

Series: “*The Puzzle of the Cross: Learning from Jesus’ Seven Sayings*”

Main Idea: In Luke 23:34, we hear the first saying of Jesus from the cross, “Father, forgive them.” From these words, we learn something important about the forgiveness of Jesus, that it involves three actions.

The Context: What happened to Jesus?

1. Jesus experienced the violation of His rights.
 2. Jesus experienced the violation of His reputation.
- I. Jesus’ forgiveness involves intercession.
“FATHER, forgive them...”
 - A. This is a prayer.
 - B. This is a prayer for sinners.
 - II. Jesus’ forgiveness involves intervention.
“Father, FORGIVE them...”
 - A. He asked for permission.
 - B. He asked for protection.
 - C. He asked for pardon.
 - III. Jesus’ forgiveness involves an indictment.
“Father, forgive them, for they KNOW NOT what they do.”
 - A. They didn’t know who He was.
 - B. They didn’t know how guilty they were.
 - C. They didn’t know that He was choosing to pay their debt.

Solving the Puzzle of the Cross: Ponder two implications...

1. Jesus’ prayer was answered.
2. Jesus’ prayer is still being answered.

The Seven Sayings of Jesus from the Cross:

Jesus’ first words: Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).”

Jesus’ second words: “Today you will be with Me in paradise (Luke 23:43).”

Jesus’ third words: “Dear woman, here is your son... Here is your mother,” (John 19:26-27).”

Jesus’ fourth words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Matt. 27:46).”

Jesus’ fifth words: “I am thirsty (John 19:28).”

Jesus’ sixth words: “It is finished (John 19:30).”

Jesus’ seventh words: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46).”

Video: “The Puzzle of the Cross”

Today is Palm Sunday, and this week is Passion week. What a significant time for us to remember what our Savior endured to rescue sinners like us. At the end of this service, we’ll remember by participating together in communion. To help us prepare, we’ll place ourselves in and under His precious Word by going to the scene of the cross.

The message of the church is the message of the cross. We proclaim the cross of Jesus Christ as the message of hope to a world in need of hope. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God.”

We remember the cross. We preach the cross. But why? What happened on the cross? Yes, Jesus gave His life on the cross. But go deeper. What really happened on the cross? What made His death different from the death of other great men? What is it

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message has been adapted from a sermon preached at WBC as part of a 1994 series on “The Seven Sayings of Jesus from the Cross.”

that makes the cross so significant for us, 2000 years after the fact? What happened on the cross?

So many don't know. It's a puzzle to them, and we want to help solve that puzzle, by giving "the cross puzzle" to our neighbors and friends on Good Friday, and by a launching a new series today.

Jesus Himself, as it were, solved the puzzle. He did it with words, seven sayings on the cross, as recorded in the four gospels.

For the next seven weeks, the Lord willing, we want to meditate on the words Jesus spoke from the cross. Even as He died, He was teaching, explaining, clarifying, giving hope. His seven announcements reveal for us seven wonderful benefits that He secured for us.

This is my prayer, to fill this community with the knowledge of what Jesus Himself said from the cross about the cross, that He might receive the worship He deserves. And may that worship begin with us.

This morning, we want to focus on the first of Jesus' seven sayings. It's found in Luke 23. Please journey with me to the cross as I read the familiar account.

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:26-34

The Context: What happened to Jesus?

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. Most of you know the story. You know what happened, but let me remind you that He has just experienced two horrendous violations.

1. *Jesus experienced 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 Him, declaring, "I have found no fault in this man!" (23:14, AV). 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. There was a second violation.

2. *Jesus experienced the violation of His reputation.* Look again at the immediate context. Verse 32 reveals that He was killed alongside two what? Malefactors, says the AV. Hardened "criminals" says the ESV and NIV. Literally, "an evil worker" (*kakourgos*).

Tragic, yes, but in another sense, just what we would expect having read the life of Jesus in Luke's gospel. Throughout His life He has associated with sinners (see Luke 15:1). And now, He who associated with sinners in His life does the same in His death. 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? Does He cry out, "It's not fair! I'm innocent!" Does He call for the angels who have worshipped Him in heaven to come and rescue Him from these wicked oppressors? No.

Listen to His first words. Verse 34, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (ESV, AV).” In the NIV, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

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. Jesus Himself declared in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” How vividly do we see the love of Christ in these first words He uttered from the cross!

But what do these words really mean? We've heard them before. Yet what is Jesus really saying? He's obviously connecting His cross-work and forgiveness. But how? What's the connection?

To answer that question, we need to slow...it...down...and ponder these words very carefully. And when we do, we're going to learn something very important about the forgiveness of Jesus, that it involves three actions.

I. Jesus' forgiveness involves 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, and certainly not this kind of 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.² What's the first thing Jesus did on the cross? He prayed. His thoughts turned upward. His gaze fixed upon His Father. Yes...

A. This is a prayer. Notice that verse 34 begins with a connector, the little word “and” in the ESV, or “then” in the AV. “Then Jesus said, Father...” When man had done his worst, Jesus prayed.³

And notice, He did not pray for Himself. For whom did He pray? ““Father, forgive 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. Yes...

B. This is a prayer for sinners. Which sinners? He doesn't specify. He obviously prays for the Gentile soldiers that just drove the spikes into His hands and feet. But they weren't alone in their guilt, were they? No. He also prays for the jealous, spiteful Jewish leaders whose hands were bloody with guilt. And for spineless Pilate, who instead of doing what was right, did what was expedient.

And yet, were they the only ones for whom Jesus prayed that day? Were they the only ones who were guilty? No. He prays for all who put Him on the cross. And who does that include?

Oh dear friends, He had US in mind. It was for our sins that He went to the tree. Our sins put Him there. This is why He has come, to seek and to save the lost. Listen to those words again, “Father, forgive them.” His forgiveness involves *intercession*, prayer, prayer for sinners.

² Hobbs, 9

³ Pink, 19

There's something important about the verb Luke records in verse 34. "And Jesus SAID." It's an imperfect tense. A more accurate translation would be, "And Jesus kept saying." Listen to the words of Russell Jones 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.⁴

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

Arthur Pink observed, "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!"⁵

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, and specifically, prayer that results in the forgiveness of sinners!

Brothers and sisters, 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. But there's more.

II. Jesus' forgiveness involves intervention.

"Father, FORGIVE them..."

Notice Jesus did not say, "I forgive them," but rather, "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."⁶

When Jesus prays this prayer, He is intervening for sinners. He is asking the Father for three outcomes, as it were.

A. He asked for permission. The same word translated "forgive" is translated in Matthew 19:14 as "suffer" (in the AV). "Suffer the 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 prays from the cross, "Father forgive them," there's a sense in which He is asking the Father for permission. "Father, permit them. Don't interfere now. Allow the crucifixion to continue."

⁴ Russell Jones, pp. 13-14.

⁵ Arthur Pink, p. 9.

⁶ Spurgeon, p. 15.

I want to talk to you dads for a moment. Men, if you found out that some thug was about to injure your child, what would you do? There's no question. You'd intervene as fast as you could. You'd stop that injustice, wouldn't you?!

Yet Jesus, in essence, speaks to His Father, saying, "Permit it to be so. Don't interfere. Don't stop this from happening."

B. He asked for protection. Hear Him again. "Father, forgive them." If Jesus had not prayed this prayer, the wrath of God could have justly 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 His dear and precious Son.

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 third outcome.

C. He asked for pardon. Again, from the Father. "*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, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven (Matthew 9:2)." To the woman who washed His feet with her tears, He said, "Your sins are forgiven (Luke 7:48)." Why now does He ask the Father to forgive?

The answer? Because God alone can forgive.

You say, "Do you mean that Christ was not God?"

Indeed, He was, and is. Fully God. But also fully man. And He always works in submission to His Father, whose work He had come to do.

And there's a humbling mystery in this. Arthur Pink contemplates this Trinitarian mystery 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).!"⁷

While it's not clear *why* Jesus asked the Father to forgive, the fact that He did is absolutely clear. There on the cross, Jesus asked for pardon, forgiveness for sinners, the sinners at the cross, and the sinners who caused the cross.

Friends, it's because of this prayer that planet earth wasn't destroyed for the cosmic crime committed on that Good Friday. It's also because of this prayer that we are here today, able to approach our Holy God, indeed, to become sons and daughters in His family. If we experience that for which His Son prayed on the cross.

For forgiveness. This is what we need, beloved. This is why Jesus went to the cross. It's because sinners need forgiveness, and forgiveness is what He offers sinners because of His death on the cross.

But there's more. Jesus' forgiveness involved intercession ("FATHER forgive them") and intervention ("Father, FORGIVE THEM"). And thirdly...

III. Jesus' forgiveness involves an indictment.

"Father, forgive them, for they KNOW NOT what they do."

Why did Jesus ask His Father to spare them? What reason does He give? Think carefully about the phrase, "For they know not what they do." What does that mean?

⁷ Arthur Pink, pp.12-13.

Is Jesus saying that ignorance excuses wicked behavior? Every teenager has tried that trick at some point. “What? I didn’t know that was wrong. I thought this was an open book test!”

So is Jesus saying, “Father, let's just forget what this sinful world has done to Me. Our love is big enough to overlook this. It's not that big of a deal.”? No, that’s not what He’s saying, and it’s certainly not the case. God Himself made it clear that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3:23), and that “the soul that sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20). Indeed, sin must be punished.

I want you to think about something. Jesus didn’t have to pray these words *outloud*, but He did. Why? He wants those responsible for His death to recognize their ignorance of something, for that recognition is vital to their experience of forgiveness.

So, 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, that we must know if we’re to experience the forgiveness of God? Three realities.

A. They didn’t know who He was. 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 (AV).” Paul spoke of this ignorance in 1 Corinthians 2:8, “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

Of course, what's really tragic is that they OUGHT to have known. There was no excuse for not knowing. They had the Old Testament prophecies. They saw Jesus' works. They heard His words. They should have known Who He was. But they didn't.

They simply didn’t know who He was. They thought He was a guilty criminal, worthy of death. There’s a second reality they didn’t know.

B. They didn’t know how guilty they were. He wasn’t guilty. They were. And they didn’t even know it. They were actually executing an innocent, righteous man. But it’s worse than that. They were executing God Himself who had come to earth in human form. *Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see*, as they Christmas carol rightly says.

But they didn’t know. They willfully refused to know, who He was, and how guilty they were. This is the heinous nature of sin, their sin, and our sin too.

“I’m a good person. Surely, I’ll go to heaven when I die.” Have you ever thought those words, or said them? They’re not true, my friend, no matter how many times we’ve said it, or others have said them about us.

Oh, my friend, we have so much in common with those soldiers at the cross. They didn’t know who He was and how guilty they were. And we enter this world in the same condition. And consider a third reality.

C. They didn’t know that He was choosing to pay their debt. Dear friend, Jesus did not die for good people. Good people don’t need forgiveness, but sinners do. And it’s in behalf of sinners that Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus' forgiveness involves an indictment, and here it is. When Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them,” He was not asking His Father to overlook the sin being committed. 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 was choosing to pay the debt of the guilty parties. He willfully took their place. 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.”⁸

It's significant that His *sixth* saying from the cross was a business term. In the Greek, *tetelistai*. Meaning, “It is finished. The debt is paid in full.”

There was once a slave who robbed his master, and fled town. Hundreds of miles away he met another man who was in prison, and that man was a Christian. They talked. Eventually, the prisoner told the runaway slave about the Savior who died for sinners, and the Spirit of God opened up his eyes. He came to know what he had not known, who the Savior was, how guilty he was, and how the Savior had chosen to pay his debt. And he repented, and placed his faith in Christ.

And then he did what forgiven sinners do. He gave evidence that he'd been forgiven. How? He stopped running, went back home, and made things right with those he had wronged. But he didn't go home emptyhanded. The man who led him to Christ wrote a letter to his master, and gave it to him to deliver. You know who wrote that letter, don't you? It was the apostle Paul, and here's what Paul had to say to Philemon (the master) in behalf of Onesimus (his runaway slave).

“If he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account.” That's Philemon 8. And that's precisely what Jesus says in His first saying on the cross. Put their sin on My account.

Jesus' forgiveness involves an indictment, His own indictment. He is choosing to take the sinner's punishment, judgment, and eternal hell. He is dying as a sacrificial lamb, a sin-bearer, a substitute. He, the Perfect One, is dying in behalf of the sinner.

“Which sinner?” you ask.

And the answer? Any lost sinner who will ask! “Ask, and it will be given to you,” said Jesus in His invitation at the end of His sermon on the mount in Matthew 7:7.

You say, “But you don't know what I've done. My sin is great. How could He ever forgive me?”

My friend, I commend you for acknowledging how great your sin is, but I must correct your faulty thinking regarding the limitation of His mercy. I have good news for you. Jesus Himself answers your question in His second saying from the cross.

So I hope you come back next week! But you don't need to wait. Hear His Words right now. “This day you will be with me in paradise.”

To whom did Jesus give that promise? Who did He say would be with Him in paradise that very day? A good man? No. He said those words to the criminal who was nailed to the cross right next to Him.

My friend, Christians are not perfect people. We are forgiven people! And it's all because of what our Savior endured for us on the cross. He interceded for us. He intervened for us. He was indicted for us. Where? On the cross.

Was Jesus' prayer answered? Yes. God did not strike down those at the foot of the cross. He allowed His Son to stay on that cross for six eternal hours, and thereby pay the price of redemption. Then He died. And three days later, He raised His Son's body from the dead, proving that His payment was sufficient to secure the pardon of any sinner who would humbly believe in Him.

⁸ Jones, 16

Solving the Puzzle of the Cross: Ponder two implications...

1. *Jesus' prayer was answered.* Amazingly answered! Not many weeks after Jesus said, "Father, forgive them," many of the same people who were at the scene of the cross gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. They listened this time. Not to Jesus, but to His servant, Peter. And 3,000 Jews 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, "But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses...And now, brothers, *I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.*"

Thousands were saved. Luke tells us even some Jewish priests were saved. Why were they saved? Because Peter preached a great sermon? No. They were saved because their Savior prayed for them, and His prayers are always answered.

Then, and now. Yes...

2. *Jesus' prayer is still being answered.* The Father is still forgiving those for whom Jesus prayed.

*Upon the cross of Jesus
mine eye at times can see
the very dying form of One
who suffered there for me:
and from my stricken heart with tears
two wonders I confess,
the wonders of redeeming love
and my unworthiness.*

Have you ever confessed these two wonders, my friend, the wonder of redeeming love, and your unworthiness? If you have, you're an answer to Jesus' prayer.

Closing Song: #183 "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" (all three verses)

Communion

Brothers and sisters, our Savior prayed for us long before we ever believed in Him. This is such a comforting reality. He prayed for us. We've just considered one of these prayers this morning, but as we come to the table, let's consider another pray, one He offered to His Father the night before He was crucified. Listen to what He prayed in John 17:24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world."

What did Jesus say about us in this prayer? He said that we are gift to Him from His Father. He told His Father that He desires for us to be with Him, and He has desired that from before the creation of the world. He wants us to see His glory. That's why He died for us, and defeated death for us, because we are His, and He loves us.

And He's given us a special way to remember Him, and what He did to obtain our pardon. If you know Christ as your Savior, this table is for you. Let's do this in remembrance of Him.

Gift to the congregation: "The Cross Puzzle"