



Father, Forgive Them
Luke 23:26, 33-34
March 5, 2017 Diane Christopher

It is said that the last words of people as they lay dying tell you the character of that person. So I looked up some last words of some famous people:

Oscar Wilde: Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.

Humphrey Bogart: I should have never switched from Scotch to Martinis.

Thomas Jefferson: Is it the Fourth? (He died on July 4, 1826.)

Grover Cleveland: I have tried so hard to do the right.

Anna Pavlova, ballerina: Get my swan costume ready.

Malcolm X (speaking to his assassins): Let's cool it brothers...

Edgar Allen Poe: Lord help my poor soul.

Leonardo da Vinci: I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.

As you know, the Bible records the words of Jesus as he is dying on the cross. Over the next six weeks, during the season of Lent, we will study these final words of Jesus.

Apparently, to talk while being crucified is very difficult. The person on the cross must lift oneself up in order to open the diaphragm, and that is done by pushing on the feet, which have been nailed to the cross. The pain that is experienced in that effort must be excruciating.

Therefore, words spoken from the cross are very important because it takes so much effort and pain to say them. We will study the words Jesus saved for that cross. They are spoken to us, and as followers of Christ, we emulate. How can we not.

Turn with me to our scripture passage today. Before we hear Jesus' words from the cross, let us pray.

Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

Luke 23:32-34 - **32** Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. **33** When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. **34** Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The Word of the Lord....

The first words out of Jesus’ mouth from the cross: Father, forgive them. Jesus was forgiving the soldiers as they were killing him.

What do we do with that?

Is this just something from history that we find interesting? Or, is it for us, too?

How do we forgive those who have hurt us the most?

Do we have to?

I must admit I did not want to do the sermon on these particular words of Jesus. I did not want to talk about forgiveness - again – I seem to have talked about it often this past year. But it was the first chapter of our all-church study, and Paul said I get to do the first sermon in this series, so here we are. Again.

I thought I didn’t have anything more to say about forgiveness, but when you hear those words “Father, forgive them” from the lips of Jesus while he is being killed, it makes forgiveness so much more important and crucial for us.

Jesus’ first words from the cross were a prayer and an act of grace. Jesus doesn’t offer a word in his own defense. He doesn’t condemn anyone. He doesn’t turn against God. He doesn’t attempt to save himself (although the Bible says he could have). He doesn’t blame anyone. Instead, he forgives.

The soldiers didn't ask for that forgiveness. They were not repentant. They didn't articulate any faith. They didn't deserve forgiveness. They believed they were in the right. They will make no restitution. Yet, Jesus extended forgiveness to them anyway because it is what Jesus came to do.

The Old Testament helps us understand this. The Day of Atonement is a holy day for the Jewish people, which they still honor today. On the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament, there was a special ceremony. Two goats were brought to the temple. One of the goats was to be sacrificed; the other would become a scapegoat.

The one to be sacrificed was brought before God, the sins of the people symbolically placed upon the goat, and the goat killed and burned. This was a picture, a drama, to help the people understand that sin is serious and it is deadly.

The priest would then lay his hands on the other goat, the "scapegoat," and pronounce the sins of the people on that goat. The goat would then be cast out into the wilderness as a visual image of the people's sins being carried away. It is a drama of God forgiving their sins.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus for the first time, he said, "Look the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Maybe he should have said, Look, the Goat of God, who takes away the sin of the world (but it doesn't sound as beautiful)!

Scripture says while Jesus hung on the cross, all our sins were laid on him...just like they were laid on that goat. And Jesus says, "Father, forgive them." Our sins...taken away, even the unrepentant soldiers.

No one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

Scripture says while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Before we even realized our wrongdoing, Christ gave us mercy and forgiveness. ..from the cross. Jesus wasn't just praying for the soldiers when he said "Father forgive them." We are the "them," too. You. Me. Us. Forgiveness has already been given to you.

There are 2 great themes in scripture: (1) we need forgiveness, and (2) God is willing to do so. "The LORD , the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7a).

God forgives because that is the kind of God God is.

So, we respond. God's grace is not only a gift, but it is an example for us to follow. But, oh, it is so hard to do, maybe one of the hardest things to do in life. C.S. Lewis once said, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."

I am going to make this even harder. Are we called to forgive those who have wronged us even if they don't care, won't say they are sorry, or would do it again if they could? Yes, because that is when Jesus forgave the soldiers. God is asking us to extend to those who have wronged us what has already been extended to us.

O God, help us do so.

Jesus didn't wait to forgive you. He didn't wait until after things got better and you straightened up your act. He didn't wait until you sufficiently felt bad for what you've done. He prayed for our forgiveness when we weren't sorry or repentant. Father, forgive them. Jesus isn't just praying for the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. He is praying for you and me. If we've been forgiven like this, then we are called to forgive other people like this, too.

O God, help us to forgive.

We live in a broken world. You are going to be wronged, hurt and sinned against. Some of you have been wounded and your wounds run deep. As Christians, we are called to be the most forgiving people in all the earth. We are called to forgive no matter the wrong, because no matter what our sin, God forgave us.

O God, help us do so because we cannot do it on our own.

So we fall before the cross in gratitude and in awe of the grace and mercy and love and forgiveness extended to us. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to do the same to others...even as they hurt us with their words and deeds.

I end with an application from our Final Words study: Take a moment to think about people who have wronged you. Then pray this prayer:

Father, forgive them. Father, you know their heart, and you know my pain. I pray for those who hurt me. Forgive them, and heal me. Amen.

Now, as followers of Jesus Christ, who are learning how to forgive, I ask you to stand and declare your faith together as Body of Believers. Linda Jorn will lead you in The Apostle's Creed found on page 14 in our hymnals. We will do the traditional version....