



Grace in the Final Hour

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Synopsis: Can the worst criminal be saved—even at the last minute. Here's what we can learn from the story of the thief on the cross.

Jeffrey Dahmer was convicted of unspeakable acts of perversion and cannibalism that shocked the nation. He was murdered in prison, but not before he had professed faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Ted Bundy was a notorious serial killer executed for his crimes. But before he died, he also claimed faith and forgiveness in Christ.

I recently read of a murderer executed in Texas. The newspaper reported his last words before the lethal injection. It sounded like a church testimonial as he praised God for his new-found salvation in Christ and expressed his assurance of going to heaven.

We may not know in this life if these professions were genuine, but I believe it is more than likely that they were.

And that bothers me.

I don't think I could forgive someone of that sort, especially if they murdered a member of my family or any person I knew. It would torment me to think of such a person in heaven. It would not be fair!

But wait. Can we not see in ourselves an aversion to God's grace? Grace is so amazing it is sometimes unbelievable.

I had a friend whose father was dying of cancer. He had only months, probably weeks, to live. He was not saved, so my friend tried to speak to him about salvation. His father's response was that he felt it was not fair to call on the Lord at the end of his life to forgive him when he had ignored and neglected Him throughout his life.

I told my friend to tell his father about the thief on the cross (**Luke 23:39-43**). I referred him to one of the two criminals (as Luke calls them) who was crucified with Christ. This dying convict recognized Jesus as innocent and the King of the Jews (the Messiah) when he said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered without hesitation, "Assuredly, today you will be with me in Paradise."

In this criminal's conversion there is free and unconditional forgiveness. Can you imagine those who were victims of this convict standing at the foot of his cross to witness the execution? They surely felt satisfied as human justice was fulfilled. But how would they have felt at Jesus' words of pardon? Betrayed? Outraged? It wasn't fair!

Jesus had a habit of outraging people with His love for sinners. Mockers derisively labeled Him "the friend of sinners" (**Luke 7:34**). He forgave a hated tax-collector (Matthew), a demonized woman (Mary Magdalene), and a blasphemer and persecutor of Christians (Saul of Tarsus).

Was it fair? No. Was it love? Yes.

When I recently explained salvation by grace to an unbeliever, and how Jesus the innocent died for us the guilty, he objected, "But that's not fair!"

How insightful! How true! This person was not far from the kingdom of God. At that point I knew I was explaining the Gospel clearly.

I agree with my friend's father that it is not fair to be forgiven at the end of one's life. But neither is it fair to be forgiven *at any other time* in one's life.

Salvation is not fair. Jesus paid it all; I can bring nothing but my sin. I can only receive the free gift.

Of course *it is unfair!* But that is grace. That is love.

And if it is unfair to forgive those who butcher other human beings, would it not also be unfair to forgive those who crucified the Son of God? That's you and me, friend.

By nature, forgiveness is never fair. It says to those who are guilty of causing our pain, "I will swallow the pain. I will take the hurt and not hold it against you any longer. I will not hurt you back in the way your cruel deed really deserves."

So I thank God every day that He is "unfair." Remember that God knows what it's like to lose a Son, too. But He forgives us because He loves us so.

Death-row convicts-unlikely teachers of a powerful lesson. They teach us that God's grace is truly amazing. So amazing it overwhelms human emotion, reason, and our capacity to comprehend. These men also teach us that for condemned people like us, unfair as it is, the Gospel is simple enough to give the promise of eternal life-even in life's final hour.