

Stop Using the Thief on the Cross as a Shortcut to Salvation

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Every year around Easter, social media lights up with the same well-meaning but dangerously misleading message: "The thief on the cross wasn't baptized, didn't take communion, never gave an offering, yet he still made it to paradise. All you need is John 3:16; just believe!"

It's a message meant to comfort, but if we're not careful, it can deceive. Because while belief is absolutely essential for salvation, it's important to understand what the Bible actually means when it speaks of belief.

In John 3:16, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

But what does "believe" really mean?

The Greek word used here for "believe" is *pisteuō*, which doesn't simply mean to mentally agree with a fact. It implies trust, commitment, faithfulness, and obedience. In other words, true belief in Jesus is not passive, it is active. It compels us to respond in obedience to His Word.

That's why John 3:36 is so important, even though it's often left out of the conversation: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

Belief and obedience are inseparable.

So, what makes the thief on the cross unique?

Let's be honest, we are not the thief on the cross. That man had a unique, once-in-history opportunity. He encountered Jesus face to face before the New Covenant was established through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

While Jesus was still alive, He had full authority on earth to forgive sins directly. In Luke 23:43, He tells the thief, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

But here's what many overlook, the New Covenant had not yet been put into effect. Hebrews 9:16-17 says: "For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death."

The thief died under the Old Covenant. You and I live under the New Covenant, and that means we must follow the plan of salvation Jesus gave after His resurrection.

Shortly before ascending into heaven, Jesus gave His disciples this command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

And again, in Mark 16:16: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Jesus is not unclear. The apostles weren't confused. When we look at the book of Acts, the history of the early church, we see a consistent pattern in every conversion account:

Hearing the Gospel (Acts 2:22-24; Acts 8:12)

Belief (Acts 16:31; Acts 18:8)

Repentance (Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)

Baptism (Acts 2:38; Acts 10:47-48)

Forgiveness of sins through baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4)

This isn't a man-made tradition; it's God's divine pattern.

Many argue, "If you say baptism is necessary, then you're teaching salvation by works." But here's the real question: What exactly makes baptism a work?

Is being immersed in water somehow a greater "work" than repenting or confessing Jesus? The answer is found in Colossians 2:12: "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

Baptism is God's work, not ours.

Jesus warned us not to take the easy road when it comes to salvation. In Matthew 7:13-14, He says: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

So let me say this with love. If you are trusting in the thief on the cross to excuse you from obeying Jesus' commands today, you're on the wide road, not the narrow one.

Jesus' plan is clear. It includes faith, repentance, confession, and baptism for the remission of sins. To leave any part out is to follow a doctrine of man, not the gospel of Christ.

We cannot treat salvation like a buffet, picking the parts we like and ignoring the rest. The thief on the cross was saved under extraordinary circumstances, but you have access to the full truth of the gospel and a clear path of obedience.

And if you haven't followed that pattern yet, there's still time.

Because I love you, I plead with you, don't base your eternity on a misused story. Obey the gospel. Believe in Jesus with the kind of belief that leads to action. Repent. Be baptized. And rise to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

Let's stop using the thief as a shortcut and start following the Savior who gave His life so we could follow Him fully.