

**THE SERMONS, LECTURES, AND SONGS OF  
SIDNEY EDWARD COX**

Sermon: *The Dying Thief*  
Luke 23:39-43

**Editorial note: This audio was given to me by Tom Walker, a friend of mine who serves with me on the Board of Visitors of the Salvation Army College for Officers Training in Atlanta. Tom is the son of James Walker who was commissioned in Atlanta as a member of the Holdfast Session in the spring of 1940 while Major Sidney Cox was serving as the training college principal. James Walker had a collection of Sidney Cox audio recordings in his possession at the time of his death.**

**Tom provided me with some of his father's audios from the Salvation Army's 1969 Southern Bible Conference held at the Shamrock Village in Fort Pierce, Florida. It was believed that this particular audio was recorded at that Bible Conference. However, Sidney Cox's reference to the Adams Park Alliance Church during this sermon almost assuredly indicates that this sermon was delivered at that church. I am unsure of the location of this church, but it likely was in the Detroit, Michigan where Sidney Cox resided during the 1960s.**

**During the latter part of his life, Sidney Cox had developed a close relationship with the Christian and Missionary Alliance ("CMA"). CMA operates as a vast network of churches, similar to a "denomination" and Sidney Cox was often invited to preach and fill the pulpit at CMA churches. Adams Park Alliance Church was a typical CMA church.**

**Sidney Cox's reference in his closing remarks that he'd been, "...in the business of preaching for 53 years," would date this occasion to the mid to late 1960s. He was commissioned as a Salvation Army officer in 1910. He would have been 78 years of age in 1965.**

**John Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney and Violet Cox. July 2011.**

**SIDNEY COX:**

Tonight I want to talk to you from a very familiar passage of scripture concerning a very familiar story. It's the story that we speak of as, *The Dying Thief*, and I want to read it to you. You find it in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke and it begins at the 39<sup>th</sup> verse; just three or four simple verses there; for I want to discuss this thing with you tonight. This is what it says. Luke 23, verse 39.

"And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him saying, 'If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.' But the other, answering rebuked him saying, 'Dost thou not fear God seeing thou art in the same condemnation, and we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this man hath done nothing amiss.' And he said unto Jesus,

‘Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.’ And Jesus said unto him, ‘Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.’”

Now, we’ve heard that story many and many a time; but let’s look at it as if it was coming to us fresh from the hand of God, as indeed it is; because while we may seem and to have heard these old familiar stories many a time, every time they come to us, there’s a new freshness about them. I hope that will be your experience as we turn to this one tonight.

Let’s have a word of prayer before we do anything else.

Our Father, we would commit ourselves to Thee for the definite guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without His work within our hearts and for us in our thinking and in our speaking and listening and deciding, this service will be but sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. We would ask our Father that all the way through that Thou wilt guide and bless and control, that the Lord, himself may be able to bring out of our midst tonight that which will be pleasing to Him. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I think perhaps the meanest people on earth, and we know that this old world of ours is full of mean, contemptible people; but I think the meanest people on earth are the folks who deliberately plan life something like this: they say, “I’m going to get everything I can out of it. I know God somewhere or other is giving all these things, but I’m going to take everything I can get. I’m just going to get everything I can out of this life; I’m going to squeeze the thing until the last drop of juice has been got out of it; and then, right at the end, I’ll throw the husk of it into the face of God; and I’ll turn to God at the last minute; but I’m not going to turn at all until the last minute.”

Now, you would be surprised my dear to find out how many folks there are just like that. Their name is legion – people who have deliberately planned life that way. It isn’t that they’re unaware of God, not at all. They are aware of God. That makes it all the worse. But, they have deliberately planned to take everything that God offers, burn the candle of light clear down to the socket and then, throw the smoke of it into the face of God. And they say, “There are lots of folks who have got in at the last minute; folks who have repented on their death beds and so on,” and one of the people they hide themselves behind is this dying thief. And they say, “Look at the dying thief, he got in at the last minute; he got everything out of life and he got in at the last minute. That’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to get in at the last minute.”

I talked to a doctor one time about this business of death bed repentance, and I said to him, “Doctor, have you seen very much of that?” Now, he’d seen lots of folks die, but I asked him, “Have you seen very many who have repented on their death beds?” And he said, “No. I have not seen that.” He said, “I have noticed this – that when a person is dying, they are usually too busy dying to do anything else.” Did you hear it? “They’re usually too busy dying to do anything else.”

One of the folks they hide behind is this dying thief and in doing so, they make a rather pathetic mistake because they forget that there were two dying thieves, and one went to Hell and the other went to Heaven. One went out into the darkness, the other went out into the light. One went out into the mystery of lostness, the other went out into the glory of paradise. And if anybody is going to hide behind the dying thief as an excuse for their meanness, it would be well for them would it not, to make quite sure which dying thief they're hiding behind. There were two of them.

Now, one of the things that this story does, is to knock to pieces the ecclesiastical notion that there are certain ways by which we come into saving knowledge of God, and that these ecclesiastical things can not be ignored.

Now, let me ask you something about this man, this dying thief. To what church did he belong? Had he been baptized; if so, by what method? Was he sprinkled, dipped or poured? What? How much money had he given to missions? How much had he accumulated in the way of good deeds, because remember that this world of our is just full of folks who think that the way of salvation is the measure between their good deeds on the one side and the bad deeds on the other. If the good deeds outweigh the bad ones, that's salvation; and if you talk to them, that's what they'll tell you, and they will say, "I'm not so bad. I don't do this and I don't do the other, and I do do this and I do do the other; and if I keep on doing it that way, I think I'll stand as good a chance as some of those church members; and then he'll always add the postscript, that some church members have \_\_\_\_\_. Have you ever noticed that? And that's the way they talk to you. They seem to think that salvation is a sort of a balance; and that in one side, the good deeds have been placed and in the other side, the bad ones.

How many good deeds did this man have to offer? Well, he didn't have any; and yet we are deeply convinced that when the Lord Jesus said to him, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise," He meant exactly what He said. In other words, we believe that this man was a saved man. Whatever our theological point of view is regarding salvation, we are convinced that when the Lord Jesus said to this man, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise," He meant just that, and that consequently we can think of this man, and we do think of him as a saved man.

But let's wait a minute. Let's wait a minute. Isn't it necessary for a person to believe something when they are saved? Oh yes. Yes, that's true. And they must not only believe something, they must believe the right things; and they must believe it in the right way.

Let me remind you of this, that before anybody is ever saved, they must believe something about God; they must believe something about themselves; they must believe something about sin; and they must believe something about the Saviour from sin. And, they must believe the right things.

Now we look, and we lift our hands and we say, "Here's a dying thief. Did he believe any of these things?" I wish you would just stop a minute and let's go through and find out

what he did believe; because it may be an eye-opener to us to find out just how much this man did believe and what he believed about the essential things.

Now, if you're going to find out what he believed, you've got to listen to a conversation; because here were three crosses – our Lord in the center, a thief on this side and another one on this side; and the conversation went backwards and forwards for a time, and then our Lord's voice is heard in the center. Let's follow the conversation and see if we can find out why we believe this man was a saved man. What did he believe about God? What did he believe about himself? What did he believe about sin? What did he believe about the Saviour from sin?

Now, let's listen to the conversation. It starts over here. Here's one man that turns to the other and he says, addressing the Lord in the center, he said, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us." And remember my dear, that's the last time you ever hear his voice. He went out into the eternal darkness with that damning 'if' upon his lips; for 'if' is the language of doubt; and he went out into the darkness saying, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us." We do not see him again. We do not hear him again. He's gone, and gone forever.

Now let's turn to the other man for this is the man we're interested in, let's hear what he has to say; and he replies to his friend on the other side in this fashion, and he says, "Dost thou not fear God?"

Now, let's stop. "Fear God?" The first thing we notice is, he did believe something about God, and he believed God was to be feared. "Dost thou not fear God?" Now let me ask you something. Why would any man fear God? What's the basis of what we call 'fear of God'? Well, the basis of it is the consciousness of sin within. If there is no consciousness of sin within, and we are quite sure that sin has been dealt with, and that we can look into the face of God without sin bringing its ugly face between us and God, there is no fear then. Not at all. But where there is the consciousness of sin within, then there is fear. Of course. And every man who looks into the face of God with fear and trembling is the man in whose heart there is some consciousness of sin. This man was conscious of his sin and he knew this – he knew that God was involved in this matter of sin; that in reality, God was the one sinned against. Now, he had lifted his hand against men all the way through his life. His business had been to lift his fist against somebody or other on the road to Jericho or somewhere else. But now, in this moment, he becomes conscious of the fact that his sin was not merely against his neighbor, not merely against the one who traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho or somewhere else, but in reality, his sin was against God. Now, this man became aware of that.

"Dost thou not fear God?" And no one fears God except those who are conscious of the fact of sin within their lives, and equally conscious of the fact that sin in its essence is directed against God. I may steal from my neighbor, but in reality, I have insulted God and broken God's law. Wherever the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of a man, that's what he thinks about.

Do you remember what David said on one occasion when he stood in the presence of God having sinned grievously, and he looked into the face of God and he said, “Against Thee and Thee only have I sinned.”<sup>1</sup> Wait a minute David. What about Bathsheba? Didn’t you sin a sin against her? What about Uriah? Didn’t you sin against him? And yet in that moment when David stood before God, the only thing he could think of was his sin against God, “Against Thee and Thee only have I sinned.” A sinner in his essence is a rebel in the realms of God regardless of what the outward may be. And here was a man who knew that he stood in that position, condemned before God.

Now let’s watch again, and we can find out something else about this man. He knew this – that having sinned against God, God would have to condemn that sin. Now you listen to what he said. “Seeing we are in the same condemnation.” Now God much righteously condemn sin and this man knew it. There wasn’t any way out of it. God must deal with sin in righteousness. If God ever allowed one sin to go without adequate punishment and dealing with, then God would in that moment forfeit His righteousness; and God deals with sin and he says, “Dost thou not fear God, seeing we are in the same condemnation.”

And I want you to notice something else – it was the man himself who said, “We are in the same condemnation.” He was the one who said, “I’m getting exactly what I deserved. God is doing the thing in righteousness which I deserve. We are in the same condemnation.” Listen to it again, “And we indeed justly for we receive the due reward of our deeds.”

So this man did believe something about God; and he did believe something about himself; and he did believe something about sin.

Now, let’s look at it again. What did he believe about the Saviour? What? Now you notice what he says; talking again to his friend, he said, “But this man,” speaking of the Lord Jesus in the center, “This man hath done nothing amiss.” Now watch it. In that moment, he put the crown of sinlessness upon the bleeding brow of our Lord. In that moment and by that expression, he put the crown of deity upon the brow of our Lord; because remember my dear, sinlessness is the mark of deity, not humanity. The mark of humanity is, “We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.” But the mark of deity is, “This man hath done nothing amiss.”

Supposing somebody came in this room tonight and opened this door right at this moment and came up here and stood in front of us and stopped this so-called sermon of mine and said, “Preacher, I’ve been looking around for somebody who has done nothing amiss and I thought I might be able to find somebody like that this Sunday night in the Adams Park Alliance Church. I’m looking for somebody who has done nothing amiss.” Let me ask you my dear, would he look at you? Would he? Would you be the one for whom he is searching? Would you? I want to tell you if he looked at me, I’d be heading out of the door somehow or other, or hiding down in the pulpit. Oh, I’ve done thing amiss many a time and sometimes with malice of forethought and so have you. So have you.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 51:4

But, here was someone quite different. “This man hath done nothing amiss.” Now he believed that about the Saviour. Now you watch it again, and he says again speaking to the Lord, “Lord,” and we’ll stop right there, for that word would have been utterly out of place had it been addressed to any human less than God. Once more this one had put the crown of diety on this brow bleeding beside him.

This is what this man thought, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” A kingdom? But a kingdom isn’t possible without a king. You can’t have a kingdom without a king, and somehow or other, this man had been brought to the realization – not only was he beside one who was sinless; not only beside someone who was more than man, but who was the king of a kingdom that was just around the corner. And somehow, this man knew that.

So, he did know something about God; and he did know something about sin; and he did know something about himself; and he did know something about the Saviour. And to this man came the word from the lips of our Lord, “Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.”

Now I have been setting before you in the simplest possible words and without any decoration the pathway that leads from death to life. There must be a recognition of God. There must be a recognition of sin. There must be a recognition of one’s own guilt in the sight of God as the man there in the back of the temple one day said, “God be merciful to me the sinner.” He put that label on himself. Here was a man placing himself in exactly the same category, and he did believe something about the Saviour.

Now the reason why we mention these things is because it does us good sometimes to just check up on ourselves. You know, I’ve been in this business of preaching the Gospel for a good many years. I’ve been a preacher for longer than most of you have lived. I started this business 53 years ago and I’ve been at it ever since. That’s a long time. I’ve seen a lot in that time. And one of the things that has distressed me is the thing that we ought to be rejoicing about, for I have seen folks old and young by the score come and kneel at an altar of prayer in response to an invitation; and I have watched them as they have come down an aisle somewhere, somehow and have knelt for a few moments and have gone through some little old formula that we call conversion and have gone right back where they came from without ever once having thought consciously, sensibly about God at all; and have never once been disturbed by the fact of sin; and have never once been terribly disturbed by their own responsibility for it; and they have never once had a real view of the blessed, wonderful Lord Jesus dying as the Lamb of God for their sins; and realized that it was their sins that drove the nails in His hands.

I have seen scores of folks who have come forward and gone through some old formula like that and have gone grinning back to the place where they came from, and they didn’t even bother to take the chewing gum out of their mouths when they came and knelt in the presence of Almighty God; and I’ve seen it scores of times. And they go back and there’s a little bit of a flutter here and there and then back again in the same old way; and the next revival meeting it has to be done all over again.

Now that may sound like a hard saying, but it's a very disturbing one because there are an amazing number of folks who are not in that group anymore, but that was the thing that happened in their lives.

By the way my dear, and you forgive me for saying this to you, won't you; because I may not get a chance to say it again – what did happen when you were saved? What did you think about God?

(The audio ends abruptly at this point)