heaven at the sight of this criminal's repentance?

Well, is it not so that, in sync with Christ's parable of the *once-lost-but-then-found-sheep*,²⁸ every angel wept for joy?

And is it not so that, in the realm of the devil, every demon gaped at this unexpected defender of Christ!

Yes, suddenly, this one criminal is now defending Jesus.

And you'd like to ask: Where were those (whom) we would expect to defend Jesus?

Yes, as someone has said so well...

- *The much more spiritual Peter had abandoned Him!*
- *The much more educated Pontius Pilate had washed his hands of Him!*
- *The much more loyal mob of Palm Sunday had demanded His death!*
- *The much more faithful band of disciples had all been scattered!*²⁹

So, indeed, *when it seems that everyone has turned away, a (repentant) criminal places himself between Jesus and the accusers and speaks on behalf of Jesus!*³⁰

And this is what he says (in v.40):

Don't you fear God ... since you are under the same sentence? i.e., don't you even in your final moment of judgement³¹ fear God?

You see, by grace, criminal number one had come to the end of himself:

- He couldn't hide who he was!
- There was nothing fancy about him!
- Stripped from all pride, he was now brought low – absolutely humbled! Yes, his only "clothing" there on the cross was his cloak of disgrace – his nakedness!

²⁶ *One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"* (NASB).

²⁷ My adaptation of Lucado (ibid:93)

²⁸ cf. Lk 15:7 "*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*"

²⁹ My adaptation of Lucado (ibid:93)

³⁰ My adaptation of the words of Lucado (ibid:93)

³¹ κρίμα, ατος, τό **1. Legal decision of judgment** (Ac 24:25); **2. LN 56.22 authority to judge**, right to judge (Rev 20:4); **3.verdict**, the legal decision rendered by a judge (Ro 5:16); **4.condemnation**, punishment (2Pe 2:3); **5. LN 56.2 lawsuit** (1Co 6:7); **6.judgment**, decision, evaluation (Ro 11:33)

My brother & sister, what do you do when you've come to the end of yourself and there's nowhere to go and you're in the presence of the Son of God!?

Well, if, by God's grace, you have the Spirit of God, you humbly acknowledge your guilt & you accept Christ!

And you accept Him on His terms!

You accept Him for who He says He is!

Look! Is this not what criminal number one, by God's grace, did?

Stripped from all pride! *Humbled* before Jesus Christ!

That was point 1.

Here is point 2...

Faith

My brother & sister, what did this repentant thief on the cross know about Jesus?

What was the contents of his faith?

Well, please hear again his words of v. 41, "***We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.***"

Did you hear that?

- "We are getting what we deserve. This man has done nothing wrong!"
- In other words, this repentant thief owns that he *deserves* what was being done to him!³²
- And, by what he saw of the Man on the centre cross, this repentant thief is also convinced that that Man – Jesus – had done nothing wrong!
- "We are guilty and He is innocent!"
- "We are filthy and He is pure!"
- "We are wrong and He is right!"
- But hang on:
 - if He has done nothing wrong;
 - if He is innocent;
 - if He is pure & right, then... what is He doing on a cross of punishment?
- Then He must be on that cross not for *His* sins!
- Yes, then it means only one thing: He must be on that cross only for *ours*!³³

My brother & sister, place yourself for a moment in this criminal's position. Would not these have been your thoughts...?

- "I have faith in this dying King!³⁴ For, although He is dying, He has convinced me that He is greater than anyone else I have ever seen!"
- "And I accept Him on those (His) terms!"
- Faith!!!

³² Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (pp. 1907–1908). Peabody: Hendrickson.

³³ My adaptation of Lucado (ibid:94)

³⁴ For the idea of how it took faith for him to trust in a dying King, cf. Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 23:32

Well, why not be like this criminal? You see, although you/I can't fully explain with our heads everything about this dying King, why not just accept Him on His terms – and in *faith*!?

Plea (for help)

And so, this criminal turns *to Jesus* for help!

Jesus is his last hope!

And to this marvellous Hope, this criminal makes no big speech; he utters no words of blame/excuses; just a desperate plea for help!

Verse 42 tells us what he asks for: “***Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.***”

What a humble request!

Yet what an eye-opener as to this criminal's faith!

After all, does this criminal's request not reveal...

- That he believed Jesus was the King of a kingdom?
- That he believed Jesus had ultimate authority?
- That, unlike even the Sadducees, this criminal believed in life after death?
- That he believed that, although he was not to be saved from that painful cross, he could nevertheless be saved from something worse – from sin & eternal suffering?³⁵

Indeed, this criminal's request reveals much about his faith!

Yet it was a humble request!

Yes, in this man's Spirit-worked awe of Christ, he dares not ask big – just small; just “remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

See? Even though this criminal had the honour to (in part) drink of the same cup as Christ and, yes, to be even (in part) baptised with the same baptism as Christ – either on Christ's right or His left,³⁶ he nevertheless does not ask as the honour-seeking disciples once asked, “O Lord, prefer me!”³⁷ No, just, “Remember me!”

Conclusion: Gift (The gift is surprisingly great!)

My brother & sister, brought low, this repentant criminal asked for *crumbs*!

Yet, Christ gave him a *whole loaf*!

He asked to be *remembered*, Christ gave him *eternal life*!

And Christ gave it as from “today” – i.e., the very same day as the day of the sinner's plea!

Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise, i.e., heaven!³⁸

And so, with a few minutes of earthly life to spare for this criminal, the Shepherd rejoiced as this sheep enters the fold just before the gate was closing!

³⁵ cf. Henry, M (ibid)

³⁶ cf. Henry, M (ibid)

³⁷ cf. Mt 20:20-21 *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something.* ²¹ *And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.”*

³⁸ cf. Hendriksen (2004:1033) who refers to 2 Cor 12:2 & 4 which makes clear that ‘heaven’ and ‘paradise’ are two words that indicate the same place. *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the **third heaven**. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows.* ³ *And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to **paradise**.*

Congregation,

Our passage shows: there are two ways of reacting to Jesus!

Even those with equal opportunity receive Jesus differently!

One criminal on Golgotha died with great peace in his heart; the other one's pain was double (physical & spiritual)!

But, thanks to the centre Cross that held the Son of God, there is **abundant grace for all who humbly receive Jesus!**

How about you & Jesus?

In the last 20 min or so, you & I again had that opportunity!

How do you respond?

Look! If this person – no, this *criminal* – was able to receive pardon (and this at the 11th hour), why won't you/I turn (again) to Jesus? I mean, the Lord has not yet returned: today (as way back then) is Good Friday – Good Friday of forgiveness of sins for all who receive Jesus Christ on His terms and for His glory!

Amen! (2,532 words excluding footnotes)