

Father, Forgive Them

The cross had been erected, the flesh had been torn, hanging by spikes in his hands, and Jesus labored for every breath. There wasn't a muscle in his body that wasn't burning. His eyes stung from the mixture of blood and sweat. All those who he had been teaching for three years were gone; only a handful of friends stood there at the foot of the cross. Oh, but the taunters and the revilers, they were there; they were shouting out "Come on down, King of the Jews. Ha! Some Savior! He saved others, why can't he save himself?" Through blurred eyes, Jesus looked down upon that murmuring rabble; and let his eyes drift heavenward and he uttered the short prayer; "Father, please forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Tell me, from where does that kind of love come from? Can you explain to me the origin of that source of forgiveness? Contrast that to us. We lose our cool when somebody cuts us off in traffic or bumps into our grocery cart or when the kids aren't ready on time. Look at Jesus. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Who would have criticized Jesus if he had one little word of concern for himself? Maybe saying, "I'm innocent, what about my rights?" Or even a word of criticism, "Surely, you'll be sorry" would have been appropriate. No, when his pain was most severe and when he stood on the brink of being separated for the first time in all eternity from his Father, about whom was he thinking? He was thinking of the sins of the people who had put the six-inch spikes through his hands and who had spit on his face.

Tell me, what kind of love is that? Where does it come from? What kind of marriage would you have if you had that kind of love that was totally consumed by the needs and the desires of someone else ahead of your own? What kind of Christians would we be if we had that kind of love for one another? We get so upset by the trivial, but by contrast, Jesus, during the most painful, unfair and unjust death imaginable prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." That short, but poignant prayer is recorded for us in Luke 23:34. It is the first of seven statements recorded from the lips of Jesus while he hung on that cross.

These seven statements are more than just seven statements. They are like the tab or the index pages on a huge notebook, just a word or two, but behind it there is a volume of information waiting to be understood. These sayings on the cross are like the sign that states, "Power Cable Buried Here." If you could dig down just a little bit, you would find this unimaginable source of power waiting for your life. These statements from the cross summarize who Jesus is. If you can understand them fully, you'll understand the capsulated summary of everything he said and everything he did.

The most basic statement the cross makes is **Forgiveness**, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Yes, he was praying for those who put the spikes in his hand and who led the illegal trial, but he was praying just as much for those the Hebrew letter said would crucify him afresh.

I heard a story of two fellows who were on a boat out in the ocean and the boat went down, but they managed to work their way onto a life raft and they floated for a few hours before being picked up by the coast guard. One of the two fellows on that life raft was tremendously grateful. He was just showering the captain of the boat with praise, and he shook hands with every crew member. He said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." The other fellow was kind of quiet. He said, "Well, you know Tom, don't make such a big deal out of it." When they got to the shore, the news reporter was there and he interviewed that first fellow and he was crying with tears of gratitude. The other fellow didn't want to be interviewed. The newsman looked at the first fellow and said, "What's with your buddy?" And he said, "Well, to tell you the truth, he thinks he could have got out on his own."

It's interesting isn't it, when you think you can get out on your own and you're not really rescued? I think the very first mark of a genuine Christian, a true convert to Christ, is one who knows he was a "goner," one who talks and behaves in a manner that says, "I was on my way down, I was holding up the third finger, and I was about to drown in my sin. Jesus Christ saved me."

What's sad is, across this land and across the world there are hundreds of thousands of folks sitting in pews, smug and proud. They wouldn't say it out loud, but down deep they're thinking, "I'm doing pretty good on my own. I'm paddling that boat right well." They look around at all the other folks who aren't sitting in those pews thinking, "I'm a pretty good guy, never killed anybody, never could hit anybody, I don't curse, I don't smoke, I don't chew, I don't run with those who do." They're kind of just proud of how well they're paddling their boat on their own.

I can ask two questions to anybody and learn a whole lot about their theology, learn a whole lot about what they think about Jesus and about all spiritual things.

1. "Are you going to heaven?" They'll either say, "Yes, no, or somewhere in the middle—not sure, hope so, don't know," that type thing. You can find out a lot.
2. To those who answer yes, "how are you going to get there?" What I've found over 50 percent of the time when I've asked that question, the number one response is: "Well, I've been about as good as most people I know." You know what they're saying: "I'm paddling that boat hard." Contrast that to the Apostle Paul who said I am the chief of sinners. O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death."

Paul said that because he understood forgiveness. It's been said about Paul that he only understood two things: He knew that he was lost, and he knew that he was saved. When you read his epistles, his understanding comes through every single line. That's what every genuine Christian knows, he or she knows they were lost, they were desperate and all of a sudden someone threw them a lifeline.

Consider this simple prayer that Jesus uttered, "Father, forgive them, for they know what they do." What does that forgiveness entail? How does it apply to you and me? What are its characteristics?

1. Forgiveness that Jesus offered and prayed for on the cross is given.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) Did you hear the contrast there? "For the wages," that's the salary, "is death," that's the payment of sin "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The first thing we need to remember about the forgiveness that Jesus offered on the cross and still offers from heaven's throne room is that it's something that we don't earn. His grace, his forgiveness is a gift.

Let me illustrate that and show you why that's important. Think right now and exclude salvation, the cross or things we consider spiritual, vertically given, what's the most precious earthly gift that you have right now? What is that? Some of you might say it's a newborn child, that's the most precious gift. Some of you would say healthy family, that's the most precious gift. Excluding salvation, the love of my wife is the greatest gift I have. But if I were to say, "You know honey, you've loved me now for 17 years and I really appreciate that. I want to pay you for that love. I wish I had more cash on hand, but I have about \$1,700. I could give you about \$100 a year for all the love you've given me up unto this point. Let me give you \$1,700. We're going to work it into our budget right now. I'm going to pay you another \$25 a month from here on out for the love that you're giving me. Now what do you think she would do?

Well, first of all, she would think it's a joke. I mean she'd laugh, "What are you doing—come on?" Then if I pressed the issue and said, "No, no, this is what I really want to do. I want to pay you for that gift." She would look at me like I'm absolutely absurd. Folks, that is absurd because a gift is not something you can buy. It's not something you can earn. If you can, it's not a gift; it becomes a salary, a wage.

Read Romans 6:23 again, "For the wages..." the salary is attached to sin, it is death, "but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ." I'm amazed at how many millions of people reverse those two. They think that the lostness they have, the spiritual death they are going to die, is just a bad break or just the fickle, capriciousness of a funny God and that the salvation they're going to have, they're earning day by day because of how good they are. They've got it exactly reversed. The thing we're earning is hell through every sin we commit. The gift is forgiveness.

What do you do when you receive a gift? You say, "Thank you" and you act in gratitude. The bigger the gift, the longer and the more you act in gratitude. By attempting to pay for a gift:

- a. You insult the giver. God is insulted if we try to pay for the gift of forgiveness because we're reducing him to a hireling. We reduce him to a sales clerk. We prostitute him by trying to barter love, and God will not be reduced to that. He reacts strongly to that and he always has. In fact, that's what angered Jesus so much about the Pharisees. They thought they were paying for their salvation. They were earning it. Some people think that today.

There is a world of difference between attainment and atonement. Attainment is something you work to achieve. Atonement is something that is given to you. The word atonement means to pay a debt that one is unable to pay for himself. Jesus offered the atonement. God, the Son, knows we cannot get out of our own mess. So, he offered himself as a sacrifice and on that cross he pleads: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Oh, but the human spirit, it just wants to be saved by attainment. Do you know why? Because we live in a sin-stained world that doesn't operate by atonement, it operates by attainment. We know the answers to these old slogans though, "There ain't no such thing as a free what? Lunch?" and "Look out for number one!" Sure, we all know those, that's the way the world operates, so we want to save ourselves by our own good works. The question I ask anybody who has that philosophy is how many good works does it take then to be saved? What's the quota? What's the standard? You insult the giver when you try to pay for the gift.

- b. You create a business relationship. If you say, "Here, you give me this, I'll give you that." That's an exchange, a swap, a trade, a business transaction. When you try to pay back God's gift, you reduce a Father/Child relationship to an employer/employee relationship, and that is so short of what God wants.

Let me illustrate that. Each month I make a mortgage payment to somebody in Chicago that I've never seen. He or she has never seen me. Now do we have a relationship? Yes. Does he care if I've got appendicitis? Or if my marriage starts to get in trouble? No! All they care about is getting their's. It's a relationship, but it's shallow. It's just on paper. If I come to a contractual agreement with God, "Now I'll do this, you provide me with heaven," then I'm making a business relationship with God. He wants to be my Father, not my employer. He wants to love me and bathe me and forgive me like a perfect dad. That's what he wants.

- c. When you try to pay for a gift, it reveals your own misunderstanding. You just don't have the concept. Forgiveness is given.

2. Forgiveness that Jesus pleaded for and offered is radical.

It is radical, extreme and extraordinary. The gift is a radical substitution. "For God made him who had no sin to be sin for our sakes, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) That's my favorite verse in the Bible because that tells what the cross is all about. Who is the him in 2 Corinthians 5:21? You know who it is. It's Jesus, right? Let's say it again putting Jesus in for him. "For God made Jesus who had no sin to be sin for our sakes, so that in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God."

As an illustration let's say you are standing in Judgment one day. God says "how many sins did you commit?" You reply with bowed head, "Oh not many. Lord." He says, "Well, think real hard." "Well, there was that one time I didn't help the lady across the street. Then there was another time, I didn't honor my father and mother like I should. And I ..." He said "Let's just look at the books." The book of your life is opened, it is stained with sin. Everything you did or said is recorded there, your good deeds as well as your sins. You really do not want anyone looking at it. Suddenly Jesus walks up and stands beside you clean and white as snow. Remember, God made him who had no sin to be sin so that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God. Do you want to know Christian how you're going to look before the Father on the Judgment day? Unless Jesus has cleansed you by His Blood and has substituted his life for yours, it will be ugly and not welcomed. If His Blood has cleansed you and you remain in Him, Jesus will stand there holding all your sins. It is a radical substitution.

3. The forgiveness is arranged.

It wasn't accidental or happenstance; it is part of an eternal plan. When I was growing up, I heard this illustration used a lot for the cross. Maybe you've heard it. The story is of a fellow who operated a mechanical bridge that allowed trains to go across the bridge, but would turn at certain times so ships could pass by on the river below. One time the bridge was turned, but all of a sudden word came and he could hear a train coming. And he was going to need to move that bridge back in line so that passenger could make it across and not be destroyed. But the problem was that day he had brought his little three-year-old son to work. The son had gotten away from him and he looked for Junior and he was down in the mechanism of the bridge, in the gears itself, the little boy was playing on the gears and now with just minutes, he didn't have time to go down and get the boy and still close the bridge. He had the choice of saving the train and hundreds of passengers or throwing the switch and crushing his son. Anguished by that decision, he threw the switch. Our God gave His Son on the cross so all who would come to him could be forgiven and saved.

Now that's a powerful illustration, but there's one main part of it that's not right at all. It's inaccurate. See if you can figure out where the inaccuracy is. "Men of Israel, listen to this, Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and

foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”
(Acts 2:22-23)

What’s the fallacy of the illustration that I’ve heard all my life? Here it is. The cross, unlike the engineer sitting up in the plant, the cross was not a knee-jerk reaction by some ecclesiastical engineer who saw the world spinning out of control. The cross was part of the original blueprint. The plan was in the works the minute that Eve’s teeth sank into the fruit. It was there before when Jesus came to this earth, was born or crucified. The shadow of the cross came nearer with every step he took.

Have you ever stopped to think that Jesus was the one who put life into the seed that became the tree from which his cross would be hewed? Jesus was the one who put the iron ore in the earth from which the spikes would be smelted? Jesus was the one who breathed life into the embryo that would be named Judas in his mother's womb, who would come out and betray him? (Colossians 1:15-16)

What was it like to plan your own execution? I don't know, I don't have any idea, but it was not an accident. I know that he knew from the beginning that the only way his bride could be dressed in white and live forever in heaven was if he himself would die for her sins. Folks, knowing that I better understand why he could look down from that cross having always known he was going to hang there and say: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." You see the love that offered that prayer came from the throne room of heaven where love has its very origin. The cross and the forgiveness were no accident. They were arranged.

4. Forgiveness is continuous.

I'll tell you something interesting about this one sentence prayer from Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." The imperfect tense of the verb is used, indicating a repeated action in the past tense. Well in other words, more literally, the translation is Jesus kept saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Can you see that? I can see him muttering it all the way through the six hours between each of the statements: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

How appropriate because though his sacrifice was once and for all, the forgiveness stemming from that cross is perpetual. Hebrews 9:26 says, "If we walk Christians in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7) I love that word "all", don't you? A little bitty word, but it means so much—cleanses us from all sin—all our sin before we came to Christ in baptism, all our sins after if we walk in the light.

Two verses later "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) Then two verses John says, "My little children, I write these things to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin ... we have Jesus Christ, the Righteous, as an advocate for our sins." (1 John 2:1) I want you to see as a Christian, if we are willing to walk in the love and the will of Jesus, not in rebellion to his will, if nurturing sin, trying to hide it in some closet away from God, but instead openly confessing our shortcomings and mistakes, then we are forgiven continuously. We are being washed daily so that we are clean and stay white. Then God lets me in.

5. Forgiveness is exemplary, a pattern to be imitated. Jesus empowers us to forgive others around us. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) The key to living a forgiving life toward other people is the realization of your own forgiveness stemming from that cross. Forgiving people are forgiven people. There are no exceptions.

The following acrostic may help you remember God's gift of His Grace.

G-iven
R-adical
A-rranged
C-ontinuous
E-xemplary

We accept that gift when we come to that cross. Scripture tells us how. God doesn't make us climb mountains or run a marathon. What he says to us is simply, I want you to put your trust in Christ, come to that cross in faith, believe that Jesus, God in the flesh, died on that cross for you, confess this belief before men, die to your sins and be buried with Him in water baptism at which time I, God, will give you a new life free from sin having been washed clean by the blood of Christ. Amazing Grace Lesson #1251 Steve Flatt February 25, 1996