

Sermon Luke 23:44-56 | The Certain Gospel: Living Life after Jesus' Death

Homiletical Idea: The death of Jesus should change the way we live.

Introduction

"I want to tell you about the night I killed Ted Morris."

Tommy Pigage opened his court-mandated appearance at the Trigg County High School MADD meeting with those trembling words. Standing in the back of the gym was Elizabeth Morris, Ted's grieving mother. In time she would find it in herself not simply to forgive but to unofficially adopt the young man who had collided with her son while driving drunk. Her husband, Frank, a part-time preacher and a driver for UPS, would baptize Tommy with his own hands. Years later, Tommy still called his new parents every day between 4 and 5 p.m. Though Tommy had no right to expect anything from them, Ted's parents opened the door of their life to Tommy. In the process, everything changed.

We have had a great opportunity this year leading up to Easter to look more closely at passages of Scripture that often get rushed through. Often times the week before Easter will focus on the Triumphal Entry and then the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus are condensed into an Easter sermon focusing on the resurrection. This year we had a sermon on the night in the Garden of Gethsemane, a sermon on Jesus' trial, a sermon last week by Terry on the crucifixion, and now a sermon on the death of Jesus. If you can make the sunrise service tomorrow, Terry will be speaking on the resurrection.

The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10-11 "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead." Paul wants to know Christ, but he doesn't stop at his resurrection. Paul wants to participate in his suffering. Think of his betrayal, trial, beating, and crucifixion. He wants to become like him in his death. I think often times we want to stop with Philippians 3:10a "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection." I think it is good to study how Jesus suffered and how he died so we too can learn from it and agree with Paul on all of Philippians 3:10-11.

Context/Background: I probably do not need to do much in the way of refreshing your memories or setting the stage for Jesus' death. We remember that Jesus went to pray the night of his arrest and he asked the disciples that were with him to pray too. Jesus prayed so hard drops of blood mixed with his sweat; his disciples fell asleep. Then one of his disciples, Judas, betrayed him, and Jesus was arrested. After his arrest, Jesus is denied by another disciple, Peter. Often, we forget to count these things among Jesus' suffering, but think how devastating it would be if this is how your friends supported you in a tough time. Jesus then endures mocking, multiple trials, beatings, humiliation, nakedness, and ultimately crucifixion. Now, as his death is imminent, Jesus must face separation from the Father for the first time in all eternity.

As we look at the death of Jesus, I want to answer 4 questions that I think, to varying degrees, many Christians do not think deeply enough to answer well. After looking at these questions, I hope to encourage all of us that the truth about the death of Jesus ought to change the way we live. As I studied these questions, it became apparent that whole sermons, or multiple sermons, could be preached on them. And, entire books have been written on them. So, forgive me for being brief on each topic, and perhaps long overall, but please talk to me after, or anytime, if you want to discuss anything more.

1. Why did Jesus have to die?

- a. Perhaps the simplest of the four questions, but not without controversy. I am sure we have all heard someone argue that God can't be loving if he would murder his own son. Or perhaps you have heard someone say that there must have been a better way. Scripture tells us God's ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9) and he is perfect and just (Dt. 34:2). We cannot judge his plan for redemption using human understanding. Before Adam and Eve sinned, God told them the punishment for their sin would be death. Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. A holy God and a just judge cannot neither accept sin nor waive the punishment. Sin is rebellion towards God and God cannot be in the presence of sin, so death has to be the punishment. Death is separation from God. Sin is what separates us from God. Therefore, sin brings about death.

- b. Throughout the Old Testament we see a sacrificial system involving innocent lambs and other animals being slaughtered to pay for the sins of the people. Hebrews 9:22 tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Hebrews 9 also details how the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies once a year cleansed with blood that was not his own and contrasts that to Jesus entering into God's presence once for all cleansed by his own blood. Jesus sacrificed himself one time for the sins of many.
- c. Jesus had to die because the only way to redeem sinful people and allow them to enter God's presence was through paying the price of sin. The wages of sin is death, which is separation from God. When people pay the price for their sin, they are separated from God for eternity. For the relationship between God and man, even God and creation, to be restored for eternity, someone needed to take the punishment we couldn't take. Only one was worthy and able to pay that price, Jesus.

2. Who did Jesus die for?

- a. This is another fairly straightforward question, but again not without controversy. The controversy usually revolves around whether Jesus died for the sins of the whole world or just some of the people, those who are often referred to as the elect. In Calvinism, if you are familiar with it, this is referred to as limited atonement, and it is one of the five points of Calvinism. However, this is not the question I am asking, and I am not going to spend any time on it. What I am asking is for whom, as in what kind of people, did Jesus die.
- b. Who did Jesus die for?
 - i. Jesus died for the ungodly; for sinners. Romans 5:6-8 "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

- ii. Jesus died for those who were dead in their sins. Colossians 2:13-15 “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”
 - iii. Jesus died for his enemies. Romans 5:10-11 “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”
- c. We can debate if Jesus’ atonement is limited in scope, but make no mistake, Jesus’ atonement is unlimited in power. There is no person too bad, no sin too big, no point in life too late for Jesus. No matter who you are, what you’ve done, or how long you’ve lived that way, Jesus has covered that debt.

3. Where did Jesus go when he died?

- a. So perhaps now we are entertaining a more controversial question. I am going to give you multiple choice on this one, but do not yell it out or raise your hand. I am going to present a point of view I believe to be defensible, but it is definitely a secondary issue believers disagree about. It is also an issue with many sides, secondary questions, and debates. I mentioned death being separation from God. Death being the separation of two things meant to be together, physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. We know from our text that Jesus’ body was placed in a tomb cut into the rock that had not been used before that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. Before he dies, Jesus says in verse 46 “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” But, where did Jesus’ spirit/soul go?
 - i. Here are the options:

1. Jesus went to Heaven
 2. Jesus went to Hell
 3. Jesus went to Hades
 4. Jesus waited in the tomb
 5. None of the above / Never thought about it
- ii. Option 1 gets some votes in most groups. After all, shouldn't Jesus go to Heaven and didn't he tell the repentant thief that he would be with him that day in paradise? That may depend on the definition of paradise. The words of Jesus himself do not well support that he went to heaven. In John 20:17, the morning of the resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"
- iii. Option 2 gets some votes in most groups too. Probably this is due to the Apostles creed (and other creeds) which says he descended into hell. However, this is also not well supported by Scripture where hell is described as the place prepared for Satan and his angels as well as those who reject God, but only after the final judgment. This could also be the result of some level of confusion about the difference between Hell and Hades.
- iv. Option 3, Jesus went to Hades, seems to align best with Scripture, and when understood, changes our view of Jesus death and resurrection. A chunk of the information I will present on this view came from an article by Joe Rigney, a Professor at Bethlehem College & Seminary, that I found very helpful. I want to give him credit for helping me understand and explain it, but, I will take all the blame if you don't follow me.

- b. David says in Psalm 16:9-10 “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay.” Peter explains this in Acts 2:29-32 29 “Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.”

“In the Old Testament, Sheol is the place of the souls of the dead, both the righteous (like Jacob, Genesis 37:35, and Samuel, 1 Samuel 28:13–14) and the wicked (Psalm 31:17). In the New Testament, the Hebrew word Sheol is translated as Hades, and the description of Sheol in the Old and New Testaments bears some resemblance to the Hades of Greek mythology. It is under the earth (Numbers 16:30–33), and it is like a city with gates (Isaiah 38:10) and bars (Job 17:16). It is a land of darkness — a place where shades, the shadowy souls of men, dwell (Isaiah 14:9; 26:14). It is the land of forgetfulness (Psalm 88:12), where no work is done and no wisdom exists (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Most significantly, Sheol is a place where no one praises God (Psalm 6:5; 88:10–11; 115:17; Isaiah 38:18).” – Joe Rigney

Probably the best description in the New Testament comes from the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus. Luke 16:19-24 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

That is not the end of the parable, but that gives us the glimpse of Hades. We learned that, like the Hades of Greek mythology, the biblical Hades has two compartments: Hades proper where the rich man is sent and “Abraham’s bosom” where the angels carry Lazarus. Hades proper is a place of torment, where fire causes anguish to the souls imprisoned there. Abraham’s bosom, on the other hand, while within shouting distance of Hades, is separated from it by “a great chasm” (Luke 16:26) and is a place of comfort and rest.

“While much mystery remains, the picture begins to take shape. All dead souls go down to Sheol/Hades, but Sheol is divided into two distinct sides, one for the righteous and one for the wicked. The righteous who died prior to Christ dwelt in Sheol with Abraham, and though they were cut off from the land of the living (and therefore from the worship of Yahweh on earth), they were not tormented as the wicked were.” – Joe Rigney

“Following his death for sin, then, Jesus journeys to Hades, to the City of Death, and rips its gates off the hinges. He liberates Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, John the Baptist, and the rest of the Old Testament faithful, ransoming them from the power of Sheol (Psalm 49:15; 86:13; 89:48).” – Joe Rigney

- c. Why spend so much time on a controversial and uncertain item?
Because I want to remind us that Jesus didn’t just die for my sins as we often like to say. Of course, that is true, but it is incomplete. Jesus rescued the souls of all the righteous from eternity past. He ended the needed separation between God and man. He died for the sins of all people of all times that accept his offer to take their place and pay their debt. Jesus defeated death.
4. What did Jesus’ death accomplish?
- a. As discussed in the first question, why did Jesus have to die, Jesus paid the price for the sins of all who accept his offer to do so. This is the gospel. Jesus’ death, his shedding of blood, accomplished what we could not. When people pay the price for their sin, they are separated from God for eternity. Accept Jesus’ offer to pay the price

for you. As 1 Peter 3:18 tells us “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

- b. Secondly, Jesus made us spiritually alive. Jesus removed the required separation between a holy God and sinful man. In Jesus we are no longer dead in sin. Colossians 2 13-15 “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”
- c. Third, Jesus allows us access to the God the Father.
 - i. Remember the discussion about the high priest entering the Holy of Holies? Luke 23:45b “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” No longer do we need an earthly mediator. No longer do we need to be separated from God.
 - ii. Hebrews 4:16 “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” No longer do we need to be afraid when entering God’s presence like the high priests of old wondering if we are worthy. Well, we know we’re not worthy, but we know we are covered by one who is.
- d. Finally, Jesus rescued the souls of the righteous from Hades ushering them into Heaven to be with God and worship him forever. This is good news, gospel, for those who are in Christ, who skip the land of forgetfulness, where no one praises God. Instead, when Christians die, they join with the angelic choir and the saints of old to sing praises to Jesus.
- e. Jesus’ death paid the price we could not pay, made us spiritually alive, allows us to commune with God now, and enter Heaven when we die. But, don’t forget that offer is available to those you may least expect to accept it.

The death of Jesus should change the way we live.

5. So, how should all this information change the way we live? Perhaps it makes us a little better at understanding or sharing the gospel. But, I think there is more. If I ended the sermon without trying to push past our heads and into our hearts, to change the way we live, I think I would only do half the job. Some people complain that those who claim Christ but lead sinful lives (as if there are any who don't, but you know what I mean) cheapen God's grace, love, or forgiveness; that they make a mockery of it. I am not sure if that is true or not, but I have been convicted that the Christians who really cheapen God's grace, love, and forgiveness, make a mockery of it, are the ones who don't even give a whole lot of effort to these commands:
 - a. John 13:34-35 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'."
 - i. How are we doing at loving those around us. How are we doing at loving like Jesus did. How are we doing at loving sinners, people who are dead in their sins, our enemies, the annoying person at work (or church), the bad driver making us late, etc?
 - b. Ephesians 4:32 "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."
 - i. Do we forgive those who wrong us, or do we hold grudges? Do we stop to think about how much God has forgiven us from?

The Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor reminds me how quickly we can forget about the debt that has been canceled on our behalf. But Jesus takes this very seriously. Matthew 18:32-35 "You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Bob Goff has written two books about loving people that I have on my list to read, they are Love Does and Everybody Always. Michael Card has a new book out explaining God's love (as best anyone can) called Inexpressible: Heseb and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness. I only preach 2 or 3 times a year, but God worked it out that I preached on our core value of love. I preached on John 13:34-35. And, now I preached on the death of Jesus, probably the greatest act of love in history. I am certain that God did this because I needed the messages I preached. I hope and pray they were not for me alone and that they also edified some of those who heard them. But, here is my encouragement this Easter. Love because God loves you. Forgive because God forgives you. Start every day thankful for what Jesus' death has done for you.

Conclusion:

The older I get, the longer I am a Christian, the more I study the Bible, the more I see the kind of thing Jesus was teaching in so many of his parables. The Parable of Prodigal Son reminds me not to be like the older brother who resented his younger brother coming home, refused to celebrate his reconciliation, refused to forgive his brother. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard reminds me that the thief on the cross deserves what he got just as much as I do if I spend a lifetime working for God; neither of us deserve it.

Remember the story I opened with. How love and forgiveness for Tommy changed his life. Not only is this a picture of the love and forgiveness God gives us, when we have no right to expect anything, but it is one of thousands of stories like it that impact the world when followers of Christ take Jesus' example and commands seriously. The death of Jesus allows us and compels us to live this way.

Love because God loves you. Forgive because God forgives you. Start every day thankful for what Jesus' death has done for you. Please pray with me.

Benediction: 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones."