

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: March 19, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BEYOND SAVING?” ~ Luke 23:32-33, 39-43

? Is anyone beyond saving?

It is easy to answer reflexively, almost without thinking: ‘Of course not; no one is so broken or corrupted that God cannot rescue them!’

☑ {II Pet 2:22} But then that hardcore addict enters your life. Sure, he’ll get clean; but then, as “**‘A dog returns to its vomit,’ and ‘A sow that is washed returns to ... the mud,’**” he goes back to using. The cycle is repeated over and over again. And I wonder: Is he beyond saving?

☑ Or, it’s that drama queen with the personality disorder. Chaos follows in her wake. Her problems are always bigger, and someone else is always to blame for them. She calls herself a giver, but she takes and takes and takes. I wonder: Is she a lost cause?

☑ Or, it’s the hypocrite who slams LGBTQ sins or heterosexual immorality, but not both. Who reviles abortion or the bombing of children in enemy lands, but not both. Who demands religious freedom for their group, but is OK denying it to others. I wonder: Are they a hopeless case?

☑ Then I take a look in the mirror. I’m not an addict; still, I’ve got potential for it. I don’t have a personality disorder; but I do have my share of dysfunction. I don’t *think* I’m a hypocrite; even so, I am not completely consistent. And I wonder: What about me?

? Is anyone beyond saving? Is anyone a lost cause? Is anyone a hopeless case?

■ Please turn to Luke 23:32-33: “**Two other men, both criminals [are] also led out with him to be executed. When they [come] to the place called the Skull, they [crucify] him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left.**”

★ These sinners have no hope for physical survival. Their fate was sealed the moment those spikes were hammered through their wrists and ankles. Death is a foregone conclusion. No one lives through a Roman crucifixion. They are goners.

★ These sinners have no hope for moral reform. It is too late to change their ways. It is too late to make amends. They cannot reverse course. Transgression is not merely something they have done; it is who they have become.

★ {Dt 21:23; Mt 25:41} These sinners have no hope for spiritual redemption. The law is explicit: “**anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.**” What will he say in the end? “**Depart from me, you who are cursed.**” No one expects Holy God to save such unholy offenders as these.

☑ The inscription over the gate to Hell in Dante’s Inferno would not be out of place atop their crosses:

**I Am the Way into The City of Woe.
I Am the Way to a Forsaken People.
I Am the Way into Eternal Sorrow
Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here.**

If Hell is the place without hope, each man has a foot firmly planted on the threshold. Death will drive them through it.

No justice system is perfect. Some convicts are innocent. And some – more than we might care to admit – are put to death for crimes they did not commit.

That is not the case this time. These men are guilty. Luke calls them *κακουργοί* [kakoúrgoi], “**criminals**,” literally “**wrongdoers**,” “**reprobates**,” “**villains**.”

¶ {Kittel, Friedrich} Matthew {27:38} and Mark {15:27} identify them as *ληστας* [lēstás]. Translators used to interpret this as “**thieves**” or “**robbers**”; but more recent scholarship indicates that “**rebels**” is the better rendering.

In all likelihood, these men are Zealots, insurgents who have used extreme violence in a futile effort to liberate Israel. They have probably assassinated Romans or murdered Jewish collaborators.

{Mt 26:52} Depending on your point of view they are either freedom fighters or terrorists. Regardless, their fate confirms the truth of Christ’s warning: “**all who draw the sword will die by the sword.**”

These two have forfeited all hope of physical survival, moral reform, and spiritual redemption. If anyone is beyond saving, they are.

I am taking a risk, emphasizing their depravity. We could easily take comfort in our relative goodness.

★ {Rom 6:23; Is 64:6} That would be a potentially fatal error, for several reasons. 1) Though some misdeeds inflict more immediate damage, the “**wages of**” all “**sin is death.**” 2) It is possible to avoid these coarser sins even as we are utterly consumed by deadly pride. 3) We cannot take credit for any good deeds done in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the ones we do in our own strength are as “**filthy rags**” by comparison.

{Lk 18:11, 14} Remember the Pharisee who boasted, “**God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even this tax collector**”? There is no reason to doubt that he was innocent of *those particular offenses*; all the same, he was not “**justified before God.**”

If these rebels are beyond saving it is not because they are “**robbers**” or “**evildoers**” or “**adulterers**,” or even murderers. It is because they are sinners like the hardcore addict and the drama queen and the blatant hypocrite – and me.

■ Back to our text. Verse 39: “**One of the criminals [hanging] there [hurls] insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’**”

This is not an honest request, it is a sneering insult. This guy is staring into the gaping jaws of death, and all he sees is a bottomless pit. He has no confidence in the man on the cross next to his. This is the voice of anger, fear, and despair.

■ Verses 40-42: ⁴⁰ “**But the other criminal [rebukes] him, ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he [says], ‘since you are under the same sentence?’** ⁴¹ **We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’** ⁴² **Then he [says], ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’**”

{Is 9:2} This is an unexpected turn of events! This rebel, who has been “**walking in darkness**” – who for so long been in the place {NLT} “**Where death casts its shadow**” “**of deep darkness**” – sees “**a great light**”!

{Jn 1:5, NLT} The darkness has all but choked the life out of this reprobate. Then, to his surprise, a **“light shines through the darkness,”** a light that **“the darkness”** of his depravity **“can never extinguish.”**

Hence, he asks humbly, yet with expectation, **“remember me.”** This is the voice of hope.

■ His hope is not misplaced. The Savior answers (verse 43), **“Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

? How is this text Scripture for us? What can we take away from this?

✎ First, no one is a hopeless case.

Not the hardcore addict, not the personality disorder drama queen, not the blatant hypocrite, not you and me at our worst. No one.

There are a couple of caveats.

We are not equipped to help everyone. Some people might be too troubled, too broken, too needy for us to effectively assist. That does not mean they are a lost cause. Our limits are not God’s limits.

Also, though no one is beyond saving not everyone will be saved. One of the criminals crucified with the Savior dies with a curse on his lips.

✎ That brings us to our second takeaway: we must put to death false hope and trust Jesus.

The Creator has blessed us with good gifts of food, drink, romance and sex. Likewise, he has endowed us with a measure of strength, wisdom, ingenuity, and skill. It is right to derive appropriate assurance and satisfaction from these blessings.

But we often invest excessive confidence and hope in them. It is tempting to rely on them for ultimate security, joy, and significance. We easily fall victim to sensuality, sexual sin, and addiction on the one hand, and self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and the will to power on the other.

In the end, pleasure, possessions, and power cannot provide substantial security, joy and significance. Not when you are nailed to a cross. Not when your body is ravaged by disease. Not when a loved one dies.

As for embracing Jesus: Some of us don’t even as our lives fall apart. We just lean harder on the old false hopes, invent new ones, or reject hope all together.

{1 Pet 1:3-4} Not our brother on the cross! He turns to the Messiah in trust, and **“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus”** gives him **“new birth into a living hope,”** **“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”**

? Is anyone beyond saving? Is anyone a lost cause? Is anyone a hopeless case? Sometimes I wonder.

Then I read this account of a sinner with no hope whatsoever for physical survival, moral reform, or spiritual redemption – and Christ Jesus promised, **“Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

Luke 23 is the word of the Lord.