

Homiletics Analysis: Luke 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Luke 23 narrates the trial, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus Christ. The chapter moves with relentless momentum through six distinct movements: the Jewish leaders' accusation before Pilate (vv. 1–5), Pilate's transfer to Herod (vv. 6–12), Pilate's triple verdict of innocence and the crowd's demand for Barabbas (vv. 13–25), the procession to Golgotha (vv. 26–31), the crucifixion itself including the two criminals and the mocking witnesses (vv. 32–43), and the death, cosmic signs, and burial (vv. 44–56). Luke uniquely emphasizes the repeated declarations of innocence — by Pilate (three times), by Herod, by one of the criminals, and implicitly by the centurion — making innocence one of the chapter's governing literary and theological concerns. Luke also includes material found nowhere else: the weeping daughters of Jerusalem (vv. 27–31), the prayer of forgiveness from the cross (v. 34), the exchange with the penitent criminal (vv. 40–43), and the detailed portrait of Joseph of Arimathea and the faithful women (vv. 50–56). The chapter closes not in triumph but in suspension — the body in the tomb, the Sabbath descending, the women resting.

This Text — Intent

Luke is not simply recording events. He is constructing a theological portrait of the Innocent One who suffers willingly in the place of the guilty — and doing so in a way designed to produce a specific effect: that the reader would recognize in Jesus not a failed messiah but the perfectly just man who absorbed the world's injustice, offered forgiveness to those who killed Him, and secured paradise for the undeserving. Luke's intent is that his reader would be confronted by the criminal's question — “Do you not fear God?” — and would find in Jesus the same answer the criminal found: unearned welcome, immediate certainty, and paradise guaranteed. The intent is not primarily cognitive (learn what happened at the cross) but vocational and worshipful: place yourself among those at the cross, recognize your condition, and receive what only the dying Christ can give.

Subject Sentence: The Innocent One dies condemned, offering forgiveness and paradise to the guilty.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every reader at the foot of the cross with the same choice that faced the crowd, the criminals, and the centurion — to mock, to ignore, or to

cry out in faith — and through this passage He is assuring all who cry out that the dying Christ is both fully able and fully willing to bring them home.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Triple Declaration of Innocence

Luke's triple Pilate declaration ("I find no guilt in this man," vv. 4, 14, 22), corroborated by Herod (v. 15), the penitent criminal (v. 41), and the centurion (v. 47), is not incidental legal reportage. Reformed exegesis reads this as Luke's deliberate theological framing: the one who dies is the righteous man, the innocent servant of Isaiah 53, whose death is therefore not the punishment of his own sin but the bearing of another's. This is the mechanism of substitutionary atonement — the innocent condemned so the guilty might go free, literalized in the Barabbas exchange (v. 25). Wesleyan and Arminian interpreters tend to read the innocence declarations primarily as historical apologetic — Jesus died unjustly, condemned by corrupted human systems — emphasizing the moral horror of the crucifixion rather than its substitutionary logic. This reading captures genuine truth (the injustice is real and Luke records it) but underweights what Luke is doing structurally. The innocence theme is too architecturally prominent — five independent witnesses — to be read merely as apologetics. Reformed exegesis is preferred: Luke is constructing a theological argument in narrative form. The innocent dies condemned. That is the gospel's mechanism, not merely its scandal.

The Prayer of Forgiveness (v. 34)

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" is omitted in some significant manuscripts, leading some text-critical scholars (Metzger, others) to question its authenticity. However, the phrase is consistent with Lukan theology throughout (Stephen's parallel prayer in Acts 7:60; the theme of ignorance in Acts 3:17), and most contemporary text-critical scholarship treats it as original. The interpretive question is the scope of the prayer — who are "them"? Dispensational and some Baptist readings restrict it to the Roman soldiers mechanically driving the nails. Reformed exegesis reads it more broadly: the soldiers, the crowd, the leaders, even the mocking criminals at that point. The prayer's scope matches the cross's scope — a forgiveness broad enough to encompass all who act against God in ignorance. This is consistent with Luke's redemptive-historical framing and should be preached as such, guarding against either trivializing it (mere politeness) or restricting it to a narrow historical referent.

The Penitent Criminal (vv. 40–43)

This exchange is the clearest evangelistic moment in the Passion narratives and is subject to two significant misreadings. First, some Arminian interpreters use the criminal's "deathbed conversion" to maximize human decision — the criminal's choice is highlighted at the expense of the grace that enabled it. Reformed exegesis properly notes that the

criminal's faith is itself miraculous: at the moment when every visible indicator pointed to Jesus' failure and defeat, this man confessed His kingship ("when you come into your kingdom"). This is not admirable human initiative — it is Spirit-given sight in the darkest moment. Second, Roman Catholic interpretation has historically read "today you will be with me in paradise" as evidence that paradise is an intermediate state distinct from heaven, used to support the doctrine of purgatory. The Reformed reading is exegetically straightforward: "today" is temporal and emphatic — not "eventually, after purging" but *this day, immediately, with Me* (personal presence). The adverb *sēmeron* is decisive. This passage is one of the clearest biblical refutations of any intermediate state of purification: the criminal, unbaptized, without works, without time for anything, is promised *that day* direct personal presence with Christ. This should be preached with full confidence.

The Centurion's Confession (v. 47)

Luke records the centurion as saying "Certainly this man was innocent (*dikaios*)!" — whereas Mark and Matthew record a fuller confession of divine sonship. Some interpreters (particularly from more liberal critical traditions) read Luke's version as reducing the centurion to a mere moral witness, not a faith confession. Reformed exegesis notes that *dikaios* ("righteous/innocent") in Luke's theological vocabulary is not a thin moral category but carries the full weight of the "Righteous One" — the messianic title of the Servant of Isaiah. The centurion's statement in Luke is not less theological than Mark's — it is differently theological, aligned with Luke's governing innocence theme. Whether it constitutes saving faith is not stated; Luke presents it as a moment of involuntary recognition at the cross, consistent with his pattern of Gentile witnesses (the centurion of Luke 7; Cornelius in Acts 10).

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 53:4–12** — The Suffering Servant who bears iniquity, is numbered with transgressors, makes intercession for the transgressors, and is cut off from the land of the living though he had done no violence. Luke 23 is the narrative fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic portrait in nearly every detail.
- **Psalms 22:1–18** — The righteous sufferer mocked by those who wag their heads, whose garments are divided by lot (v. 18), who cries out in abandonment but is ultimately vindicated. Luke 23 echoes this psalm without quoting it directly, situating Jesus as the ultimate speaker of Israel's lament.
- **Genesis 3:22–24** — The closing of paradise through sin's entry. The penitent criminal's reception of paradise "today" is the explicit reversal: what was barred through human rebellion is reopened through Christ's death. The tree of cursing becomes the tree of restoration.

- **Romans 5:6–8** — “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul’s theological summary of what Luke 23 narrates: the righteous dying for the unrighteous, the timing (while we were helpless), the scope (sinners, enemies), the motivation (God’s own love). The two passages interpret each other.
- **Hebrews 7:26** — “Holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners” — the High Priest’s qualification. Luke 23’s innocence theme establishes exactly this: the one who dies is the only one qualified to serve as the atoning sacrifice, because He alone has no sin of His own to answer for.

Aim: To place the reader at the foot of the cross — among the real witnesses, not a sanitized distance — so that the dying Christ’s offer of forgiveness and paradise becomes not a historical fact to be admired but a personal claim to be received.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The whole assembly leads Jesus to Pilate; three charges: perverting the nation, forbidding tribute to Caesar, claiming to be king	Charges are politically framed to compel Roman action; the religious charge (blasphemy) is converted to sedition
3–4	Pilate questions Jesus about kingship; Jesus’ indirect answer; Pilate’s first declaration of innocence	“You have said so” — neither denial nor the expected claim; Pilate finds no guilt
5	Leaders intensify: “He stirs up the people from Galilee to here”	Galilee mention triggers the Herod referral
6–7	Pilate learns Jesus is Galilean; sends Him to Herod Antipas, who is in Jerusalem	Pilate using jurisdiction to escape responsibility
8–9	Herod delighted to see Jesus; hoped for a sign; questioned at length; Jesus gave no answer	Jesus’ silence before Herod — cf. Isaiah 53:7; the sign-seeker receives only silence
10	Chief priests and scribes accuse vehemently before Herod	The accusation follows Jesus everywhere

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
11–12	Herod and soldiers mock Jesus, dress Him in fine robes, send Him back; Herod and Pilate become friends	Mockery as ironic investiture — the king dressed as a king by those who mean to deride Him
13–16	Pilate summons accusers; second declaration of innocence; Herod's concurrence; Pilate proposes flogging and release	Three parties now: Pilate, Herod, Pilate again — all finding no guilt
17	[Some manuscripts: Pilate obligated to release one prisoner at the feast]	Textual note; the Barabbas custom
18–19	Crowd demands Barabbas (insurrectionist, murderer) instead of Jesus	The substitution is explicit: the guilty goes free, the innocent is condemned
20–22	Pilate appeals a second and third time; crowd shouts for crucifixion; third declaration of innocence	Three innocence declarations by Pilate — structurally deliberate
23–25	Crowd's voice prevails; Pilate releases Barabbas and delivers Jesus to their will	"Their will" — Luke's indictment; Pilate capitulates to injustice
26	Simon of Cyrene compelled to carry the cross	The cross carried by another — brief echo of discipleship call (9:23)
27–28	Large crowd of women weeping; Jesus turns and addresses them	Unique to Luke; Jesus' attention even in extremity
29–31	Jesus warns the daughters of Jerusalem: days are coming when barren will be called blessed; "if this is done to the green wood, what will happen to the dry?"	Prophetic warning about Jerusalem's coming judgment (70 AD); the green tree = innocent Jesus; the dry tree = guilty Jerusalem
32–33	Two criminals crucified with Jesus, one on each side	Numbers the suffering with transgressors — Isaiah

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		53:12 fulfilled explicitly
34a	“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”	The first word from the cross in Luke; intercession for the executioners
34b	Soldiers divide garments and cast lots	Psalm 22:18 fulfilled without citation
35	People stand watching; rulers scoff: “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One”	Irony — He saves others precisely by <i>not</i> saving Himself; “Chosen One” is messianic title
36–37	Soldiers mock: “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself”; offer sour wine	Mockery from Gentile soldiers — parallel to rulers
38	Inscription above: “This is the King of the Jews”	Irony proclamation; Pilate’s sign becomes inadvertent true declaration
39	One criminal rails: “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”	The impenitent criminal — demanding miraculous rescue, not mercy
40–41	Second criminal rebukes first: “Do you not fear God? We are receiving what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong”	Fear of God, honest self-assessment, innocent verdict — three theological movements in two verses
42	“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”	Faith confession at the moment of apparent defeat; “your kingdom” acknowledges what no visible evidence supported
43	“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise”	Immediate, certain, personal — <i>sēmeron</i> (today); <i>met’ emou</i> (with me); <i>paradeisos</i> (paradise)
44	Darkness over the whole land from the sixth to ninth hour	Cosmic sign; midday darkness = divine judgment (cf. Amos 8:9)
45a	The sun’s light failed	Intensification of the darkness

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
45b	The curtain of the temple torn in two	Access opened; the barrier between God and humanity removed at the moment of Jesus' death
46	"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"; Jesus breathes His last	Psalm 31:5 — the righteous sufferer's final trust; Jesus dies in confident surrender, not despair
47	Centurion glorifies God: "Certainly this man was innocent/righteous!"	Gentile witness; <i>dikaios</i> — the Righteous One recognized by a pagan soldier
48	Crowds return home beating their breasts	Grief and contrition — unusual response; the crowd is not entirely hostile
49	All Jesus' acquaintances and the women from Galilee stand at a distance watching	Faithful witness at distance; the women's role established for the resurrection narrative
50–51	Joseph of Arimathea — council member, good and righteous, not consenting to the decision, waiting for the kingdom of God	Counterpoint to the council; a righteous man steps forward
52–53	Joseph goes to Pilate, asks for the body, wraps it in linen, places it in a rock-cut tomb	Honorable burial — the body is not abandoned; care and dignity
54–56	The women observe the tomb; return to prepare spices; rest on the Sabbath	The chapter closes in waiting; obedience even in grief; the stage set for chapter 24

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–25	The Trials: The Innocent Condemned by the Guilty
2	26–31	The Procession: A Warning on the Way to the Cross
3	32–43	The Crucifixion: Mockery, Mercy, and Paradise

Division	Verses	Label
4	44–49	The Death: Cosmic Signs and Earthly Witnesses
5	50–56	The Burial: Faithful Care and Waiting Silence

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Innocent One dies condemned, offering forgiveness and paradise to the guilty.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every reader at the foot of the cross with the same choice that faced the crowd, the criminals, and the centurion — to mock, to ignore, or to cry out in faith — and through this passage He is assuring all who cry out that the dying Christ is both fully able and fully willing to bring them home.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize yourself in the guilty crowd, not among the sympathetic onlookers.

The most dangerous position at Golgotha is the middle distance — close enough to watch, far enough to remain unimplicated. Luke places multiple witnesses around the cross, and most of them are wrong. The rulers scoff. The soldiers mock. One criminal rages. The crowds stand watching. Even the disciples are at a distance. The temptation for any reader is to locate oneself among the sympathetic women, the righteous Joseph, the sorrowful crowd — rather than among those whose sin nailed Jesus there. But the innocence theme runs in one direction: He had done nothing wrong. Everyone else had. The penitent criminal's confession — “we are receiving what our deeds deserve” — is the correct self-assessment for every person at that cross, including those standing at a comfortable theological remove. Before receiving the cross's benefit, the reader must stand where the criminal stood: guilty, condemned, deserving exactly what they are getting, with nothing to offer and nowhere else to turn. (*Mind/belief*)

2. Let the prayer of forgiveness destroy the lie that your sin has placed you beyond reach.

The prayer in verse 34 is offered at the moment of maximum offense — while the nails are still fresh, while the mockery is active, while the soldiers are gambling over His clothes. Jesus does not wait for remorse. He does not wait for an apology. He prays forgiveness over people who do not know they need it, who are in the middle of the act that requires it. If the forgiveness of Calvary reaches people in that condition — mid-sin, unaware, unrepentant — then there is no moment in any reader's history, no act in any reader's past, no depth of any reader's shame that places them outside its reach. The criminal on the cross had hours earlier been mocking Jesus (Matthew 27:44 implies both criminals mocked initially). The forgiveness that turned one criminal mid-crucifixion can reach

anyone. Stop treating your particular sin as the exception the cross cannot cover.
(*Affections/worship*)

3. Trust the word of Jesus over every visible indicator of His defeat.

The penitent criminal's faith is the passage's most astonishing moment precisely because of what it required him to believe against. Jesus was dying. He had been declared politically dangerous, beaten, mocked, and abandoned. Every visible indicator pointed to the conclusion that the kingdom was over before it began. And yet the criminal said: "When you come into your kingdom." He addressed a dying man as a reigning king. He believed the word of Jesus against the evidence of his own eyes. This is the shape of saving faith in every generation — not faith in what can be seen, documented, and verified, but faith in what the dying-and-rising Christ has promised. Whatever your circumstances are signaling about God's absence, His defeat, or His indifference, the criminal's confession stands as the template: cry out to the King whose kingdom is not diminished by what you can see. (*Mind/belief*)

4. Receive the words "today you will be with me in paradise" as addressed personally to you — not as a historical exchange to be analyzed.

Luke preserves these words not as a record of a past transaction between two first-century criminals but as the living voice of Christ speaking to every reader who identifies with the penitent criminal's condition. "Today" is the operative word — not eventually, not after sufficient spiritual preparation, not after a process of gradual improvement. Today. The dying Christ does not say "I'll see what I can do" or "you'll have to wait and see." He speaks with the authority of a king making a royal decree: *this day, you will be with Me, in the restored garden of God's presence*. For the reader who has been treating their standing before God as uncertain, conditional, or perpetually provisional — this word is meant to land with the same force it landed on a dying criminal: with immediate, personal, unqualified certainty. Receive it. (*Affections/worship*)

5. Follow Joseph of Arimathea's pattern: step forward to honor Christ when the cost is highest and the crowd is against you.

Joseph is a member of the council — the body that condemned Jesus. He did not consent to the decision (v. 51), but Luke does not record that he spoke against it at the time. What he does after the death is costly: he goes to Pilate publicly, identifies himself with a condemned man, handles a ritually defiling corpse, expends his own new tomb, and acts alone against the tide of the decision his own body made. This is not the application of a distant observer but of someone embedded in a community that got it wrong, who decides that honoring Christ matters more than institutional comfort or professional standing. For every reader embedded in a workplace, a family, a community, or a church that is making decisions that dishonor Christ — Joseph's costly, public, post-verdict act of faithful care is the model. Step forward. It will cost something. It is worth it. (*Will/behavior*)

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Luke 23 teaches that the death of Jesus Christ is not the tragic end of a failed messianic project but the divinely appointed mechanism of justification — the innocent dying condemned so that the condemned might go free. The passage establishes with unusual literary care that Jesus is the Righteous One: five independent witnesses across different social positions (Pilate, Herod, a criminal, the centurion, and implicitly the penitent crowd) all declare His innocence. This is not incidental. Luke is doing theology through narration: the one who dies must be shown to be innocent before His death can accomplish anything for the guilty. The curtain's tearing (v. 45) declares that the barrier between holy God and sinful humanity has been removed at the precise moment of Jesus' death — not gradually, not symbolically at some later point, but in the instant His spirit departs. Access to God is a consequence of what happened on that cross at that moment, for that reason, by that Person.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Luke 23 is a narrative exposition of penal substitution — the Reformed doctrine that Christ bore the punishment due to sinners in their place. The Barabbas exchange makes it structural: a guilty man goes free while the innocent man is condemned in his stead. This is not metaphor in Luke; it is the literal event that functions as the paradigm for the cross's logic. The passage also powerfully grounds the Reformed insistence on the sufficiency of faith alone, without works, apart from sacrament: the penitent criminal receives paradise on no other basis than his cry of faith toward Christ. He has no time for baptism, no opportunity for sanctification, no accumulated works of any kind — and yet receives an unqualified “today you will be with me in paradise.” This is *sola gratia* and *sola fide* embodied in a single exchange. Furthermore, Luke's emphasis on Jesus actively *giving up* His spirit (“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,” v. 46) rather than being defeated preserves the Reformed insistence that the atonement is God's sovereign act, not a human miscarriage of justice that God subsequently redeemed. Jesus lays down His life; it is not taken from Him (cf. John 10:18). Even in the Passion, divine sovereignty governs.

Main Takeaway

The man dying on that cross is both perfectly innocent and perfectly willing to receive you — guilty, empty-handed, with nothing to offer and no time to improve. The criminal got it right: fear God, admit you're getting what you deserve, and call out to the King. That's the whole transaction. And the answer you'll get is the same one he got: *Today. With Me. Paradise.* Stop waiting until you're more ready. You never will be. He already is.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Luke 23 to a historical passion narrative rather than a theological confrontation.** The most common failure is to treat this chapter as reportage — explaining what happened at the cross — rather than letting it function as Luke intends: a direct address to the reader. The chapter does not merely describe a past event; it stages an encounter. The preacher’s task is to collapse the distance between AD 33 and today so that the congregation stands at the foot of that cross, not reads about it.
- **Preaching the penitent criminal morally (“have faith like the criminal”) rather than substitutionarily (“receive what the criminal received”).** It is easy to make the criminal’s faith the sermon’s point — his exemplary courage, his humble honesty, his last-minute wisdom. This moralizes the passage and smuggles in a works-righteousness backdoor: be like the criminal. The criminal’s faith is not the point; the criminal’s *Christ* is the point. The application is not “show faith like his” but “cry out to the One he cried out to and receive what he received.”
- **Softening the innocence declarations into mere historical irony.** Luke’s five-witness innocence theme is load-bearing for the theology of substitution. If the preacher treats Pilate’s “I find no guilt in this man” as merely a sad historical irony — Rome got it wrong — the mechanism of the atonement is left unarticulated. The innocent dies condemned. That is not just tragic; it is salvific. Preach the mechanism, not just the injustice.
- **Mishandling “today you will be with me in paradise” by importing eschatological complexity that blunts the pastoral force.** The *sēmeron* (“today”) is emphatic and unqualified. The preacher should not undercut it with lengthy discussions of the intermediate state, paradise versus heaven, or the disputed manuscript tradition around verse 34. These discussions belong in a commentary, not in the pulpit moment when someone in the congregation needs to hear that the dying Christ’s “today” is also for them. Preach the certainty; do not hedge the comfort.
- **Omitting the warning of verses 28–31 in order to move quickly to the “good parts.”** The daughters of Jerusalem and the green/dry wood saying are unique to Luke and serve a genuine pastoral function: the cross of Christ is not only a place of rescue but a place of judgment. The same event that opens paradise for the penitent criminal announces coming judgment on impenitent Jerusalem. Both truths belong in the exposition. A sermon that omits the warning leaves out Luke’s own framing of the cross’s two-directional force.
- **Failing to close the gap between the two criminals.** Every listener falls somewhere between the two criminals — one demanding miraculous rescue on his own terms, one confessing guilt and calling on grace. The preacher should force the

congregation to locate themselves on that spectrum honestly, not allow them to assume they are automatically in the second criminal's position because they are in church. The question "do you not fear God?" is addressed by Luke to every reader through the lips of the penitent criminal. It should land that way from the pulpit.

Filename: 42 Luke 23.docx