

Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing

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Date: 13 March 2016

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[0 : 00] I know it's only a short part of Scripture to remember, but it'll help us just to keep it in the context in which it was said. So, the verse is Luke 23, verse 34, okay? Luke chapter 23, verse 34, and the verse is, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do, okay? For they know not what they do. Well, this is to continue the series of From the Garden to the Cross, and so we move this evening from the garden to the cross. We've made the transition. We've not focused on anything in between, simply so that we can focus on the words of Jesus. In the garden, they were the words of prayer. Here, the same, they are words of prayer to the Father, and we're making the transition from the garden words to the cross words. In the garden, we learnt some strong things, some difficult things, that actually there are some things that cannot be done in any other way than the way that they are being done by God. And we understood that we have to come to terms in some circumstances that there are some things that God cannot do. And that's not because of a limitation on God's side. It is, however, a limitation on our side. Or it is because it cannot happen any other way according to the will of God. And we saw that in the life of Jesus.

Father, can this cup not pass from me? And the answer is no. No, you have to drink it all. In other words, you have to be the one, you're the only one, who can take the judgment in order to remove sin, in order to save men and women, boys and girls. It cannot be done any other way. The second thing that we learnt is that on the cross, death is not the victor. Death doesn't win. Even though it looks, as you look at the cross and you see a dying Christ and a dead Christ, that death is one. But actually, death loses. Death is the victim. At the cross, we have the death in the death of Christ. Death dies.

And that's why, though, that's why, though, we've not yet seen death dead. Remember, the last enemy to be dealt with, according to Corinthians, we'll get there, we'll eventually, is death. Okay? But death has lost its victory. Oh, death, where is thy sting? It's gone. And so there's quite a lot of things that we learnt. Most importantly, I think we learnt this relationship between what God does, why God does it, and why it cannot be done in any other way. Or tonight, then, we move from the garden to the cross and come to what are regarded the first words or the first statement that Jesus spoke on cross. Now, there are seven sayings in total that Jesus said from the cross. The trouble is, is you can't get to all seven by reading one gospel alone. You have to read all the gospels. Even though you could probably get away without reading Mark, you would still need to read Mark to find out if there's anything in Mark that you've not read. So you understand that we have to read the entirety of all the gospels to get these seven sayings that Jesus spoke. Once you have the seven sayings, you then have a problem.

It's not a big problem, but it is one worth working through. And that is, what order do they go in? Okay, because you're reading the gospels and Jesus is saying these things, but because he's saying this in Matthew and this in Luke, which order do they go in? And what I'm going to give you this evening are the seven sayings that Jesus spoke from the cross, and I'm going to give you the order that I think that Jesus said them in. So Jesus begins, I think, here in Luke 23, verse 34, where Jesus says, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And the reason I believe that is the first saying, Luke 23, verse 34, is because, as we see from verse 33, they come to the place of the skull, and they crucify Jesus. And the next thing that we read after Jesus is crucified is, are these words, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Then it says, and they cast lots and divided his garments. The second saying from the cross is Luke 23, verse 43, when Jesus says to him, and he said to him, truly I say to you, this is Jesus speaking to one of the thieves, criminals, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. I can remember when I went to watch the film, The Passion,

I didn't know whether or not I should go, but I did, and you know, there's a lot of hype around it, a lot of discussion afterwards. But I was really interested, bearing in mind that it was a Roman Catholic who produced the film, where he was going to put the comma in this statement.

[5 : 13] Because where you put the comma in this statement can lead to you either believing in a place called purgatory or not, all based around one comma. And the comma is on which side of today do you put the comma? Today I say to you, comma, no, sorry, truly I say to you, comma, today you will be with me in paradise. Or truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. In other words, one leaves room for a place called purgatory, all because of where you put the comma, and the other one doesn't.

But Jesus says, truly I say to you, today, today you will be with me in paradise. In other words, the moment you die here on the cross, you're going nowhere else but with me. There's nothing else in between. Do you understand how important that is? So, just to get that, just to get that across.

The third saying is John chapter 19, verse 26 to 27. It's two sayings, in fact. It says that when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved, that is John, that's the most frequent way John is spoken of. John, I don't want to lay on thick with John, but John speaks about himself that way in his own gospel. Okay, John 19, when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved, well, that's John, standing nearby, he said to his mother, woman, behold your son. And then he said to the disciple, behold your mother. That's John 19, 26 to 27. The next saying is in Mark 15, verse 34, where it says at the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which means, my God, my God, why have thou forsaken me? That's Mark 15, verse 34. The next saying is John 19, 28. And it says after this, Jesus, knowing that everything was now finished, said to fulfill the scripture, I thirst. John 19, 28, I thirst. John 19, 30, when Jesus received the sour wine, this is why I think it's the next one, for obvious reasons, he said it is finished, or that very famous word that's often quoted in Greek, tetelestai, it's completely done, it is finished. And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

And then finally, in Luke 23, verse 46, Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And so there you have the seven sayings that Jesus spoke from the cross. And I want to suggest, I could be wrong, but I want to suggest that they are the order in which the seven sayings ought to be read. They seem to move with quite a smooth transition, if you were to piece them all together. So they're the seven, and I think they're the order in which they should be read. What we're going to concentrate on this evening is this one statement in Luke 23, verse 34, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. That's what I want us to look at together this evening. Now, when you read this statement, there is something here that you don't find surprising at all. And the thing that you don't find surprising is Jesus praying to his

Father, asking for others to be forgiven. In other words, Jesus, at the very moment where it was the toughest, he is practicing what he preaches. He is asking the Father that the very people who are doing this to him would be forgiven. That the very people who shouted out in the sort of mock courtroom, crucify him, crucify him, would be forgiven. That the crowd that went against him would be forgiven.

[9 : 17] That the Roman soldiers that nailed his hands to the cross and his feet to the cross, that they would be forgiven. That those who stood there and watched it all happen probably didn't say much, but nevertheless were glad that it was happening. Father, forgive them. But it's the next statement which is puzzling, which is the surprise. Because all these people have done all these things, and Jesus says, for they do not know what they do.

I find that quite shocking. Because I'm reading this and thinking, well, how can people do this and not know that they're doing it? What did Jesus have in mind when he says, Father, forgive them, you know, the people who are doing this, but they don't know what they're doing? How is that even possible? What does Jesus mean when he says, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing? Well, I think there are three parts to this saying. The first part, obviously, is that it's a prayer. Jesus is speaking to God the Father. It's another prayer that we get to hear.

Okay, we got the priestly prayer that we get to hear. We get the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and now we get this prayer from the cross. Jesus is speaking to his Father from the cross, and we get to hear what he's saying. And that is, Father, forgive the people who are doing this to me because they don't know what they're doing. The second thing is, is even though they don't know what they're doing, he's still asking that they be forgiven, which means that what they are doing still needs forgiveness. Okay? They don't know what they're doing, but even though they don't know what they're doing, what they are doing still needs forgiveness. Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do. Is Jesus suggesting the reason they should be forgiven is because they don't know what they're doing? I don't think so. It doesn't seem to read that way to me when you put it all together. But this one statement, that we have a group of people who are doing all these things, that they don't actually know what they're doing.

So what does Jesus mean? I'd like to think that if I was there in the day of Jesus, that if I was a disciple, I would be the one who didn't flee, yet they all fled.

And if I wasn't a disciple, I would at least be part of the crowd who wouldn't agree what was going on. Okay, because I refuse to see myself, even though it's probably wrong or untrue, that I could actually play any part in crucifying Jesus. Okay, to imagine for a moment that we could have got any enjoyment out of crucifying Jesus is something we can imagine, probably because of the distance between us and the cross, and also because now we are a believer. But it is quite possible, isn't it, that we could have easily have been a Roman soldier quite happily to nail, put nails through the hands of Jesus. That we could have easily have been one of the crowd shouting out crucify him. We could have easily been that person, couldn't we? We could have easily been the person who laid out the leaves at the beginning of the week, and then at the end of the week says, get rid of him. Give us Barnabas.

[12 : 28] Okay, we could have easily been that person. So it's not fair for us to think, well, I wouldn't have done it. I think you would have done it. And I think that you still do it now, just like I still do it now.

What am I speaking about? I think that we do things that are against God now, and we don't even know it. Just like these people here who are doing things against God, and they don't even know it. Even though they know what they're doing, Jesus is suggesting there's something that they don't know. And so here's the question. How is it possible for a person to not know what they're doing, even though they clearly know what they're doing? That's the question, isn't it? How can a person not know what they're doing when they clearly know what they're doing?

Is Jesus for a moment suggesting that the people who shouted crucify him didn't understand what they were saying? Is that what Jesus is suggesting? I don't think he's suggesting that at all.

Is Jesus suggesting that the Roman soldiers who nailed the nails into the hands of Jesus and into the feet of Jesus didn't know what they were doing? I struggle greatly with that. It seems to me that they did know what they're doing. So in what sense did they not know what they were doing, even though they knew what they were saying and what they were doing to Jesus? Because Jesus says, Father, forgive them, and I want to ask the question, for what?

For what? Because they don't know what they're doing. So what are you forgiving them for? So here we go. In the book of Leviticus, there is an offering called the trespass offering. I don't know if you've ever read Leviticus. It's not the type of thing you'd sit down and do on a Sunday afternoon, but I would give it a go nevertheless. In the early chapters, you get to read about all the type of offerings. One of the offerings you'll get to read about is one called the trespass offering.

[14 : 33] And the trespass offering is an offering that God's people made in case they sinned and didn't know it. In case they sinned unintentionally and they've done something and it resulted in a sin, and now they didn't mean it, but hey-ho, the sin's happened. Or they sinned in ignorance, that they've sinned and they've not known that it's a sin, and it's had to be brought to their attention. Now, God is making a provision here, and he's saying to the people, look, you're able to sin and not know that you sinned. So, because you're able to sin and not know that you sinned, I'm going to make a provision for you that you must offer an offering called a trespass offering for all those sins that you've committed that you don't know that you've committed.

Why? Because even though you don't know that you've committed them, they've still been committed. Okay? Ignorance doesn't get rid of the sin, it just gets rid of your knowledge of the sin.

Okay? Does that make sense? Ignorance doesn't get rid of the sin, it just means it gets rid of your knowledge of the sin. You don't know that you've committed the sin. You don't know that it's resulted in a sin. So, God is providing his people with this grace, saying, look, because it's possible for you to live in such a way where you can sin against me and not know it, I'm going to give you this offering which will do two things. One, it'll make atonement for the sin. Two, it'll also remind you that you're capable of sinning against me and not know it. And so, when Jesus comes here to the cross and he says, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do, you have this hint, this Old Testament image of the trespass offering. That Jesus Christ is himself the offering on behalf of people who are doing things not knowing what they are doing. His offering is his life for their life to God and all their sins that are committed in ignorance, their unintentional sins. Because Jesus clearly does state here that though they probably did know what they were doing, in one sense they didn't know what they were doing either. So, offering must take place because whether you know it or not, it's still a sin.

Okay? How many times has someone done something that's wrong and you don't pick them up on it because you know that they don't realize it? You don't say anything to them because you know that they did it in absolute ignorance. But you still know that it's happened. You still have to deal with the consequence.

Okay? And so, you don't say anything to them because you don't want to embarrass them, you don't want to show them up, you don't. But nevertheless, you're still left with the result. So, you understand that while it was done in ignorance, it still doesn't get rid of the actual outcome. And that's what Jesus is dying on the cross for, for every unintentional and ignorant sin that we have also committed.

[17 : 33] that it's possible that we commit lots of sins, which the atonement and the death of Christ covers every single day in our life, or at least every month, every year, and we don't even know it. God's made that type of provision, that when we pray, we ought also to pray. In fact, in Scotland, I think you're fond of saying, forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are debtors against us.

There's a couple of understandings there of whether it's a debt or a trespass. If it's a trespass, then we're asking God to forgive us for those things that we've done that we've not known that we've done. Okay? As we forgive others who have done things to us that we know that they've done, but they don't know. Okay? There is a provision for that in the Christian life, because it is absolutely possible for believers to do things that we shouldn't know out of ignorance.

Now, here's the thing. I've actually said this to you before, but this is something you really need to listen to. Sometimes I'm fearful of telling you the truth, and this is one of the reasons we didn't have the prayers of confession this morning, is because if I remove your ignorance by teaching you God's Word, you automatically become more culpable.

Okay? I'm going to say that again. If I remove your ignorance by teaching you God's Word, we automatically become more culpable, because now you know. And this is why you have the warning in Hebrews 6 of apostasy, of those who have tasted of the things to come with the spirit of the waters of baptism, and then cannot return again unto repentance, lest they put Christ to open shame. It is a fearful thing to remove someone's ignorance.

Terrible. Well, it needs to be done, but the sort of weight that goes behind it is enormous. So, the reason why there is such an offering as a trespass offering, and the reason why we have Christ on the cross, is because we need to be forgiven, and atonement needs to be made for all those sins that we do, that we don't know that we've actually done. What Jesus is pointing out here is that when people are ignorant, they're ignorant because they are sinful, and when you are sinful, sinful people acting sinfully never make a good decision. Okay? Sinful people acting sinfully make bad decisions, make horrible decisions. We do terrible things. There's sinful people acting sinfully, whether it be out of ignorance or whether it be on purpose, and Jesus has come to deal with that. The reason why removing their ignorance is so important is so that we don't make the bad decisions. It's so that we don't do the things that we once did. We don't walk in the ways that we once did. It's to remove all of that. This is spelled out for us in Corinthians. If you were to read the chapter on from which we read this evening, this is what you would read. Paul is speaking about the wisdom of God that comes from above, which the rulers of the age, that is the age that in the time of Jesus, the rulers in the time of Jesus, didn't understand. There is a wisdom from above, and they didn't get it. This is what Paul says, none of the rulers of the age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

[21 : 12] So this is how these people knew what they were doing, and yet not knew what they were doing. Okay? They knew what they were doing, but they did not know what they were doing. For if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. It was not that they didn't understand that they were crucifying Jesus. It was rather they didn't understand who Jesus was.

Okay? It was not that they didn't understand that they were crucifying a man. It was they didn't understand who that man was. So when Jesus says, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do, they did not know with absolute clarity that the person that they were crucifying was God the Son. Hence why they wanted the plaque taken down, the King of the Jews, off the cross.

They didn't understand who Jesus was, yet culpable, because they still crucified an innocent man. And though it's part of God's plan, Paul clearly says that if they had understood, if they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. If they had known, they wouldn't have done it. And so now we begin to understand what Jesus means from the cross.

Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing. They just don't know. I'm going to try and illustrate just how important this is for us. A couple of weeks ago, it may be a bit longer than that, we were looking in our Bible studies at the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Yes. My teaching would be that while the wheat and the tares, the wheat are the genuine believers sown by the Son of God, and the tares are unbelievers sown by the devil, they're sort of counterfeits. But even though they're counterfeits, they're still, they're recognized as counterfeits.

[23 : 17] They're counterfeits. And it's not that you don't know, the world may not know, but believers know that they're counterfeits because they can tell the difference. Jesus isn't saying at that point that it's impossible to tell the difference between a believer and an unbeliever. That just wouldn't make any sense. Jesus is saying in the parable this, that the Son of Man came, he sowed his seed, and he was the first one to do it. And then it produced wheat. That wheat is real believers, the sons of God. But then the devil came along and decided to sow his seed, and his seed sprouted into tares, the unbelievers, the weeds that are there. And what you have is you have this now field where there is both wheat and weeds growing together. And then the next thing is what you really ought to notice as well. What does the devil do? Well, the devil just walks away. And why does he walk away? Because the laborers are going to do the devil's work for him. Why does the devil walk away?

Because the believers are actually going to do the devil's work for him. Well, how is that the case? What is the next thing that the laborers say in that parable? Let's go and pull the weeds up.

Let's just go and get rid of it all. Okay, and the master, that Jesus has to say to them, no, not because you can't tell the difference, but if you do, you'll damage the wheat. The issue isn't clarity. The issue is entanglement. Okay? Now, here you have a bunch of laborers who have the right motives, who want to make God's place a pure place, who want to make God's place the pure kingdom that it ought to be. They have right motives, but wrong actions. Why? Because they're ignorant of the underlying reality. And the underlying reality is this, that you will do the devil's work when, even though you think you're doing the right thing, you're actually doing the wrong, because to do it, you will damage the wheat in doing so. You see how important that is?

So when Jesus is forgiving us of our ignorance, he's not just forgiving us of our ignorance, he's forgiving us in such a way where he needs to remove that ignorance, lest we cause a great deal of damage. Hopefully then you can see that it is possible for a person to do something that they know that they're doing, but at the same time not know what they're doing. Just like the laborers who set out to do the devil's work, thinking that they were doing the right type of work. For if the rulers of the age knew what they were doing or knew who Jesus was, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. It is absolutely possible for you to know exactly what you're doing and yet at the same time not know what you're doing. And Jesus says, Father, forgive them. There is forgiveness here to be found.

And so now it gives us a great deal of hope when we have to proclaim the message to people who don't see the things the way we see them. Now what is the problem with proclaiming the gospel? Well one of the biggest problems is, is that we're trying to get this truth that we know to be truth across to people who just don't see it. I mean, you couldn't make it any more difficult.

[26 : 45] Okay, we're trying to get them to see things that they don't see. We're trying to remove their ignorance and sometimes we almost want their ignorance to be removed first before they actually get to hear the gospel, but that's not the way that it works. The way that it works is that the gospel itself is the power of God that not only saves but removes ignorance. So how do we get through to people who don't see things the way that they ought to be seen? Well, Jesus answers it from the cross. Father, forgive them. Forgive them because they don't know. There's no other way to deal with people who don't know other than to release them through the forgiveness of Christ. There's just no other way to deal with them. And that's what Jesus does at the cross. In conclusion then, know this, that as a believer, it is your responsibility to meditate, to think upon, and to worship God.

And as you worship God and you think about the accomplishment of the cross, then your love for him will inevitably grow. But a Christian who doesn't grow, and this is one of the things when you're in a church for a long time, you see the Christians that grow and you also see the Christians that don't grow. And because you read the Bible, you understand the reasons why some Christians grow and you also understand the reasons why some Christians don't grow. This is one of the things that happens when you stay around the same person for a long time. You get to see things change, and you also get to see things that never change that really ought to.

But as we meditate on Christ, as we think of Christ, we can't help but change. This is how God changes us. The more we think about the death and resurrection of Christ, the more we fix our attention on Jesus, we are transformed from one degree of glory to the next. That is how it happens.

But of course, not everybody can handle the challenge. And most of us, because of our ignorance, play in the devil's playground. You ought to see from the parable of the wheat and the tares, that ignorance is like playing in the devil's playground. Idle hands are not the devil's workshop, though that could be true. The real workshop of the devil is our ignorance. Because out of ignorance, we do the very things that God doesn't want us to do. Sinful people acting sinfully make terrible decisions, really bad decisions. Because we've participated for well over a year now in the confession of our sin in the morning service, and this is right even though we didn't do it this morning, and I've given the reason for why that was the case. But we do it because we're no longer ignorant.

We recognize that things need confessing. We recognize that we have to be clean before God, and the way to get clean before God is to come clean confessionally before him. But is it possible for a person to be sat in the church and called into confession by God and then not confess?

[29 : 59] Well, yeah, of course it's possible. How do we know that? Because that's exactly what the Bible says. The man in Proverbs says that the man who, the psalmist speaks of a man in Proverbs who regards iniquity in his heart, and because he's done this, he doesn't get his prayers answered.

But what's the issue there? Not, I'm not getting my prayers answered? That's not really the issue. That is an issue. But the real issue is that sinful people acting sinfully make bad decisions.

What you're dealing with there is that when you hold on to iniquity in your heart, what do you think your next decision is going to be? It's going to be a bad one. Why is it going to be a bad one? Because it takes us into our ignorance. It blinds us to the things of God. We hide it, and as we hide it, it blinds us. And so sinful people acting sinfully make bad decisions. So we remember what Jesus did for a reason. We meditate upon what Jesus did for a reason.

We study what Jesus did for a reason, so that we would grow out of our ignorance, so that we would remember that we have been forgiven for the things that we didn't know that we were doing. We've been forgiven of our ignorance, and we are to be transformed out of that ignorance.

If the rulers of the day, remember, had this kind of wisdom that comes from God above, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. So you can see how important it is that we belong to a God who doesn't only forgive us in our ignorance, but he has come to take us out of it.

[31 : 31] And the way that he takes us out of it is by getting us to just concentrate and think upon everything that Jesus has done for us, and everything that Jesus is as a person. That's what changes a believer. The thinking constantly of who has saved you, how he saved you, why he saved you, and what it means now to be saved. That is how you change. Any other way, it's a bit like, as I said before, swimming up a waterfall. You're going somewhere, but it's not where you think, and you're getting nowhere fast. So remember the cross, but remember the cross for everything that it speaks of.

Christ, who gave his life for you to change you, to make you the person that God wants you to be, that it couldn't be done any other way than the way it's being done right now. Amen.

Amen.