

SI: Last Sunday we looked at David and Goliath.

David was the man in the middle.

He stood alone not just between two armies,

he stood between two possible destinies for Israel.

Freedom and happiness or slavery and oppression.

With faith in the Lord and unconventional weapons he triumphed.

His victory over Goliath opened the way for God's people

to participate in his victory.

Jesus Christ is our man in the middle. He's our David.

He fought alone against the giants that would enslave and destroy us—

sin and guilt and death and hell and the devil.

And he triumphed with the most unconventional weapon—the cross.

He triumphed through death and then he rose victorious—

and we get to participate in his victory by faith.

In seven weeks we're going to celebrate Christ's victory on Easter.

For the next seven Sundays we'll take a break from Samuel and look at the cross.

More specifically, we're going to ponder the seven statements Jesus made

as he was hanging on the cross.

These are usually called the Seven Last Words.

I first preached the Seven Words fifteen years ago, then again 8 years ago—

and I want to do it again, because this is one of those portions of Scripture,

that we need to hear regularly—like the Christmas story.

The first word from the cross is in Luke 23.

INTRO: Two months ago I went to the hospital one evening to visit someone.

As I was walking through the lobby on my way out, a young woman stopped me and asked—Are you a priest? Can I talk to you?
We sat down. I asked her what she wanted to talk about and she said forgiveness. She was very articulate.
She said—My mother was a terrible mother.
She abandoned my brother and me. I haven't talked to her in years.
But I found out she was dying so I came all the way from Florida to see her one last time and I was hoping that when she saw me she would tell me how sorry she was and I would forgive her and get some peace.
But she still doesn't think she's done anything wrong.
I've just left her in intensive care and I'm in turmoil.

I didn't have any idea where she was coming from spiritually so I just asked her:
Do you believe in Jesus Christ?
She said I've read the Bible and the Koran and the teachings of Buddha and there is truth in all religions.
I said Jesus is not just another religious teacher, he's God in human flesh and he rose from the dead.
Are you interested in knowing what he says about forgiveness?
She said she was—and all this time I was praying and asking God to give me the right passage of Scripture—and he brought this one to mind.
So I turned to Luke 23 and pointed out these verses and asked her to read.

She said: That's interesting. The people who crucified Jesus were just like my mother. They didn't think they had done anything wrong, but he forgave them. We talked about how Jesus shows us forgiveness is possible even if the person doesn't admit to wronging us.
But then I knew I had to challenge her personally.
So I told her that when Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them—he was also praying for us because our sins put him on the cross.
And that means we also know not what we do.
Without the Holy Spirit, you're just as blind to the wrongs you've done and the sins you've committed as your mother is.
You're just as much in need of God's forgiveness through Christ.
She pushed back at that some. Said she was a good person. Not like her mother.
But her heart was softened a little and she let me pray for her.
Then the conversation was over and I hope a seed was planted.

There's a long tradition of preaching the seven last words.
So there are loads of sermons and devotional books. I've read a number of them.

They all seem to focus on three big themes.

The first theme is what this word tells us about the character of God the Father.

It shows the love and compassion of the Father his willingness to forgive sin.

The second theme is the work of Jesus Christ as our High Priest.

He intercedes for us. His work is our forgiveness and this word assures us that we are indeed forgiven.

Third category of comments had to do with what this word tells us about the life we've been called to live as Christians.

Specifically, how we are to imitate Jesus

and forgive the people who have wronged us and look on them with compassion.

All three themes are intertwined. You can't have one without the other.

That young woman was struggling to grasp that third theme—how to forgive another person. But she couldn't because she didn't personally know the love of the Father and the High Priestly work of the Son.

That's what I mean by intertwined.

For the purpose of this sermon, thought, I want to separate them and focus on third theme—what Christ's word from the cross tells us about forgiving others.

As Christians, we ought to be experts on forgiveness.

We are forgiven people—that's our identity.

We've been forgiven by God through Jesus Christ.

So we ought to know how to apply the forgiveness we have received from God to other people.

There may be people in your life who don't know how to forgive.

You may know people like that young woman.

You're their lifeline. Show them Jesus and show them how to forgive.

And even closer to home, maybe you have been wronged.

And maybe you're struggling to forgive and feeling the hurt of unforgiveness.

This word of Jesus from the cross can set you on a path of forgiveness that will give you freedom and joy.

This word from the cross has two parts, let's look at each.

1. First, "Father, forgive them" shows us that forgiveness is costly.

2. Second, "For they do not know what doing" shows us forgiveness is divine.

MP#1 Forgiveness is costly

Jesus said: “Father, forgive them . . .”

His words show that forgiveness is costly.

Let’s think for a moment about the cost of forgiveness.

Suppose some kids are playing in your neighborhood—

one puts a baseball through your living room window.

He’s in your debt. He owes you for that broken window.

You can make him pay—or you can forgive him.

If you forgive him, the debt doesn’t disappear. The window still has to be fixed. But you pay for it. You absorb the cost.

Let’s go a step deeper: What if someone has not just broken a window—

what if he has broken something much more precious?

What if he has broken your happiness by his betrayal or cruelty?

What if she has shattered your plans and dreams by her lies?

What if he has hurt your good name, or hurt people you love?

When a person wrongs you deeply, he’s in your debt. He owes you.

It’s not a monetary debt, but it’s still a real debt.

It’s the price of very precious things that often can never be recovered.

What if a child is abused? His innocence and happiness is broken.

There is no way to put a price on that in dollars but there is clearly a debt owed.

What does it mean to forgive someone who has wronged you like that?

What’s the cost that has to be paid?

Before we answer that, let’s go one step deeper.

Our sins are a debt we owe God.

I’m sure you’ve noticed that when some churches say the Lord’s Prayer

they say, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Others: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Presbyterians say debts and debtors and that’s what I’m used to—but both in Bible.

Debts in Matthew, Trespasses in Luke.

Our trespasses are debts we owe God.

Jesus paid our debt in himself on the cross.

The debt didn’t just go away—he paid it.

When somebody wrongs you, you can try to make him pay, or you can forgive him.

When you forgive, the debt doesn’t go away—You pay it.

The way you pay is through an internal struggle that is like death.

You give up your desire for revenge,
and replace that with a desire for God to bless the person who wronged you.

When Jesus said: “Father, forgive them . . .”
he was giving up his right for revenge.

The Bible says: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”
Jesus Christ is Lord. As Lord he had a right to revenge.

Those mocking him said, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!”
He could have done it if He had wanted to.

He could have sent them all straight to hell.

But as 1 Peter says: “when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate;
when He suffered He made no threats.”

When someone wrongs you, it’s natural to want that person to pay.

He took something from you. He is truly in your debt. There is no denying that.
And the only way he can really pay is by suffering.

He has to suffer at least as much as you have suffered,
and he has to know he is suffering because of what he did to you.

But because of our sinful nature, we can’t get vengeance sinlessly.

It always boomerangs back on us.

Even when vengeance is just in your mind, when you fantasize what ought to
happen to that person—that he will lose his business or that her new romance
will fail and she’ll be heartbroken.

Maybe you are prone to more theological fantasies.

You imagine the shock this person is going to get when he stands before God
and has to answer for what he did to you.

In Lewis Smedes’ book on forgiveness he says fantasies of vengeance are like
an IV bag dripping poison into your soul.

Forgiveness means giving up all your claims and all your claims
that the person who wronged you must pay.

But that’s just one side of the coin. The Christian life always has a positive side.

You’re not done forgiving when you give up your desire for the person to pay.

The positive side is that you must bless the person who wronged you.

Jesus didn’t get revenge, instead He prayed, “Father forgive them.”

He did the very opposite of revenge. He prayed for their blessing.

And that is the cost that you must pay. Blessings for curses.

There are so many powerful examples of this in church history—

Christians who have been deeply wronged
and who have prayed blessings instead of curses.

Two years ago this month Beshir Kamel went on television and thanked Islamic State terrorists for not editing out the last words of his brother and the other Egyptian men they beheaded on a beach in Libya. “Lord, Jesus Christ,” were the last words of the Coptic Christians slaughtered because of their faith. The courage and integrity of their witness strengthened Kamel’s faith.

“We are proud to have this number of people from our village who have become martyrs,” he said after his brother’s murder. “Since the Roman era, Christians have been martyrs and have learned to handle everything that comes our way. This only makes us stronger in our faith, because the Bible told us to love our enemies and bless those who curse us.” He further explained that his mother is prepared to welcome any of the men involved in her son’s beheading into her house. If one of them were to visit her, she would “ask God to open his eyes, because he was the reason her son entered the kingdom of heaven.”

The Christian host invited Kamel himself to pray for his brother’s murderers on television. This was Kamel’s prayer: “Dear God, please open their eyes to be saved and to quit their ignorance and the wrong teachings they were taught.”

Darlene Deibler Rose’s autobiography, *Evidence Not Seen*. Shared before.

Darlene and her husband were missionaries in Indonesia, Japanese prison camp.

The women’s camp was run by a Japanese officer name Yamaji.

He had a violent temper and would beat the women for the slightest provocation.

Darlene describes the brutal beating he gave one young woman

named Elise because she had not come to roll call quickly enough.

First he broke her wrists with his cane, and then, when she fell to the ground

he kicked her until she was temporarily paralyzed.

This is what Darlene wrote about her prayer that night:

“In weariness of spirit and emotionally drained, I stretched out on my rack, reviewing what had happened, still seeing Elise’s battered body and bruised face. Phrases from the Gospel of Matthew were going through my mind: ‘Love your enemies.’ ‘Do good to those who spitefully use you.’ ‘Pray for your enemies.’ All right, Lord, I’ll pray for him. I sincerely don’t want the man to be lost eternally—but I really would like it if you would curdle the food in his stomach tonight. How very much easier it is to be philosophical about and forgive the wrongs done to oneself than to forgive the injustices done to the people we love. With sufficient provocation, there is within each of us the potential to violence—but for the grace of Almighty God. With a prayer for God to have mercy on the man, I drifted off to sleep.”

I like the honesty of her words.

Because they show that there is a cost for forgiveness.

It's not easy to bless those who have wronged you.
It takes supernatural power. That brings us to the second point . . .

MP#2 Forgiveness is divine

Forgiveness requires the work of the Holy Spirit in you.

He gives you a new way of looking at person who wronged you and at yourself.
That new perspective—that divine perspective, empowers you to forgive.

We see this in the second part of Jesus' word from the cross.

What did Jesus mean when he said: "For they do not know what they are doing?"

It seems like they knew exactly what they were doing.

The Jewish religious leaders knew what they were doing.

They plotted for three years to kill him. They bribed Judas to betray him.

People in the crowd knew what they were doing.

Jesus had healed their sick and fed them bread and fish.

But they shouted for him to be crucified.

They knew what Roman crucifixion meant for a man.

Pontius Pilate knew what he was going.

He knew he was executing an innocent man to maintain his office.

That's why he went through that whole charade about washing his hands.

Some of the older commentaries give this explanation:

Jesus was just praying for the Roman soldiers.

They were the only ones who didn't know what they were doing.

They were just doing their job.

All the others responsible for crucifixion did know—Jesus not praying for them.

But that doesn't sound right. Jesus taught us to "pray for those who persecute" us
and that seems to be exactly what he was doing.

So it's best to understand that Jesus' prayer included all responsible for his death.

But it still doesn't answer the question—

In what sense did they not know what they were doing?

Jesus was looking at these people from a spiritual perspective.

He saw them as people blinded and enslaved by sin.

They were willingly enslaved, but enslaved none the less.

Jesus looked at these people spiritually.

He saw people made in the image of God who were blinded by sin.

And Jesus didn't hate them for that. He had pity on them.

He said to his Father: Look at them. They are blinded by sin.

They are in bondage. They do not know what they are doing.
Have mercy. Father, forgive them.

Jesus able to see his enemies that way because he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Bible says he was filled with the Holy Spirit beyond measure.

As a man completely filled by the Holy Spirit, he had a spiritual perspective.

Able to look past the outside, look past pain inflicted and see the person,
and the enslaving power of sin.

Your sinful nature will never let you see people that way.

You will focus on their offense and condemn them for it.

You may dehumanize them: He's just a liar. She's just a sorry piece of trash.

You consign that person to the garbage heap.

That's what you will do—unless you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Only by the Holy Spirit are you ever going to be able to look at people spiritually,
be moved with pity for their condition, even when they wrong you.

There is something else that Christ's word from the cross can teach you
but it's a hard lesson and you might not be ready for it.

It's that you are no different from the person who wronged you.

You are also a person made in God's image and you are a sinner,
and there are times, even as a Christian, that you are blinded by your sin.

There's an old Easter song that asks a probing question:

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

What's the answer to that question? Were you there?

Yes, you were there. Your sins put Jesus on the cross.

When Jesus prayed, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do—
he was praying for you.

You may not like to hear that.

That young woman at the hospital didn't like it much.

She was sharp enough to see that it put her on the same level spiritually
as her mother and she didn't want to accept that.

And certainly, you understand I'm not saying that in terms of offenses and wrongs
everything is equal. Not at all, some sinful actions are more heinous than others.

But there is an equality in this sense, that we all stand in need of God's forgiveness.

And if you haven't committed the really heinous crimes, it's only because of
his restraining grace. If His grace was removed from your life for a moment
you would do terrible things.

And in your mind and motivations you have done terrible things.

So by the power of the cross you have to look at this person who wronged you and say—He's just like me.

He is a person made in God's image, made to do beautiful things.

And he is a sinner, blind and enslaved.

And that's what I was until the grace of God found me.

Believe this first word from the cross.

Believe what it says about the power of sin and the greatness of God's grace.

And then, with that knowledge, you take little steps of forgiveness.

I know a man who was wronged by his wife.

And for a long time after they had divorced he dehumanized her in his speech, talked about how worthless she was, how he would never stoop as low as she did.

He wanted vengeance, fantasized about it. And some of his fantasies came true.

She went through a sad string of busted relationships and he rejoiced.

He was a Christian. He knew it was wrong and it was killing him.

But in time the Holy Spirit had enabled him to pray:

“Father, forgive her, for she does now know what she is doing.”

He began to pray: Lord, help my ex-wife to find the love and contentment she couldn't find in our marriage. Don't let her be hurt.

Give her good relationship with our kids. When I see her next, say a kind word.

That cost him. But power to do it came from knowing that he had owed a great debt, and been forgiven much, at great cost to Jesus Christ.

And that's what you have to do—look at the cross—

hear the loving words of your Savior—pay the price,
and move ahead with forgiveness.

This is who we are—Forgiven people. It's our identity.

And the Savior we love so much spoke first of forgiveness as he was dying for us.

By the power of the Holy Spirit—let's take his words to heart.