

Text: Luke 23:32–43

Focus: The penitent thief—deserving of death in the eyes of the world—witnesses Jesus responding to violence with love and recognizes, in that moment, the power of mercy.

I. Setting the Stage: Who We Think the Thief Is

I didn't set out to kill anyone.

I just wanted to take my country back.

I believed everything they told me—that the election was stolen, that our freedoms were under attack, that it was time for real patriots to rise up.

So I packed my gear. I prayed. I kissed my wife goodbye. And I got in the truck and drove to D.C.

When we got there, it felt like electricity. Flags waving. Chants echoing off the buildings. Grown men crying because they believed God was finally going to win this war.

We stormed the steps. I don't even remember how I got inside.

Someone broke a window. I climbed through.

There was shouting—so much shouting. Chaos. Pepper spray. Broken furniture.

And then a man in uniform stood in our path.

I don't remember what I said. I just remember the look in his eyes—he was scared.

And then it happened. I shoved him. Someone else struck him.
He fell.

PAUSE

They showed me the video footage in court.
They said I was part of it.
I was.

They called me a traitor. A terrorist. I was part of the insurrection

It's the end of a long and bloody day.

Three crosses stand outside the city.
The crowd has gathered—not to mourn, but to mock.
To watch the “problem people” die.

Two of them are rebels—insurrectionists.
They've seen violence. They've committed violence.
They believed in overthrowing Rome by any means necessary.

And between them... hangs Jesus.

No army. No weapon. No plan of attack.

And when the spikes are hammered through his wrists, he says,
“Father, forgive them. For they do not know what they are doing.”

One of the rebels—his body twisted in pain—gasps out,

“Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself... and us!”

It's not really a question. It's a sneer.
He's still clinging to the same story:
Use power. Take control. Prove yourself. Win.

And then the other man in his MAGA hat speaks:

“Don't you fear God?”
“We're getting what we deserve. But this man... he's done nothing wrong.”

Then he turns to Jesus and says:

“Remember me... when you come into your kingdom.”

There's no theology here. No polished confession.
Just a man who sees something true.

He sees a dying man—offering forgiveness.
He sees someone absorbing violence without returning it.
He sees mercy... and he wants to be near it.

He doesn't ask for a second chance.
He doesn't try to justify his past.
He just... asks to be remembered.

And Jesus—still bleeding, still bearing the hatred of the world—says the most scandalous thing:

“Today... you will be with me in paradise.”

II. What Moved Him

It wasn't a miracle that moved him.

There was no last-minute healing. No angels. No thunder.
Jesus didn't come down from the cross and prove himself.
There was no sign that made it clear.

And it wasn't a sermon.
Jesus wasn't preaching that day.
He wasn't laying out doctrine. He wasn't explaining who he was or what was happening.

What moved the thief—what cracked his heart open—was how Jesus responded to violence.

While the crowd hurled insults...

While the soldiers cast lots for his clothes...

While people mocked him, saying, "If you're really the Messiah, prove it..."

Jesus didn't retaliate.

He didn't curse them.

He didn't defend himself.

He took it all—the hatred, the violence, the humiliation—and he refused to give it back.

Instead, he said:

"Father, forgive them."

And in that moment, the criminal hanging on the cross saw something perhaps he'd never seen before.

He had only know a way of being where power was taken by force.

Where people were silenced with fists.

Where survival meant getting them before they got you.

But here—right next to him—was a man who had every reason in the world to strike back...

And instead—he chose mercy.

That's what moved him.

Not a display of strength.

Not a promise of reward.

But love that refused to become hate.

III. When Love messes with our logic

And that kind of love. it *disrupts* everything we thought we knew about who belongs and who gets to speak. Because grace like this doesn't make sense.

It doesn't follow the rules.

It doesn't reward the polished, the powerful, the prepared.

The first person welcomed into paradise by Jesus wasn't a spiritual leader.

It wasn't a disciple.

It wasn't a prophet or a martyr.

It was a criminal.

A convicted insurrectionist.

A man guilty by his own admission.

A man with nothing to offer—no résumé, no restitution, no time to make things right.

That's the kingdom Jesus reveals on the cross—

A kingdom built Not on purity, but mercy.

And here's the scandal:

The one we would be most likely to write off... is the one Jesus remembers.

IV. Two Responses to Love.

There were two men—one on each side of Jesus.

Both were dying.

Both were within feet of him.

Both had witnessed the same cruelty, the same mockery, the same mercy.

And yet... only one of them recognized what was happening.

One heart hardened.

The other heart broke open.

Same pain.

Same cross.

Same Jesus.

Different response.

And that... is the real mystery.
It's the part I still can't quite explain.

What makes one person respond with cynicism—and another with hope?
What makes one heart shut down—and another whisper, *Jesus... remember me*”?

Maybe this is part of what the gospel is trying to teach us:
That keeping our hearts open—soft, tender, responsive to grace—might be more important than any other kind of perfection we're chasing

V. Feeling Something is the Faithful Response

Let me be clear:

If you're witnessing all that's happening in the world—the cruelty, the hate, the corruption parading as Christianity—and you're feeling something in your body, in your chest, in your soul...

Good.

That means your heart is still alive.
It means the Spirit is still working in you.
It means you haven't gone numb to the suffering around you.

You *should* be feeling something.

If you care about people...
If you care about the gospel...
If you care about the kind of world we're leaving our children...

You will feel something.

Anger. Grief. Frustration. Exhaustion.
Whatever it is—it's not a problem to have emotion.
It's a problem *not to*.

The danger isn't feeling too much.

The danger is letting what we feel turn into something that hardens us.

VI. The Emotional Landscape of Resistance

For some of us, all this injustice stirs **anger**.

And honestly? That's a holy impulse.

But if we're not careful—if we aren't intentional about how we channel that anger—it starts to harden us.

It stops seeking justice and starts looking for someone to destroy.

For others, it leads to **numbness**.

We shut down.

We scroll past.

We say, "I just can't handle this today."

We disengage—not because we don't care, but because caring feels dangerous.

Some of us feel **ashamed**—because we've been complicit.

Or we feel **powerless**—like nothing we do really matters.

And some of us... we've just gone **cynical**.

We've stopped being surprised by grace.

We've stopped believing that anything—or anyone—can really change.

All of those responses are human.

They make sense.

They are emotional survival strategies in a world that keeps breaking our hearts.

But they have a cost.

The cost is a heart that slowly closes in on itself.

The cost is a spirit that forgets how to be tender.

The cost is that we start looking more like the empire we're resisting—and less like the Jesus we're following.

The cost is being next to Jesus —seeing mercy first hand and responding with cynicism rather than letting it break your heart open.

So I want to ask you—gently, honestly:

Which of these emotions feels true for you right now?

What's happening in your heart when you look at the world?

VII. The World We're Up Against

If I'm being honest, when I think about the people I'm most tempted to write off—the ones I cannot imagine being “remembered” by Jesus—this story feels almost *too* generous.

Because we are surrounded by hatred right now.

White Christian nationalism is not just loud—it's spreading.

It is spewing bile from pulpits and podiums.

It's using the name of Jesus to justify violence, cruelty, racism, exclusion, and domination.

It's upholding patriarchy and homophobia, calling them “biblical values.”

It's dressing up empire and calling it the kingdom of God.

It is ugly.

It is dangerous.

And it is wrong.

It worships power, not love.

It builds walls instead of welcoming strangers.

It distorts the gospel and calls it holiness.

And let's be real:

If you care about justice...

If you care about truth...

If you're trying to follow Jesus in this world right now...

This kind of hatred *does something* to your heart.

There's no escaping it.

If you're paying attention—if you're *alive*—your heart will respond.

The question is: *how will you respond?*

Because the moment we stop believing that even the thief on the cross could be remembered...

We stop believing the gospel.

Jesus isn't just dying—

He's showing us what real power looks like.

This is what nonviolence looks like at its most sacred:

Not weakness. Not giving in.

But choosing love when the world demands hate.

We will have other days to talk about how to resist, how to seek justice, how to disrupt injustices.

But today the message is to love mercy.

To be brave enough to stay soft.

To be willing to see love when it bleeds in front of us.

To not numb yourself and be unaffected by the world around you.

To be open to disruption—that looks like grace undeserved.

Because sometimes the truest face of faith is the one we least expect.

The man who once tried to fight the empire with violence...

Now hangs next to someone who's fighting it with mercy.

And there one realizes which kingdom is real.

Questions:

How do you keep your heart soft?

And what are your warning signs that your heart is hardening?