

Last year my daughter was in a class at her co-op school. She was making a presentation and mentioned the need to obey Christ in order to be saved. Specifically, she noted the necessity of baptism. There was a boy in the class who openly exclaimed that she was mistaken.

After class, they talked. He quickly expressed that salvation is by faith and not works and that baptism was not necessary to be saved. He hung (pardon the pun) his argument on the Thief on the Cross. My daughter answered him with a series of observations about that story.

A little while later, the boy saw his father and asked him to talk to my daughter. Once the dad was up to date, the boy left them to talk. The father started with “we all know that salvation requires only two things: faith and grace.” I think he mentioned Romans. My daughter asked a pertinent question, to this effect: “Do you mean Abraham faith?” He said “yes.” She paraphrased James 2 where it teaches that faith without works is dead and then directly cites Abraham’s obedience.

The man paused a moment before saying: “Okay, but what about the Thief on the Cross?” Do you see how things tend to circle back to that? It’s a safe zone, a “slam dunk” for the Calvinist. So when Romans starts to reveal multifaceted truths about Grace and Living Faith and even the Purpose of Baptism (Romans 6), all of that is processed through this basic idea:

The Thief on the Cross – a) was saved by belief only b) proves baptism isn’t required for salvation.

Let’s first begin by recalling this story and some important things about this man:

- 1) **Matthew 27:44** – Both criminals were distraught and dying and hurled abuse at Jesus.
- 2) **Luke 23:39-40** – He came to his senses and recalled that God exists and is to be feared.
- 3) **Luke 23:42** – He believed in Jesus! He knew the kingdom was spiritual/eternal!
- 4) **Luke 23:43** – Upon His confession and request, Jesus Christ granted the man salvation.

So, regardless of misapplications from this story, don’t overlook the greatness of it. A man who was guilty of sin and overcome with fear, turned to God, acknowledge Christ, asked for help, and got it! In that situation, we would all do well to have done the exact same thing!

However, to say this defends faith only and eliminated needed immersion in the Christian age is false. Primarily because it operates under a series of dangerous assumptions. Here are 4:

1. It assumes that the thief had never been baptized
 - a. The whole idea is that he was saved without it. But how do you know that?
 - b. In the text, I know he knows God, he knows about Jesus, and the Spiritual Kingdom.
 - c. **Matt 3:1-6** – This man, a Jew, could easily have been among those baptized by John.
 - d. **Luke 3:3** – “Forgiveness of sins.” Had he done so, then fallen away? We Don’t Know.
 - e. **Acts 2:36-38** – It is worth noting that no Jew made the Thief argument 50 days later.
2. It assumes that his circumstances aren’t relevant
 - a. Baptized or not, he was affixed to a cross until death. This is somewhat unique.
 - b. Unless Jesus miraculously released him, he could not be baptized.
 - c. **Mark 16:15-16** – If the man had been released, what would he have done here?
 - d. If you want to talk scenario – in the desert, no water, we can talk about grace.
 - e. If you want to talk about you and me – with water heated behind me. Not the same.
3. It assumes that changing covenants don’t matter
 - a. **Hebrews 8:6,13** – Christ lived under the Old Law, and introduced the New Law.
 - b. **Heb. 9:15-18** – It was not in effect until His death. This salvation came before.
 - c. The thief lived under Moses’ Law. Under Christ’s law, the method is clear: **Rom. 6:3-4**
 - d. **Col. 2:13-14** – Old Law gone. Now what? **Col. 3:11-12** – Our way to Christ!

4. It assumes that Christ's Teaching is Trivialized

- a. One of the best ways to test a theory about Christ, is to listen to Him all the more.
- b. **Mark 16:15-16** – Believed and Baptized shall be Saved (under Christian Age)
- c. **Matthew 28:18-20** – Commands included Baptism – we can't eliminate that.
- d. **Acts 1:4-5; 2:36-38** – An extension of Jesus into the Christian Age – His Apostles.

Okay, that was the easy part of this lesson. The end is going to be the toughest. Let's start with a summing up of what we know and what it means:

- 1) The criminal was a penitent man who was saved by Jesus on the cross.
- 2) We don't know if he was baptized previous by John or not.
- 3) We do know he had no option to be immersed at that time.
- 4) We can see he never lived under the Christian covenant as you and I do today.
- 5) Jesus, after being raised, was abundantly clear about the necessity of baptism for salvation.

This leads to a couple of necessary conclusions

- a) This story cannot be used to oppose the teachings of Christ and His Apostles
- b) New Testament teaching is unopposed: You must be baptized in order to be saved.

Here's the hard part. In East Texas I have had similar conversations with several people who were saved by believing, like the criminal, without baptism. They were immersed a few days or weeks later, perhaps to be added to the local church, or as some outward sign of inward grace, or maybe just to put the final stamp of figurative proclamation of what has already happened – salvation.

Ephesians 4:4-6 – This text states that there is only one, right Baptism, just like the rest of the list. And it's been hard to get people to see that if the thing isn't for the PURPOSE the Bible states, then it is not the Bible Thing.

But this is where our thief has created issues in the past, and now may serve to help us out. Belief in our salvation being like the thief has permeated religion for 500 years. His salvation eliminates baptism as ESSENTIAL or THE MOMENT WHEN we are saved, as neither seems true of him.

First, there are 2 Faiths – One says salvation is by belief alone (like the thief) and the others says we must act in faith and repent and be immersed to be saved. They are not two versions of one faith, they are two. One is right and the other wrong. One must be abandoned and other embraced.

There are two baptisms in modern Christian religion. *There is one that is after salvation. It is not essential. It is an outward sign some time later. For salvation was at the moment of accepting Jesus.*

There is one that is for salvation. It is essential. And salvation occurs at the moment you go down into the water FOR A SINGLE PURPOSE – to have sins washed away. One must be abandoned for the other.

They are not the same. One is right and the other is wrong. They stand for different things. They DO different things. In Scripture there is only ONE BAPTISM. So which one was yours?

If they were lost until the moment they were immersed, as a necessary work, for the forgiveness of their sins, and to be added to Christ's body at that moment – they have done the will of God.

If they were saved like the thief, or by belief only, and baptized at any point after, that is foreign to the teachings of Christ. You must be born again! **Acts 22:16** – “why do you delay?”

If they say: “you mean I should be baptized again?” **Acts 19:1-5** – Look at men who believed and obeyed, but their knowledge of God's will was incomplete. Once they knew, the obeyed. Won't you?

If you have learned something new about the criminal on the cross - If you have seen something clearly about the purpose of New Covenant baptism – regardless of your past. What will you do?