

Be a good sport. I remember having that drilled into my head as a youngster. It seemed like every sports team I ever played on was terrible. Baseball, soccer, basketball. None of them did very well. But still, after the game was over, I was reminded: Don't pout. Don't whine. Don't give up. Be a good sport.

It's amazing how many professional athletes need to be taught that lesson. Take Dale Begg-Smith, for example. Begg-Smith was a skier for Australia at the 2010 Winter Olympics. And after failing to win gold in the men's moguls, he stood on the silver medal platform with a look of derision, scorn, and utter dejection. He was referred to by newspapers as "a sourpuss" and "Mr. Miserable."

Then there was McKayla Maroney. The US gymnast had a fantastic performance at the 2012 Olympics, but made a mistake on her very last vault. The result was a silver medal... and a very upset McKayla. Who stood on the platform with her arms folded across her chest, her lips pursed, and her eyes glaring. And she was forever immortalized as one of the most popular memes of all time. McKayla was not impressed.

Being disappointed in a poor performance is natural. But at some point, you have to be a good sport, show some respect for the athletes around you, and most of all, remember that you still won a silver medal at the Olympics. You may not be on that middle platform, high above the crowd, but to be at the right and left is still a place of honor.

It's always been a place of honor, in fact. It was a place of honor 224 years before the birth of Christ, when the Olympics were first founded. And it was certainly considered a place of honor to the disciples James and John, when they asked to be seated there next to Jesus when he came into his kingdom. Effectively, James and John were asking to be awarded silver and bronze medals. Second and third place. "We're not Jesus, but we're the next best thing. We're not the Christ, but we're still better than everyone else."

In response, Jesus gives the brothers an unexpected answer: *"To sit at my right or my left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."* I have to imagine this took the two men off guard. Who else but Jesus could decide who would sit next to his throne? And who in the world is being offered these places of honor other than two of his most beloved disciples?"

As usual, the disciples weren't really listening to Jesus. Once again, they had missed the purpose of his mission. For if they had been listening, they would have known what it meant to make this request. If they had been listening, they would have known what it meant when Jesus said they would need to drink the cup he drank and be baptized by His baptism. If they had been listening, they would have known that sitting at Jesus' right and left meant hanging on a cross to his right and left.

Yes, that's right. The men for whom these places had been prepared were the two criminals crucified along side of Jesus. The cup they drank together was the cup of suffering. The baptism they each received was to be buried into death with Christ.

What do we know about these men who took the places of "honor" by Jesus' side? Very little. Matthew's gospel tells us that they were thieves, though the fact that their theft had resulted in a capital crime and execution by crucifixion probably implies that they had stolen from the wrong Roman. Luke, on the other hand, doesn't even tell us that much. "Evil men," is all he calls them. Criminals.

And yet, their words on the cross speak volumes about themselves. Take the first one to speak, for example: *"Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* It's a mocking insult. This man has obviously heard about Jesus. Heard about his miracles. Heard him called "the Christ" by those who followed him. But he has no faith. In fact, he has less than no faith. He's chosen to spend his dying words hurling insults at the Son of God.

And as abhorrent as this may be to us, think for a moment about what he's saying. Consider the fact that James and John were also standing there. Standing with Mary at the foot of the cross. Looking up and thinking the exact same words: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

Their error at that moment was the same as the criminal's. They expected the Christ to come into his Kingdom with power and glory. To come in with armies and miracles. They expected it to be a time of honor and that those who sat next to him could take pride in knowing they were a part of that honor.

But it's nothing like that. Jesus comes into his Kingdom with nails in his hands and feet. He comes into his kingdom being executed alongside thieves and criminals. He comes into his kingdom with shouts of mockery and ridicule. Jesus had told them on that day that they asked to sit at his right and left not to lord their power over anyone, but to be a servant of all. But you don't know service until you see the Son of Man give his life as a ransom for many.

And yet, surprisingly, there is someone on that hilltop who understands what it means for Jesus to come into his kingdom. It's not James, nor John, nor any of the disciples who should have known. No, it's the other unnamed criminal alongside Jesus. He too was being executed for theft. He too had heard of Jesus before. But, in contrast to his comrade, he has a completely different impression of Jesus.

*"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."* Now, I don't know about you, but I've never thought of theft as a capital crime. Even armed robbery doesn't earn you the death penalty. Not today. Not in Jerusalem 2000 years ago.

Which means that this man wasn't simply confessing to the crime of which he had been found guilty in a court. He was confessing to all the other hidden sins of his life. The guilt and shame that had weighed him down until he simply wanted to die.

And yet, as much as he knows his own guilt, he is confident of Jesus' innocence. *"This man has done nothing wrong."* Not simply, this man has not committed a capital crime. This man has done nothing wrong. He is sinless. He has no guilt. He is the Son of God.

Which means that there is only one reason he is up there right now: Because he chooses to be. Because this is a part of some plan that goes beyond human comprehension and human expectation. Because this is somehow a part of bringing about the Kingdom of God that he spoke about so often.

*"Jesus! Remember me when you come into your kingdom!"* Even though we're both hanging on a cross, moments from death. Even though it all looks hopeless now. I know it's going to happen. Jesus! Thy kingdom come! And remember me when it does.

It may be the simplest, most heartfelt confession in all of Scripture: I have sinned. I deserve death. But God... please, remember me anyway. And to those simple words of confession comes those simple words of absolution: *"Today, you will be with me in paradise."*

That is what absolution is. That is what we receive in Holy Baptism. The promise of God to remember us in His kingdom. The promise of God to save us, even in the midst of our sin. The promise of God to deliver us into paradise.

Things haven't changed much since that dark day on Calvary. We still sin. We still suffer for that sin. We still die. We still stand at the right hand of God and beg for mercy that we don't deserve. Beg for mercy from the Lamb, seated on His throne. Not a throne of gold or silver. But a throne of wood. The throne of the cross.

We stand there. Begging for mercy as we ourselves hang from crosses of our own making. Crosses we fully deserve. We beg for mercy. And Jesus turns His head. Looks at us. And says those amazing words of grace and promise to us: "You also will be with me in paradise." Amen.