

Father, Forgive Them • Luke 23:34

There is often a very special significance to a man's dying words. So much so that the last words that a person speaks prior to death can become a profound basis for interpretation for all of that person's life. Somehow the last words are seen to have a special power, a special meaning, a special significance. In fact, at times, in our courts of law, they are assumed to have a power and significance which is even greater than something that might have otherwise been said or even signed.

But of all the dying words of all of humankind, none has greater significance, greater profundity, greater power, than those of Jesus Christ. His dying words stand apart from all other dying words that can be quoted in anyone's biography. And that, of course, is because his death stands apart from all other deaths that are recorded in history or in anyone's biography. He was and is unique. And so his death was unique. He is the God Man. It's a mystery that we try to describe and grapple with, but really we never quite come to terms with because it is so great, so infinite, so mysterious to us.

There were three hours that passed between the first pound of the nail by the Roman soldier into Jesus' flesh and the last breath that he breathed before he died. It was during those awful hours that the Son of God spoke seven times. Actually, more often than not, they were sentences or at least phrases that he spoke. But they have been popularly referred to as words: the seven last words of the cross.

Our attention here focuses on the first of those words and so I invite you to turn in your Bibles to the 23rd chapter of Luke's gospel as we focus on Luke 23:34. But before we step into this holy story and hear the first of these holy words, let me suggest that we prepare our hearts and our minds with a brief moment of prayer.

Lord Jesus, as you spoke those startling, stunning words from the cross centuries ago, so speak now to our hearts and to our lives. Amen.

In what was to become one of his most famous speeches, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in 1940, addressed the House of Commons in Great Britain, and in that speech he called upon the people of Britain to stand firm against the insanity of Hitler's forces that were about to be thrust upon Britain. Churchill said, having described all of Hitler's advancing conquests, "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that if the British empire and its commonwealth lasts for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour."

Let me tell you that Jesus looked good when he fed the thousands. Jesus performed marvelously when he made the blind to see and the lame to walk. Jesus was scintillating in his teaching of God's truths. But of all the things Jesus said, all the places that Jesus went, and all the things Jesus did, he most brilliantly shined there hanging on the cross as he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." That was Jesus' finest hour. In that hour, in that crisis, Jesus turned to God.

Now, it is not that way with everyone. Some people acknowledge God when the seas are smooth. Then they are quick to speak his name and they are quick to acknowledge his presence. But as soon as the storm starts stirring up, there are those who have the tendency to turn their backs on God and blame him for the winds that have come and to indite him for the circumstances in their lives.

It was not that way with Jesus. But that is not to underestimate the crisis because, indeed, the crisis of the cross was great.

Sometimes it seems to me, as a pastor and as a Christian, and perhaps to you as well, that knowing that he is God tends to make us minimize what the cross was all about. We try to imagine ourselves being crucified, and we immediately impose a barrier there that says, "Yes, but we are different; we are not God. We seem to assume that what Jesus experienced on the cross was less difficult and less painful or that he was better equipped to handle it than we would be. But actually, it ought to be interpreted just the other

way. Because he was God, the anguish was greater and not less. He knew what was coming.

Have you ever known what was going to come because you'd already been through that experience before? Sometimes those of you who are trained in the medical profession make the worst

of patients in the hospital because you know the medical procedure all too well. You know the pain and the anguish you've seen on other faces and the problems that they have faced.

Jesus knew full well what he was facing on Calvary's cross; so much so, that a few hours before his crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane he actually prayed and said, "Father, if there is a way, let's call this thing off. If there is a way, could there be a cancellation of the cross?" Oft times life's horrors are even worse when we know what to expect, and even

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though Jesus knew full well that this was his purpose and his mission in life, he prayed that he might be delivered from it.

Of course, there was great physical pain and anguish, but much to my surprise at least, as I have re-read the passion accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke and John, I find that there is relatively little, almost nothing, said about the physical pain of crucifixion. It simply says, "...and he was crucified." The reason for that being that the Bible wants to make it most clear that the crisis of the cross was primarily a spiritual crisis and not primarily a physical one. That the horror of it was that there, in that moment in time and history, Jesus Christ the Son of God was made to be sin for us. That was the crisis, and the essence of Calvary was bearing human sin and divine wrath.

We must never underestimate that the crisis of the cross was great, but Jesus' relationship to the Father was greater. And although the magnitude of the crisis of the cross was greater than we can describe, the relationship that he had with God the Father was even greater still. So that the first word that Jesus spoke amidst his crucifixion crisis was "Father." In the worst of crises he turned to the One he knew could be trusted. Even when everyone else who knew him had forsaken him and denied him and abandoned him, he turned to the One he knew would stick with him. He turned to the One who was absolutely dependable, no matter how great the crisis, no matter how huge the problem. Jesus knew that God the Father loved him and would ultimately do right by him, no matter what.

For us, we tend to think God's closest when things go particularly well. It is not in the crisis of a difficult prognosis or some horrible news that comes our way that we think of God as being closest of all to us. We tend to assume that God is there and he is superintending the circumstances only when the circumstances are favorable. But Jesus here demonstrated that the Father can love just as much and be just as close, that his loyalty and commitment is not diminished, even when there is suffering and even when there is death.

Now, I don't know to whom you turn when the crisis gets great. I know that for some people, when things really flare up, they turn away from God, while other people, when things really become difficult, they turn to God. And the choosing of the direction to which we turn is, of course, our own independent doing. It is as different as the people who do the choosing. However, crises and suffering and even death are not adequate causes to turn away from God. Quite the contrary. When the crisis is fiercest of all is precisely the time when we should follow the example of Jesus and pray as he prayed. It is then that the first word that we utter in the midst of crisis is "Father." In crisis Jesus turned to God.

Amidst need, and I find this the most amazing of

all, amidst need his thoughts were not of himself, but of others. Although his own needs were great, and indeed they were, here he prayed for the needs of others. Don't you find that strange? Actually, I find it stunning. Here they were, nailing his hands; they had beaten his back; they had pressed thorns into his brow. And all through this, his thoughts were not on the physical pain, his thoughts were not on the humiliation he had experienced. Instead, he was thinking about the people who had done it to him. He was thinking about the soldier who had whipped him. He was concerned about the soldier who had nailed him to the cross. He was worried about the welfare of the people who were standing around that little mound that kind of looked like a skull and were throwing out jeers. They were the same ones that, just a little time earlier, back on the other side of the city gate, had shouted, "Crucify him!" His own needs were so overwhelming and yet he was concerned about them.

I'd like to be like that. I'd like to be that kind of a person. I would like to be the kind of guy that, when things are piling on top of me, when my schedule is crumbling, when my feelings are hurt because of something that someone has said, when I'm terribly sick, I would like to be the kind of guy that then, amidst all of my great needs, am not thinking of myself, but I'm thinking of others – perhaps of the people who have afflicted me, who have inflicted the wounds which I'm suffering. I'd like to be like that. But I find that terribly hard to do. I find that my natural and normal tendency is to become preoccupied with my own problems and my own needs. I find that I have to force myself to think beyond myself to my family, to my friends, to my church, to my nation, to people around me. When my own problems are mounting up, I find it extremely difficult to be concerned about others, particularly about people whom I might classify as my enemies.

How does someone do that? In the face of their own need, think about others? But Jesus did it. He did it. Although his own needs were infinitely high, he was concerned about others and he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

You know their actions were unjust, those accusers of his, those 'crucifiers.' And yet even though they were unjust, Jesus recognized the best side of it as far as they were concerned. He acknowledged that he recognized their ignorance.

We're to keep in mind, of course, that whenever we read the Gospel accounts, that Jesus was, indeed, innocent. He had not committed any crimes, he was not guilty of any sins, and basically the people knew it. Pilate knew it; in fact, Pilate admitted it. The Sanhedrin knew it. They knew their laws well. They knew all the procedures that had been established by written law and by tradition. They knew they were having their trials at an illegal time by an illegal procedure. They

knew, they knew, they knew. They knew Jesus was innocent. But they indited him nonetheless. The people who were out on the street on that Passover eve were people who were shouting, "Crucify him," but they knew that he didn't warrant crucifixion. They couldn't even begin to suggest that Jesus was guilty of any kind of a capital crime. They knew. They knew he was innocent.

If ever there was a victim who was unjustly accused and unjustly condemned, then Jesus was he. If there was ever a man who legitimately could turn to his executioners and say, "You're doing the wrong thing; stop it!" it was Jesus.

We all, at some time or another, have been wrongly accused of doing something. Maybe we have gotten into trouble in school or on the job or with a traffic ticket. There have been times then we have then responded by saying, "You know, you just have no right to do that to me." And hardly do we seek to see things from the perspective of those who are unjustly accusing us.

But the Savior saw the bigger picture. He saw them as needy men and women who indited him, who accused him, who called for his crucifixion, who actually executed him. And so he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Now, Jesus was not so naive as to say that they were completely ignorant of their practice of condemning and executing an innocent man.

We have a tradition in our Western system of jurisprudence where we say ignorance of the law is no excuse. So for example, you may be driving along and the speed limit drops from 55 miles per hour to 15 miles per hour. Perhaps the sign was covered by snow, but you receive a traffic ticket. You go before a magistrate and you say, "I didn't know that the speed limit was 15 miles per hour." He will tell you that legally that is not an adequate excuse. Just because you don't know something doesn't mean that you are not guilty of the crime, or that you are excused from the punishment of that crime.

Jesus was not here saying that they were completely ignorant and innocent of condemning a man who should not have been condemned. What he was saying when he prayed to God the Father, "...they do not know what they are doing," was simply that they did not have even an inkling of the magnitude of what they were doing. They did not realize that here was God whom they were crucifying. This was no ordinary criminal and this was just not another crucifixion on another day. This was God and it was their sins and our sins which had precipitated the crucifixion that there was taking place.

Jesus saw their ignorance of the eternal universal magnitude of their sin and so he prayed and said, "Father, although they may be guilty of condemning and executing an innocent man, they are ignorant of how great a crime they are perpetrating."

There he was on the cross, his own needs great, and yet praying for the needs of others. There he was on the cross, giving them the benefit of the doubt and praying that they be forgiven of their ignorance. There he was on the cross, his own actions severely limited, and yet doing what he could.

When you reflect on the three years of Jesus' public ministry, you'll recall that he was a leader who went to his people and did not just expect his people to come to him. He would go where they were. He traveled all

over the Holy Land. He was on the Sea of Galilee to the north; he went all the way down to Jerusalem in the south; he went back and forth to Judea and Samaria, all different places. He went to them. Now he was being crucified and his feet were

nailed to the cross so he couldn't go to them as he once went to them.

During his ministry, as he traveled about, he was repeatedly moved with compassion for the needs of people, and so he used his hands as the great physician to heal them. He would touch; he would rub; he would point; he would do what he could, and what he could was to heal. But no longer could he do that because his hands were nailed to that crossbar and so they were immobile, incapable of reaching out and healing.

And as he traveled about and as he healed, he taught. He taught at the Mount of Beatitudes and he taught in the Temple Square in Jerusalem. He taught walking back and forth on that little pathway between Jerusalem and Bethany. He gave to them the words of God, the words of life.

But when a man is being crucified, breath is, indeed, precious. When a man is being crucified there are only a few words he can speak. They must be measured and they must be counted. His breath must be used with care.

Jesus could not go to them; he could not reach out and touch them and heal them; he could not teach them. But there was one thing he could do - he could pray. And so he did what he could.

I find it interesting as I study the seven last words of the cross to find that the first was a prayer, the last was a prayer and the middle was a prayer. The first, fourth, and seventh of the seven last words of the cross are all prayers.

You know, my friend, I don't know what you think

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of Jesus Christ - I don't even know if you do think about Jesus Christ, but I know that he thinks about you. And I know, on the authority of the Bible, that this same Jesus who prayed for those who were crucifying him has since not only died but has come back to life. And not only has he come back to life, but he has ascended to heaven, and the Bible says that he is now in heaven at the right hand of God the Father and there in heaven his primary occupation is prayer. Right now he is doing what he did on the cross. He is praying for you, for me. He is doing what he can. He is praying for us. Fantastic.

This Jesus, although his own needs were great, was thinking and acting and praying for others. But what impresses me the most about the words here recorded from Jesus lips as he was being crucified is that, under all of this pressure of crucifixion, it was here that Jesus practiced what he preached. The preaching of forgiveness was a mark of Jesus' ministry.

You'll recall from your own reading of the Bible that Calvary was not the only hill upon which Jesus ministered. He had also been on a place up north in Palestine called the Mount of Beatitudes, and it was there, with the somewhat familiar words of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:43 and 44, that Jesus preached. Imagine listening to a sermon by Jesus himself!

He preached and said to the crowd, "You have heard that it was said," [and he must have shouted out the words until he was hoarse as he spoke to thousands of people without a public address system] " 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

They must have done a double take. Was this carpenter turned itinerant preacher from Nazareth really saying what I thought he said? Yes, I've heard that quote - it is a familiar saying here in Palestine. "Love your neighbor; hate your enemy." And if it is not a quotation in other cultures, it is certainly a practice in other cultures. If you're going to love anybody, you love the people you like. If you're going to hate, hate your enemies, the people you don't like.

But now Jesus is saying, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." That is powerful preaching. It is easy to love those that are lovable. It is easy to love those that are in your family. It is easy to love those who are your best friends, those have all kinds of common ground with you, but how difficult it is to love those who are your enemies, those who hate you, those who do rotten things to you, those who hurt you and rip you off and do you in. That was powerful preaching.

Now, I, too, am a preacher. Sunday after Sunday I stand in the pulpit and say the things that I seek to teach from the word of God. It is quite an experience, you know, preaching - at the same time it is an indescrib-

able delight and an awesome difficulty. Sunday after Sunday I stand in the pulpit and talk about salvation and forgiveness. I talk about discipline and godliness and holiness and love and commitment. But let me tell you, it is a hard thing to do.

The difficulty of preaching is dwarfed by the difficulty of practicing it. It is one thing to stand in the pulpit before many people and say what you're supposed to say, but it is quite another thing to go home and live that way. It is quite another thing to live out godliness and commitment and forgiveness in the office on the ordinary days of the week or in the shopping center or driving a car or relating to people who might irritate me or people whom I offend and those who naturally lash back. It is easy to get caught in the drama of defeat and to preach one thing and to practice quite another. So take it from a preacher who I think understands that it is simply amazing that Jesus not only preached forgiveness, he practiced forgiveness.

There is a significant truth that is tied here in Luke 23:34 and one that I think has been lost in most of our English translations of the Greek text. The verse reads like this: "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"

The main verb in this sentence is 'said'. That main verb is what the Greeks called an imperfect tense. That doesn't mean that it was less than good or less than perfect, but the Greeks, unlike English speaking people, have different ways of speaking of things happening in past time. They have one tense where they would say, it was done once and that's it. So for example, if you walk over to the door and you close the door and that is the only time you ever close that door, the Greeks use what was called an aorist tense. It was closed and it stayed closed, that was it. You never did it before, and you never did it after. Or at least that was a primary action that wasn't repeated in the context of what is being described.

But if you got up and went over and closed the door and then somebody out in the hall opened the door and then you went over and closed the door and then somebody opened the door and then you went over and started to close the door, and if I were describing that in Greek, I would use an imperfect tense because you repeatedly closed that door. Both taking place in past time, one being a point in time, the other being a repeated process in time.

Now, that Greek lesson is to say that here in Luke 23:34 the main verb, 'said', is an imperfect tense indicating that Jesus didn't just say it once, but he said it repeatedly. Over and over again. Technically, I guess you'd then have to say there were more than seven last words of the cross, that Jesus spoke more than seven times, because the first of the seven last words was oft times repeated. A most literal translation of this would be something like this; "Jesus kept on saying, 'Father,

forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”

I said before that this was a stunning prayer, but it is more stunning if it is a repeated prayer. See if you can picture what is going on here. They walk Jesus out of Jerusalem. He is so weak from the beating that he can't even carry the crossbar of the cross, so he stumbles and falls and they have to pick him up. Then they get someone else to carry the crossbar. They get him just outside the gate and on the hill and they strap the cross together and put him on the ground. Then they get some nails out and a mallet and they start to hammer those nails into his hands. And Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Then they move down his body to his feet, and they take nails and hammer them through his feet, and he says again, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

They take the cross and drop it into the rock-lined socket on the top of the hill and there is extra agony as it thumps in. He whispers it again, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Then the malefactors on either side of him, on the other crosses, start to curse and swear and to put him down and say the ugliest things they can with their precious breath. Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

There are passersby who are on their way to market or back home again after having been to the market, and they stand around at the foot of the cross and throw out their jeers and their ugly comments and their smart aleck reactions to what's happening. And Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

While all those others may have lacked sophistication, the priests who stood around the cross were sophisticated, indeed, and so there was a theological bent to all that they said. And every time they spoke, Jesus responded with, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

You see, it is one thing to stand on the rolling hills of Galilee and to preach it, but it is another thing, under the pressure of crucifixion, to practice forgiveness. Was Jesus prayer answered? Were they forgiven? Did God the Father forgive those who crucified Jesus that day? Some of the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke and some of the best of manuscripts, quite frankly, do not have Luke 23:34 in them. Scholars have deliberated down through the centuries wondering why this expression would have been left out by copyists in those early centuries.

I'll give you a guess. I think that the scholarly evidence is such with other manuscripts and supporting documents that Jesus actually said those words. I have no doubt about that at all. The evidence is good. But I think those copyists that left it out, although they were

Christians and although they were scholars and although they were committed to precisely copying what was there on the previous manuscript, found it absolutely incredible. That a man being crucified could pray and say these words even if he is the Son of God!

Okay, back to the question. Was Jesus prayer answered? Yes. Yes, God forgave them. Or better stated, God offered forgiveness which some accepted. Leading the pack right after the crucifixion was that Roman soldier whose story is told by Mark, who, after everything was finished, walked up to Jesus and looked him in the face and said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

And then there were others. There were others described right here in verse 48 who, after the crucifixion, were described saying, "When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away." It was the beginning of their acceptance of forgiveness.

But the climax came, actually just the beginning, of a multitude of millions who accepted that forgiveness, on Pentecost when, in one day, three thousand people said "yes" to God's "yes", for Jesus had prayed for them as well, "Father, forgive them...." They said "yes", and they believed.

There is the soldier, there are the crowds at Calvary, there are the three thousand at Pentecost, and then - and then - there is you. Actually, you know, it was your sins and my sins that necessitated that crucifixion. So then, we, too, were included in Jesus repeated prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Has that prayer been answered in your life? I believe that God has answered it and has offered to each one of us forgiveness for our sins that crucified Jesus Christ. The question is: have you said "yes" to the Father's "yes" to Jesus prayer? Have you been forgiven? I hope you have. But I can tell you that you have been forgiven only if you have accepted the forgiveness. If you have even an inkling of a doubt, let me suggest that right here, right now, you tell God that you accept the forgiveness through Jesus Christ on Calvary's cross.

Would you like to do that? Why don't you bow your head and pray something like this: "Father, it was for me that Jesus died. It was my sins that crucified him. I'd like to be forgiven, and so I accept Jesus Christ as my Savior. I accept the forgiveness for which he prayed. In Jesus' name. Amen."

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