



Links Players

New Beginnings 2026 | Man on the Middle Cross

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him [Jesus]: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?" (Luke 23:26-43, NIV)

Unless you are one of those sleuths who love digging around golf lore, the name John Kerr will not ring any bells.

John Kerr (1852-1920) was a Scot who authored *The Golf Book of East Lothian*. Kerr was also a Scottish Presbyterian minister. Kerr's love for the game was legendary.

In our own era, the late Dr. R. C. Sproul, a Presbyterian minister, was a great "stick." Dr. Sinclair Ferguson, another Scot and Presbyterian minister, is known for his golf prowess.

Alistair Begg is a Baptist pastor in Cleveland, a native Scot, and a man who loves golf. Among the many things that fascinate me about this son of Glasgow is his cameo in the movie *Bobby Jones: Stroke of Genius*. Begg plays the role of Stewart Maiden, a Scottish golf professional who influenced Jones' life.

Which brings me to a recent video by Alistair that has gone viral— <https://youtu.be/viKEtJZcRuQ>. In this 3-minute clip, Alistair refers to the thief on the cross to get to the heart of the Christian faith: "Jesus saves sinners."

As we know, Jesus was crucified between two criminals. One mocked him, saying, "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" The other rebuked him, saying, "Don't you fear God..."

Two men, both criminals, yet with vastly different reactions to the "man on the middle cross." The first man's response echoes the perspective of the surrounding crowds and soldiers. He sarcastically says, "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us." He clearly meant that the Messiah should use his power to get them off these crosses.

The other criminal saw in Jesus something beyond the others. Four things about this second criminal are clear: 1) He fears God, 2) He admits his sinfulness, 3) He acknowledges Jesus' innocence, and 4) He asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus enters his kingdom.

Jesus' answer — "...today you will be with me in paradise" — shows at least two things: First, this criminal had nothing to offer in the way of good works. His life was an immoral one. His appeal rested entirely on mercy.

Second, his appeal for mercy was directed to "the man on the middle cross." Mercy is available precisely because Jesus refused to come down from the cross.

The middle cross and the man on it, Jesus, paid the "entry fee" into Paradise for those who, like this criminal, fear God, humble themselves, admit their sinfulness, and come to Jesus with nothing more than their failed moral lives.

Alistair's point is the same as Luke's: First, mercy is available to sinners precisely because the Son of God refused to come off the cross. Second, to receive mercy, sinners must repent and ask Jesus to bring them into his kingdom.

Today, one criminal is with Jesus in paradise, while the other is, sadly and tragically, forever alienated from the mercy of God made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Which will we be?

Prayer: Jesus! Open our eyes to see the mercy provided by your atoning death.

READING: Luke 23: 26-43; Psalm 1; Proverbs 4:18-19; Matthew 7:24-27.

1. Golf is about making choices: go for it or lay up; up and over or down and under those limbs? Discuss these and many other choices and how they have affected your scores.

2. After reading these texts, discuss what they have in common and why Scripture thematically addresses "two paths." Watch the embedded video.

3. Application: Are we good at humbling ourselves, or do we stiffen up at the thought of admitting our failure?
