



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

Father, Forgive Them...

Luke 23:34

^{ESV} **Luke 23:27**...And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" ³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

Heavenly Father, Would you send now your blessed Holy Spirit to superintend our time together? Would you cause Him to cause your Word to make our hearts tender and receptive and cause them to receive the Word of the Lord that they may grow thereby? Would you tune our hearts to worship because of what Christ our Lord has accomplished for us?

Would you do that to the honor of Christ and to the advancement of His kingdom in whose name we pray? Amen

Our subject this morning is, **“Father Forgive Them: Jesus First Word from the Cross.”**

The last week of February 2004 was an absolutely extraordinary week in the United States. It was an extraordinary week for the extraordinary reason that during that week the focus of the United States of America in general as given over, almost exclusively, to the contemplation and consideration of the Passion of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you had told me even a week before it happened that Mel Gibson’s movie, the Passion of Christ would have been the focus of attention around the water cooler at work or that soccer moms across America would be lining up to confront the gruesome visualization of what our Savior suffered on the cross I would have told you that your were losing your grip on reality. I would have told you that the possibility of the nation discussing for a whole week the crucifixion of Jesus was just about as likely to happen as say the government taking over General Motors.

But those of you old enough to remember saw it for yourself. It was on every newscast of every channel for a full week.

There were a litany of experts on every side weighing in as to the nature of Mel Gibson's film and whether it was anti-Semitic or whether indeed the Passion story in and of itself was anti-Semitic.

For a week there was a swelling chorus of objections both to the content of the movie and to a lesser extent to the message and tone of the gospel accounts themselves. There was even a charge that we ought never to discuss the crucifixion of Jesus because it was too violent and because it divided men and women everywhere.

I remember it like it was yesterday. I remember it because I had so many people that wanted to talk to me about it. They wanted to know my opinion about this controversy or that one. And I had the opportunity to say as an ordained gospel minister that I did not think that the Passion account, and I restricted my thoughts to the biblical account and not the movie, was anti-Semitic at all. In fact, I said that I thought it was the ultimate expression of God's love toward both Jews and Gentiles. I said that I thought the story of Christ's atoning work on the cross was the ultimate fulfillment of all the promises

ever made to the Jews and that it stood alone as the great ultimate expression of His wondrously loyal covenantal love.

On the other hand, I had to agree that the Passion story is terribly violent. I am speaking again of the gospel account and not the movie. But it was not too violent; it was as violent as the cumulative judgment of our sin required and while much of the Passion account is cast in simple, almost matter of fact language, it is clear that Christ' crucifixion was the singular most violent act of all the ages and that Christ' sufferings were the most dreadful ever endured by any man. That is not because other men have not suffered the same kinds of things; it is rather because His sinless, matchless goodness made Him different from all other men. His Passion was violent; it was as violent as God's divine justice required in putting away our sin and it is that fact especially that grieves me. To think that my sin helped to add to the brutality suffered by the sinless Son of God faced in His Passion is the single saddest, most heartrending thought I think I have ever entertained. It is like knowing that my sin or my moral failure has somehow damaged one of my children or grandchildren...only it is ten thousand times worse. But my sin did just that, of course, and so did yours.

Isaiah tells us that...

^{ESV} **Isaiah 53:5**...But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

Still, to think that His body was broken because of my sin or that His blood was shed because of my sin causes me to long for holiness. It causes me to want to put my sin aside and to follow hard after God. It causes me to be conflicted. I am at the same time extraordinarily grateful for His atoning blood and ever sorrowful that my sin and rebellion led to it being shed.

That is why we ought never question God's wisdom in satisfying His own justice in the sufferings of Christ. To do so is to place ourselves in judgment of the wisdom of God and we ought never do that because His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts.

Praise be to God that they are not.

Now as far as the crucifixion being divisive, that is true. There is no getting around that. It is the most divisive single event in the history of the world. The crucifixion and how men relate to it through faith in Jesus separate the redeemed from the unredeemed eternally just as it separated the Father from the Son temporarily. It separates nations

and families and tribes and tongues into those washed clean in the blood of Christ and those rushing headlong into eternity to bear their own sin in the Day of Judgment. With regard to the divisiveness of the cross and of His atoning work, we have even Jesus own words.

^{ESV} **Matthew 10:34...**"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Yes, His work on the cross was divisive. It was divisive in that it divided men into believers and unbelievers but at the same time it was the single greatest act of reconciliation in history. You see the atoning work of Christ reconciled sinful man to God. Listen to how Paul puts it.

^{ESV} **Romans 5:10...**For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

^{ESV} **Colossians 1:22...**he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, —

^{ESV} **2 Corinthians 5:18**...All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Now because we are reconciled to God we can stand in full genuine reconciliation with all other men and women in Christ. The barriers and the divides that separated us in the past disappear in Christ. What is it to me whether a man or woman is black or brown or white if they are washed in the blood of Christ? What does it matter to me if a man or woman is from the south or from the north or from Africa, India or China? If they redeemed by Christ's blood they are precious to me.

You see He has fashioned out for Himself one new people from every tribe, tongue and nation. We are reconciled to God and we are reconciled to each other and we have been granted the enormous privilege of imploring others around us to be reconciled to God as well. Now in doing that work of reconciliation we are granted the extraordinary privilege of following His example. That means we are to act like Jesus, to emulate His forbearance and His behavior. That does not mean, of course, that the atoning work of Jesus was

primarily an example. It was not primarily an example. As an example it would have accomplished nothing more than heaping upon our heads greater condemnation than we already bear. As an example, it would have set the standard for our behavior so high that no one could have ever met it. No, it was not primarily an example. It was primarily a sacrifice of propitiation to turn aside God's wrath. But it certainly has value as an example for us to model, to seek to emulate through the power of the Holy Spirit. Take for example the gracious words He spoke at the onset of His crucifixion in Luke 23:34.

^{WSV} **Luke 23:34**...And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

These wonderful words constitute the first of Christ's seven sayings or seven words from the cross. There are not many words like them recorded in human history. In fact, I think it is safe to say that they are unparalleled in human history. For one thing, they are words of extraordinary grace.

We know, from many ancient writers, that the torture of being crucified often drove those being crucified to despair and to die blaspheming and cursing. Seneca, the Roman orator and historian who lived during this same time said that such men often cursed

heaven and earth, the hour of their birth, their judges and executioners and that they often spat in fury on those who looked on. I think you get a sense of how most men acted when you consider how one of the criminals crucified with Jesus railed against Him.

Not a few of the ancient historians tell us that sometimes the crucifixion squads grew weary of listening to those being crucified and climbed upon ladders to gag them or split their tongues so they would not have to listen to them curse. But none of that was necessary with the Lord Jesus. His words were words of extraordinary grace and yet for all their extraordinary graciousness they cause my heart to be wrung out like a sponge because I am so slow to forgive. Where His first words were words of forgiveness, my first words tend to be words of condemnation or of blame. His first thoughts were directed in kindness toward those lifting their hands against Him. My first thoughts are almost always of myself.

In fact, it is possible, I think, to discern something of the nature of how different our Lord's thoughts and ways are from our own by looking at the first three words from the cross. In those first three words He pled grace and forgiveness on behalf of those crucifying Him. He spoke forgiveness and acceptance to the repentant thief at His side and He charged the Beloved Apostle John with the care and

nurture of His mother. It was only then that He turned to His own pitiful estate and condition.

His words were extraordinarily gracious and demonstrate His genuine selflessness and concern for others.

But that is not all. Hear again what he said in Luke 23:34.

^{ESV} **Luke 23:34**...And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

You see, His words were not only words of extraordinary grace; they were also words of enduring kindness. Now you can't see it in the English version we use here, the English Standard Version, but in other modern translations like the New American Standard or the New International Version there is a little phrase appended to the beginning of the verse that says something like, "**And Jesus began to say**" or "**Jesus was saying.**" That little phrase tells us that His prayer, "**Father forgive them**" was not uttered once but many times. In Greek the word "said" is in the imperfect tense which tells us that Jesus repeated these words over and over again. It could just have well been translated, "**And Jesus kept on saying.**" You see the idea is that Jesus did not just request that the Father forgive those crucifying

Him. The idea is that he kept on saying it over and over. That is, he pled with the Father to do so.

I suspect that He prayed these words the first time when they first drove the nails into hands. I suspect that He prayed them again as they lifted up the cross and dropped it into place. I suspect He prayed them again as He endured their mockery and their taunts. I suspect that He prayed them again as they offered Him the sour vinegar on the sponge. You see He kept repeating them and as He did He modeled for both His disciples and for us the very kind enduring forgiveness He had commanded them to display.

Look for a moment at Luke 17:3. There our Lord had instructed His disciples concerning forgiveness and the importance of enduring in that forgiveness.

^{ESV} **Luke 17:3**...Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

And do you know what? His command buckled their knees. They were not able to imagine such an enduring commitment to forgiveness. Look at their cry in verse 5.

^{ESV} **Luke 17:5**...The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"
And you know I share their cry.

When I consider that Jesus kept on pleading for the forgiveness of those crucifying Him it causes me to cry out, "**Lord increase my faith.**" You see even in the moments when I am able to forgive, I am quick to take up an offense again especially if I think those I have forgiven are trying to take advantage of me or if I somehow suspect that their repentance is insincere. I am slow to forgive and quick to give forgiveness up but our Lord was not. Our Lord is not.

You see the pleading for forgiveness that our Lord displayed here was not like that at all. It was not contingent upon the performance of those for whom He prayed. It was contingent only upon His manifold kindness, a kindness that endured and endures even unto today. That's why he could say over and over again, "Father forgive them. Father forgive them. Father forgive them."

Now finally, I have to add that not only was this word of forgiveness a demonstration of extraordinary graciousness. Not only was it a word of enduring kindness. It was also a word of prophetic fulfillment and covenantal faithfulness to His promise.

You see in the biblical record up to this point, Jesus had had never asked the Father to forgive anyone. He never asked the Father to forgive anyone...he forgave those that needed forgiveness himself. If you go back into Luke and look at his dealings with sinners, he always pronounced, "Your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven. You sins are forgiven." But here he changes that. He doesn't say, "I forgive you." Instead he pleads, "Father forgive them" and I want to know why he does that. Why does he change here of all places.

And you know thinking about why he did that for a long time has led me to conclude that he does what he does here in order to fulfill the prophetic word given in Isaiah 53. Let me ask you to turn there in your Bibles to Isaiah 53:12. It will just take a moment and we'll be done. Isaiah 53:12. Isaiah 53:12 reads like this:

^{ESV} **Isaiah 53:12**...Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

In praying this prayer, Christ our Lord fulfilled the prophetic word of the Old Testament by interceding on behalf of those that put him to death. Of course that raises an additional question...who was

responsible for the death of Christ? Who is it that actually caused his death? And you know, of course, how the various arguments go. You know how some of the charges regarding his death lead to accusations of anti-Semitism and so on. But what I see here in his interceding for the transgressors is not the fact that he is zeroing simply on those that crucified him that day. He was not zeroing in on the contingent of Roman soldiers that nailed him to the cross or even the Jewish mobs that mocked him or even the Jewish leaders that demanded his crucifixion. I think he was zeroing in on the sin of the countless men, women, boys and girls of all of the ages that bound him over to the cross.

And if that is true brothers and sisters, and it is true, it means that when he prayed that prayer he was praying for you and he was praying for me. Oh, that that thought might sink deep down into our hearts and will fill us up with gratitude for all that he has accomplished on our behalf. Oh, that we might come to know experientially the depths of his forgiveness in such a way that it might actually compel us to forgive others when they disappoint us. Oh that Christ's prayer on our behalf might compel us to pray for others when they fail to give us whatever it is we think we deserve.

You see there is a forgiveness to be had. And once we have it, there is a forgiveness to lived out...to be lived out as we consider Jesus' words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Let's pray.