

WHAT WE LEARN FROM A THIEF!

Steps to a New Life:

Luke 23:32-43

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Bethany Church

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I don't change very easily. Just ask my family. Change means moving into what is uncertain and unfamiliar, and that is the place where mistakes often multiply. Change can be exciting, but it also can make one very vulnerable. I have to be motivated to change. Last summer my family tried to persuade me to buy a new car. Frankly, I liked the old one. They finally succeeded after giving me a list of 10 reasons why I should buy a new car:

1. Your whoopee cushion taped to the steering wheel is a poor excuse for an airbag.
2. You are continually losing the stoplight challenge with that 14-year-old and his moped.
3. The last time thieves broke in your car they took "The Club" and nothing else.
4. We think the gas gauge should be measured in something more contemporary than cubits.
5. You know the car hasn't been the same since Henry Ford borrowed it.
6. We are tired of your 15-minute Jiffy Lube job lasting 3 days.
7. Aren't you tired of re-duct-taping your windshield each time you stop for gas?
8. We are embarrassed that traffic reporters now refer to you by name when discussing morning tie-ups.
9. We are also embarrassed that people run up and ask if anyone is hurt every time you stop at a traffic signal.
10. Your passenger seat is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Of course, I'm teasing; but motivation is key to making any change or doing anything new. Without motivation we expend little effort. Without effort one won't take the steps that

lead to the new life God offers us in Christ; and everybody needs new life: no matter how good or bad they are. The kingdom of deception and death shrouds every human being. Every person is devastated, not only by outside evil, but also by evil working within. For you to fulfill your purpose and realize your potential, you need something to happen within you that gives you power to overcome temptation, defeat, guilt and bitterness. Jesus told a religious teacher named Nicodemus that despite his religious fervor and devotion, he and everyone else must be born again (John 3:3). Everyone needs a new birth and the life that springs from it. One doesn't fall into a meaningful life with God. New life isn't dumped on us automatically; and it doesn't come in your genes. Unlike his evil opponents who manipulate and dominate, God respects your decisions and responds to them. Therefore, to experience the birth of which Jesus spoke, and the new life that springs from it, you must consciously take some steps. In the next few weeks, we will consider what steps bring new life. Today, let's look at what steps brought life to a thief.

Jesus was crucified with two other men. He hung between them (John 19:18). Matthew and Mark call them robbers. However, these robbers were not people who quietly swiped things. They were not people who snuck around and grabbed valuables in the middle of the night. If that had been the case, the authors would have used the Greek term "klepto," which is the root of the English word *kleptomaniac*, a person who obsessively swipes things. These robbers were people who mugged or extorted property from others. They were like the bandits who attacked a Jewish man walking to Jericho, stripped him of valuables and left him for dead. Jesus called the money changers at the temple this because of their exploitation and extortion of the poor. Luke described these men with term criminals or "doers of evil or harm." As muggers, extortionists or both, they were violent. Jesus hung with violent men. You can imagine the bitterness, anger and hatred that filled their hearts. These men not only left a trail of victims. Their acts sowed

violence and fear in the people of their communities. They didn't merely take property. They stole souls, for many of their victims may have succumbed to fear and bitterness.

Matthew notes that they joined in the taunting of Jesus that was so prevalent. Luke, however, found that one thug said something to the other that was unexpected:

"Don't you fear God even when you are dying? We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." (Luke 23:40-42, NLT)

Jesus responded:

I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43, NLT)

That very moment the destiny of a thug changed. What thousands and millions of people hunger for, look for, and work for, became his without a single righteous act. This man had taken, not given. He had extorted his possessions from others, or even worse, beat them out of others. Now, however, for him a new life was unfolding with people like Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Elijah, Daniel, Jesus and God himself. It was unfolding not because he was good or because he deserved any mercy. When he left the earth that day, his victims remained. His crimes dug pits for people, and those pits for some would be eternal prisons. Yet, this robber, on the threshold of death took four steps that changed him forever.

The first step motivated him. He asked his fellow henchman, "Don't you fear God even when you are dying?" The thief saw what was coming. He saw judgment. He experienced fear. He did not want to meet God and experience the life that was unfolding. He wanted something different. He was moved by fear.

The two most powerful motives in the world are love and fear. For love, one will give her life. She will lay down her life for her child or friend. For fear, one will take a life. We are witnessing fear at work in Iraqi civilians; as at gun point they take up arms.

Often, at the other end of fear is hope. These same civilians hope that somehow they can escape death and detection. People flood to the city of Rochester with fear and hope. They let other people do painful things to them, like poke them with needles, put them through tests or even cut them open. They do this out of fear of what will happen if they don't, and out of hope of what might happen if they do. For the thug on the cross, fear and hope laced his words. "Don't you fear," he asked the other thief. "Remember me," he called to Jesus.

John Newton captained a slave ship. He profited from transporting slaves from Africa. He justified his work. He reasoned that slaves were dying on other ships, but that he treated them well. He would not face the horror of his deeds. He had a praying mother though. She would not relent in praying for him. In *Amazing Grace*, his most famous hymn and his personal testimony, he wrote: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved."

We don't move a step toward a new life until we are motivated. Are you motivated? Do you really want a new life, or are you fine with who you are right now? The thief experienced a new destiny and a new life because he was motivated. He feared, and also, perhaps with the tiniest strand, he hoped.

The thief took a second step. He recognized the facts: "We deserve to die for our evil deeds." In other words, the thief realized he was getting what he deserved. He saw the fruit of his action. No one makes life-changing decisions, such as solicits a personal trainer to help them get fit, enters a treatment facility to address an addiction, or goes to counselor for help until they see the fruit of their actions, and don't want that fruit. No new life is possible if you are satisfied with the present. This thug was getting along okay until his life became intolerable hanging with Jesus. The thought of meeting God scared him. At that point, with all the carnage he left behind, he saw his need for change. Hanging there, he was ready for change. Do we have to

hang before we are ready to change? How far down the road of pain must we travel? The second thug never arrived. He was too bitter. He may have blamed everyone but himself.

The first thief took a third step when he pondered Jesus' life and claims: "This man hasn't done anything wrong." He knew the claims of Jesus. That was the reason so many were taunting Jesus; but he also observed the life of Jesus that many witnessed. He could say, "He hasn't done anything wrong." What have you heard about Jesus? Have you heard some of Jesus' teaching? Even non-believers confess there is no teaching like his. His words, like no others in human history, cut through human pride, expose human need and offer such help and hope. Have you heard Jesus' claims and the testimonies about his deeds? Even here at Bethany we are experiencing remarkable things through faith in him. Such knowledge gives one reason for hope. Jesus claimed to be the bread of life. "I am the way, the truth and the life," he said. "No one approaches the Father, except through me." Have you pondered the claims and life of Jesus? Do they give you hope?

Finally, this thief did the only thing he could. He called to Jesus: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." That simple act changed his life. That same act is bringing new life to thousands of people every day on this planet. People are calling to Jesus, and Jesus is sending his Spirit into their hearts. Jesus is remembering them and comes into his kingdom, for he is establishing his kingdom in their lives. As a result, they are experiencing a new birth. They have a new faith, love, hope, power, passion, identity. They are new.

Have you been left out? Are you alone? Would you like to join them? Do you fear the moment you must give account? Do you see the fruit of your attitudes and actions, and not like what's coming? Do the claims and life of Jesus give you hope? Call to him and he will respond. Call to him right now.