

**Turn to the book of Luke, chapter 23.**

**Luke 23:33** And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. **34** Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots. **35** And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." **36** The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, **37** and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." **38** And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. **39** Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." **40** But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? **41** "And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." **42** Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." **43** And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

There are lots of interesting and controversial things that we could consider from this passage, such as whether or not baptism is required for salvation, or what Paradise is, or did Jesus go to hell, etc.

But we ain't goin' there!

I want to focus our attention on the attitudes that the thieves possessed during their last day on Earth, and see what we can learn from that.

**Turn to Matthew 27 & Mark 15...let's read the other accounts**

**Matthew 27:38** Then **two robbers** were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. **39** And those who passed by blasphemed Him, ... **44** Even **the robbers** who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

**Mark 15:27** With Him they also crucified **two robbers**, one on His right and the other on His left. ... **32** ... Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.

But wait! Luke 23 said that only one thief reviled the Lord! But Mark and Matthew say two! Did Luke lie?! Of course not! Luke simply omitted the part of the story where the second thief reviled Jesus. Inspiration of the Holy Spirit does not make the author a holy fax machine. God gave them “wiggle room”. (BTW ... the accuracy of Luke’s writings are the marvel of **secular** history and archaeology.)

One of two things is true here ... either the second thief had a change of heart as seen in Luke, or the accounts in Matthew and Mark are simply broad-brush overviews that seem contradictory--but in reality, are not. Both explanations work, and neither present a negative outcome on the **inerrancy** or **infallibility** of scripture.

And since I mentioned those fancy theological terms, perhaps a definition or two are in order.

**Biblical Inerrancy** is the quality of Scripture to teach only the truth in all that it affirms. Consider how many versions of an accident scene a police officer hears when interviewing multiple witnesses? Does a discrepancy between accounts mean that someone is lying? Not necessarily. Could it have appeared that both thieves were reviling the Lord when only one was? Of course. While Webster’s defines inerrancy as “without error”, theologians do not use the term that way. It accepts that truth can include approximations, free quotations, language of appearances and even differing accounts. **[examples]**

**Biblical Infallibility** is the quality of Scripture to never fail in its inerrancy. It teaches always and only truth in all of the things that it affirms. For instance, when Jesus said that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds, He certainly knew that there are some seeds that are smaller. He was using a well-known idiom in order to communicate a larger truth. Jesus was not affirming the size of

mustard seeds, but rather using that metaphor in the vehicle of a parable in order to teach a lesson to the people.

**But I thought that we were here to probe the minds and the lives of the thieves on the cross? Yes, we are ... do you see how easily we are distracted from the goal by things that seem--or actually are--important? Let's get to those thieves then ...**

**THEIF #1**: **Clearly** a blasphemer because he did not ascribe to Jesus what was due Him as God the Son. **Clearly** a bad guy given his fate with the Romans as a convicted criminal. Was he Jewish? If so, did he ever go to synagogue? Did he believe that God exists? Who knows? We certainly don't. But we do know that he mocked the divinity of Jesus; and for this, he is a officially, a blasphemer.

**THEIF #2**: **Apparently** a blasphemer at the beginning of the crucifixion, but a repentant and believing sinner before it was all over. Did he believe in God? **Clearly** (recall his rebuke of the other thief). **Hebrews 11:6** states that “**without faith [it is] impossible to please [Him], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and [that] He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.**” I'd say that the second thief definitely received a reward that day when Jesus promised him Paradise.

He was not baptized. He did not indicate whether or not he believed in the Trinity, or Creation, or other **BIG** doctrines of that sort. We have no tithing records for this man.

Whatever this thief knew about God and religion before his demise is dwarfed by his disregard for it up until the last hours of his life. He had a change of heart though, and saw something that made him believe. In spite of his overall ignorance of doctrine and theology, he was accepted by the author of Life and Love, for one simple confession--given humbly and honestly. God honored that with a fantastic reward.

In **1 Corinthians 13:1**, the Apostle Paul teaches that “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not **love**, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. **2** And though I have [the gift of] prophecy, and **understand all mysteries and all knowledge**, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not **love**, I am nothing.

Here we come face-to-face with a seeming paradox between (1) the importance of having deep knowledge of theology, versus (2) having deep love. In fact, it *seems* like a dilemma ... meaning that only one or the other can be, or should be true. It is true that it's a dilemma; just a **false** one.

A false dilemma is when two extremes are presented as if only one or the other is possible and true. We split the horns of a dilemma in two ways. First, we point out that these two extremes are not polar opposites; but rather, two of many points along a continuum of important developments in the Christian life. Second, we provide a third option; in this case, the primacy of love as a foundation for deep knowledge of doctrine, theology and the rest.

Let me repeat that point: **the primacy of love as a foundation for deep knowledge of doctrine, theology and the rest.**

By design, doctrine divides truth from error; however, it has also had the affect--historically--of dividing Christians in a way that is almost as **scenic** as the the crucifixion itself. Battles over doctrines like Creation, or Calvinism, or Tithing, etc ... have shown that we have a tendency to devour our own. When I say “we”, I speak of the body of Christ in general; not necessarily this church or anyone in it.

My goal for today was to give you a dramatic and simple reason to undergird your knowledge of scripture and doctrine with something even greater ... **LOVE**. I'd like to offer it in the form of what I'll call, **THE SECOND THIEF ON THE CROSS TEST.**

1. **HONESTY**: this thief was honest with himself and the world, in the sight of God. He tuned out the blasphemy and the bickering and spoke only truth in the sight of the One who is **Truth**. He did not know much; but he finally knew the **truth** that set him free.
2. **HUMILITY**: this thief suppressed his need for escaping temporal justice, by embracing eternal justice, from the best possible source. His faith must have been as **small** as a mustard seed, if not **smaller**. Do you think that he rejoiced more than anyone had ever rejoiced when he entered Paradise? Amazing Grace?
3. **HONOR**: this thief called Jesus “Lord”. Here’s what the Greek word *kurios* means in scripture: he to whom a person or thing belongs, about which he has power of deciding; master, lord, the possessor and disposer of a thing, the owner; one who has control of the person, the master; a title of **honor** expressive of respect and reverence, with which servants greet their master ... as well as a title given to God, the Messiah.

From one angle, the scene of the cross of Christ was a war of doctrine where the temporal victors (the Jews) devoured one of their own (Jesus was a Jew) over doctrine and theology. At least, that’s what they thought it was about. A sinner saved by grace (the second thief) was indirectly caught up in the mess that led him to the cross of Christ by way of carrying his own.

And this is the basic point that I want to make today: that we should spend more time “**denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily to follow Him**” ... in honesty, humility and honor. Denying our need to be right and to always win, in favor of loving those around us.

This IS NOT meant to imply that we can ignore OR belittle the importance of good doctrine. **We balance them with, and in, Love.**

★ YouTube clip? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>

Bottom line = let **LOVE** comes first in all that you do. **Let’s pray.**