

**Series:** The Seven Sayings of the Cross, Part 2

**Title:** “Father, Forgive Them”

**Text:** Luke 23:34

**Date:** February 20, 2022

Forgiveness is one of the most difficult things to do. Yet Jesus calls us to unequivocally, without exception, forgive others. On one occasion, Peter asked our Lord about the subject. He said, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). The apostle may have thought his proposal was generous. First-century rabbis normally said one was required to forgive up to three times. Perhaps Peter felt a bit of self-righteous satisfaction as he asked his question. Maybe he imagined Jesus would affirm him and congratulate him for his piousness. Instead, our Lord said, “I tell you, not as many as seven...but seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). Jesus’ mathematical equation used numbers that referenced completion and perfection. The point was that God’s children are to be unlimited in their forgiveness of others.

To follow the Lord well, one must learn to forgive. Consider a story from the life of one of the most famous artists of the Western world:

Leonardo da Vinci, the famous artist best known for his depiction of “The Last Supper”, epitomizes the value of mended relationships and buried hatchets. While most of us are familiar with his famous painting of our Lord’s last meal in the upper room, few have ever heard the real story behind the story. While in the process of painting his masterpiece he had a brutal and bitter altercation with a fellow painter. The master was so enraged that he began to plot an evil scheme. He would paint the face of his own adversary into the face of Judas and thus portray him to all posterity as the traitor himself. As soon as da Vinci finished painting Judas everyone immediately recognized him as Leonardo’s former friend. He continued to paint the Lord’s Supper scene adding each of the disciples into the portrait. It then came time to paint the face of Christ. However, as much as he tried, one attempt after another, he could not paint the Lord’s face. Something was strangely keeping him from it. His own heart revealed to him that his hatred for his fellow painter was the problem. He buried the hatchet with his friend, repainted Judas’ face with another, and then, with great liberty, painted the face of Christ and, thus, completed the masterpiece we have admired down through the centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Leonardo’s experience underscored the soul-wrenching agony associated with bitterness. It also emphasized the way in which forgiveness can bring liberty to the human soul.

The problem with forgiveness is that it seems hard to come by. In our mere humanity, there are some things that are impossible to forgive. Our best efforts are futile. We are fallen, marked and marred by Adam and Eve’s first sin; thus, we struggle with letting go of injustices and injuries inflicted by others.

Is there any truth in God’s Word to help us? Fortunately there is. Jesus’ first saying from the cross gives us heavenly insight concerning the subject. It presents the gospel of forgiveness, but it also gives practical advice for how we might forgive others. In the span of just a handful of words — “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing” — we find that Jesus is both willing to forgive and able to teach us how to forgive.

### **THE PLAN OF THE FATHER**

The first word Jesus uttered from Calvary was the word “Father.” The significance of that fact should not be lost on us. At two other times on the cross, Jesus would address the Heavenly Father. He would also say, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46) and “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Perhaps the words “It is

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, O.S. *The Art of Connecting*. (Dallas, TX: GuideStone, 2004), 127-128.

finished” (John 19:30) were also directed toward God. Whatever the case, approximately half of Jesus’ statements from the cross were spoken to the Heavenly Father.

What does this tell us about Jesus’ work at Calvary? It indicates that He was focused on fulfilling the Lord’s will. Shortly before His arrest, trial, and public execution, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). In the hour of His suffering, He remained transfixed on the Lord. He was steadfast and resolute in His devotion to His earthly mission.

Jesus knew He was the one foreordained to make atonement for the sins of God’s people. Revelation 13:8 depicts the timeless nature of Christ’s mission by speaking of “the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered” that was intact “from the foundation of the world.” By addressing the Lord from the cross, Jesus indicated He was absolutely abandoned to what the Father wanted Him to do.

It is important to highlight this aspect of the cross. While on Earth, Jesus submitted Himself to do the will of the Father. He Himself said, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Though Jesus was and is an equal part of the Trinity (John 1:1; Colossians 1:16), He willingly subjugated Himself, taking upon Himself the form of a man in order to make a ransom payment for the sins of God’s people. Scripture says, “...existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8).

Some allow Jesus’ submission to the Father to diminish their view of the Trinity. Some even find occasion to deny the divine nature of Jesus. They err in doing so. Instead of diminishing His status, Jesus’ humble submission highlights His faithfulness to provide redemption. The book of Isaiah told of Messiah’s commitment to the cross. It quoted the Anointed One as saying, “I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. The one who vindicates me is near; who will contend with me?” (Isaiah 50:7-8). Luke 9:51 seems to indicate that Isaiah’s prophecies spoke of Jesus’ determined commitment to go to Jerusalem for us.

What do these things teach us? They reveal that Jesus was faithful to give Himself up for sins. He purchased forgiveness for those who were previously far off from God. Our hearts should be filled with gratitude for the great work Christ has done. We have a Savior who gave Himself for us. He neither flinched or faltered in doing the will of God. May we live lives of worship for Him, and may we be steadfast in our devotion to Him.

## **THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER**

Jesus’ cry concerning forgiveness also teaches us much about prayer. His first saying on the cross was in essence a form of prayer. It is important to note that He used the very term of address He taught His disciples to use in prayer. In His famous instruction on prayer, He said, “Therefore, you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9). Throughout Luke’s gospel, Jesus Himself used the very title He encouraged His disciples to use in the Lord’s prayer (Luke 11:2). On one occasion, He prayed, saying, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...” (Luke 10:21). Shortly before His crucifixion, He agonized and said, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me...” (Luke 22:42).

It is significant that Jesus prayed while on the cross. In fact, out of His seven sayings from Calvary, both the first and the last were forms of prayer. Later we will see Him cry out to the Father, saying, “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit” (Luke 23:46). What is the meaning of Jesus’ prayers from the cross? In the midst of unfathomable pain and agony, why did He pray?

Jesus’ prayers from the cross accomplished much in His work of redemption. They signified the way in which our sin substitute was cut off from God on our behalf (Luke 23:46) in order to secure our eternal pardon from sin (Luke 23:34). However, Jesus’ prayers from Calvary also provided believers with a powerful example. While on Earth, He did much to

educate His disciples concerning the subject. In His dying moments, He provided them with a model they would unlikely forget.

It is significant that earlier in Luke's gospel, the disciples approached Jesus and asked, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). The Twelve made their request after they had personally seen their Master pray in private. Something about the way He prayed ignited a desire within them to pray similarly. Undoubtedly, the scene from the cross was intended to do something similar. Jesus' dying prayers were meant as both a means of redemption and a model of prayer for believers of all generations. By examining our Lord's prayer, we can glean several lessons about the way prayer should work in our own lives.

### **Pray incessantly.**

There is latent power in Luke's simple words, "Then Jesus said..." (Luke 23:34). In the original language of the New Testament, Luke used an imperfect verb. The tense indicated a continual action in the past. One could translate Luke's words as meaning, "But Jesus kept on saying..."<sup>2</sup> Our Lord's example teaches us that prayer should be a habitual part of our lives. Like eating and breathing, it should be something we do on a regular basis. It is for this reason that Paul told believers, "...pray constantly..." (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It is also why the Psalmist declared, "I complain and groan morning, noon, and night, and he hears my voice..." (Psalm 55:17). God's people have the privilege of carrying on continual conversation with God. The cross reminds us of this reality.

### **Pray spontaneously.**

Jesus' outburst of prayer would have seemed strange to bystanders. Convicted criminals were customarily known for cursing Roman guards, the Roman government, and spectators. Evidence of this is seen in the rude remarks of one of the criminals crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39). Instead of following cultural custom, our sinless Lord committed Himself to prayer. From His soul, He bursted forth in intercession and supplication to the Heavenly Father.

A lesson is found in our Lord's example. A healthy prayer life is marked by spontaneous outbursts of prayer. Christian praying should not be coldly isolated to one compartment of one's schedule. Believers can and should pray at all times and in all types of situations. Drive times, down times, dinner times, and distressing times can all be occasions for prayer. Paul said, "Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18).

### **Pray relationally.**

There was great significance in the way Jesus addressed the Lord. He said, "Father." We have previously talked about the love of God. We have also mentioned the way in which Jesus instructed His disciples to use the same title He used when He prayed from the cross (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2). It is now important to see the meaning of the term of address in relation to the love of God. Used in prayer, the word "Father" implied intimacy and close relationship, indicating that prayer is relational and conversational. It demonstrated that prayer is not an empty, aseptic spiritual discipline.

Many Christians do not pray because they regard the activity as a raw and rigorous discipline detached from any relational connection. Believers must remember that prayer involves a soul-to-soul conversation between the Creator and the child of God. Because of the cross, believers can confidently pray, knowing that the Father loves them and accepts them.

Other religions often evoke unhealthy fear and trepidation regarding prayer. Christianity teaches us that the work of Christ has made us right with God. One has rightly said, "God

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<sup>2</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), [CD-Rom].

wants to be on a first-name basis with his people.”<sup>3</sup> Because of Calvary, we don’t have to be insecure and timid in approaching the Lord. The Bible says, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Romans 8:15).

## **THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS**

Jesus’ first saying from the cross also teaches us much about the practice of forgiveness in our own lives. Yes, the cross is first and foremost about what Jesus did for us; yet, there are practical lessons we can apply to our lives from the events surrounding the cross. Remember, the Lord is both our means of salvation and a model of sanctification. Many avoid finding any personal life lessons from Calvary out of a fear of not being “gospel centered.” Certainly, we don’t want to miss the meaning of the atonement, but we also don’t want to diminish the practical advice we can gain from Jesus’ mode of living.

We know that the early church regarded Jesus’ cry of forgiveness as an example for their own lives. The book of Acts tells of the way in which the earliest church members personally repeated Jesus’ prayer. When a deacon named Stephen was martyred, he prayed the same thing Jesus prayed from the cross. The Bible says, “While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ And after saying this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60).

In his dying words, Stephen repeated some of Jesus’ dying words. He saw our Lord’s act of forgiveness as an example to follow. The story of Stephen’s death seems to indicate that the Lord’s words of forgiveness on the cross were cherished and often repeated amongst the early church. Additionally, it seems that the Lord’s words were regarded as an example to be followed. Though they were often slandered and persecuted, the first believers sought to forgive as Jesus forgave.

As it was with the first church, so should it be with us. Jesus modeled forgiveness for us at the cross. As His children, we must seek to grow in our capacities to forgive others. One has rightfully said, “There is nothing so lovely and so rare as Christian forgiveness. When the unforgiving spirit is threatening to turn our hearts to bitterness, let us hear again our Lord asking forgiveness for those who crucified Him.”<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that Paul told the Ephesians, “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ” (Ephesians 4:32). Jesus’ display of forgiveness is meant to be a model for us. Let’s consider four realities it teaches us about forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness involves overlooking the wrong of another.**

According to Roman custom, crucified individuals usually uttered certain formulaic oaths as they hung on the cross. One popular chant said, “May my death atone for all my sins.” Since Jesus was sinless and not guilty of any crimes, and because His purpose in dying on a cross was different, He did not follow the normal protocol. Instead, He used His dying breath to forgive His abusers.

In Jesus’ example, we see the core essence of forgiveness. The Greek word for “forgive” in the New Testament is one that had the basic meaning of “to leave,” “to send off,” or “to let go.”<sup>5</sup> The meaning of the word sheds light on what it means to forgive. Many

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<sup>3</sup> Lamb, David T. *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist, and Racist?* (Downers Grove, ILL: IVP Books), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Barclay, William, ed. *The Gospel of Luke. The Daily Study Bible Series.* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), [CD-Rom].

<sup>5</sup> Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 83.

struggle with forgiveness because they don't know what it is. Plain and simple, forgiveness involves overlooking and letting go of the offenses of others (1 Corinthians 13:5-7). One has commented:

Remember, forgiving is not denying the wrong they did, it's releasing the right to wrong them in return. Does that mean they get away with it? No. No one ever gets away with sin. Forgiveness is not letting someone 'get away' with sin; it's letting Jesus be the Judge of it. Forgiving, means placing the sins and the sinners into the nail-scarred hands of the only One qualified to judge. In doing so, we are released from the bondage of bitterness that comes after our repeated attempts to exact justice have failed.<sup>6</sup>

### **One does not have to ask for forgiveness.**

From Jesus' example, we also learn that one does not have to receive a request for forgiveness in order to grant. Our Lord chose to overlook the insults and injuries inflicted upon Him by others even though none asked for it. Take note of how Luke 23:34 ended with the observation, "...And they divided his clothes and cast lots." Even while Jesus uttered some of the most gracious words ever uttered, rude Roman soldiers incredulously gambled for His clothing.

Many stay shackled to the chains of resentment because they believe someone must ask for pardon before a release can be given. Such a misunderstanding thwarts the freedom forgiveness can bring. Jesus' example reveals that one can overlook the faults and failures of others though forgiveness may not be requested. Joseph is also an example in this regard. Consider his story in Genesis 50:15-21. Before his brothers ever asked for forgiveness, it is apparent he had released all feelings of hostility toward them.

### **Forgiveness is different from reconciliation.**

Our Lord's example of forgiveness tells us that forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things. Reconciliation takes place when a severed or strained relationship is restored. Forgiveness doesn't require such restoration. One can let go of hard feelings even when it may be impossible for things to be made right.

Think about the victim of an abuser. Though a perpetrator may never admit wrongdoing, the one who was hurt can let go of resentment. Recompense is not a prerequisite. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean every wrong has been righted.

Many struggle on this point. They assume a friendship has to return to its previous state for full forgiveness to be granted. Not so. A family member does not have to subject himself to the abuse of another in order to extend pardon. He or she may forgive while erecting healthy emotional and social boundaries.

Jesus' experience teaches us these things are so. The Roman soldiers gambled for His clothes and the crowd mocked. Asking Jesus for forgiveness didn't enter into their thought processes. Yet, Jesus extended pardon. You can forgive someone without being fully reconciled. Learn the difference. This could be the key to gaining freedom from burdens of the mind.

### **Forgiveness often requires prayer.**

Last, Jesus' act of forgiveness at the cross teaches us that prayer is often needed for forgiveness to be made a reality. If you are like me, you know that it sometimes seems impossible to overlook the wrongdoings of others. Even small slights can sometimes cause great agitation. Have you lost sleep over an injury from another? Do you know what it is like to stir and stew, feeling that forgiveness is out of reach? If you do, you know that forgiveness requires help from God.

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson, Sandra D. *Hurt People Hurt People: Hope and Healing for Yourself & Your Relationships*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 208.

Apart from the Lord's help, it is impossible to forgive others. Some have experienced such great tragedies and travesties that they are keenly aware of this. Can the human heart forgive deep hurt, horrific abuse, and life-changing personal injury? Yes. All things are possible with the Lord. The stories of Christians like Corrie ten Boom and Jim Elliot's family reveal that even the greatest injustices can be forgiven. Biblical stories from the life of Joseph, Ruth, David, and Daniel reveal likewise. God can help us forgive the greatest hurts, but prayer is required.

This is why Jesus included prayers concerning forgiveness of others in the Lord's prayer. He taught us to pray, "...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Those words were uttered in the context of what is known as "the Lord's Prayer." The passage of Scripture (Matthew 6:9-13) is regarded by a template of how disciples ought to regularly pray. For this reason, some have said the passage should instead be called "the Model Prayer."

Now think about this — when our Lord taught His disciples to pray, He indicated that prayers concerning the forgiveness of others ought to be a regular part of their prayer. Along with giving praise to God (Matthew 6:9, 13), praying for God's will to be accomplished (Matthew 6:10), giving thanks for God's provisions (Matthew 6:11), and confessing sin (Matthew 6:11), believers are to regularly pray about those who have hurt them. What a lesson for us concerning forgiveness.

Do you pray for those who have hurt you? Scripture says, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Instead of sulking in self-pity, and instead of fantasizing about secret revenge, take your greatest hurts to the Lord. Do what Jesus did — pray prayers of forgiveness regarding those who have hurt you. The Spirit will hear those prayers and heal your hurting heart.

## **THE PARDON OF SALVATION**

Toward whom was Jesus' first statement aimed? Of whom did He say, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." One could possibly see His words as being spoken over all who would be saved by His sacrifice. Luke, however, seems to have applied them to the Roman soldiers who crucified our Lord. The very next words in his account say, "And they divided his clothes and cast lots" (Luke 23:34).

The soldiers' actions may seem like a random and cruel gesture by calloused and dimwitted army men. In reality, there was a cultural custom that allowed Roman soldiers to benefit off of crucifixions. Normally four soldiers oversaw public executions.<sup>7</sup> According to Roman law, those who performed capital punishment were entitled to the possessions a criminal had on his person. This provided a perk for doing extra duty.<sup>8</sup>

Typically, a Jew like Jesus would have worn five main articles of clothing — an inner tunic, an outer robe, a belt of some sort, sandals, and a turban.<sup>9</sup> The four soldiers who provided detail for Jesus' crucifixion would have gambled for these items by tossing sticks or pebbles that contained numerical markings. In essence, the game would have been similar to what we call dice. The most-prized personal belonging from Jesus would have been His relatively expensive seamless outer tunic (John 19:23-24).

While the soldiers greedily gambled for the few earthly possessions He had, Jesus expressed forgiveness. He cried to the Heavenly Father, "they do not know what they are

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<sup>7</sup> Barclay, [CD-Rom].

<sup>8</sup> Carson, D. A., R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, eds. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition. 4th ed.* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), [CD-Rom].

<sup>9</sup> Barclay, [CD-Rom].

doing.” The meaning was that the four soldiers weren’t aware of the enormity of their crime. The men didn’t know they were crucifying the Son of God.<sup>10</sup>

In Jesus’ merciful request for forgiveness, we see the glorious realities of the cross. We see the Christian message in all of its illustrious beauty. At Calvary, Christ provided forgiveness for even the chiefest of sinners. Even the enormity of evil associated with murdering the Son of God is not beyond the bounds of Divine pardon. Whoever you are, know that you are not disqualified from God’s grace. Because of Jesus, the Lord can and will forgive you of your darkest sins. If you are in Christ, rejoice and bask in the love of the Cross. Stand secure in what Christ has done for you. One has said, “God will not look upon our sins. We keep record of wrongs done to us, letting them bubble back up again and again instead of forgiving fully. But God casts our sins behind him—he will not see them again. It is finished. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pink, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, Andrew J. Lessons from Sickness in Isaiah 38. *Banner of Truth Magazine: July 2021*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust), 19.