

Chapter One: Jesus' First Saying

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Luke 23:34

"Forgiveness at the Cross"

This morning, we want to focus on the first of Jesus' 7 sayings. It's found in Luke 23. Journey to the cross with me as I read the familiar account--Luke 23:26-33.

Oh friend, do you see the Savior? We will never appreciate the first words He spoke on the cross until we fathom the horrid treatment He received.

1. See the Violation of His Rights.

He had been mocked by the mob (22:63). His enemies spoke blasphemous words against Him. They beat Him (22:63). King Herod and his henchmen scorned the Altogether Lovely One (23:11). Pilate played political games with Jesus. He declared, "I have found no fault in this man!" (23:14). Yet out of political expediency, he gave in to protect himself (23:24).

It all boiled down to this. The world put an innocent man on the cross! Jesus of Nazareth had lived a perfect life. He was without fault. He modeled true love. He healed the sick, He gave sight to the blind, He freed the demon-possessed, He set the captives free, He even raised the dead. But in the end, the world turned on Him. The world rejected Him. The innocent One was executed.

But the atrocity went even deeper.

2. See the Violation of His Reputation.

Look again at the immediate context. V 32 reveals that He was killed alongside two what? Malefactors. Hardened criminals. Think of it. He who in His life associated with sinners likewise in His death did the same. The Spotless Lamb of God was numbered with the transgressors.

What was Jesus' attitude towards this injustice? How did He respond? Did He lash out in anger and hostility? "It's not fair! I'm innocent!" Did He call for angelic hosts to conquer his oppressors? No.

Listen to His first words. V 34 "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Isaac Watts said it well, "Alas and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I? Was it for sins that I have done, He suffered on the tree? Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!"

Father, forgive them. Luke is the only gospel writer to record this saying. Luke's gospel presents the sufficiency of Christ to save sinners (19:10). How vividly do we see the love of Christ in the words He uttered from the cross!

What's involved in the forgiveness that Jesus provided on the cross? According to Luke 23:34, we learn that Jesus' forgiveness on the cross involved 3 actions.

I. Jesus' forgiveness involved Intercession.

"FATHER, forgive them..."

Imagine being there, hearing those words. The last thing a soldier expected to hear when he executed a criminal by crucifixion was a prayer. Usually, the victim screamed in agony, and spewed venomous curses at the one who drove the nails in his hands.

That's what ordinary men would do. But Jesus was no ordinary man (Hobbs, 9). Do you know the first thing Jesus did on the cross? He prayed. His thoughts turned upward. His gaze fixed upon His Father.

Notice that little word "then" that begins v 34. "Then Jesus said, Father..." When man had done his worst, Jesus prayed (Pink, 19).

And notice, He did not pray for Himself. For whom did He pray? "Father, forgiven THEM." He prayed for others, for others who did not deserve the prayer, and didn't even ask for it. He practiced what He preached (Lk 6:27). He prayed for guilty men.

He prayed for the Gentile soldiers that drove the spikes in his hands and feet. He prayed for the jealous, spiteful Jewish leaders whose hands were bloody with guilt. For spineless Pilate, who instead of doing what was right, did what was expedient.

But were they the only ones for whom Jesus prayed that day? Were they the only ones who were guilty? No. He prayed for all those who put Him on the cross.

Oh friend, He had US in mind. It was for our sins that He went to the tree. Our sins put Him there. Listen to those words again, "Father, forgive them." His forgiveness involved intercession.

There's something important about the verb Luke records in v 34. "Then SAID Jesus." It's an imperfect tense. A more accurate translation would be, "Then Jesus kept saying." Listen to the words of Russell Jones (13-14) as he reconstructs the picture. "Arriving at the place of the skull, Jesus looked about and prayed, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' As the centurion crushed Him to the ground and tied His arms to the crossbeam, He prayed, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' When the blunt spikes tore through each quivering palm, He prayed, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' When they elevated Him to the cross, He prayed, 'Father...' When the crowd cursed and reviled, He prayed, 'Father...' When the soldiers parted His garments and gambled for the seamless robe, He prayed, 'Father...' How many times that prayer pierced heaven's blue that day no one knows."

Application: The first word Jesus uttered from the cross was a prayer. Is that significant? Yes! Jesus' public ministry opened with prayer (Lk 3:21). And here we see it closing in prayer. Surely, He is our Model.

Arthur Pink observed (9), "No longer might those hands minister to the sick, for they are nailed to the cross, no longer may those feet carry Him on missions of mercy, for they are fastened to the cruel tree...How then does He occupy Himself? In the ministry of prayer!"

Some in our church family are on beds of affliction. Those who at one time were teachers and active workers now can not even leave their rooms. Can they have a ministry? Oh yes! Just like Jesus. As long as we're on the earth, we can engage in the ministry of prayer!

Challenge: No one is so far gone that we should cease to pray for them. If Jesus would pray for His murderers, surely we have reason to make intercession for even the most hardened sinner!

Jesus' forgiveness involved Intercession. Notice the second action.

II. Jesus' forgiveness involved Intervention.

"Father, FORGIVE them..."

Notice Jesus did not say, "I forgive them," but "Father, forgive them." It was obvious He had forgiven them. Charles Spurgeon commented, "He seems to lose sight of the fact that they were doing anything wrong to Himself. It is the wrong that they were doing to the Father that is on His mind, the insult which they are paying to the Father, in the person of the Son (15)."

When Jesus prayed that prayer, He was intervening for sinners. He was asking the Father for 3 things.

A. He asked for Permission.

The same word translated "forgive" is translated in Mt 19:14 as "suffer." "Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me." The Schofield uses the word "permit." What Jesus was saying was, "Don't interfere with the children. Let them come."

When Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them," there's a sense in which He was asking the Father for permission. "Father, permit them. Don't interfere now. Allow the crucifixion to continue."

I want to talk to the dads for a moment. Men, if you found out that some thug was about to injure your child, what would you do? You'd intervene as fast as you could. You'd stop that injustice, wouldn't you?!

Yet Jesus spoke to His Father, and said, "Permit it to be so. Don't interfere."

B. He asked for Protection.

"Father, forgive them."

If Jesus had not prayed this prayer, the wrath of God would have scorched those who dared to touch God's anointed. God who is just would have been justified in obliterating the entire world for insulting and executing the very Son of God.

How thankful we can be that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them." He asked for protection, not for Himself, but for those executing Him. "Father, don't judge them now. They don't know what they're doing. Delay your hand of judgment. That will come later."

He asked for permission, for protection, and...

C. He asked for Pardon.

"Father, forgive them."

Why did Jesus ask the Father to forgive? Up until this point in His ministry, Jesus Himself forgave. To the man sick with palsy, He said, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee (Mt 9:2)." To the woman who washed His feet with her tears, He said, "Thy sins are forgiven (Lk 7:48)." Why now does He ask the Father to forgive?

Because God alone can forgive. You say, "Do you mean that Christ was not God?" Certainly not. Truly He was fully God. But He was also fully man. Arthur Pink is right when he says, "When the Lord Jesus cried 'Father forgive them' He was on the Cross, and there He might not exercise His divine prerogatives...He had said, 'The Son of man hath power ON EARTH to forgive sins' (Mt 9:6). But He was no longer on earth! He had been lifted up FROM THE EARTH (Jn 12:32).!" (12-13)

There on the cross, Jesus asked for our pardon. Friends, because of that prayer, we are here today!

Jesus' forgiveness involved Intercession and Intervention. But a question remains. Why did Jesus ask His

Father to spare them? We come to the third action.

III. Jesus' forgiveness involved an Indictment.

Think about the phrase-- "For they know not what they do." What does that mean? Did ignorance excuse their behavior? Was Jesus saying, "Father, let's just forget what this sinful world has done to Me. It's no big deal."?

Of what were they ignorant? Certainly they weren't ignorant of the fact that the man they were crucifying was a good man. Pilate testified to his innocence (23:14). And no doubt the leaders were well aware of what they were doing when they cried out, "Crucify Him!" And surely, the mob knew it was no game when they insisted on His death. They knew. They all knew.

What then did they not know? They didn't know WHO it was they were crucifying. They knew not they were crucifying the Lord of glory. John wrote in 1:10-11, "He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." Paul wrote of this ignorance in I Cor 2:8, "Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

What's really tragic is this--They OUGHT to have known. There was no excuse for not knowing. They had the OT prophecies. They saw Jesus' works. They heard His words. They should have known Who He was. But they didn't.

And in their behalf, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not..."

Key: Jesus' forgiveness involved an indictment. Here it is.

When Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them," He was not asking His Father to overlook the sin. A holy God can't overlook sin. The penalty must be paid.

The unspoken implication of what Jesus said was this--"Father, forgive them, and condemn Me instead."

You see, there on the cross, Jesus took our debt. He took our sins upon Himself. What He said to the Father was, "Yes, they're wrong. But charge their wrong to My account. I'll pay their debt to the last penny." (Jones, 16)

There was a slave once who robbed his master, and fled town. He met a man who was in prison. The prisoner was a Christian. They talked. Eventually, the prisoner led the slave to faith in Christ. Do you know what he did next? He told the prisoner he had to go back home to his master. But he didn't send him empty-handed. He put in his pocket a letter to the Master. You know who wrote that letter, don't you? It was Paul. Here's what Paul wrote to Philemon in behalf of Onesimus--Philemon 8 "If he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account."

That's what Jesus said too. Put their sin on My account.

Jesus' forgiveness involved an indictment. His own. He took our sin, our judgment, our hell. Though innocent Himself, Jesus went to death row for us.

Christians are not a perfect people. But we are a forgiven people! Do you know why? Because of what happened on the cross. Jesus forgave us! He interceded for us. He intervened for us. He was indicted for us. At the cross.

Was Jesus' prayer answered? Yes. God did not strike down those at the foot of the cross. Just the opposite.

A couple of months later, many of the same people who were at the cross gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. They listened this time. Not to Jesus, but to Peter. And 3,000 were converted.

What did Peter tell them? We get an idea by reading what he said in his second sermon recorded in Act 3:14-17. V 17 "And now brethren, I know that through IGNORANCE you did it..."

Thousands were saved. Luke tells us even some Jewish priests were saved. Why were they saved? Because Peter preached a great sermon? No. Because the Savior prayed for them.

Friend, did you realize the Savior prayed for you? Christ prayed for you and me long before we ever believed in Him (check out Jn 17:20).

On that day, the crowd cried out, "We will not have this man to rule over us!" And Jesus forgave them. They didn't know what they were doing.

Do you know what is a worse tragedy? Some of you this morning are slighting the Son of God. And you KNOW what you are doing. You know Who He is. You know you ought to crown Him Lord of your life. Yet you refuse.

There are only two options. Either you receive Christ, or you reject Christ. Which have you done?