

“Giver or Taker”

June 1, 2008

Scripture: (Luke 23:32-43)

Whenever I walk into this room, especially when no one else is here, I feel a peace and solitude I don't feel anywhere else. There are two things that strike me when I walk in. The first is the large cross; this cross reminds me of how grateful I am for what Christ has done for me, even when I rejected Him. The second are the two smaller crosses on each side of the large cross. These crosses remind me that I have choices and each one depends on how I view the larger cross in the middle. I can either be a taker or a giver, I can live my life how I want it to be or as God intended, I can live in rebellion or in freedom, and the list goes on and on. These crosses remind me that if I want to live as God intended, I have to walk with Christ to get there.

On the day Jesus was crucified, there was not just one cross on that hill, but three. Jesus died between two thieves. Have you ever wondered why?

There were a lot of other kinds of criminals back then as there are now. There were murderers. And there were people who abused animals and children and women. And there were those who lied, and those who prostituted. And there were sorcerers, and there were gamblers. There were zealots – political rebels who created riots and uprisings.

But Jesus was crucified between two thieves.

Never read scripture just for the story line; the story line is there and it's a great one. But there's usually much more to the story than meets the eye at first glance. The gospels are full of innuendo and symbolism. The gospels are full of treasure and in order to see it, you've got to dig a little beneath the surface. It's in Luke's gospel that we read about these thieves in the greatest detail.

But why two thieves? Why did God do it this way? And why does Luke bother to mention it? Why not just focus on Jesus; after all, He's the focal point of the story. Well, we need to know that Jesus was

“... numbered among the transgressors.” (Isa 53.12 NIV)

He was killed alongside the lowest common denominator of criminal. You couldn't get much lower than a thief. But two of the very same kinds of criminal, two thieves – one on each side. Why?

Luke is describing the human condition, of our condition. Thieves are people who steal what doesn't belong to them. Thieves are people who take what belongs to another and then they act like it's their own. But it never really does belong to them, does it? And they know it. What they take is not rightfully theirs. They have taken it by force.

I remember talking to a kid who had been caught shoplifting. He would go into department stores and just take things. And he looked up at me – and said:

You know, I don't want or even need this stuff I've taken. I'm just trying to fill myself up inside. And when I see all these things, I think that if I just take them, they'll make me feel better, but they never do.

Then it struck me, how stealing what you think you want can leave you so empty.

And who am I? I have a tendency to break the rules sometimes. I'm one who Christ died for. But, am I a thief?

I usually don't think of myself that way. I don't go into people's living rooms at night and steal their TV sets. I don't stuff peanuts into my pockets in grocery stores Well, not anymore. Remember there was a time in grocery stores when there weren't any free samples given away? Used to be I'd sample peanuts, grapes or cherries off the bunch in the produce section. I got walloped for that by one of my kids, the one we called our lawyer. One day he yelled out across the store:

Dad...You are stealing! You didn't pay!

Every eye was on me ... and a bunch of other guys as we tried to look innocent, stuffing our loot into our pockets, even the store manager. Ever try cleaning crushed grapes out of your pocket?

Despite this, I don't usually think of myself as a thief. It's a kind of foreign concept. But when I ask myself:

Do I live as a giver or as a taker?

this makes me stop and think about it a little bit more.

Am I living, constantly trying to fill an emptiness in me, or am I already full and giving out of that fullness? Do I see my life as a possession that belongs to me, that I own? That I feel compelled to use for my own ends? Or do I act as though life is a gift from God? Do I live surrendered to God's purpose and will for me?

If I don't, I've stolen my life away from God's purpose and call for me, and I'm in essence using what ultimately belongs to God (the Author and giver of life) for my own ends...not God's ends. In this way I live what I call "my life", as a thief.

When I look at it this way, I can see too many days when I've lived as a thief – a taker. In my darker moments, sometimes I feel as if there may not be enough of what I think I need. Of what I want to go around. I'm just like the shoplifter that I don't usually identify with. I think I know what I want...what I need to fill me up inside. I think I know what I need to be successful, important, to be of significance.

In order to get there I may have to take what may not belong to me. On these darker days when I'm afraid that God is far away I translate scripture from:

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord ...(Jeremiah 29:11)

To:

"I know the plans I have for me, plans to get me where I need to go, no matter what." (NewAgeMeism 1:1)

One night I woke up from a bad dream. I was walking down this dark street at night, turned a corner and saw a robbery taking place. The people being robbed stepped out of the shadows and one of them I recognized — It was me! Then the robber turned around and I could see his face. It was me! I had been stealing from others as well as myself.

On these days I can be a thief. I can steal credit from people, and pretend it was my idea. I steal time that belongs to my kids and grandkids and give it away to things far less important. I steal by spending money on things I don't really need and that others could use. I steal from relationships by pursuing my own pleasure and ignoring the command to show sacrificial love. I steal joy from those who have experienced success and do a one up-man-ship game to make myself look

better. I steal by keeping my faith to myself, for my own spiritual high, and not sharing it with others.

Underneath all of this stealing is the false assumption that my life belongs to me and I'm the focus of it all.

I steal to make myself happy, secure and content. But I'm not secure; I stay empty, and once I've stolen, I simply want more – just like the shoplifter does. **When we treat our lives as a possession rather than a gift, when we act as the owners of our life, rather than as recipients of a gift, we live as thieves.**

We take what God has given us – the gift of life - given to us in order that we might love Him and the world, and use it instead to take for ourselves. It goes back to Eden. We separated ourselves from fellowship with God by taking the one thing that didn't belong to us. We had the whole Garden – just one thing we couldn't have – that lousy fruit – we stole the fruit that was forbidden. And it left us empty and alone, ashamed, scared and lost. This happens when:

We know the plans we have for us.

This happens when we steal our lives away from God's purpose for us.

Ever watch TV shows or movies where thieves come in and steal things considered "secure." No matter how many red electric eyes are crisscrossing to protect the diamond in a great museum, it still gets taken in the end by the experts. Experts who know the inner working of the museum and the holes in the security system. The difference between these robberies and me is that their stealing is carefully planned out and executed.

My kind of stealing I do without even realizing I'm doing it. It's engrained in me; it's part of my nature. I steal from fear, from depletion, from a place of survival rather than abundance.

The irony of the two thieves on the cross with Jesus in the middle is that as they had lived their lives by forcefully taking away from others. Now their lives are being forcefully taken away from them.

Jesus wasn't having anything forcefully taken away from Him, even though He hung there right along with them. He gave up His life willingly. And even when He died, the scripture says:

"He breathed His last." (Luke 23: 46b)

The way it's written in the original implies an act of will ... even His last breath was under His Divine control. Jesus' life was not stolen from Him. As he told His disciples:

"The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (Jn 10:17-18 NIV)

So here are two thieves on either side of Jesus ... having their lives stolen from them by force, while the One who has all the force in the universe hangs there willingly, out of love, sacrificing Himself for the sins of the world, according to plan. Christ is hemmed in by those who took and claimed as their own what never belonged to them...and it all seems to be ending in futility. Here they hang, with the rightful owner of all that is, the Creator of all that was stolen, hanging between them.

Up until now we have known them as just “two thieves”. But as their lives begin to slip away, something happens. Something happens that sets one thief apart from the other. It’s their reaction to Jesus.

It’s funny how two people can look at something and see such different things. The first thief sees only himself and reacts with cynicism. There are a lot of cynics in our culture today. It’s the hardness that comes from self-absorption; it’s the inheritance of the “taker.” The first thief looks at Jesus and with hostility spits out:

If you’re the Son of God, then do something. Get us down from here. C’mon! Show yourself to the world. Save us.

This thief’s been empty all his life, stealing from others to fill himself up, he hangs there helpless, angry at God, wishing God would do things his way, as many do, who want to steal God’s power for their own ends. This thief hangs on the **Cross of Rebellion**.

The second thief looks over and sees Jesus and he has a completely different reaction. Maybe he’d been studying Jesus for a time. Maybe he even joined in the mocking at the beginning. But he is silent now; looking at Jesus, not angry, just lost in thought. Maybe thinking something like this:

If Jesus were insane, they would ignore Him... And if He had no followers, they wouldn’t care about killing Him. If He was nothing to fear – why crucify Him. You only kill a king if he has a kingdom. Could this be the Son of God?

And regardless of what actually went on in his mind, God touches this criminal. He’s the last person you would think of to speak up for Jesus ... he wasn’t a disciple, he wasn’t a religious leader, he wasn’t a family member, or a long-time friend. But by the power of the Holy Spirit – this taker; this thief, the least likely person to testify – to defend Jesus, opens his parched lips and speaks words of truth. He asks his angry partner:

Don’t you fear God? Don’t you fear God even when you are dying? We are getting what we deserve. This man has done nothing wrong.

The second thief says: We are guilty. We are thieves. We’ve taken what doesn’t belong to us. We’ve lived our lives as takers, not as givers. We’ve considered life to be our possession, and lived like owners of our own fate.

But Jesus is innocent. This thief is right. Jesus is not on the cross for His sins. Jesus is there for ours. And then comes the plea, from the **Cross of Repentance**; that is the plea and prayer of all Christians:

“Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom.” (Lk 23:42 NIV)

Remember me, Lord, the thieving person that I am. Remember me, Lord, the taker who couldn’t be satisfied. Remember me, Lord, the one who stole things that belonged to others that I pretended were my own. Remember me, Lord, the one who knew the plans I had for me.... Remember me Lord, the one who was so afraid there wouldn’t be enough for me that I had to step on people and cut corners and cheat and ignore those I love the most to get where I am, which is still simply wanting more.

And in that moment Jesus gave the thief something that was now rightfully his. Something the thief didn’t have to steal. Maybe it was the first thing this thief had ever gotten that was a free gift – that had his name written on it; that truly belonged to him. This thing that Jesus gave freely to the thief was the gift of forgiveness. If you think about it, the word forgiveness means “given ahead of time.” It was already his; all he had to do was recognize who Jesus was and ask for it.

And Jesus goes beyond the request “to simply remember” the thief.... He does more. It’s like He implies remembering you isn’t enough.

“Today (there won’t be a delay) you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Lk 23:43 NIV)

The transaction was automatic. The movement from stealing what doesn’t belong to me, to receiving the freedom of the gift that does belong to me – Forgiveness – was complete.

That’s what this cross Jesus was hanging on is all about, this **Cross of Redemption**: The gift of forgiveness, now rightfully yours, opening up the door for us “to be with Jesus” in intimate fellowship.

Whenever my sisters and I would steal stuff from each other when we were kids, my mother used to have a little poem she’d use as kind of a guilt trip thing (mothers are good at this):

*The world is full of givers, and the world is full of takers;
And when the takers have taken all the givers can give,
The world will come to an end.*

We come to this cross as thieves, all of us, at one time or another thinking of our life as our possession, of not living in surrender, of not living as givers, but rather as takers. We need the same kind of forgiveness. The question really is not whether or not we live as thieves; we all do. It’s the human condition.

The question today is:

What side of the cross are you on? When you look at Jesus who do you see?

- Are you blinded by cynicism, hardened by self-absorption?
- Unbelieving because things haven’t gone your way?
- Trying to do things your way?

OR...

When you look at Jesus

- Do you recognize the One who is hanging there?
- Can you reach out to Him now and accept what He died to give you? You don’t have to steal forgiveness. It’s a gift of grace, from a God Who can’t stop loving you. It’s rightfully yours.

The presumption is not that we should receive forgiveness. The presumption is that we don’t, after all God did to make it available to us. I know that sometimes it’s so hard to forgive ourselves. We let other people be forgiven. We tell folks, yes, Jesus forgives you. But when it comes to us, we let the condemnation committee that lives in our heads, the voices that lurk in the corners of our mind, tell us that somehow Jesus’ forgiveness is for every other thief but us ... and we keep stealing crumbs, living a half forgiven life, rather than claiming the complete and total forgiveness that is ours in Christ Jesus.

For the first time the thief didn’t have to pretend that something belonged to him when it didn’t. He simply had to ask, and it was given. The gift of forgiveness was the first thing he could claim as rightfully his.

And you can claim it as rightfully yours. Today!

In his helplessness as death moved in, this thief knew he couldn’t take hold of heaven on his own by force. He needed a Savior. He couldn’t steal eternal life but it was given to him freely, immediately, and graciously. There was plenty to go around. And all that would have separated

him from God for eternity, was wiped out in the person of Jesus who hung there just for him – and just for you – and just for me. The incriminating evidence was shredded, the accuser banished, the spreadsheet of sins erased, the microchip of blame, destroyed.

That's the power of the cross for all of us thieves. If we recognize Jesus, if we ask to be forgiven, if we cry out in our weakness:

Lord, remember us....

We will be with Him now and in the eternal life to come. It's what He longs for. It's what He died for to give us. It' the plan He has for us.

So the question for today is:

WHICH SIDE OF THE CROSS ARE YOU ON?

In a few moments we will be coming to the Lord's Table. Maybe you just want to say thank you, thank you for what you did for me. Thank you for dying for me. For the deep love that is you; vast, unmeasured, unbounded, and free. Maybe you need to ask for forgiveness for somebody else. Maybe you need to forgive yourself and claim that forgiveness as rightfully yours today so you can be set free. It's a great gift God has given us, and it's free. And God looks forward to giving it to us.