

The Thief on the Cross Luke 23:39-43  
11-17-13

When reading the record of the death of Christ, one of the most startling and wonderful interactions on the cross was the conversation Jesus had with the second thief. Many believe that this is an example of a pattern of salvation, and have marked this as an example of salvation by *Faith Only (Sola Fide – “Justification is by Faith Alone”)*. Is this correct?

There are three important facts about the Thief on the Cross:

1. He died before the Gospel was in effect
2. He had both faith and works
3. He received a Unique Dispensation

The Thief on the Cross died before the Gospel was in effect. While the Gospel was preached before his death (Mark 1), it was not fulfilled and in effect until Jesus arose from the grave (I Corinthians 15:1-4). While on the cross, the Law of Moses was in effect. Presuming he was a Jew, the thief was part of that covenant. Therefore, his hope was not as a Christian.

This begs the question: what hope did Jews have who lived before Christ’s death? Jesus taught that they could be saved by Christ: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out." (Luke 13:28). We need to understand that we are taught in places such as Hebrews 11 that Christ justifies by Faith, and universally, Faith is demonstrated in works:

Second, the thief on the cross had both Faith and Works. We know Faith without Works is not Faith:

*“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also”* (James 2:26). According to Luke:

- He believed in Jesus on the cross
- He repented of his sins
- He confessed Jesus as Lord before men

All three of these things are called “works” by the Scriptures. Believing is a work according to John 6:29. Confession is a work according to Matthew 10:32. Repentance is a work according to Acts 26:20. His words reflected repentance and his confession confirmed faith. *“You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”* (James 2:24).

The thief was not saved by *Faith Only* because it is IMPOSSIBLE to be saved by *Faith Only*. We are told that it is impossible to be saved without faith (Hebrews 11:6), and the Scriptures tell us that faith without works is not faith (James 2:17). Therefore, it is impossible to be saved without works.

Third, we must understand that the Thief has received the Grace of God through a “unique dispensation”. There are a number of unique dispensations by God in the New Testament; dispensations of forgiveness (John 8:11), of healing (Matthew 9:6), even of resurrection (John 11). Such were done to demonstrate the power of God (John 20:31). They do not typify our expectations, but serve to demonstrate authority. Such is the mercy of the Thief. To be “saved like the thief” requires being on a cross with Jesus and dying at a moment of two covenants. Only two men ever had that hope, and only one man ever accepted it. It is not our hope; Our hope is in the Gospel, the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16)