

Lessons Learned from the Most Unlikely Teachers
Luke 23:32 – 33; 39 – 43
August 16, 2009

I expect to learn things when I read the teachings of Jesus; after all, the Jews called him a great Rabbi, a great teacher.

I expect to learn things when I read the writings of men who spent as much as three years with Jesus, watching His miracles and observing how He showed concern for people; surely, the wisdom gained from their exposure to Jesus was invaluable.

I expect to learn important things from the writings of Paul; he was well schooled in the Jewish tradition before he met Jesus and applied the truth of grace and a personal relationship with God to what he previously knew.

I expect to learn things from the words of Solomon, because he asked God for wisdom, and God granted his request.

But the Bible is full of people whom you would never suspect could teach you some significant truths, but somehow they do. Today I want to point to two unlikely teachers: the criminals hung on crosses on either side of Jesus at Calvary on the day He was crucified. I believe they can teach us some very important truths about making choices. (Read scripture)

1. Every choice I make separates me from someone/something, and moves me closer to someone/something (Luke 23: 39 – 40).

- A. The two criminals executed with Jesus had much in common.
 - 1. They were condemned to die by the same system that condemned Jesus.
 - 2. Their sentences were carried out the same day as Jesus', at the same time.
 - 3. They hung the same distance from Jesus, on either side.
 - 4. Their commonality even extended to both hurling insults at Jesus at one point (Matthew 27: 44).
- B. Then something happened – one of them made a choice, the choice to believe that Jesus was in fact the Messiah.
 - 1. That choice moved him away from the other criminal, and at the same time moved him closer to Jesus.
- C. The choices we have in life have the same consequences.
 - 1. Each choice we make will move us closer to someone or something, and the choice will move us further away from someone or something.
 - 2. It may be people we shared values and lifestyles with, that now we no longer share those activities or lifestyles.
- D. Therefore, I need to carefully weigh the consequences of my choices; I ought not make them thoughtlessly or carelessly. The cost may be too great.

2. God freely gives me the choice where I will spend my eternity.

- A. I want you to notice the silence of Jesus toward the unrepentant criminal.
 - 1. I struggle with this detail of Scripture, because it runs contrary to every

instinct of my evangelical heart. All of my training as a minister is focused upon the phrase, "Repent and be saved."

2. Every self-respecting evangelist would give their right arm for the opportunity Jesus had at that moment.

B. Jesus, the greatest evangelist, had the perfect scenario to win this soul for the kingdom.

1. In a few fleeting hours, this man would die on his cross and face eternity.

2. Just a little pressure, or a couple words of encouragement, or perhaps explaining a key scriptural truth or two would turn the tide and move this thief from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

C. But Jesus is silent; He allows this man to slip into eternity unrepentant of his sins.

1. "Surely Jesus could have said something; after all, He is the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to search of the one that is lost."

2. But I remind you, Jesus is also the Prodigal's Father who did nothing but wait for to see if the lost son would ever return home.

D. How God's involvement in my salvation and my free choice work together without contradiction is a mystery I really cannot explain, but I clearly see both at play in the Bible and in my life.

1. But don't make the dangerous mistake of some folks I have known who have presumed God would on some fateful day override their sinful choices, cancel out their rebelliousness and practically drag them into the kingdom.

2. Remember, God gives us free choice.

3. It only takes one good choice to overcome a multitude of bad choices (vs. 42 – 43).

A. Because these criminals were being executed on a cross tells me this is probably not their first offense.

1. They likely had made two lifetimes' worth of bad choices that got them to the ultimate sanction imposed on them that day: people with whom they kept company; things they did; choices they made; things they said.

B. But it only took one good choice by one man to erase a multitude of bad choices.

1. That one good choice ended with him in Paradise.

C. I realize I make more bad choices than good choices in my life.

1. And I am forever grateful that God says one good choice will cover a multitude of bad choices.

2. You see, that good choice moves me away from the environs and bad company with which sin infests my life and soul.

3. Every time someone encountered Jesus in His earthly ministry, He called them to follow Him; that meant they needed to move closer to Him and away from the world.

Today, I know my situation is not helpless. I am only one good choice away from getting my life back in order. How about you? Are you in the clutches of bad choices; I assure you God is not interested in dredging up all the ugly details, or humiliating you as a moral failure. He is ready and more than able to forgive you, draw you back into relationship, and give you back that sense of peace and victory.

Are you ready to make that choice?

Let's pray!