

Seven Last Words Part 1

We have entered the season of the church calendar called Lent, the forty days prior to Easter. Lent is to be a time of repentance and reflection, a time of fasting in order to give greater attention to spiritual things, a time of preparing our hearts in anticipation of Easter and our celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ. We are going to focus these next Sundays upon the extraordinary sacrifice made for us on the cross. My hope is as we recognize and acknowledge the price paid for our redemption, we will respond with increased devotion and surrender to the Lord. In order to focus our attention upon His sacrifice, we are going to look at the final words of Jesus from the cross.

Often referred to as the seven last words of Christ, these seven phrases or sayings of Jesus are taken from the gospel accounts of his crucifixion. Three of the sayings are found only in Luke's gospel and three are found only in the gospel of John. The other saying appears in both the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Matthew. The seven sayings are:

Father forgive them for they do not know what they do. Luke 23:34

Today you will be with me in paradise. Luke 23:43

Behold your son: behold your mother. John 19:26-27

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Matthew 27:46. Mark 15:34

I thirst. John 19:28

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Luke 23:46

It is finished. John 19:30

This morning, we are looking at the first saying. The gospel of Luke tells us, **“When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, 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.’ Luke 23:33-34.**

Stop and think for a moment about the last words of people being executed. Some time there is a final profession of innocence. Often times the condemned ask for forgiveness from those they have wronged, they apologize to the family of someone they murdered or harmed, but seldom does anyone forgive those who are responsible for a wrongful execution. You don't hear people praying for forgiveness for the judge, the prosecuting attorney, the guards and the executioner. That's what is happening at the place called the Skull. Golgotha. Jesus, the sinless,

innocent Son of God is being fastened to a cross, nails piercing his hands and feet, a crown of thorns shoved down upon his brow. His face is swollen from the beating he received as the soldiers mocked and struck him again and again. His back, torn and bloody from the brutal force of the whip, the Roman cat of nine tails, is now pressed hard against the rough wood of the cross as he struggles to push his body upwards in an effort to breathe. It is at this moment we hear his first words. Unexpected. Unbelievable. His first words are a prayer uttered through the excruciating pain, "Father forgive them." Who could imagine asking forgiveness for the perpetrators of such humiliation and torture and pain? He was undeserving of their hatred, their torture, the pain they inflicted upon him and the soldiers were undeserving of his prayer, his forgiveness, his life.

But was it the soldiers to whom Jesus was referring when he said "Father forgive them"? Of whom was he really speaking? The Roman soldiers were following orders, like any good soldier would do. They had crucified hundreds, perhaps thousands. They were used to being cursed, spat upon. They were used to hearing the condemned beg for mercy. They were even used to hearing prayers for deliverance, for heavenly mercy, but this was no doubt a first. They heard Jesus whisper this prayer asking the Father to forgive them for what they were doing. Surely they must have wondered what kind of man this was they were executing, to pray for their forgiveness. But was the prayer for them? Yes, it was. But was it only for them?

What about Pilate? Was the prayer for this cruel Roman Governor who tried to wash his hands of an innocent man's blood? Yes it was. What about the Jewish elders, the members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court that had found him guilty on trumped up charges and had condemned him to death, turning him over to Pilate for sentencing? They were standing nearby, still shaking their heads and condemning. Was he asking the Father to forgive them? Yes, I think he was.

What of the crowd that yelled "crucify him"? The crowd who said, "Let his blood be upon us and our children?" Was Jesus asking the father to forgive this fickle crowd? I think he was, but I don't think that is all. "Father forgive them." Of whom was he speaking? I think he was speaking of all of us. You see, all of us are liable. We're all responsible. All of us are guilty. All of us are complicit in his death and all of us need forgiveness.

I preached a message last year about four basic truths based on something Richard John

Neuhaus wrote in his book *Death On A Friday Afternoon*. You may recall he said the truth about the human condition is, **1) Something very bad has happened. 2) We are complicit in what has gone wrong. 3) Something must be done about what has gone wrong. 4) Whatever it is that must be done, we cannot do it.**

Something bad has happened and all of us are responsible. All of us are sinners. All of us are guilty. The bible says, **“There is no one righteous, not even one.” Romans 3:10. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23.** We don’t like to admit we are responsible but we’ve all sinned. Jesus came to be the sacrifice that atoned for sins and we all have sinned. That means it was our sins that put Jesus on that cross. Face it. He is talking to the Father about us when he prayed Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing. We are the ones.

The apostle Paul referred to himself as the “chiefest of sinners.” We think, “Well, I’m not that bad. I may be a sinner, but I’m not as bad as some I know.” Neuhaus wrote, “I may think it modesty when I draw back from declaring myself chief of sinners, but it is more likely a failure of imagination.” He continued, **“About chief of sinners I don’t know, but what I know about sinners I know chiefly about me...”** “We did not mean to do the deed, of course. The things we have done wrong seemed, or mostly seemed, small at the time. The word of encouragement withheld, the touch of kindness not given, the visit not made, the trust betrayed, the cutting remark so clever and so cruel, the illicit sexual desire so generously entertained, the angry answer, the surge of resentment at being slighted, the lie we thought would do no harm. **“It is such a long and tedious list of little things. Surely not too much should be made of it, we thought to ourselves. But now it has come to this. It has come to the cross. All the trespasses of all the people of all time have gravitated here, to the killing grounds of Calvary.”...Richard Neuhaus** The harsh reality is, we are responsible. He was praying about us all along.

We must face the truth. Something is really wrong and we are responsible. We are sinners. We need forgiveness. Our sins put him on the cross. Jesus knows it so he prays for us.

Notice he prays, **“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”** What did he mean? The soldiers knew what they were doing, nailing a condemned prisoner to a cross. They had done it a thousand times. The crowd knew what they were doing, calling for the

death of a man when they cried, “crucify him.” They knew the facts of the crucifixion but they didn’t know the enormity of their actions. They didn’t recognize the seriousness of their sin. They didn’t realize they were crucifying the sinless Son of God. Arthur Pink wrote, “**The emphasis is not on ‘they know not’ but on ‘they know not what they do.’**” ...Arthur W. Pink

We know not what we do. Hasn’t that been the truth since Eve took the forbidden fruit in the garden, gave it to Adam and they both ate? Reaching for the power to determine what was good and evil for themselves, they over-reached and became powerless to stop the spread of evil and wickedness and sin. It wasn’t that they didn’t know they were eating fruit that was forbidden to them, but Adam and Eve didn’t realize what they were doing. They didn’t realize what they were doing to themselves and to all of us. They didn’t realize the enormity of their actions. They didn’t realize how deadly and devastating sin would be.

That describes all of us. Demanding what we think to be ours, “give me the fruit, give me what I want,” with no regard for the cost or the consequences! We don’t know what we are doing, or what our sin and choices will cost us.

Remember Jesus’ story of the prodigal son in Luke 15? We are like that prodigal. We demand what we think we are “entitled to” and then go on our way to the far country. We don’t know what we are doing. “Forget the cost. Forget the consequences. Live for the moment.” Thinking we have it all, we make one bad decision after another until finally, like the prodigal son, we find ourselves impoverished, hungry, broken, alone, dying. “Father forgive us because we don’t know - we don’t realize what we are doing to ourselves and to others.”

Those soldiers, nailing Jesus to the cross, didn’t realize what they were doing to themselves. They were diminished as human beings by their violence, by their hatred. They were degraded by their own actions. We too are diminished by our wrong choices, degraded by our sinful acts. Teenagers, faced with too many choices and little guidance, experimenting with sex, with drugs, alcohol. You don’t know what you are doing to yourself! Forget what other people think, forget what those in your school think about you, what does God think? How does he view your choices? How do you view yourself? How does it make you feel about yourself? At the end of the day, those bad choices make you less than who you wanted to be. Less than who God’s intends for you to be.

All of us, choosing sin, choosing addiction, choosing adultery, cheating, lying, flirting

with sin. We don't realize the enormity of our actions, the deadly consequences of our sin, our choices. It will leave us broken, scarred, less than God intended us to be.

The prodigal son kept running, sinning, making bad choices. "Father forgive him for he doesn't know what he is doing" and then one day, the bible says, "**He came to his senses.**" One day he realized what he was doing, he realized where he was and that he was less than God intended him to be. This wasn't how he was meant to live his life. He realized he had failed, he had sinned, he had grieved his father and he needed to ask forgiveness. He needed to change. He needed to go home.

"Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Maybe we didn't know what we were doing, the enormity of our sin. That our sinful choices and actions were worthy of death. The bible says the soul that sins must die. Our sins placed us under a death sentence. Justice demanded that we die. Suddenly we come to our senses and realize the enormity of our sin. None of our sins were little or insignificant. You see, we can measure the severity of the crime by the severity of the punishment. Don't judge yourself by starting with your sins. "I'm not that bad, not that sinful. I deserve a slap on the wrist, maybe probation." To understand the seriousness of your sin, start by considering the punishment already handed down – death. Justice cries to be satisfied and the sentence is death. We didn't know what we were doing, but we have come to our senses. We know now. We stand condemned. But then we hear his prayer. "Father forgive them." And it's more than a prayer for forgiveness that stuns us, it's the amazing way in which that forgiveness is supplied!

The bible says, "**...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.**" But God did not forgive our sins by simple ignoring them or excusing them, that would not be just. He forgave our sins by assuming them, as Jesus Christ, God in flesh, took our sins upon himself and bore them on the cross. The bible says it like this, "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" **2 Corinthians 5:19-21.** Richard Neuhaus said it like this, "**God became what by right he was not so that we might become what by right we are not.**"
....Richard John Neuhaus

God's justice had to be satisfied and so – God's love and mercy provided a sacrifice. Jesus died on the cross for our sins! The price of our redemption, his death on the cross shows us

the seriousness of our sins and it shows us the extent of his love and mercy.

“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.” But now we do. Now we understand. Remember the crowd that cried “crucify him”? Fifty days after that dreadful day, the crowd gathered again. This time there was a commotion in an upper room. It was the feast of Pentecost. The crowd gathered again and this time Peter boldly stood up and began to tell them what they did not know about Jesus and about the crucifixion and about his resurrection. At the end of his message he said, **“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Acts 2:36-38**

Forgive them for they know not what they do. But now we realize what we did. Our sins put him on that cross. It was our sins that were condemned. It was our death sentence being carried out and Jesus took our place and bore that penalty in his own flesh. He became sin so that our sins could be forgiven. He became what by right he was not so that we might become what by right we are not. He became sin so we could become sons and daughters of God, forgiven, clean, holy and righteous in his sight.

Now that we know – what do we do? Peter answered that question in Acts 2. **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” Acts 2:38** It was a call to repent and receive the forgiveness for which Jesus prayed. Father forgive them. And to all who will repent and ask for his forgiveness, we will receive new life, forgiveness, mercy, a new start.

Sometimes when we come to our senses and realize what we’ve done, when we realize how we have sinned against God, against others, against ourselves, we wonder if we can truly be forgiven. Maybe we’ve done too much. Maybe we’ve gone too far. But here is what we know – God’s mercy is beyond measure. His forgiveness is not limited to the sins that we know but it covers even the sins we’ve forgotten, the sins of ignorance and the sins of intent, the sins of the past, present and future. Is there enough forgiveness for the likes of us? Absolutely. Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Neuhaus wrote, **“What ludicrous figures we sinners cut....we act as though there is not forgiveness enough. There is more than forgiveness enough.” ...Richard Neuhaus**

There is forgiveness for the soldiers that nailed him to the cross. Forgiveness for the Sanhedrin that falsely condemned him. Forgiveness for the crowd that called “crucify him.” Forgiveness for all of us whose sins required his death upon the cross as our substitute and the perfect sacrifice. Father forgive them and the good news is: There is more than forgiveness enough. O, the incredible depths of his mercy and forgiveness and grace!

Remember those four truths I mentioned? Something has gone terribly wrong. We are responsible. Something needs to be done about it and we cannot do what needs to be done. Something needs to be done and something has been done about it! Jesus came to do what needed to be done. He has come, not to condemn the world but that the world through him could be saved. Jesus died in your place and settled your sin account. He offers salvation and forgiveness for all of us today. There is forgiveness for you. So what do we do?

Like the crowd listening to Peter on the day of Pentecost, we ask what should we do? And the answer is the same. Repent and believe upon Jesus. You’ve come to your senses. You understand. Ask him to forgive your sins and receive him as your Savior. Make him the Lord of your life. Receive his forgiveness and his mercy. “Father forgive them” Jesus prayed and the good news – there is more than forgiveness enough!