

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

Message: The Dying Thief

**Editorial Note: This sermon were delivered to the Grace Bible Church in Detroit, Michigan sometime in 1971. Sidney Cox was 84 years of age in 1971.**

**Sidney and Violet Cox resided in Detroit during their retirement years. In 1962, they retired to the Salvation Army retirement home in Detroit, "The Eventide." Violet was in failing health and ultimately died in 1967. Sidney continued residency there until a late in life move to Birmingham in 1972.**

**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." Grace Bible Church was a CMA church to which Sidney and Violet belonged during their years in Detroit. Sidney was often asked to lead Bible studies and often filled their pulpit to preach.**

**John Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney Cox. December 29, 2008.**

...about the dying thief. And the story of it of course is found in several places, particularly in Luke, the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter, 39<sup>th</sup> verse, and this is what it says. Luke, the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter, 39<sup>th</sup> verse, and this is the word that lies before us:

“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.”

The story of the dying thief, as recorded by Doctor Luke.

We find in this world of ours, some strange, objectionable people. I don't think we have to live in this world very long to discover that there are strange and very objectionable people who live in this world. I think perhaps one group that is most objectionable is this. Let me describe them to you, you may have met somebody like it: the people who know something about God, who recognize something of God's providence; for instance, they know they couldn't live for one split second if God shut off the means of life. They know that. You don't have to argue about that. They're not atheists, not at all. They know God provides things for us. They know who sends the sunshine and the rain. They know who puts fertility in the soil. They know who puts the smile on a baby's face. They know who provides for us when we do not deserve it. They know all about that.

And yet, in spite of it, they have planned life along this line – “Oh, I know that God has done this and God has done that and I recognize that and I'm not repudiating God there, I just know. But, I've got my life to live and I'm going to live my life in my way, and I'm going to do as I please regardless. I'm

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going to plan my life as I want to plan it. I'm going to live it as I will. I'm going to do as I please, regardless of what God thinks or what God says or what God has done. I'm going to live my own life and," - postscript, "When I get to the end of life, then I'll turn to God and I'll get in to whatever is on the other side that's good; I'll get in there, and I'm going to turn the last minute."

Now you would be surprised my dear, if you could find out how many people think that way. "Oh sure, we don't repudiate God. We know God sends all these things. Sure. I'm going to live my life and when I get to the end, after I've squeezed every drop of juice out of this life, I'll throw the husk of it into the face of God and I'll turn to God at the last minute. There have been lots of folks who have repented on their death beds."

Now, if you haven't heard that, you will probably. There are lots of folks who talk that way, and one of the people they hide behind and say, "Look at this one. He got in at the last minute," - one of those whom they hide behind is this dying thief. If they know anything about their Bibles, and they usually know a little about it, they will say, "Well, look at the dying thief. He got in at the last minute. That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to get everything I can out of it and then I'm going to get in at the last minute." - deathbed repentance.

I talked to a doctor one time about that, a Christian man; we were riding along in a car and we'd been thinking and talking together, and I said to him, "Doctor, I've been thinking about this business of deathbed repentance. You ought to know something about that. You see a lot of people die. Have you ever noticed that this is something that occurs frequently, or once in a while? What do you think about it?" And this is what he said to me. He said, "No, I haven't seen very much of that, if any. But I have noticed this: that when a person comes to die, they are too busy dying to do anything else."

Did you hear it? Thank you, Doctor. You'll meet him in heaven some day. As a matter of fact, you'd meet him if you went to heaven today, because there's where he is, right now. And he knows what we're talking about - to busy dying to do anything else.

One of the persons that they hide behind is this dying thief. Now strange to say, we believe that the dying thief was a saved man; that when the Lord Jesus said to him, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise," He meant exactly what He said. We believe he was a saved man, but then, wait a minute. Before anybody can be saved there are certain things that are necessary before salvation can take place at all; and when you say that, you are so right.

For instance, we say that it is necessary to believe certain things; to believe certain things, and you are so right about that. It is necessary. And then we look at a dying thief and we say, "Did he believe any of these things that make up the pathway into salvation?" For instance, there are four things about which we must think and think correctly before we can ever be saved at all. Salvation my dear, is not something into which you stumble occasionally. Not at all. Salvation is a plain path where you tread every one of the four steps; and the four steps are these, before we can be saved: we believe something about God; we believe something about sin; we believe something about ourselves; and we believe something about the Saviour from sin.

Now we say with perhaps a little perplexity, here is a man dying on a cross who had lived his life exactly in the opposite direction all this time, and yet to him our Lord said, "Today shalt thou be with

me in paradise,” and in our hearts we say, “We believe the dying thief went there to be with the Lord.” In other words, he was a saved man. How do we reconcile that with this which is so important to us?

By the way, what church did that dying thief belong to? Was he baptized? And if so, by what means? Was he sprinkled, dipped or poured? How much money did he give to foreign missions? Did he ever teach a Sunday School class? Did he ever do any what we call witnessing? And here’s somebody, and we wonder, how could he be saved unless these things were present? And the answer to it my dear is, he couldn’t be, and neither can you.

Now the only way to find out what the man did believe is to listen while he talks because he suddenly appears and just as suddenly disappears and we have a few brief words that fell from his lips and that’s all. And whatever we think about him, whatever judgment comes to us regarding him, it must be on the basis of what this man said. Now the only way is to listen to him. Will you listen to him this morning? You have already listened to him without listening already this morning. Now will you listen to him? Because here’s a conversation that goes on – two men, one on either side of the central cross - a thief here and a thief there, and this conversation begins over here. And you will remember that one thief spoke to the one in the center and said, “If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us,” and that’s the last word you ever hear from him and he went out into the eternal darkness with that damning “If” upon his lips – for “If” my dear, is the language of unbelief. When you say, “If” to God, when God has said “Thus and so,” and you say, “If” to God, you are entering into the realm of unbelief. Here was a man who went out into the darkness, who we never see him again. You won’t see him again unless you go to the place where he is – and he’s gone.

But the other man answers him. Now he’s the man we’re interested in. Here’s the man to whom our Lord said, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” This is the one we want to hear. What did this man say? And so we listen step by step and word by word while he says something; and on the basis of what he says, we shall be able to either confirm our judgment - I hope - we shall be able to confirm our judgment that this man is a saved man, and maybe it might be well for us to ask the question, “Is this what happened to me? Is this what happened?”

Now, here is this man, and he’s talking to his friend on the other side of the cross, and this is what he says, “Dost thou not fear God?” Now, let’s wait a minute now. We’re going to believe something about God and the right thing, because no one is ever saved who doesn’t believe the right thing about God. We don’t drift into salvation by believing what we want to believe. We believe what God is and what God says according to the book. Now here’s a man who didn’t know anything about the book and yet he knew something about God – for the first thing that comes from his lips is this, “Dost thou not fear God?”

Now let’s stop a moment. Here in that simple little phrase, “Dost thou not fear God,” we have several things. One – the fact of God. There is no question there, not at all. He isn’t covering up God with some mask or other, not at all. He isn’t talking about God as the ‘first great original cause’ or something of the kind. Not at all. It’s just God. There’s the fact of God standing there right before his eyes, and he says to his friend, “Dost thou not fear God?”

Now let me ask you something else. Don’t you see that in that statement he had uncovered something of the character of God? “Dost thou not fear God?” Why should any man fear God? Why does any man

fear God? The only answer to that my dear, is that there is something within the heart of man that tells him that he is wrong and God is right; and in view of that, he stands before the God who is right; the man who is wrong stands before the God who is right with fear in his heart. It's the fact of sin that produces fear of God anyway. We're not afraid of God apart from the fact that we know within our hearts this dreadful thing is there; this separating thing; this thing that God can not in His righteousness tolerate for one single moment.

And here was a man on a cross who is saying to his friend, "Dost thou not fear God?" And to confirm the fact that his fear was based on his own sinfulness, he continues to say to his friend, "Dost thou not fear God, seeing we are in the same condemnation." He says, "Seeing thou art in the same condemnation," but you can see him putting himself there into the very same position. We are in this position before God of being condemned. What kind of a God is it who condemns sin? Not a God of vengeance, a God of righteousness. God in his righteousness has no other course open but to condemn sin, and here's a man, strange to say, who in a situation like this is glimpsing something not only of the fact of God but of the character of God and of the righteousness of God. "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

Now watch it again, "And we indeed justly." So God must not only deal with sin, but in the dealing with sin, God does it justly, in accordance with His righteous nature; His righteous character.

Now here's a man who did know something about God. God, the fact of it. God, the fear of him. God, the dividing thing between ourselves and God. God, who in His righteousness must condemn this. God, who in His righteousness and in His condemnation is expressing His justice. We've got something about God. This is no ordinary picture of God. The God who is in the mind of the average person, Christian or otherwise, is a strange creature somewhere off on the edge of things and we don't mind Him being there so long as He doesn't bother us. But here's a man who knew something about God. He knew the fact of God; he knew what it is that separates between man and God; he knew something about the character of God; he knew something about the justice of God; and he knew something about himself, as well, and the man on the other side. He knew he was personally responsible for the separating thing, his sin; he was responsible, "We indeed justly. We receive the due reward of our deeds." This man had done something that is the hardest thing for any man to do, and that is to admit that he was a sinner. The hardest thing for any man to do is to admit that he's a sinner. The hardest thing for any unsaved person to do is to admit that they need to be saved.

But here's a man who did this. Isn't it amazing what this man knew? Now we know why he knew it. He certainly didn't know it by going to church. We know why. But here was a man who knew something about God and he knew something about himself and he knew something about sin.

Now my dear, let's stop. What did he know about the Saviour from sin? Because again, follow the conversation. This is the only way in which we'll ever find out. Here is this man, he's talking to his friend and saying, "We indeed justly, for we receive the due rewards of our deeds." Watch it. "But this man." Now he's going to talk about the one in the center. What does he know about him? What? Well, the first thing he knows about him is that the one in the center is entirely different to the people on either side of him. They were spotted; black with sin; hopeless in the presence of God. Apart from God's mercy, there was no hope for them at all.

Here was a man who had spent his life with his fist raised against everybody else. One of the strangest words that fall from the lips of this dying thief was the word 'fear.' Here is a man who says, "Dost thou not fear God," and he hadn't feared anybody in his life. His hand had been against everybody. There had been no fear about anybody. This was the one thing that without, and yet, here was this man now standing in fear of God. "Dost thou not fear God?" But there's somebody there, somebody in the center and he puts the crown of deity upon the bleeding brow of our Lord when he says, "This man hath done nothing amiss."

Let me remind you of something my dear, sinlessness is the mark of deity. It isn't the mark of humanity. If somebody came into this room right now with a Diogenes lantern or something of the kind saying, "I've been searching around in the churches to try to find out somebody who's done nothing amiss and I thought I might find somebody in Grace Bible Church this morning." And he comes right up front and stops this so-called sermon and looks at you. I hope he wouldn't be looking at me because I'd be heading out the door somewhere or other, or hiding behind the pulpit. I wouldn't let anybody look at me. If they're looking for somebody who has done nothing amiss, would you like them to look at you? What about you?

Don't you see what this man did in that moment? He took this crown of deity and placed it upon that bleeding brow of the man who had done nothing amiss. Everything He did was good. He went about doing good – that's the mark of this one in the center. Did you hear it? Here was somebody who in the midst of all the mystery that he was facing had discerned this, and upon the brow of this one in the center there was placed the crown of deity. "This man hath done nothing amiss."

Oh my dear, that's the kind of Saviour who comes walking into your life and stands in front of you and says, "I want you to trust me." If we looked at Him and there was the faintest semblance, the faintest shadow of evil doing or even self-doing – there isn't much difference between those two, if any - but if there was the faintest sign of it, could we trust Him with our salvation? The only person you can trust with your salvation is the person who has done nothing amiss. Apart from that, he would have been dying on that cross for himself, not for you. Or, not for the dying thief either. Here was this thing, "This man hath done nothing amiss." And we hold our breath as we look at Him. That's the Jesus who loved you and gave Himself for you. Did you hear it?

Now, you watch, because he isn't through yet – just a word or two more. But he says to this one in the center; now his conversation is going to this one, for he says, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom, Lord." Do you know that that's a word that would be utterly inappropriate, could not possibly be applied to a person who is only human? This is a word that is applied to somebody who is greater than human; and again, he puts the crown of deity. He's not talking to a man, he's talking to the God man! And he puts the crown on the brow of the one who had done nothing amiss; and who was the Lord of today and the Lord of tomorrow.

What kind of a kingdom would it be without a King? Don't you see what he had said in that phrase, "When thou comest into thy kingdom," not just a kingdom where you will be a part of it, but where you will be the center of it. It is, "Thy kingdom." Do we not say the same words if we are sensible at all? We ought to say them over and over again, "Thy kingdom come." That's what this man said. There's a kingdom in the future and there's a king who is going to occupy the place that no other one could ever occupy - the center of it.

And we look at a man and we're utterly amazed as we say to ourselves, "What kind of a person is this? How did he know this?" Well my dear, by nature he's as ignorant of those things as we are. There isn't one of us in this room that could ever have glimpsed even the slightest idea of the fact of God; and the character of God; and the righteousness of God; and the justice of God; and what God thinks about sin; and the sinlessness of God. There isn't one of us that could have had the faintest idea of that apart from the fact that God, the Holy Spirit reveals these truths to us.

The truth of salvation my dear, is not a discovery. It is a revelation. We didn't discover Jesus. He revealed Himself to us. And we sometimes sing quite erroneously that, "The great discovery that I made was when I found Jesus, my Lord."<sup>1</sup> We're wrong on two counts there: we didn't discover Him in the first place, not at all. It was a revelation. We didn't discover Him, He found us; and the only reason we know anything about Him, in the majesty of His redemptive power, is that God, the Holy Spirit pulls back the veil and says, "I want you to see God like that. I want you to see the Saviour of men like that." And when you do, you'll hear the same thing from His lips that the dying thief heard and you'll never hear it any other way.

"Today, shalt thou be with me in paradise."

We've been talking together this morning about the dying thief and the fact that salvation is marked by a pathway, marked by these steps: We believe something about God. What do you believe about Him? We believe something about sin. What do you believe about it? We believe something about ourselves. What do you believe about yourself? We believe something about the Saviour from sin...

(Audio ends abruptly)

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<sup>1</sup> He is referring here to the popular hymn, *I've Discovered the Way of Gladness*, words and music by Floyd W. Hawkins.