

“Father, Forgive Them...”
by Rom A. Pegram (3/1/20)

I've had the privilege of being with several people as they were approaching death. A person's dying words sometimes simply express his/her needs: "Could you move the pillow?" or "May I have a drink?" Sometimes they express a concern for others—a final 'I love you' or 'It's going to be O.K.' A person's final words reveal what is on his/her heart at that time, and sometimes they reveal the nature of the person's faith, as well. I've told you before what my mother's last words were: "I'm happy!" We interpret that as JOY, because no one who is dying of cancer can really be happy about that situation. But she knew God's gift of JOY and PEACE in those moments, as many do who have put their faith in Christ... John Wesley is said to have uttered these words: "Best of all, God is with us." He had a deep conviction of God's presence...

In the case of crucifixion, the very act of speaking would be painful and would require a great deal of effort. It's believed that death comes to those being crucified by a combination of exhaustion, shock, buildup of fluids around the heart & lungs, as well as asphyxiation. So, for someone being crucified to even speak would require great effort, as the victim would have to pull themselves up by the nails in the wrists in order to expand the diaphragm. For all these reasons, words are sparse amongst those being crucified; yet Jesus felt it important enough to leave us with *seven last statements* (words) from his cross (over 4 Gospels). Let me share today's scripture with you (Luke 23:26, 33-34, NLT) and then we'll hear briefly from one who was there...

As they led Jesus away, a man named Simon, who was from Cyrene, happened to be coming in from the countryside. The soldiers seized him and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ... ³³ When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."
And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.

SIMON OF CYRENE READING:

We had spent two weeks sailing from the north coast of Africa to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. My sons were small boys, yet old enough to feel the excitement as we approached the Holy City. As our small caravan came over the last hill, Rufus let out a shout, "Look, Father, the Temple!" There she stood, the earthly palace of God, gleaming as she towered over the city. Though my family had lived in Cyrene for generations, Jerusalem was for us, as for every Jew, our heart's home.

The night before we joined our cousins in Bethany for the Passover Seder that marked the beginning of the Festival, sharing a meal and recalling God's salvation of our people. We ended that meal, as we did every year, praying for the coming of the Messiah. The next morning Rufus, Alexander, and I left early to spend the day in Jerusalem, visiting the Temple and then the Festival taking place near the markets.

As we approached the city we saw what appeared to be a parade coming our way. But soon we could see that this was no parade. There were Roman soldiers driving three criminals toward the rock quarry where criminals were crucified. Each of these criminals was carrying a heavy beam across his shoulders. One clearly had been badly beaten, for his body was bloodied and he looked as though he could barely walk. I took Rufus and Alexander by the hand and pulled them away from the road. I did not want them to see this terrible thing.

Just then the tragic figure, the sorely wounded man, stumbled and fell at my feet. I saw that his brow was wrapped in a crude crown of thorns, and suddenly I realized who this man was. This was Jesus of Nazareth, whom some claimed was the Messiah. He had been critical of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. I could not believe it—they had actually sentenced him to death!

Everything happened so quickly. I was lost in my thoughts when I heard one of the soldiers say, "You there! You carry his cross! And you, Jesus, get to your feet!" There was nothing I could do. I told my boys, "Stay close." I picked up the beam, far heavier than I had imagined, and pitched it over my shoulder. Then I reached out a hand to Jesus to help him up. He was clearly in pain. But there was still, in his face, a strength and determination. He looked me in the eyes, as if to thank me, and then he set his face toward Calvary.

It was only a five-minute walk to the place they called The Skull—Golgotha—where the Romans crucified their victims. Dropping the beam before the executioners, I stepped back, searching for my boys. And then we stood and watched as they assembled the cross. Then they stripped Jesus naked and laid him atop the beams. They stretched his arms to the sides before they drove the spikes into his wrists as he shouted in pain. Then they nailed his ankles into the side of the cross, one on the right and one on the left. Finally, they hoisted his cross up and in position and, as they did, he let out another shout of pain.

Because I had never been so close to a crucifixion, I had not realized what a horrible thing this was. Rufus began to cry. Alexander became nauseous. There were two thieves being crucified with Jesus, and the soldiers hoisted each one into the air. The Romans shouted to the crowd, "Take a look at your king now! This is a lesson from Rome—don't forget it!" The soldiers, laughing, began to throw dice for his clothing. Some in the crowd wept. Others hurled insults at him. The religious leaders stood with their arms crossed, a strange expression of satisfaction on their faces. And then Jesus took a deep breath, and someone in the crowd said, "Shh! He's about to say something." This is what he said: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

I would never forget these words. A dying man, tortured and crucified, praying that God would forgive his tormentors. What kind of man would do such a thing? His words would haunt me the rest of my life. Ultimately, they would be the reason I became one of his followers...

It's not surprising these first words—spoken by Jesus from the cross—were a prayer. What is surprising, haunting, and, for some, disturbing, is *what* he prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Let's begin this look at Jesus' first statement from the cross with a question: *Who is the 'they' Jesus was referring to?*

- He was, of course, praying for *the soldiers* who cruelly tortured him and crucified him and who were preparing to gamble for his clothes. "Father, forgive them."
- I believe he was also praying for *the crowd* who, even now, were beginning their verbal assault on him. "Father, forgive them."
- Then there were *the religious leaders* who, out of jealousy and spiritual blindness, conspired with the Romans to kill him. For these hypocritical leaders he prayed, "Father, forgive them."

Talk about sharing God's grace with others (even when you don't feel like it)! Can you believe this? Can you imagine such mercy—that *Jesus would pray for 'them' as he hung on the cross? It's one of the most powerful images in all of scripture!* But I think there's someone else Jesus prayed for too, *asking for God's mercy to be extended...*

- Folks, I believe that *WE* are among the 'them' Jesus was praying for as he said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

There's an old gospel hymn that asks the question (#288, UMH), "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answer is that, in a profound spiritual sense, *you were there!* The entire human race was there at the Crucifixion. The death of Jesus is an event that transcends time. And *Jesus' prayer gave voice to what Jesus was doing on the cross.* He was offering himself to God the Father as a sacrifice of atonement for the whole human race!

You and I were there ... when they crucified the Lord! In a sense, Jesus was praying, "Father, forgive Adam. Forgive Rom. Forgive those in church and those on the streets. Forgive those in the country & those in town. Father, forgive *them...*"

This is the power of the words Jesus cried out on the cross: They were prayed not only for those who stood by at the cross, but also for all of us! With that in mind, let me share 3 brief truths these first words of Jesus teach us:

WE NEED FORGIVENESS. The fact Jesus devoted one of his seven last statements to a prayer for forgiveness tells us something, doesn't it? **WE NEED FORGIVENESS!** It wasn't just those around the cross on that day that needed forgiveness; *we need forgiveness, too!*

The truth is ... we need forgiveness because we struggle with *sin*. Now, sin is a word we'd rather not use today. We prefer 'mistake' or 'slip-up.' But, the Greek/Hebrew words for 'sin' in the Bible mean to 'stray from the path' or 'miss the mark.' The implication, of course, is that God has a path or way we were intended to be on, but we don't follow that path. Instead, we stray from it. Let me give you an example...

When I was a kid, we lived in the Methodist parsonage in South Wayne. I was in grade school. And why I thought this was a good idea, I don't know, but one time I couldn't resist the tomatoes in our back-door neighbors' garden. One day, I snuck over

there, picked those tomatoes, and used them as ammo against my siblings. Folks, I was probably only in 3rd or 4th grade ... and *I was a thief!* (And I was a liar, because I denied doing this the first time I was asked. And then the water-boarding started... 'Kidding!)

Now, I never did that again ... but I've done several things since then that I'm not proud of. Unfortunately, as we become adults, we don't stop sinning. Our sins merely become more sophisticated, and we become more adept at justifying them. Sin is a problem we never outgrow; it's part of our humanness. So, *we need forgiveness...*

Now, I want you to hear me clearly today. The central message of the gospel is *NOT* sin; its objective is not to beat us over the head with that fact. When Christianity speaks of sin, *the aim is not to make us feel guilty but to help us discover the grace and healing mercy of God* we so desperately need! ... For us heart patients, it's kind of like chest pains and shortness of breath; you don't want to focus on that. You want to focus on the cure (surgery). In a similar way, the gospel's focus is not on sin; sin is simply the diagnosis. The gospel's focus is on the cure—*God's grace* (forgiveness) and gift of salvation, which leads me to this...

GOD'S GRACE IS A GIFT (REMINDER). We learn this, too, from these first words of Jesus from the cross. Paul describes it this way (Rom. 5:6-8, NLT): "When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷ Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

The idea that Jesus was praying from the cross for our forgiveness, and that he was—even before we repented—dying for us, is *mind-bending!* Before you were born, God knew the sinful things you would do (tomatoes) and forgave you in advance. On the cross, Jesus suffered and died to save you from those sins. But, as we learned earlier, you still have to do *your part*, don't you? You have to accept this gift of forgiveness & salvation by asking Christ into your life. (Remember: LOVE begins when we let go!) And finally...

JESUS INTENTIONALLY MODELED FORGIVENESS! God's grace is not only a gift; it's also an example for us...

I don't know if you've ever thought about this or not, but Jesus could have prayed this prayer to himself. Instead, he chose to pray it *aloud*. He wanted us to 'overhear' his prayer. He not only wanted us to know we're forgiven; he wanted to teach us what it means to be a follower of his. *Those of us who choose to follow Jesus must practice forgiveness as he did!* Listen to these examples of Jesus' teaching on mercy & forgiveness:

- Matthew 5:7 (Sermon on the Mount) – "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."
- Matthew 6:12 (CEB) – When they asked Jesus how to pray, he said this: "Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who

have wronged us.” And two verses later (Matt. 6:14,CEB), Jesus also taught them: “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”

Jesus actions and our following suit must go together! Jesus knew this: *How can you know God’s mercy when you are unwilling to extend mercy?* Folks, people who regularly forgive others find it easier to believe and trust in the grace of God because their hearts have been enlarged by grace, and they freely offer it to others...

Suffice it to say, on the cross *Jesus’ first words demonstrate God’s willingness to forgive our sins*, and they call us to become people who follow suit, so we too pray as Jesus did, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing.”

Can you pray that prayer for others yet? Once again, LOVE was behind everything Jesus did! Are you now willing to do the same? Are you willing to follow in Jesus’ path? The truth is, even Jesus’ disciples struggled with forgiveness; that’s why Jesus had to teach on it so much. If you’ve ever struggled with forgiveness, keep your eyes on Jesus ... on the Cross. He’ll show you. Just keep watching...