

Topical Message approximately 30 minutes



## ★ The Ugliness of Sin, the Power of the Cross, and the Beauty of Grace

Main Scripture: Luke 23:32-43

Supporting Scriptures: Romans 3:23; Romans 5:8; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-10; John 3:3



### Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we come before You with thankful hearts. Open Your Word to us, and open our hearts to Your Word. Help us see sin honestly, the cross clearly, and Your grace beautifully. Encourage those who are weary, awaken those who have grown comfortable with sin, and draw those who do not yet know Jesus into new life. May

**everything we hear today lead us closer to our Savior. In Jesus' name, amen.**

Let us open with God's Word. Luke chapter 23:32-43.



(NIV)

***Luke 23:32-43 <sup>32</sup> Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.***

***<sup>35</sup> The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."***

***<sup>36</sup> The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine***

***vinegar <sup>37</sup> and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”***

***<sup>38</sup> There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.***

***<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”***

***<sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”***

***<sup>42</sup> Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”***

***<sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”<sup>1</sup>***

## **Historical Setting: Outside the Walls of Jerusalem**

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<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Lk 23:32–43.

Imagine Jerusalem during Passover.

Pilgrims have gathered to remember how God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. Families are preparing to celebrate a rescue accomplished by God's mighty hand.

Yet outside the city, another scene is unfolding.

Roman soldiers are carrying out executions. Three men are being crucified. Two are criminals. Between them hangs **Jesus of Nazareth**.

Crucifixion was a brutal Roman punishment intended to cause suffering, humiliation, and fear. An execution like this sent a message: this is what happens to those who fall under Rome's judgment.

But the man on the middle cross has committed no crime.

Jesus has healed the sick, welcomed the outcast, taught God's truth, and shown compassion to the broken. Nevertheless, He has been betrayed, falsely accused, mocked, beaten, and nailed to a cross.

Some religious leaders ridicule Him. Soldiers mock Him. Even one of the dying criminals insults Him.

Above Him is a notice identifying Him as "the King of the Jews".

They intend it as an accusation. Yet the One hanging beneath that sign **truly is the King.**

Here, at the cross, we see three things together: the ugliness of sin, the power of God's saving work, and the breathtaking beauty of grace.

Let us begin with the truth we often find hardest to face.

## ★ 1. Sin Is Uglier Than We Want to Admit

  (NIV) **Romans 3:23 says, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.<sup>2</sup>**

Notice that word **all**.

Sin is not merely something committed by people whose lives make the evening news. It reaches **every human heart**.

We tend to measure ourselves against one another.

“I have made mistakes, but at least I am not like that person.”

But God’s standard is His own holiness. Compared with His perfect goodness, every one of us falls short.

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<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 3:23.

Sin includes the wrong things we do, the good things we refuse to do, and the attitudes we develop within.

It can appear as dishonesty, bitterness, pride, sexual immorality, greed, or cruelty. Sometimes it wears respectable clothing. A person can attend church faithfully while **refusing to forgive** someone at home.

Sin says, “God, I know what You want, but I want my way.”

And its ugliness extends beyond the moment of disobedience.

A lie damages trust. Anger wounds a family. Greed treats people as objects. Pride makes us unwilling to confess when we are wrong.

Sin promises freedom while tightening its grip.

  Think of a fishing hook hidden beneath attractive bait. The fish sees

something desirable. It does not see what will hold it captive.

👉 Temptation works that way. It shows us the pleasure and hides the consequences.

At Calvary, the disguise is stripped away.

We see betrayal in Judas, cowardice in Pilate, hatred in the mockers, and cruelty in the executioners. We see what human rebellion can do when confronted by perfect goodness.

Yet we must be careful. The cross does not invite us to applaud ourselves because we were absent from that crowd.

🤔 🔓 🔑 It invites us to confess that we, too, need the Savior.

The same pride, fear, and selfishness that appeared around the cross can live within us.

Before grace becomes precious to us, we must become honest about our need.

## ★ **2. The Cross Shows That God Takes Sin Seriously**

Why could God not simply overlook everything?

Because God is good.

We expect a just judge to care about wrongdoing. If a judge dismissed every act of violence or manipulation as unimportant, we would question that judge's character.

Because God is holy and just, He takes sin seriously. He sees the suffering it causes and cares deeply about every person it hurts.



(NIV)

***Romans 6:23 says, For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>3</sup>***

**“For the wages of sin is death...”**

A wage is something earned. Sin leads to death and separation from God, the source of life.

We cannot repair that separation by becoming slightly more religious.

- Good deeds do not erase guilt.
- Church attendance cannot purchase forgiveness.
- Knowing Bible verses does not make us righteous before God.

We need someone to accomplish what we cannot accomplish ourselves.



That is why Jesus came.

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<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 6:23.

- He lived without sin.
- He obeyed the Father completely.
- Then He willingly gave His life for sinners.

👉 Jesus came to give His life for our salvation, and the cross was at the heart of that mission. There, He willingly took upon Himself the punishment our sins deserved so that everyone who trusts in Him can be forgiven and brought into a restored relationship with God.

🤔💭 We sometimes speak casually about forgiveness because we forget what it cost.

Our salvation was purchased through the self-giving love of the Son of God.

When we understand that, we begin to say, “Lord, I cannot treat lightly what You suffered to save me from.”

The cross calls us to take sin seriously....  
and to take God's love seriously, too.

### ★ 3. The Cross Reveals a Love We Could Never Earn

  (NIV) ***Romans 5:8*** says, ***But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***<sup>4</sup>



When did Christ love us?



While we were still sinners.

- He did not wait until we became impressive.
- He did not require us to make ourselves worthy of His attention.



He moved toward us in our need.

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<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 5:8.

Perhaps someone listening has thought, “If people knew everything about me, they would turn away.”

Jesus already knows everything about you.

He knows the choices you regret, the words you wish you could take back, and the failures you have hidden.

And He calls you to come.

That does not mean He approves of your sin. It means His love is great enough to rescue you from it.

Grace is God’s undeserved favor. We cannot demand it as a reward. We receive it as a gift.

Some people imagine that becoming a Christian means climbing a ladder toward God, one good deed at a time.

The gospel tells us that God came to us in Jesus Christ.

Our hope rests in what He has done.

And remember: the Father and the Son are united in this saving love. Jesus willingly gave Himself. At the cross, God acted to reconcile sinners to Himself.

When your conscience reminds you that you have sinned, you do not need to hide it or make excuses. Bring it honestly to Jesus and say, “Lord, I have sinned. Please forgive me. My hope is in You and what You have done for me on the cross.”

The foundation of Christian confidence is His faithfulness.

## ★ 4. A Dying Criminal Shows Us How Grace Is Received

Return to Luke chapter 23.



(NIV)

**Luke 23:39-43 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults**

**at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”**

**<sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”**

**<sup>42</sup> Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”**

**<sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”<sup>5</sup>**

Both criminals are suffering beside Jesus. But their responses become very different.

One demands rescue while mocking Him.

The other acknowledges his guilt. He recognizes that their punishment is

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<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Lk 23:39–43.

deserved and that Jesus has done nothing wrong.

Then he turns to Jesus and says:

**“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** (Luke 23:42)

What a remarkable expression of faith! Jesus is suffering on a Roman cross, and to those watching, He appears defeated. Yet this dying man recognizes Him as the King and believes that His kingdom is still to come. With nothing in his circumstances to offer hope, he places his trust in Jesus .... the Savior hanging beside him.

And Jesus answers:

**“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”** (Luke 23:43)

Think about this man’s situation. With his life coming to an end, he had no time to

spend years helping others, make right every wrong he had done, or build a reputation as a devoted follower of God. But he could still admit his sin and place his trust in Jesus. And Jesus received him by grace.

That should encourage anyone who thinks, “I have gone too far.”

👉 While you have breath in your lungs, turn to Christ.

But do not use this account as a reason to postpone repentance. This man’s story assures us that grace can reach a person at the end of life; it does not promise us an opportunity tomorrow.

👉 Come to Jesus today.

Salvation brings us into fellowship with our Savior. The greatest blessing of eternal life is belonging to Him.

## ★ **5. The Power of the Cross Leads into New Life**

The story of Jesus does not end at the tomb.

👉 He rose from the dead.

The crucified Savior is the risen Lord. His resurrection confirms that death has been defeated and that our hope in Him is alive.

Through Christ,

- guilt can be forgiven,
- our relationship with God restored,
- and the power of sin broken.

That does not mean Christians never struggle.

A new believer will still wrestle with old habits. A mature believer may discover pride in an unexpected corner of the heart.

But those who belong to Jesus have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. We are no longer left to face temptation in our own strength.

Grace teaches us to bring our lives under Christ's lordship.

Suppose a person has been rescued from a burning building. The rescue is freely given, but it would be tragic for that person to run back into the flames.

 Likewise, the grace that saves us calls us away from what destroys us.

 We begin learning to tell the truth,

- forgive others,
- resist temptation,
- and love people we once overlooked.

These changes do not purchase salvation. They grow out of salvation.

Ephesians 2:8-10 teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and created in Christ for good works.



(NIV)

***Ephesians 2:8-10      <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. <sup>6</sup>***

The order matters.

God rescues us, and then teaches us to walk with Him.



## **6. Bring Your Everyday Life to the Cross**

How do we put this message into practice when a new week begins?

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<sup>6</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Eph 2:8–10.

What difference should the cross make in our everyday lives?

**First, be honest with God about your sin.**

Confess what you have done without hiding it or making excuses. If you have lied, admit it to God and correct the lie. If you have hurt someone, ask for forgiveness and do what you can to make things right. Repentance means turning from sin and allowing God to lead you in a new direction.

**Second, trust the forgiveness Jesus provides.**

Sometimes we confess our sins but continue carrying the guilt, wondering whether God has truly forgiven us. Remember that our forgiveness rests on what Jesus accomplished on the cross. We can learn from our failures without continually punishing ourselves for them. Bring your sin to Christ, receive His forgiveness, and move forward in faith.

## **Third, show others the grace God has shown you.**

Remember how patiently the Lord has dealt with your weaknesses and failures. Let that patience shape the way you treat others. Speak truth with humility, and be willing to forgive. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that the hurt never happened. When trust has been broken, rebuilding it may take time. Even then, we can ask God to help us respond with wisdom and love rather than bitterness.

## **Finally, keep walking closely with Jesus.**

Read His Word, talk with Him in prayer, and gather with other believers. When you struggle, reach out for help. God often strengthens and encourages us through His people.

If you have followed Jesus for many years, keep the cross at the center of your life. Let His sacrificial love deepen your worship,

humble your heart, and guide the way you treat others.

If you are a new Christian, you do not have to understand everything at once. Begin with what you know:

- Jesus loves you,
- gave His life for you,
- and calls you to follow Him.

Trust Him, take the next step of obedience, and keep learning as you walk with Him.

## **7. An Invitation to Be Born Again**

Before we close, let me speak personally to anyone who has never entrusted their life to Jesus Christ.

- You may believe that God exists.
- You may have attended church for years.

But have you turned to Jesus as your Savior and Lord?

In **John 3:3**, Jesus teaches that we must be **born again to see God's kingdom.**

Being born again means receiving spiritual life from God. It is His work within us as we turn from sin and trust in Christ.

Jesus died for our sins and rose again. He offers forgiveness and new life to everyone who comes to Him in faith.

You do not have to hide your need.

Like the criminal beside Jesus, you can acknowledge your guilt and entrust yourself to the Savior.

★ If that is your desire, you can pray in words like these. The words themselves do not save you; **Jesus saves**. Let this prayer express your sincere trust in Him.

 Let us pray...

**“Lord Jesus, I confess that I have sinned and need Your forgiveness.... I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead.... I turn to You and place my trust in You as my Savior and Lord.... Forgive me, give me new life, and teach me to follow You..... Thank You for receiving me by Your grace..... Amen.”**

If you have trusted Christ today, tell another believer. Find a church that faithfully teaches the Bible. Begin reading the Gospel of John, and talk to God in prayer.

You are beginning a life of walking with Jesus.

The ugliness of sin is real. But so is the power of the cross.

And the Savior who welcomed that dying criminal still welcomes sinners who turn to Him.



### **Closing Prayer**

**Heavenly Father, thank You for loving us when we could not save ourselves.**

**Thank You for the cross of Jesus Christ and the victory of His resurrection.**

**Give us honest hearts that confess sin, trusting hearts that receive Your forgiveness, and willing hearts that obey Your Word. Help us extend the grace we have received to the people around us.**

**Strengthen those who are struggling.  
Restore those who have wandered.  
Establish those who have trusted Jesus today.**

**May our lives show the beauty of Your good news. We belong to You because**

**of Your mercy. In the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior, amen.**

