

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”

Luke 23:26–56

Key Verse: 23:34a

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

How do you feel about forgiving others? Not just nice people, sincere people, but really “difficult” people? It’s hard to forgive when people have been foolish. It’s harder still when what they’ve done is morally or ethically wrong. And it’s most difficult when they’ve personally hurt us. Today’s passage describes the crucifixion of Jesus. Its meaning is at the core of our Christian faith. It all centers on his prayer from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” How do his words speak to us? Why is it so important to know that on the cross Jesus brought us God’s forgiveness? And how does his forgiveness impact our lives? This Easter, may God help us newly experience his forgiveness.

Luke has just recounted Jesus’ arrest and so-called “trial.” Held in custody, Jesus is first mocked, beaten, and blasphemed (22:63–65). Led away to their council, the religious leaders try to intimidate him with their questions (22:66–71). With manipulation and sheer lies they bring him to the Roman governor Pilate (23:1–2,5). Afterwards, they follow him to Herod (6–7), where they vehemently accuse him (10), and where Herod and his soldiers treat him with contempt and mockery (11). Jesus makes no answer and endures it all silently (23:9). Both Pilate and Herod try to pass Jesus off to each other, but in the end, Pilate has to decide. He declares Jesus not guilty three times (4,14,22) and desires to release him (20). But the religious leaders keep shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” (21), and their demand with loud cries prevails. Pilate agrees to have Barabbas, a convicted murderer and political rebel, released, and innocent Jesus, God’s Son, sentenced to death. It’s the worst travesty of justice ever.

Look at verse 26 (ESV). Luke begins his account of the crucifixion with a man named Simon of Cyrene—a place in North Africa. It says Jesus is being “led away,” taken out of Jerusalem to be executed. Simon, on the other hand, is “coming in from the country,” meaning he’s just arrived, most likely to worship God at Passover. All of a sudden Simon is “seized,” grabbed violently. They “laid on him the cross,” probably just the horizontal beam of it, and now Simon has to turn around and go back outside the city with all these strangers carrying this heavy piece of wood. Jesus, after all he’s been through, has probably been struggling to carry it. And the Roman soldiers are in a hurry. But to Romans, publicly carrying a cross is dishonorable, so they make Simon do it. And Simon virtually has no other choice. Such injustice is always the way of the world. Luke says quietly that Simon carries the cross behind Jesus. He’s drawn close to him

through their common humanity and shared experience of injustice. In history Simon of Cyrene has inspired so many Christians to carry our cross, whatever it is, behind our Lord Jesus. Normally, people are not forced into following Jesus. But although this event is so unfair to him, it's likely that God used it to lead Simon of Cyrene to faith in Jesus, and to help bring the gospel to his family (Mark 15:21), and eventually to a whole new continent.

Look at verse 27. Here we find "a great multitude of the people" following Jesus, as well as women "mourning and lamenting for him." Despite the religious leaders' hatred, so many people loved Jesus. But what's really motivating these women's tears? Is it all just an act? Are they just being nationalistic, weeping for a Jewish man being humiliated by Roman oppressors? In any case, Jesus, who's been so silent, begins to speak to these women. Read verses 28–31. He doesn't receive their sympathy; instead, he warns them of their future. He's enduring his own brutal suffering, but he's not vindictive; he's grieving over his people's future (19:41–44). His words become reality in just a little over 30 years, when the Jews will revolt against Rome. The Roman army will surround Jerusalem and cut off all its food supplies. It will become a time of such starvation that families will resort to eating their own children. It will be so horrible, people will just want to die quickly. That famous fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 was just a preview of what God will do to the unrepentant when Jesus comes again someday (Rev.6:16).

For now, the injustice against Jesus is outrageous, and wicked people seem to be getting away with it. But not forever. One day, God will surely judge this world in righteousness through the one who suffered the greatest injustice (Acts 17:31). Among the Gospel writers, Luke actually mentions forgiveness the most.¹ He's writing to Gentiles who've lived in sin without God's law and really need to know God's forgiveness. But for Luke, God's divine justice is essential to the meaning of the cross. In fact, it's God's justice that makes the cross of Jesus necessary (Rom.3:25). In the cross of Jesus, God's holiness and justice as well as his great mercy for helpless sinners are perfectly combined and expressed.

Look at verse 32. When news came that Jesus would be crucified, they brought out these two. Luke calls them "criminals." The Greek word is actually "evildoers." Look at verse 33. Crucified in between these two men, they're trying to make Jesus look guilty in the eyes of the people. As Jesus said earlier, it would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, "He was numbered with the transgressors."² Jesus is the only holy, sinless one. But he quietly allows himself to be crucified in between evildoers, like a lamb among wolves. Why? It's to take our shame, our guilt upon himself. Nobody wants to take our shame and guilt, but Jesus willingly

¹ 17 times in Luke; another 6 times in Acts.

² 22:37; Isa.53:12.

did so. We live in a time of “cancel culture” and public shaming. It’s vicious. But on that cross in between two evildoers Jesus bore all our shame and guilt. Only in him can we find real healing from the shame and guilt of our sin. Crucified Jesus heals all our shame and guilt.

Jesus crucified in between evildoers also reveals the evilness in humanity. When God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power, Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil (Acts 10:38). Everybody came to know how Jesus of Nazareth showed mercy to those who were sick and hurting. But in the end, people still allowed such evil to be done to him.

As they crucify him, what does he do? Read verse 34a. “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” In the Old Testament, King David prayed for his enemies, “O God, break the teeth in their mouths” (Ps.58:6a). But Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” His prayer is not just for the soldiers crucifying him, but for the religious leaders who put him there, his disciples who failed him, and really, for all those in the world doing evil today. When someone hurts us, even if it’s slightly or unintentionally, we get angry. We may lash out or fight back. Or, we may quietly judge and resent the person and use passive aggressive behavior as vengeance. But Jesus, in his first response to being crucified, his initial reaction, his visceral reflex, prays, “Father, forgive them...” His prayer boggles the mind and challenges the heart. Just these three words of his prayer reveal his character, his very nature, as the Son of God. They also reveal his understanding of what he’s doing. These people know not what they do, but Jesus knows why he’s suffering on the cross: it’s to bring sinful people God’s forgiveness.

In this prayer, Jesus our Lord is our role model. Early on in his ministry, he said some famous words: “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (6:27–28). He also said: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (6:37). Now, while he himself is suffering such humiliation, pain, hatred, curses, and abuse on a cross, he actually does what he taught others to do.

Let’s think about his words, “...for they know not what they do.” Of course these people know they’re crucifying him. What they don’t know is that he’s the Son of God. They can’t see the extent of the crime they’re committing. Sin makes us that blind, too: We sin so easily, but we can’t see that our sins are really against God himself (15:21). When we choose to sin, we cut ourselves off from God and become spiritually ignorant (Rom.1:21ff.). When we “know not what we do,” we become confused and foolish. When we “know not what we do,” we go after all the wrong things. When we “know not what we do,” we hurt those who’ve

been so good to us. When we “know not what we do,” we’re lost. In an ultimate sense, every time we sin, whether we realize it or not, we’re actually crucifying Jesus (Heb.6:6), in that we make his crucifixion necessary. Yet even in our sin-sick state, Jesus sees us not with criticism and judgment but with compassion. He sees us like sheep who’ve gone astray (Isa.53:6). And he deeply knows the Father’s heart, who longs for his prodigal children to come home (15:20). He doesn’t hate or give up on us or consider us too expensive or risky. Jesus came to this world to seek and to save the lost (19:10). So, even while suffering on the cross, he prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” As those who claim to follow him, we need to learn to see sinful people as he does, and to pray for them as he did. Like our Lord Jesus, we all need to become well-known as forgiving people, not judgmental people.

Let’s also think about the word “forgive.” In Greek it means to “let it go.” It’s like wiping a slate clean, or even canceling a huge debt. Forgiveness is actually that radical. But Jesus praying for forgiveness from the cross is still hard for some people to understand. They wish God could just forgive, without Jesus having to go to the cross and suffer so much. But God who’s so forgiving is also so just. In order for the Holy and Righteous God to forgive, there has to be a just payment for sin. In God’s sight, Jesus on the cross is the only one who could take the punishment our sin deserves. The Bible says he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed (Isa.53:5). So, the Holy God crucified his own Son so that we could be forgiven and healed of sin. We’re so sinful; we in no way deserve it; but God our Father loves us that much.

Jesus’ forgiveness on the cross is like salve to our wounds. Sometimes it’s people who wound us, but it’s our own sins that wound us the most. Until we accept that Jesus suffered on the cross for my sin, we can’t really know forgiveness. We can’t forgive ourselves, and we can’t forgive others, either. In our wounded state, we tend to wound others. We have no capacity to forgive. But when we taste the forgiveness of Jesus on the cross, our wounds, our bitterness, our hatred melt away. We begin to see God as our loving Father. We begin to have his love and his hope, for ourselves, for others, and even for the world.

So how do we experience his forgiveness on the cross? If we’re self-righteous, we can’t. Only as we realize how Jesus had to be crucified because of *my sins* can we begin to see how sinful we are. And only as we realize our utter sinfulness can we begin to appreciate his forgiveness. On the other hand, sometimes we think we’re too sinful for God to ever forgive. But when we see sinless Jesus suffering so much on the cross in our place, we realize it’s enough. We find that his forgiveness is even for me. We need to hear the voice of our Lord Jesus praying for us personally, “Father, forgive them.”

Knowing his forgiveness is as essential to spiritual life as food is to physical life. To be spiritually healthy, each day we need to remember how Jesus gave his life on the cross to forgive all my sins. And each day we need to be showing his forgiveness to others. If anyone hurts us, no matter how painful or unfair, we should not suppress or ignore it; we should forgive. Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.” And among all the good things we pray for others, we need to be praying for them most of all to know the forgiveness of Christ.

Luke goes on to show how the soldiers, the people, the rulers, the criminals, nature, the centurion, and the women respond to crucified Jesus (34b–49). The responses are varied. It tells us that not everyone responds well to his crucifixion. The soldiers who crucified him just cast lots to divide his garments (34b). They are heartless. The people stand by, watching, but the rulers scoff at him (35). The soldiers also mock him (36–37). Even the inscription above him mocks his kingship (38). They repeatedly taunt him, “He saved others; let him save himself” (35,37,39). Actually, Jesus could have saved himself, even now while on the cross (cf. Matt.26:53). But he resisted this temptation. It’s a powerful example for us, that Jesus did not save himself so that he could save others.

One of the criminals crucified next to Jesus also rails at him (39). But the other criminal rebukes him, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (40–41). Then he turns to Jesus and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (42). We don’t know how he knows all this. But after hearing Jesus pray “Father, forgive them,” his heart and his spiritual eyes open. He gains a glimmer of faith. But life itself is ebbing away. In his condemned state, and near death, only by faith can he ask Jesus this. People see this man as a cheater, trying to edge his way in at the last minute. But Jesus says to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (43). Despite all the obvious sins in this man’s life, Jesus accepts his faith in him and forgives him. What’s more, in his forgiveness Jesus unashamedly takes this man with him back to paradise. Even on the cross our Lord Jesus saves a lost one and enters eternal glory with him. It’s unforgettable. It’s a message that God’s kingdom is never a place of human boasting or achievements; it’s always the place where God’s forgiving grace reigns supreme. Only those who know this grace get in. God’s forgiveness in Jesus is still for totally unworthy sinners. All we need to do is turn to Jesus by faith and receive his forgiveness through his cross. So, what are we waiting for?

Next, Luke tells us that nature responds to this injustice with darkness (44–45). The temple curtain is also torn in two, showing that God’s presence has left

there, and that now we can come into God's presence directly through Jesus (Heb.10:19–20). Then Luke describes how Jesus died. Read verse 46. It's such an inspiring example. Like our Lord Jesus, we need to finish our life on earth with such faith and spirit and commitment. And there's one more man. Read verse 47. Though many responded poorly to Jesus on the cross, this unlikely man, a Roman centurion, opened his spiritual eyes to see who Jesus really is and to praise God. That's the power of the cross.

Let's read verse 34a again. "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" This Easter, may God move our hearts to receive his forgiveness through Jesus' death on the cross, and to pray to forgive everyone who sins against us.