

The Thief on the Cross

Luke 23:39-43

In teaching our friends and relatives about salvation and how one goes about being saved according to the New Testament, we are often faced with the question of the Thief on the Cross when we bring up the fact that baptism is required for salvation. Their statement is usually something similar to: "Well, the thief on the cross wasn't baptized, and he went to paradise with Jesus, so why do we have to be baptized today to be saved?"

There are several issues with their comments that I would like to present in this paper for your consideration and use in the event you face this question in your evangelism efforts.

1. First, we do not know if the thief was baptized or not!
 - a. Think about it, we are told that there were a lot of people being baptized by both John and the disciples of Jesus
 - i. **Mark 1:5 (KJV)** And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.
 - ii. **Luke 3:7 (KJV)** Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
 - iii. **Luke 3:21 (KJV)** Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened,
 - iv. **John 3:22-23 (KJV)** After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.
 - v. **John 4:1-3 (KJV)** When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,) He left Judaea, and departed again into Galilee.
 - b. Since so many were being baptized by both John and the disciples of Jesus, it is impossible for us to know for sure if the thief was or was not baptized
2. The thief knew something about Jesus
 - a. His statement in Luke 23:40-42 indicates that he knew something about Jesus
 - i. He stated that Jesus had done nothing amiss
 1. How could he make that statement if he didn't know at least that Jesus was innocent of the charges made against him
 - ii. He addressed Jesus as "Lord" and asked that he (Jesus) remember him (the thief) when he (Jesus) comes into his (Jesus) kingdom.
 1. This statement alone proves that the thief knew some of the things that Jesus was teaching
 - a. He knew enough to call Him "Lord"
 - b. He knew enough to know that Jesus had discussed His Kingdom

3. Next, there are several other things that the thief wasn't told to do by Jesus. But our friends and relatives who what to use him as an example of a person who wasn't required to be baptized and was yet saved never seem to consider.
 - a. First, the thief wasn't told to believe in the gospel
 - i. And there is a very good reason for this
 1. The gospel was still in the process of being formed
 - a. At the time of this conversation on the cross, Jesus had not yet died and had not yet been resurrected nor had He yet ascended in to heaven
 - i. All of these are part of the gospel of Christ
 - ii. It was impossible for the thief to believe the gospel at this point simply because it had not yet been completed
 - b. Next, the thief wasn't told to repent of his sins
 - i. It is clear that he had sins that he needed to repent of or he wouldn't be on the cross next to Jesus
 1. He even admitted as much when he said to the other thief
 - a. **Luke 23:40-41 (KJV)** But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou 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.
 - ii. We know that unrepentant thieves will not enter the kingdom of God
 1. **1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (KJV)**
 - ⁹ Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, ¹⁰ Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.
 - iii. So why didn't Jesus tell him to repent of his sins first
 1. If not being baptized is an issue with him entering the kingdom, certainly not repenting of his sins would also be an issue
 - a. However, those who want to use the thief as an excuse for not being baptized should also allow him as an excuse for not repenting
- c. And finally the thief wasn't told by Jesus to confess his (the thief's) belief in Him (Jesus)
 - i. Jesus clearly told us that confession of our belief is absolutely required for our salvation
 1. **Matthew 10:32-33 (KJV)** Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.
 - a. Since Jesus is our only mediator between us and God
 - i. **1 Timothy 2:5 (KJV)** For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;
 - b. We have no one to mediate for us if we do not confess Jesus
 - ii. But the thief wasn't told to confess Jesus either

4. Jesus had not yet died when He promised the thief that he would be with Him in paradise that very day

a. Therefore the requirements to be baptized were not yet in effect

i. Our friends and relatives may, at this time, respond by saying “No, but Jesus died before the thief did so wasn’t the requirement to be baptized in effect after Jesus died and before the thief did?”

ii. There are a couple of major issues with this line of thinking

1. First and foremost is that Jesus had the power to forgive sins while He was alive

a. He proved this during His ministry

1. **Mark 2:1-12 (KJV)**

¹ And again he entered into Capernaum after *some* days; and it was noised that he was in the house. ² And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive *them*, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them.

³ And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four. ⁴ And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken *it* up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.

⁶ But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, ⁷ Why doth this *man* thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only? ⁸ And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts?

⁹ Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, *Thy sins be forgiven thee*; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? ¹⁰ But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) ¹¹ I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. ¹² And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion.

2. **Luke 5:17-24 (KJV)**

¹⁷ And it came to pass on a certain day, as he was teaching, that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by, which were come out of every town of Galilee, and Judaea, and

Jerusalem: and the power of the Lord was *present* to heal them. ¹⁸ And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought *means* to bring him in, and to lay *him* before him. ¹⁹ And when they could not find by what *way* they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with *his* couch into the midst before Jesus. ²⁰ And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. ²¹ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? ²² But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts? ²³ Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk? ²⁴ But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house.

2. Next, and perhaps just as important as Jesus's authority to forgive sins is the fact that baptism as a requirement of salvation is not taught at all until AFTER the resurrection of Jesus

a. Jesus commanded it in

i. **Matthew 28:16-20 (KJV)**

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. ¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: ²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen.

ii. **Mark 16:14-18 (KJV)**

¹⁴ Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. ¹⁵ And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. ¹⁶ He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. ¹⁷ And these signs shall follow them that

believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; ¹⁸ They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

- iii. Both of these occurred AFTER His death, burial and resurrection
 1. So since the thief died after Jesus died, but before he was buried and resurrected he was ***not*** under the command to be baptized
- b. Peter preached it only after the death, burial and resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven
 - i. **Acts 2:38 (KJV)**
³⁸ Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.
 - ii. **1 Peter 3:21-22 (KJV)**
²¹ The like figure whereunto *even* baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: ²² Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.
- c. Paul practiced it himself after he had seen Jesus on the road to Damascus, a few years after the resurrection and ascension into heaven
 - i. **Acts 22:10-16 (KJV)**
¹⁰ And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do. ¹¹ And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus. ¹² And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt *there*, ¹³ Came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him. ¹⁴ And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. ¹⁵ For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

In summary, the example of the thief on the cross as a person who was not baptized and was saved as a reason that baptism is not required for salvation today falls apart under scrutiny. Jesus saved him by His personal authority to forgive sins while He was alive. Jesus forgave the thief while He was still living. The thief wasn't told to believe, repent nor confess either, so if he is an example then why do people today have to even believe or repent or confess? And perhaps most important, we do not know for sure if the thief was or was not baptized, but we know for sure that he died before Jesus commanded baptism for salvation. Therefore the requirement for baptism was not applicable to him, only that his sins be forgiven which is what Jesus did.