

Father Forgive Them for They Know Not What They Do

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[0 : 00] Turn to consider words you will find in the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 23, verse 34. Luke's Gospel, chapter 23, verse 34. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

We have in this part of the Gospel narrative a very detailed account of the climax of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He had endured great physical pain and weakness. He had been arrested the previous night and had to endure scourging and with it considerable loss of blood.

He had carried his own cross, at least the cross beam, towards the place of crucifixion to Golgotha.

[1 : 53] And there had been cruelly nailed hands to the cross beam and feet to the pole upon which he was hung and was enduring the most cruel harm of death, that of crucifixion in the then known world.

And in the face of all that he endured, all that he suffered, that which had been predicted of him hundreds of years ago by the prophet who was being fulfilled, he was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.

He is brought as a lamb to the slaughtered and as a sheep before a shearer is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

And yet, from that scene, there have come to us the words which are commonly known as the seven sayings of Christ on the cross.

Sayings which constitute the deep abyss into which he was now entering and sayings which have made a deep impression on the minds of men through the centuries.

[3 : 34] And I would like, in the course of the next few weeks, to consider with you on Sabbath evening these seven sayings from the cross.

The first one is our consideration tonight. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. So these sayings are recorded for us by all the gospel writers.

Matthew and Mark record one of them, the one which he cried to his father, quoting Psalm 22, My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?

Luke, in this chapter, records three of them. The one before us here tonight, then the words addressed to the thief, Today thou shalt be with me in paradise, and the one addressed to his father before he died, Into thy hands I commit my spirit.

John records the other three. spoken to the father, I thirst. The one who spoke to the father, I thirst. Then the one addressed to his mother and to John, Woman, behold thy son, son, behold thy mother.

[4 : 59] And finally, the cry with which he died, he cried with a loud voice, It is finished. Now the order in which they come to us is very significant.

There are differences of opinion, of course, on the sequence of these words, their chronological order.

I think that our reading of the narratives will bear out that they come to us in the following order. The first words addressed on the cross were these, to the father, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

A request that embraced the enemies of Christ around the cross. Then, the second word was one addressed to the thief, Thou shalt be with me in paradise.

Perhaps the circle is now narrowing from the enemies around him, he comes now to one who has come to faith in himself, Thou shalt be with me in paradise.

[6 : 13] And the third saying was the one addressed to the inner circle of his friends, to the closest circle that he had on earth, humanly speaking, his mother and the disciple whom he loved.

Woman, behold thy son, son, behold thy mother. Amen. The last four were addressed to a God alone.

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? I thirst. Into thy hands I commit my spirit and it is finished. But tonight, we consider for a little this first saying.

And we notice, first of all, the person is addressed, Father, forgive them. And then secondly, the petition itself.

It is a petition for forgiveness. Then we consider, thirdly, how people are brought to forgiveness. and how this prayer is a pattern of the intercession of Christ tonight in heaven itself.

[7 : 25] Finally, the encouragement that it affords to us and the warning that it brings to us. First of all, then, the person addressed, Father, forgive them.

now, speaking with reverence, the time when our Lord was crucified was a time of great noise and tremor.

there were many noises heard at the cross. The noise of the hammer hammering the nails through his flesh and into the wood.

the noise of the multitude mocking him, poking fun at him. The noise of the religious leader agitating the crowd to this say a furious assault on his own person.

the noise of the Roman soldiers as they played with dice and gambled. One of the prizes was his own garment which had been taken up.

[8 : 42] They cast lots for his garment. It was a place of bubble and noise, tremendous confusion, the cry of those who had been crucified with them.

One occasion railing at him, crying to him, blaspheming him.

Then the cry of one of them calling for mercy and asking to be remembered when Christ came into his kingdom. Our Lord was put to death in such circumstances and interestingly enough he was put to death by some people in the name of religion.

He had claimed that he was evil with God and they had cried out and they were crying out there, we will not harm this man, crucify him, crucify him.

And in that sense he was put to death in the name of religion. and how significant it is that in the midst of all that tumult he was the one of them all apart from the thief on the cross with them who was converted.

[10 : 02] He was the one who was giving expression to the meaning of true religion. he was the one who was in communion with God the Father.

He was the one who had unshaken faith and confidence in the midst of that awful sin. In the face of all the seeming contradiction, in the face of a sin which seemed to suggest that evil was triumphing over good and righteousness as it was in some respects.

In the face of that he was the one who recognized that God was there and that God was in control that God was sitting on the star and riding above the tumult and to that God he cried Father someone has said that if ever the hand of the creator seemed to be withdrawn from the rudder of the universe and the course of human affairs seemed to be driving down headlong into the gulf of confusion it was when Christ had to die the shameful death of the cross as a malefactor.

could could by any possibility rise out of such an abyss of wrong? The answer the salvation of the world came out of that sin and from that sin he cried with the confidence of faith with the confidence of his son Father that was religion at its best and this is where religion spread to this day at its best when people have the confidence of faith to address God in the face of all that seems to contradict the very faith that they profess to address him in the midst of it all as Father.

How many of us here tonight have what this writer to the heaps to the Romans calls the spirit of the son? How many of us tonight have confidence enough in God to address him as Father?

[12 : 52] Not to address him as Father because others say Father but to address him in the confidence of faith. And then secondly we will notice the petition that he addressed to him and this will become the main burden of the address tonight.

Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Now of course many of you will know that many books deal with the sayings on the cross and it's interesting to note that most of them if not all of them deal with this one great question and people seem to get lost in the mazes into which they enter trying to answer the question for whom did Jesus pray this prayer?

of course there are some people who clinging tenuously to the doctrine of election claim that Jesus couldn't pray this prayer for anyone but for those who are in the elect because we know that the and here we're entering into rather a difficult field but just to mention it we know that Jesus' intercession is always heard by God the Father his prayer of all prayers in the history of this world is the one which is always answered because he never asks for anything that is not in accordance with the will of God he has in the words of Andrew Murray an unchanging intercession and a prevailing intercession an intercession that goes on never for one moment broken and never on any occasion refused who then is he praying for surely the narrative makes it perfectly plain that Jesus is here praying for those who were involved in this gross act of human injustice putting him to death on the cross he is praying for his enemies for the

Roman soldiers for the Jews who handed him over for the soldiers because the soldiers were after all though it was a Roman punishment crucifixion it was the Jews who had condemned him to death the Roman authority represented in Pilate had suggested that he go free because he could find no fault in him that was his verdict but the Jewish leaders prevailed upon the Roman authority and said that if he didn't put him to death he was no friend of season and that filled him with fear so he handed him over to them to be put to death but put to death according to the Roman form of torture at that time by crucifixion so we take it that our Lord was here praying for those who were involved in his death on the cross now in a sense that doesn't answer the problem of the intercessory prayer of

Jesus embracing people who as far as we know some of them may not have come to faith some of them we do know came to faith and in that sense you see this is the argument how could he pray for people who would not come to faith and answer to his prayer how could he pray for people who would not be forgiven well of course there are two answers to that question a we don't know how many of them came to forgiveness and for all we know they may all have come to forgiveness we don't know that but the other answer is this you remember that Jesus was acting here not only as mediator but as man who was made under the law now we know that he was always acting as mediator under the law yes but he was also a man acting under the law and he was under obligation as a perfect human being to obey the law and that law said to that man even on the cross love your enemies it said to him that he was not to revive those who reviled him he was not to persecute those who persecuted him that law said to him that he was to forgive men that trespass at all times and he was under that law and here there comes to light the compassion of the man of sorrows the compassion of the son of man suffering under the hands of men and beseeching that God would forgive them and you know that this is a pattern for you and for me pattern at every level of society that we are to forgive men the trespasses we are not to continue these running battles which sow personal relationships running battles which sow so many people at so many levels of society where one is always trying to put something across someone else and I'm almost tempted here perhaps whether it's a temptation or not

[18:53] I'm going to succumb to it to suggest that publicly in our own in our own set up just now where we hear so much even at the educational level of so much a coming and going and so much of attack and counter attack is not a bath biting it's high time that each one of us put this into practice at our own level with one another that we should forgive if mistakes are made forgive and get on with it whereas what happens people borrow away and the very element that is missing in man's relationship with man is the element of forgiveness people seem to think people seem to forget that we are under law as well in the same way as our Lord was under law and it comes into the Christian church as well in our relationships within the church that we are remember the way that

Peter put it perhaps one of the most profound passages and the application of Christian teaching to Christian living that we have in the whole Bible for even here unto he says we recall because Christ suffered for us leaving us an example that he should follow his steps who did no sin neither was guile thrown in his mouth who when he was reviled reviled on again when he suffered he threatened not but committed himself to him that judges righteously and it's amazing in our society there's nothing perhaps that shows how far we have drifted from the application of Christian principles to our living there is nothing that shows it more than the threat that people wield so easily it comes words trip off their mouth that if people don't toe the line they will threaten them with something else nothing could be further from the spirit of the gospel nothing could be further from the spirit of

Christ and the best thing that you and I can do is to take out you and our example from one who was better than any of us and one who suffered more than any of and who in his sufferings cried to the father on behalf of his tormentors father forgive them now that in a sense in one way I believe answers this problem of the intercession embracing people who perhaps were not in the elect you remember that he was made under the law and he was here honoring the law and he was here asking that his wrong the wrong done to him would be forgiven here is one as someone said to whom revenge is forbidden here is one to whom pardon is enjoined and here is one to whom prayer is commanded and you and I are in the same position as regards a relationship to love but then look secondly at what he means by forgiveness father forgive them now it may very well be here that pardon or forgiveness means just that god would grant a stay of execution at the root of a that act of course was sin and sin always needs forgiveness because sin carries with it penalty and the person of sins knows this even the man in whose life the image and the likeness of god is so greatly defaced and impaired recognises that his wrong deeds demand punishment

I've no doubt that there may be on the streets a stormy tonight or in previous weeks people who are quite prepared to throw a brick through the window and run because they know that their action necessitates punishment and they want to avoid punishment so they want to conceal themselves but they cannot rid themselves of the knowledge and the idea that they have committed a wrong sin is always accompanied with a sense of punishment conscience testifies to this there are times of course when a person's conscience's voice speaks loudly to it other times the voice is quite heable other times it is even intermittent but as someone put it it is ever sounding like a low perpetual knell telling of the death going on within proclaiming that the past is a curse that the present is withered and that the future is a terrible plan and there are people tonight living under that burden a sense of accountability and there are some who recognise it maybe they're here tonight know that because of their sins they are accountable to God so you see forgiveness deals with guilt because guilt exposes us to punishment and what pardon does is this forgiveness it removes that exposure guilt as someone put

I think it was John Flavin the Puritan said that guilt is a chain with which sinners are bound and fettered by the law now pardon cuts that chain it sets the prisoner free and forgiveness in its essence is God setting the guilty free not because they don't deserve to be punished but because Christ has taken their punishment upon himself because Christ has taken their sins and died their death and on the basis of his finished work on the basis of his merits people are set free and the language of the forgiven sinner tonight in his prayer to God is this Father forgive me for the sake of Christ I cannot put by what I have done wrong I cannot eliminate my sin from my own life

[26 : 02] I cannot meet the punishment which is my due but Christ has made it for me and in his name and for his sake I ask thee to forgive because Christ's meritorious death is of greater worth and deeper significance than our sin there is sufficiency of merit in it and therefore it is satisfying to God and there is no sin tonight in the life of the sinner in this building which exceeds on the meritorious cause of forgiveness and that is your hope and that is mine tonight in the presence of God it isn't that we aren't sinners we are and we are great sinners but Christ is a greater saviour and it's on that basis that forgiveness is granted by God to the sinner but here there may be something else father forgive them for they know not what they do don't know it now ignorance as you've heard often enough is not innocence

Jesus is not saying father if they were ignorant if they weren't ignorant if they knew what is going on they wouldn't do this now in a sense that was true as we shall see in a minute but the point I want to make is this that Jesus was not in any way suggesting that the law shouldn't be exercised on a person who is guilty just because he didn't know that he was committing a fault or a sin if you are driving through a built up area and you are going at 50 miles an hour and you are caught in a speed truck the fact that you didn't see the speed limit the fact that you were innocent or ignorant of the fact that you were ignorant rather of that being a built up area doesn't in any way make you innocent so here ignorance isn't suggested by Jesus

Christ to be innocent on the part of these people ignorance enslaves ignorance removes the restraints ignorance impels people to act wrongfully that's what ignorance does Paul himself said that concerning his own unconverted life I say so that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus Christ and that's what ignorance does it makes people do things that they shouldn't do and wherever ignorance reigns darkness reigns and this is the trouble of so many areas in our own land to this night even to this tonight when the light of the gospel of the knowledge of the

gospel comes it dispels the darkness of this ignorance and you and I ought to be thankful tonight that God has not left us in the darkness of our own ignorance but

Jesus here say Father forgive them for they know not what they do and maybe in that sense what the Lord is asking here is this that there may be a stay of execution these people he says deserve judgment Jerusalem desires that thy hand should come out upon them right now but I pray thee stay thy hand leave them for a little they are ignorant of what they're doing leave them lead them unto the light of the knowledge of the truth dawns upon them and this is how people are brought to forgiveness they are brought to see the significance of their actions they are brought to know the truth about themselves and they are brought to know the truth about God they are brought to know the truth about sin through the truth they are brought to know the truth about penitence they are brought to recognize that God forgives those who call upon him in faith the light of the truth sheds light for them upon their own acts and it sheds light for people upon the meaning and the significance of Christ on the cross the meaning of Golgotha and the meaning of Calvary the meaning of the nails the meaning of the sufferings and the meaning of his death and this is what happened

I don't know to how many of them but this is what happened to a significant number of these people shortly after this a month about six weeks after this when the spirit came at Pentecost some of these people were present there and they heard Peter sir and he says to my know he said that you did this through ignorance if he had known this he would not crucified the Lord of glory the Son of God when they heard these things their heart was cut and they cried out what shall we do and he said believe and ye shall be saved here then was the prayer of our Lord answered when the light and the truth dawned on these people and the significance of what they had done came home to them with conviction they cried out oh if only I had known if only I had known their ignorance was then brought to light and it was shattered the discovery they made was off they discovered their own corruption their own sinfulness their own need of grace and it's in that light

[32 : 30] I think that the prayer of Jesus is really to be understood father delay thy judgment till they discover the truth and you know maybe you are here tonight maybe you deserve there's no maybe about of course you deserve the judgment and the chastisement of God but God in his mercy delayed the execution of that judgment upon your life till you came to recognize the truth concerning your own sin the truth concerning your own spiritual state and the truth concerning the ability of God and the power of God to meet your sin and before we come to consider finally that prayer as an encouragement to ourselves tonight just notice forth this that is a pattern of the intercession of Christ to this day a pattern in this way because of the graciousness of the prayer gracious because these people didn't desire a prayer like this they were guilty they were unworthy they had rejected the law they had crucified the

Lord of glory they didn't want forgiveness and they hadn't asked for forgiveness and that is what the graciousness of the intercession of Christ that is where the graciousness of it lies that it embraces within its compass people who don't desire forgiveness and people who haven't asked for forgiveness look at every believer here tonight how many Christians in this church tonight deserved forgiveness from God none how many in a life of sin sought forgiveness none and yet the Lord prayed for them and he was heard in that he prayed it is a pattern also intercession of Christ because of the knowledge that he has of those for whom he prays they don't know what they're doing he says he knew more about them than they knew themselves he knew what was in man and he knows us tonight he knows our needs and he knows our failings he knows our openness to temptation he sees what we don't see tonight he sees the things that are hidden from our view he sees the assault that the enemy is preparing upon you even at this moment and he's interceding for you

Simon Simon say that he's to have you that he may sift you as weak Peter didn't know it but the Lord knew it and in all our circumstances tonight known to us and unknown the Lord praise us one who knows our prayer then thirdly this notice it is a pattern because of the constancy of his prayer this wasn't the first time he had pleaded with these men wasn't the first time he had pleaded for them he had told them over and over again who he was and why he was in the world he had pleaded with them to come to him all Jerusalem Jerusalem that stonest the prophets and killest those that are sent unto thee how often I would gather thee as a chick gathereth her brood under her wings but ye would not he had repeatedly confronted them and he had been repeatedly rejected and now they nail him to the tree but still he persists he will not let them go father forgive

them someone said that sin cannot tie the tongue of an interceding friend and oh how thankful you and I ought to be tonight for that that in the face of all our unfruitfulness in the face of all our unfaithfulness in the face of the many times we have sternered the overture of grace in the face of the blasphemy that has come from your heart and the unrighteousness that has emanated from your life in the face of all these things he has continued to intercede father forgive them for they know not what they do finally in that word this prayer as an encouragement to us tonight it encourages us because these people came to the knowledge of the truth it encourages us as well because a man like

Saul of Tashus came to say I obtained mercy because I sinned in ignorance against the law you know that when you if you are ill perhaps you know what it is to have had a serious illness and when that thing hits you you wonder if you will ever recover will you ever again be the same person will you be an inlet for the rest of your life or will you even live and then you hear of some person who had the same condition as yourself and made a recovery from that disease and that fills you with hope gives you encouragement so it is in forgiveness what remember the words of him what he has done for others he can do for you father forgive them spare them spare them and here are you tonight you are spared in this church tonight others whom you knew people with whom you lived are here no more they have been cut off but you are spared

God has not cut you are you are here to hear again and you are here to be encouraged to come for forgiveness you are here to be invited to come to the Lord you are in the room of mercy time has been given to you to come to the knowledge of the truth you may have been ignorant of yourself for a long time perhaps recently you have discovered the kind of person you are you have discovered how much you need God and his forgiveness and his pardon and his mercy if God had cut you off a year ago that would be true of you tonight but he has given you this extended period is it where he has spared you so that you may come to know these truths about yourself and hear once again this truth about him that there is forgiveness with God that you might fear and there's an encouragement also for those of you who are here tonight perhaps cast down perhaps entertaining the hope that God has already forgiven you perhaps your life hasn't been what it ought to have been perhaps you haven't been as faithful as you ought to have been and hear for encouragement if he prayed for forgiveness for his enemies how much more so are his friends embraced in the prayer of our Lord oh then listen to what the psalmist said to himself oh thou my soul why art thou cast down still trust

[41 : 11] God and your redemption is ever found with him together with the encouragement there's a warning Christ prayed that the execution of judgment would be delayed and it was but it wasn't delayed indefinitely forty years after this Jerusalem was put to the sword was raised to the ground it is true for us all that the time of opportunity and the stay of execution is going to come to an end of course the world goes on and on and on this is one of the arguments that Peter used writing in the second letter speaking to people you know he says you people you think that because

God is delaying his judgment things are going to go on and on and on and on and on there will never be an end to things as they are but you know and I know that that is not true for you and for me this world is going to stop in our experience things are going to come to an end but tonight you and I have a time for reflection a time for repentance and a time to cry for forgiveness a time for you to come to the knowledge of the truth concerning yourself as a sinner and concerning Christ as a saviour father forgive them for they know not what they do will you come to receive the forgiveness of God from his son of a or his son of as or his son his f daughter they are because they don't