
The Meaning Of Forgiveness

“When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’” (Luke 23:33, 34a).

The Gospel writers did not say much about that awful moment when Jesus was nailed to the cross. In fact, they only alluded to it. Each gave a glancing notice which was three to four words in length. For example, Luke simply said, “. . . there they crucified Him . . .” (Luke 23:33). Skipping over the grim and ghastly details, the Scriptures move quickly to what Jesus did and said during those long, torturous hours when He was hanging on the cross.

We read of seven statements Jesus made while He was on the cross. Three times He spoke to God in prayer, and four times He spoke to people around the cross. In His prayers, He talked to God about those who were crucifying Him (Luke 23:34), about His feeling of forsaken-ness (Matthew 27:46), and about releasing His spirit to Him (Luke 23:46). When He addressed those around Him, He spoke to the thief beside Him, giving him the hope of Paradise (Luke 23:43); to His mother and John the apostle, asking John to see to her care (John 19:27); to a nameless person beneath Him who responded to His need for a drink (John 19:28); and to the world at large, as He announced the completion of His mission with the victorious words “It is finished!” (John 19:30).

Appropriately, one of the first statements Jesus uttered from the cross was one of His three prayers. He had prayed daily in life; we would naturally expect Him to pray during His final hours. In this first prayer, He asked God’s forgiveness for the ones who had orchestrated His crucifixion. Those who have carefully studied this prayer consider it one of the most beautiful

sentiments ever prayed. With a grace that had always been characteristic of His heart, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34a).

Most likely, this intercessory prayer was voiced during the nailing of His hands and feet to the cross, or shortly thereafter. It could have been prayed both during and after the time He was fastened to the cross. He may have prayed the prayer over and over again, for the verb translated “was saying” in Luke 23:34 is an imperfect verb (*ἔλεγεν, elegen*), which conveys past tense continuation. In other words, it was the continual desire and action of Jesus during the early part of the crucifixion to pray for the forgiveness of those who were afflicting Him with this terrible pain.

When Jesus was affixed to the cross and His instrument of torture was firmly planted in the hole prepared for it, spectators began milling around the crosses. Some had come to look in silence at the grotesque sight of men hanging on crosses, while some had come to hurl abusive words at Jesus (Matthew 27:39, 40). The stench of death was in the air, and the breezes carried the odor of human blood.

Apparently, at some point early in this great tragedy—as Jesus anticipated the prolonged, agonizing death that awaited Him—He began to voice this prayer. In the greatest act of grace men have ever known, He gathered His strength and continued to intercede for all those who had participated in crucifying Him.

His prayer will never be forgotten as long as the world stands. It not only gives us a defini-

tion of forgiveness by implication, but it also gives us the beautiful dimensions of forgiveness by His example.

During His ministry, Jesus had often discussed forgiveness (see, for example, Matthew 6:14, 15); but on the cross, as He prayed this prayer, He unforgettably demonstrated it. To Jesus, a forgiving spirit was an essential attitude for spiritual living. More than any other character trait, He implied, this quality of the heart reveals the heart of God.

True forgiveness occurs when the injured person resolves that He will no longer hold the sinful word, wicked deed, or sinister thought against the person who committed it. From the moment that Jesus phrased this prayer, a new era of abundant living entered into the world—an era of spiritual enlightenment concerning the wonderful meaning of forgiveness.

Furthermore, because Jesus prayed this petition, the world will always know the dimensions of forgiveness. It will never have an excuse for living with hate. His prayer turns forgiveness in all directions, as if it were a prism, allowing the heavenly light of His love to shine through from every angle.

Let us press near with a reverence that befits the holy sacrifice of our Savior and look carefully at this prayer. We will observe the various sides of forgiveness reflected in it.

First, notice the inward dimension to forgiveness. Jesus' prayer shows that forgiveness, in its human dimension, must begin in one's heart before it can move out to the one who has committed the wrong. The prayer indicates that what really matters is not what people do to us, but the kind of attitude we have about them and what they have done to us.

Forgiveness begins with being magnanimous of heart in regard to the wrong that has been done to us and the one who perpetrated it. It is the attitude that says, "As terrible as this deed of yours is, I will not hold it against you. I will send away this awful act even as one would release a bird from its cage, gently nudging it out and making it fly away. When I look at you, I will no longer let your betrayal stand between us. I will erase it from your book of deeds. I will forgive you and begin praying for you."

Jesus had been mistreated in every conceiv-

able way. He had been falsely accused, underhandedly condemned, and brutally crucified. Through all the mistreatment of His entire life, His heart had been free from any sin; yet He was being crucified as the worst of criminals. In spite of this, thinking of those who had sinned against Him, Jesus lifted His voice to God, asking Him to forgive them. He did not strike back, answering railing for railing or curse for curse. He did not respond to their cutting criticisms; He prayed for them in a spirit of forgiveness. Instead of castigating them, He covered their dark crimes and their wicked hearts with His compassion.

When someone sins against us, that sin is his problem with God. Our attitude toward the offender and his sin is *our* problem before God. Let us not hold any grudges as we stand before the One who loved us so much that He gave His Son to die for our sins.

Second, notice the outward dimension to forgiveness. Jesus' prayer shows that forgiveness, in its relational dimension, goes across to the one who has sinned and challenges him by making him look at the beauty of forgiveness. It goes out from our hearts to the hearts of those who have wronged us. It may not always affect the wrongdoer, but most of the time it does.

When someone sins against you, you know that a tragedy is taking place in the heart of that person: The one who is sinning against you is telling you about it by his misbehavior. Through his actions, he is crying out for help. He is saying by his evil words or deeds, "I'm in trouble. I've allowed sin to take over my life. I need someone to show me what God is like. I am trapped in the valley of death, and I need someone to show me the path to life! Can someone have mercy on me and show me how to treat other people in this world? Will someone help me put my life back together?" When you respond to the person who has wronged you with love and compassion, with sensitivity and lovingkindness, you are addressing his deepest problem. Responding to him with love is the supreme act of grace that you can extend to him.

Will that person who has wronged you be moved by your compassion? Usually, he will be. Who can look into the face of a person who has said, "I have completely forgiven you," and

not be deeply affected? However, if he is not affected by your love, you still have made the right response to his sin. This is the way Jesus handled mistreatment, and this is the way we should deal with it. Why do we offer mercy? We do it because of who we are, not because of what we think might happen in the other person when he sees that we have forgiven him.

Forgiveness is one of the most beautiful attitudes one person can have toward another. It is one of the finest gifts you can give to another human being.

Stephen was misjudged and unfairly condemned. He was stoned for his righteous living. At a young age, his life was taken from him; he was taken away from his family and the church. His future on earth was violently snuffed out by hate-filled people. What did he do concerning their crime against his life? The sin they committed was their problem with God, but his attitude about what they were doing to him was his problem before God.

Stephen remembered what Jesus did in a similar situation and responded to the angry mob with love, forgiveness, and mercy. As they threw the stones and he fell to his knees under their blows, he prayed for them, saying, "Lord, do not lay this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60). By dying with such a noble spirit, he gave the world a view of God's heart that it can never forget. Someone has said, "Had Stephen not prayed, Saul would not have preached." No one can look at genuine forgiveness and take it lightly—not even the worst persecutor of all time. Stephen's spirit of forgiveness released into the world a beautiful aroma that will linger until the end of time.

Third, observe the upward element of forgiveness. The prayer shows that forgiveness, in its divine dimension, must be sent up to God. Jesus began His prayer with the word "Father." He lifted up His voice in supplication to God.

Forgiveness is something that can only take place in the heart of God. When we sin, we sin against God. After sinning, we can only say with David, "Against You, You only, I have sinned" (Psalm 51:4a). God is our Creator,

and He is our only true moral Judge. All sin is ultimately and finally against Him. Until our record is cleared with Him, we stand guilty and condemned before Him—regardless of the forgiving attitude others may have manifested toward us. We can forgive others of what they have done to us, but we cannot remove their sins. Only God can do that.

In His prayer, Jesus was demonstrating the proper spirit in regard to those who had crucified Him. He prayed for them, and He left it to the Father to forgive them. His prayer was not fully answered until the Day of Pentecost. On that day three thousand people—some of whom must have cried, "Crucify, crucify Him!" as Jesus stood before Pilate (Luke 23:21)—became Christians by obeying the gospel (Acts 2:38–47). They were forgiven through their obedience to God's plan of salvation. Jesus demonstrated the proper attitude about them in His prayer, but they were not forgiven until they had complied with God's terms of pardon.

You and I cannot decide whether or not God in heaven will forgive those who have wronged us, but we can extend a spirit of forgiveness to them. This is what Jesus did, and this is what His example compels us to do.

The next time we are wronged by someone, let us remember our Savior's prayer for those who were crucifying Him: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34a).

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"As the criminal was stretched upon the cross, the nails were driven through his hands. Frequently at that moment victims cursed and swore and shrieked and spat at their executioners, but it was then that Jesus prayed: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23.34). Then in a moment of searing agony the cross was lifted up and set in its socket with the victim hanging on it."¹

¹William Barclay, *Crucified and Crowned* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 82.