

Series: The Seven Sayings of the Cross, Part 7

Title: "It Is Finished"

Text: John 19:29-30

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Famous last words often give a sense of finality. At his death, Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple computers, was surrounded by family and loved ones. When his time to pass arrived, he muttered, "Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow." With those words, the life of a great innovator came to an end.

From the scene of Calvary, Jesus spoke in a way that brought finality to His earthly mission. John 19:30 records, "When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' Then bowing His head, He gave up His spirit." While everything Jesus said from the cross was of paramount importance, his utterance in John 19:30 is of special significance. It brought attention to the way in which He provided a means of forgiveness for all who trust in Him. Let's examine His words and consider several realities related to His work on behalf of our sin.

THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN

Jesus' sixth saying from the cross said a lot about the relationship between Christians and sin. The message was timely, considering the circumstances facing some of John's first readers. As his gospel was initially being distributed amongst churches, a burgeoning heresy was spreading. We now know the false teaching by the name "Gnosticism." Writing his gospel later in life, John wanted to counteract the new, insidious teaching.

It is hard to define Gnosticism precisely. The title for the group was based on the Greek word for "knowledge." Within the system of belief, progression in spiritual matters occurred through enlightenment. One gained salvation via the possession of a secret knowledge. There were many variations of belief and practice associated with the movement. It would be impossible for us to discuss every nuance here. However, there is one particular tenant of the false teaching that is relevant to our study. In particular, Gnostics held to an erroneous view of the incarnation. They denied the fact that Jesus had a physical body.

In their system of belief, the Gnostics viewed physical matter as evil. The spiritual was what was important. Enlightenment often took place through heavenly visions or visitations from angels. Paul combatted these aspects of Gnosticism in his letter to the Colossians, saying, "Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind" (Colossians 2:18).

In gnostic doctrine, there was a heavenly realm that contained numerous celestial beings who all emanated from the original creator. One could experience enlightenment by communicating with such spirits. For Gnostics, Jesus was one these beings. He was sent by God to provide a course of enlightenment, but He wasn't really God. Paul contradicted this claim by saying, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth,

the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:15-16).

The gnostic view of Jesus maintained that Jesus was a mere phantom-like being who was sent from the ultimate supreme being. It was commonly reported that Jesus did not have a physical body. This led to numerous strange and peculiar teachings. One claimed that Jesus didn’t leave footprints in the sand when he walked on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.¹

Because of their views regarding physical matter, gnostics devalued the importance of the human body. They touted the spirit as being of utmost importance, so what one did with his or her body was of little consequence. This belief gave license for all types of sin. Things like fornication, drunkenness, and adultery weren’t regarded as sinful, because it was believed that such things were merely acts of the flesh. An exaggerated dichotomy between soul and spirit led to a low view of God’s law and sin. The Gnostics were known for saying “We have no sin” (1 John 1:8, 10). The apostle John contradicted such teaching in his epistles (1 John 1:6; 3:6).

With the sixth saying of Jesus, John aimed to debunk such heresy. How so? Notice the prelude to our Lord’s climactic words. Before he depicted Jesus as saying, “It is finished,” he mentioned the way in which Roman soldiers gave wine to our Lord. He said, “A jar full of sour wine was sitting there; so they fixed a sponge full of sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it up to his mouth” (John 19:29). It seems the apostle mentioned Jesus’ consumption of sour wine to prove a point — Jesus had a physical body. He had the capacity to engage in the consumption of physical food. On the cross, He was fully God and fully man. He was not a mere ghostly spirit as the gnostics claimed.

Jesus’ consumption of wine on the cross proved He was human. It was necessary for Him to be human so that He might appropriately pay for the sins of humankind. If He would have been a mere angelic, spirit being, He would not have been able to provide reconciliation for sinful people like us. A physical body had been prepared for Him for a reason (Hebrews 10:5-7).

These things remind us of critical truth related to the substitutionary atonement, but they also remind us of the seriousness of sin. May we never be like the gnostics, making light of sin. By God’s grace, may we always remember that sin is an offense to God, that it is a violation of His holy law, and that Jesus suffered and died for our sins. The gnostic heresy may have expired, but its spirit lives on. Many are dismissing and diminishing sin nowadays. The author of Hebrews warned his readers, saying, “How much worse punishment do you think one will deserve who has trampled on the Son of God, who has regarded as profane the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:29-30).

Some are like the Gnostics and the false teachers of which the author of Hebrews spoke. They deny the gospel through their minimization of Christ’s work on the cross. May we not be in their number or of their point of view. May we always remember the seriousness of sin and may we glory in the cross of Christ. Sin sent Jesus to the cross and the cross cancelled the penalty and power of sin.

¹ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John: Volume 2*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), [CD-Rom].

THE PAYMENT FOR SIN

After consuming the cheap, bitter wine, Jesus cried out. John said, “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30). The Greek word translated “it is finished” was the word *tetelestai*. It referred to one bringing a matter to a completion, something brought to an end, or to the logical conclusion of an activity. It was sometimes used in the New Testament to speak of how Jesus or another finished a teaching (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; Revelation 11:7). Paul used the same verb to speak of how he had completed the race God had given him (2 Timothy 4:7).

In the context of Jesus’ cry from Calvary, the word referred to Jesus’ act of fully paying for the penalty of sin. At the cross, Jesus successfully fulfilled and finished the mission for which He had been sent to Earth (John 6:38).² God’s grand plan of human redemption was brought to a full and successful completion. Believers can live securely, knowing Jesus has indeed paid for sins. Both the power and penalty of sin are broken. God’s children have freedom and forgiveness. Such truth is important for us, since we often forget about all Jesus did for us. When we stay mindful of these things, our Lord’s sixth saying can liberate us from various spiritual maladies.

Spiritual Pessimism

Christians who don’t remember Jesus’ sixth saying from the cross can fall into a dark state. Not trusting in what Jesus has done for them, they feel spiritually inferior. Imperfection and sinfulness overwhelms them. They are constantly bombarded with thoughts of “I’m not good enough.” Plagued by guilt and shame, they often live under a dark cloud. They don’t believe they are worthy of God’s love, so they assume there is something they must do to make God happy. Such people miss out on the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10).

Such spiritual darkness can be cured by looking to the cross. Yes, believers should experience conviction and exhibit repentance in regard to struggles with sin. However, they mustn’t live with unnecessary guilt. A sense of spiritual condemnation shouldn’t mark the lives of any of God’s children. Jesus cried, “It is finished!” He fully paid for our sins. As a result, the believer can boldly say, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:1-2).

Are you guilty of spiritual pessimism? Do you sometimes struggle with the shame of sin? Look to the cross. Have faith in what Jesus has done for you. Yes, take indwelling sin seriously. Make it your aim to be faultless and holy (2 Peter 3:14). However, do such things from a posture of forgiveness and freedom. Rest assured that Jesus has paid it all and that there is no longer any condemnation hanging over your life.

Spiritual Pride

Others have the opposite problem of those who struggle with spiritual pessimism. Because they trust in their own goodness, they live by a sort of spiritual pride. For such people, confidence in life comes from what they can do, not what Jesus has

² Zodhiates, 1375.

done. Security and significance is drawn from human performance, not Jesus' "finished" work of salvation.

Believers who adopt such a mindset readily admit they are saved by grace. They can quote great passages of Scripture like Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8-10, passages that gloriously proclaim the doctrines of salvation. Such individuals are even ardent in telling others about Christ; however, there is a breakdown of sorts in their Christian experience. They live by what they can do for God, not what God has done for them.

Rooted in legalism, the aforementioned spiritual malaise leads people to a relentless pursuit of religious rules and rituals. The cross isn't enough. A faith relationship with God is replaced by a flurry of do's and don'ts. In the end, there is little room for "but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" in such religion (Romans 14:17).

Ultimately, self is the main focus for those who live in this way. The legalist isn't enamored by the love of Calvary. Instead, he or she is consumed with what self can do. All of this leads to either one or two outcomes. First, legalism can result in frustration and despair. If one fails at keeping rules and religious requirements, one may give up and walk away from God. Second, legalism can result in pride. When one succeeds at keeping man-made rules and traditions, he or she can become inflated with a sense of spiritual self-importance. Either way, both scenarios lead to an unhealthy self-focus. Legalists are renown for pride, negativity, joylessness, self-righteousness, and hyper-critical attitudes toward others.

While there is place for obedience and discipline in the Christian life, such things are never to be a means of earning salvation, of winning favor with God. Instead, obedience and personal discipline are simply means of experiencing God, of enjoying and embodying the salvation one already possesses (Philippians 2:12-13; 1 Timothy 4:7).

Christianity reduced to mere rules, ritual, and religious requirements is no different than any other world religion. Biblical Christianity is different than all human-oriented perspectives regarding God. It brings to mankind a gospel message, proclaiming what Christ has done on the cross. While other religions focus on what man can do for God, Christianity declares what God has done for man.

The strong Christian lives by faith in Calvary. His or her mind often remembers that Jesus cried, "It is finished!" True Christianity indeed leads to moral transformation (Romans 12:1-2). Those who really know Jesus will live a different type of life (Matthew 5:13-16). However, real Christian holiness is rooted in what Christ has done, not what man can do. Christianity isn't concerned with simple good behavior; it is focused on good believing — faith oriented belief in what Jesus did at Calvary!

Spiritual Permissiveness

A third spiritual trap involves what we could call spiritual permissiveness. Those ensnared in such folly believe the cross provides a license to live however they please. They imagine that Calvary extinguished God's law, wiping out any moral requirements. Cherishing liberty, while misunderstanding critical truth concerning the law of God and the character of God, such individuals espouse a form of Christianity that makes little

demands in the way of Christian character and consecration. Those who are spiritually permissive often take great delight in thinking about Jesus' cry — "It is finished!"

The error of this viewpoint is a misunderstanding regarding the work of Christ and the law of God. Jesus said, "Don't think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Our Lord uttered those words because some mistook His teaching against manmade tradition for an outright opposition to the Moral Law. Such a perspective is misguided. Jesus intended to uphold the value of the law. He wanted His disciples to know that He came to fulfill it.

At the cross, Jesus fulfilled all of the righteous requirements of God's law (Romans 8:3-4). However, His fulfillment of such things did not nullify His desire for us to live righteous lives. The Lord still yearns for His people to fulfill His Moral Law, to embody His righteous character, and to live holy lives that shine for Him. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reveal such to be true. In that sermon, He preached about His desire for His disciples to fulfill the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:17-47). He even maintained that His disciples should portray a deeper devotion to those commandments than the one possessed by first-century Pharisees (Matthew 5:48).

The cross should never be used as a pretext for carnal living. Christians who live morally permissive lives should indeed bask in the forgiveness they have from Calvary. But they should also remember that Calvary should compel God's children to consecrated Christian living. We have not been saved *from* good works. Scripture teaches we have been saved *for* good works. The Bible says, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Many Maladies; One Remedy

There is no end to the depravity of the human heart. Truth concerning the cross has been twisted to provide a platform for all types of erroneous beliefs and practices throughout the years. However, while there are many spiritual maladies, there is one simple remedy. Strength and security in the Christian life only comes through a solid understanding of what Jesus did at Calvary. When we know what Jesus meant when He said, "It is finished," we will have truth to keep us from the pitfalls of spiritual pessimism, pride, or permissiveness. One has said, "...believe what God's Word says about Christ's death. Rest not on your feelings and experiences but on the written Word. There is only one way of finding peace, and that is through faith in the shed blood of God's Lamb. 'It is finished.' Do you really believe it? Or are you endeavoring to add something of your own to it and thus merit the favor of God?"³

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER SIN

When Satan deceived and duped Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, he certainly believed he had secured a victory over God. He imagined he had thwarted the Lord's plan of creation, that he had robbed God of majestic glory (Genesis 3:1-7; Isaiah 14:14). Unbeknownst to him, the Lord foreknew of Satan's strategies. Before time

³ Pink, 126.

began, our Heavenly Father initiated a plan to reconcile humanity to Himself (Revelation 13:8).

Such realities bring us to an important reality concerning the cross of Christ. Calvary was not a “Plan B” or an end-around to avert Satan’s tactics. It was not a nervous response to the calamity that came from sin. Immediately after original sin, the Lord proclaimed, “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

God has always been in control of His program of redemption, and He always will be. Christians should stand strong in their salvation. Christ rules sovereignly over the nations and He rules sovereignly over the church (Colossians 1:16-18). His people are His and none can snatch them out of His hand (John 10:28-30).

Such truth is underscored by the events associated with Calvary. The gospel writer added a few important words immediately after Jesus’ sixth cry from the cross. He said, “Then bowing his head, he gave up his spirit.” (John 19:30). Though they may seem insignificant, like mere narrative filler, the above words convey weighty theological truth. They depict Jesus intentionally and willingly giving up His life. One Bible scholar has noted that “Jesus retained consciousness and command of Himself to the very end.”⁴

Luke’s gospel painted a similar picture of these realities, saying, “And Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into Your hands I entrust My spirit.’ Saying this, He breathed His last” (Luke 23:46). As Jesus voluntarily gave up His life, He quoted Psalm 31:5. He did such to show that no one took His life from Him. He willingly gave it as a sacrifice for humanity’s sin. His execution wasn’t a tragedy. It was a part of God’s sovereign plan to reconcile man to Himself.

Throughout His life, Jesus was laser-focused on His mission in life. In John 6:39, He said, “This is the will of him who sent me: that I should lose none of those he has given me but should raise them up on the last day.” He knew He came to do away with the penalty, power, and presence of sin. The sovereign plan of the Heavenly Father was before Him at all times. One has commented, “Before the Lord Jesus came to this earth, a definite work was committed to Him. In the volume of the book it was written of Him, and He came to do the recorded will of God. Even as a boy of twelve, the ‘Father’s business’ was before His heart and occupied His attention.”⁵

These things should move us. They should grow our sense of security in life. None need to be insecure concerning God’s love. None need to live like the proverbial doubting Thomas (John 20:24-29). God’s plan for salvation is strong, because God is sovereign over sin. We can live in certainty and confidence. We have freedom and forgiveness in Christ!

SALVATION’S PERFECTION

⁴ Gaebelin, Frank E. Ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 9: John and Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), [CD-Rom].

⁵ Pink, 117.

The Greek underlying Jesus' sixth statement from the cross was relatively short. It contained one simple word we mentioned earlier — *tetelestai*. The Greeks valued saying things in as short and succinct way as possible. Public orators were admired for the ability to pack elaborate concepts into pithy statements.⁶ Jesus trumped all of the philosophers and rhetoricians of the hellenized world with His sixth saying. In one word, He encapsulated the whole of redemptive truth.

Interestingly, the word *tetelestai* was often used in the ancient world to speak of the full payment of financial obligations. See Matthew 17:24 for an example. John used the word to depict the way Jesus fully completed the “whole work of salvation” at the cross.⁷ Luke's gospel used the verb in this sense, speaking of the way Jesus was ordained to fulfill God's plan of salvation, as announced by the prophets. It depicted Jesus as inviting His disciples to travel with Him to Jerusalem for His crucifixion, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. Everything that is written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished” (Luke 18:31).

The usage of the Greek word *tetelestai* in the New Testament help us understand Jesus' meaning when He uttered the word from the cross. The term carried ideas of “to make an end of,” “to pay for,” or “to accomplish.”⁸ Jesus' intent in His sixth saying was to demonstrate that His crucifixion had finished an important aspect of Christian redemption.

Some modern believers find controversy here. They doubt whether or not the work of salvation was actually finished at the cross. Questions are raised about the importance of the resurrection and the ascension. In addition, some wonder what place Pentecost has in salvation, since the Holy Spirit did not permanently indwell human hearts prior to that event.

Others border on erroneous doctrine through their insistence concerning extra things that supposedly happened in between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Some imagine Jesus had to leave the cross and descend into hell in order to fight the Devil and demons. It is reported that such a descent was necessary to wrestle the keys of death from the Devil. Only after winning such a struggle was Jesus able to emerge from the grave victorious. Such teachings are based on misguided interpretations of passages like Ephesians 4:9 and 1 Peter 4:6. Believers should not be sidetracked by such silly doctrines.

It is worth noting, however, that the resurrection and ascension do have their proper place in the work of redemption. Through His resurrection, Jesus secured our ability to live a new type of life (Romans 6:4). He also guaranteed our hope of a future resurrection for our own bodies (Romans 8:11). Likewise, the ascension of Christ had a part to play within the work of redemption. It pointed to both the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), the sovereign rule of Christ over human affairs (Hebrews 1:3), and the imminent return of Christ to judge the living and the dead (Acts 1:10-11).

Many other benefits of the resurrection and ascension could be listed here. The point for now is that those two redemptive actions indeed have great theological

⁶ Pink, 109.

⁷ Zodhiates, 1375.

⁸ Pink, 120.

significance. Still, however, Jesus rightfully cried “It is finished” from the cross. His crucifixion was a climactic event in the chain of events that secured our salvation. It was at Calvary that He actually paid the debt and death penalty our sin deserved.

The miraculous elements from Golgotha gave witness to the great work that was accomplished there. While Jesus was on the cross, the sky became black as night (Matthew 27:45), signifying that God was pouring out judgment on His sinless son. In addition, the veil in the temple that separated the holy place from the most holy place was torn in two (Matthew 27:51), signifying that access to God had been granted to common people. As if that wasn’t enough, the earth quaked and dead corpses came to life (Matthew 27:52-53), portraying the way in which death was defeated through what Jesus did. Indeed, Jesus perfectly paid for our sins while He was on the cross. Because of Calvary, we have perfect forgiveness of sins, complete access to God, and the hope of a future resurrection!