

“Father Forgive Them”

Luke 23:26-56

Key Verse: 34a

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”

From the beginning God created people to be with him in unbroken fellowship. Adam and Eve literally walked, talked and worked side by side with God in Paradise. But when they ate the fruit in disobedience to God’s command, the immediate consequence was shame, then fear, and finally broken relationship with God and each other. However, when God looked at his lost children he was not full of anger but from that moment planned how he would rescue them and bring them back to himself. John 3:16 says, **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...”** When Jesus looks at his lost children, he weeps over them like a mother hen who longs to gather up her lost chicks (Lk 19:41, 13:34). However, like Adam and Eve, often we hide from God out of guilt and fear. Both believers and unbelievers alike think that God is mad at them or hates them and so we medicate by sinning which only drives us further away from him.

Today we learn about the cross of Jesus that had been God’s plan from the beginning to rescue his children and bring them back to him. We must realize that because of what Jesus did on the cross we have a new identity (2 Co 5:17). We are forgiven. What is more Christ forgave all people making it possible for anyone to be saved. God’s attitude toward the world is I forgive you, I love you. Since God has removed all the barriers let us come to him freely and accept his forgiveness poured out on all mankind.

First, Father Forgive Them (26-34a)

Verse 26 says, **“As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.”** This verse reveals how broken and exhausted Jesus was. He had been awake all night in anguished prayer and then arrested and beaten. From daybreak put on 3 separate trials. As part of Pilates’ political maneuvering, Jesus was “punished” which meant he was flogged nearly to death to the point that Isaiah 52:14 tells us that **“many...were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.”**

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Behind Jesus in this procession were many women. Always there are the women following Jesus. Where are the men? Where are his brave disciples? Running and hiding but the women were there. Verse 27 says, **“A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.”** It’s natural to cry over the injustice of what happened to Jesus. In the Catholic tradition you walk the way of the cross visiting fourteen stations of the cross and saying a prayer at each. You are supposed to then cry endlessly as you think about Jesus’ passion. However, we must think about why we are weeping. If it is because we feel sorry for Jesus then we are missing the point of the cross.

Verse 28 says, **“Jesus turned and said to them, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.’”** We should not feel sorry for Jesus. He had firmly decided to do the will of God and he was not the victim of anyone. Jesus decided to drink to the last drop the cup that the Father had given to him. With every step he was winning a great victory for the salvation of all people. Then why should we weep for ourselves instead of weeping for Jesus? **Firstly, the immediate meaning was a warning about the destruction of Jerusalem.** Jesus spoke specifically to the daughters of Jerusalem though women from Galilee followed him also (55). Luke 19:41-44 says, **“As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.’”** This would take place in 70AD during the horrible siege of Titus of Rome. Jesus had warned them time and again that killing the son of man would bring destruction upon them (Lk 20:9-16).

However there is a second warning that applies to all people. Because of our sins we all will face the terrible Judgment of God. Verse 30 is a quotation from Hosea 10:8 which was a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem because of their unfaithfulness. However, we find these words also in Revelation 6. When John saw the sixth seal opened, there was an earthquake that toppled the mountains, the sun turned black, the moon turned to blood, the stars fell from the sky and the leaders of the earth tried to hide in caves and holes in the ground. **“They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?’”** (Rev 6:16-17). Because of our sins, we are all destined to die and after that to face judgment (Heb 9:27). This

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judgment will be so terrible that sinners will wish that an entire mountain could cover them to hide from the Lord’s wrath. When we look upon the cross of Jesus we should weep, yes, but not for Jesus. Rather, we should weep for our sins and the sins of our children yes of our whole nation and our world that sent him to the cross and caused him to suffer. Because of our sin there will soon be a terrible Judgment that will come on the earth like nothing that we can imagine.

On March 24, 2004, twenty-one year old Dan R. Leach turned himself in to the police after watching “The Passion of the Christ” the movie which graphically portrayed Jesus’ last hours. It was originally thought that the death of nineteen year old Ashley Nicole Wilson was a suicide, but a repentant Dan Leach confessed that he had murdered her because she was carrying his baby, and he wanted to seek redemption.¹ Dozens of confessions followed from all around the world, from bank robbers to Neo-Nazi bombers to a team of 6 that robbed a convenience store just before seeing the movie. Police said they had never seen anything like it.² As we look on the cross of Jesus let us weep tears of repentance for our sin and the sin of our nation and especially for our children, that brings God’s judgment.

Let’s read verses 33-34a together. **“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”** Firstly, we learn from this prayer that Jesus loves us. We already considered last week, how the crucifixion of Jesus was one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in history, yet Jesus prayed for God to forgive those crucifying him. In the sermon on the plain Jesus had taught, **“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you”** (Luke 6:27-28). Jesus practiced his own teachings to the extreme. We can pretend to love our enemies outwardly but to pray for them to be blessed and not cursed is sincere love from the heart. Jesus genuinely loves all people.

Secondly Jesus sees sinners with mercy. The most perplexing words that Jesus said are **“...for they do not know what they are doing.”** Really, I’m pretty sure sinners know full well what they are doing, but Jesus says it is not the case. Luke really makes the point through his account of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion that Jesus was innocent and that everyone knew he was innocent and that they crucified him knowing full well he was innocent. How can he say that they did not know

¹ <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Passion-of-Christ-moves-man-to-confess-killing-1986042.php>

² <http://www.wnd.com/2004/03/23966/>

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what they were doing. We can say that they didn't really know the full *extent* of what they were doing killing the Son of God. But I believe that Jesus is making a broader statement about all of humanity whom he is asking God to forgive through the cross. **“Father forgive [all sinners] for they [are slaves to sin and don't really know what they are doing].”** In the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in disobedience to God's command, they didn't do it to rebel against God, break his heart and destroy God's world. They were simply deceived and believed that it would be fun to eat the fruit. Just as in the Garden, all mankind has been so deceived by Satan down through the ages. Sin promises great fun, and Satan has continually deceived people to believe that God is withholding from them all the best pleasures of life. We were all once like poor hungry Hansel and Gretel who were enticed into the delicious gingerbread house where they could enjoy all the pleasures of food. But they could not see that it was for the purpose of fattening them up to put them in the oven. So, all mankind is in slavery to Satan the prince of the air who leads the whole world astray (Eph 2:2, Rev 12:9). Honestly, we do not know what we are doing. Before I knew Christ, I had no idea I was sinning, I did what everyone did and since I was better than the worst sinners, in my mind I was a very good person—regardless of the fact that I was full of lust, hatred, revenge, lying, greed and self-centeredness. We are caught between great spiritual forces that we cannot imagine, like Job placed in a sick contest by Satan to destroy his integrity, so everyday Satan roams around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pe 5:8).

Thirdly, we learn that from the cross Jesus didn't only forgive those crucifying him but all people. Hebrews 9:26-28a says, **“But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.”** The word “all” here means ALL. Look to your left and to your right, out the window and through your Facebook friends ALL have been forgiven by Christ's one sacrifice. This means that every person in the world is already forgiven because of what Christ has done. It is perplexing that hanging in our church and most churches around the world is an instrument of extreme torture, brutality, and shame that we display prominently. But it is because every time we see the cross we are reminded that God forgives us and he loves us more than we can ever imagine.

Fourthly, we learn that we must therefore change our view of sinners. When I began school at NEIU some years ago, after the first week of school I felt prompted to begin inviting students to Bible study and I met Oscar. He was desperate for Bible study and wanted to meet every day. But he cried through the

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first three studies and finally he told me that his long-time girlfriend had broken up with him after he had gotten her pregnant and then convinced her to get an abortion. My mother had gotten pregnant at 16 and the boy also took her to the clinic to have me aborted but at the last minute she refused and couldn't go through with it and so he ran away leaving her alone to deal with it—I was that close to not being born. Growing up I hated men because I assumed they were all irresponsible like my father. So, I hated Oscar from that moment and prayed that night saying, “Lord, I will never study with this guy again! He deserves to be judged for what he has done! I can't believe you led me to him!” Yet, through much struggle that night, the Lord showed me that he had brought Oscar to Bible study and that meant that he had already forgiven him. And I was faced with a choice could I judge someone the Lord had already forgiven? I could not. In that moment of intense struggle, I felt miraculously, a supernatural love come into my heart and I went from hating him to loving him in that instant. It was one of the most profound experiences I ever had. From that time we studied for many years, Oscar was baptized and married a good Christian woman and last November had a beautiful baby boy Israel Abram. It was not because I was a particularly good Bible teacher, but because he knew that I loved him and that God had forgiven him so much. The same is true for every person that we meet. No matter how good or how wicked they are Jesus has already died for and forgiven every one. Then as Christ has already forgiven them we must do the same.

Fifthly, we must accept our new identity as forgiven. From time to time, we also condemn ourselves when we make a mistake, fall into sin that we thought we had mastered or fail in some way thinking we let God down. In these times, we can distance ourselves from God believing that he is mad at us, that because of our sinning, he doesn't love us and that we are no longer saved. However, we also must hear Jesus' words, “Father, forgive Tim...forgive Helen...forgive David.” In Jesus we have a new identity, we are forgiven. God's attitude toward the world is not anger but love and forgiveness or he would not have sent his son. Hebrews 8:12 says, **“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”** (also Heb 10:17). Psalm 103:12 says, **“as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”** Isaiah 43:25 says, **“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.”** This imagery is that of an accountant cancelling a paid debt by blotting it with ink until it is literally impossible to ever see what was written under the ink. We come to God again and again remembering our sin but God has both forgiven and forgotten them, he does not see our sin but his forgiven child. God did not send his son into the world to die so that we could be slaves to self-doubt and fear but that we may have a spirit of sonship through which we cry

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“Abba Father” (Rom 8:15). Then let’s remember that in God’s eyes all are forgiven. So, let’s see others with mercy and ourselves with grace and let’s serve God unburdened and full of joy.

Second, The new way to come to God through Christ (34b-56)

In verse 34b we see that Jesus’ amazing forgiveness generally goes unnoticed by the world chasing after sinful pleasures. Jesus was then mocked by three groups of people the religious leaders, the Roman guards and one of the criminals on the cross but the message of all three was eerily the same, **“Save yourself!”** In fact this was Satan’s temptation to Jesus from the beginning in the desert. The first time Jesus spoke plainly about his death **“Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’”** **“Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’”** (Mt 16:23) Jesus had every right to save himself, he was completely innocent. And he had all power to save himself. But if he had we would all be doomed, there would be no way that we could be saved. But Jesus did not save himself. Jesus had said, **“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it”** (Lk 9:24). In the same way Jesus lost his life that he could save ours.

Amazingly, the other criminal spoke up rebuking the first, **“Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”** Then he said, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** What’s first amazing here is that this criminal admits his guilt and that he deserved to be punished. Criminals never admit they are guilty and even if they have to admit it, they don’t think they should be punished. But knowing he was undeserving, he had faith that Jesus would forgive him if he simply asked for Jesus to have mercy on him. He is the pattern for all who wish to be saved under the new covenant: Admit that we are sinners fully deserving of our punishment, believe that Jesus forgives us and then simply ask Jesus to have mercy on us. Jesus said, **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise”** (43). This is the fruit of the cross because all are forgiven, we need only ask and we can be saved. Romans 10:13 says, **“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** This man is often called an eleventh hour convert. He has given hope to many down through the ages, for wayward children, stubborn parents or relatives: as long as they are still breathing there is hope they can be saved.

At about noon darkness came over the whole land for three hours as the horrible weight of God’s judgment came upon Jesus. When the price had been paid

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and sin broken, God ripped the curtain of the temple in two from top to bottom. This curtain was forty feet tall, thirty feet wide and as thick as a man's hand and it took three hundred priests just to manipulate it. It was clear that only the hand of God could have ripped that. The curtain was a symbol to the Jews of their sin that separated them from God. Because of our sin we cannot come into the presence of the holy God or we will die. God must have hated that curtain. But now with sin removed, it's like God was throwing the door open wide and saying **“Come!”** **And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life”** (Rev 22:17). Through the tearing of the curtain, God invites us into a relationship with him again. 2 Corinthians 5:18 says, **“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.”** It is not a distant legal transaction that removes the restrictions for us to enter heaven. But God who longed to embrace his children lovingly removed the barriers keeping us from him so that he could welcome us into his kingdom forever.

When Jesus felt that all the work was finished he said, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this he breathed his last.”** **“The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, ‘Surely this was a righteous man”** (47). While the other gospels culminate with the confession of Jesus' divinity, Luke culminates with a vindication of Jesus as being innocent. Even the crowd realized that they had done wrong and went away beating their breasts in repentance and we are there in that crowd as well. Luke concludes with the story of Joseph of Arimathea to prove that Jesus did die and was buried and also to again point out that even in that kangaroo court before the Council, not all agreed to Jesus sentence.

Through this passage one point is clear through Jesus' words, through the saving of the one criminal, through God's tearing of the curtain: it is that God has forgiven us. There is nothing that is hindering us from coming to him. God is standing with arms open wide, the curtain removed, all barriers out of the way, saying “I forgive you! Come to me.” We must accept our new identity as forgiven. And we must learn to forgive others because God has already forgiven them through the cross of Jesus. Let's realize what the cross really means. It is not that we are good enough or better than others sinners. It also is not a human tragedy in which we should cry endlessly for Jesus but it is the symbol of forgiveness and an open invitation from God. Though we are guilty and fully deserve God's wrath, Jesus has taken it in our place and we can come. So let us come. Amen.