

Father, Forgive Them (Lk. 23:34)

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And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. 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. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews" (Lk. 23:26-38).

Introduction

As we come to observe communion this morning, I want to make some general introductory remarks; after that, I will narrow down to a specific passage.

1) First, as a general comment, communion is a special time for us to focus our attention on the Lord Jesus for He said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). We must place emphasis on remembering. This symbolic meal is not a bare memorial or an empty remembering, not when we fix our eyes on Jesus (cf. Heb. 3:1; 12:2, 3). In addition, it is not a bare memorial when we remember Him along the lines of God reminding; we remember the Lord Jesus according to the outline of sound words that we have in the Gospels. Appropriately, the early church, referred to the Gospels as "the remembrances." The Gospels guide us into a divinely appointed and therefore a richly meaningful remembering.

2) Second, it is the idea of remembering that makes communion a preaching ordinance. This is so because it takes time to remember; it takes time to follow in thought along the lines of God reminding. In other words, we want to avoid the thought that the partaking is the remembering. Instead, partaking highlights the core of remembering. The bread and wine point the way to remember the Lord Jesus and how He is our nourishment, how He is our life-giving nourishment. We have the voice of God in the sign that points us to the things we are to remember about the person and work of Christ.

3) Third, communion is a means of grace. It is a means by which our faith is sealed and confirmed. That is why we talk about the voice of God in sign and seal. Jesus is present with us in a special way through the Spirit and by the word. God's voice in sign and seal summarizes two things: the remembering (the thing signified, that to which the sign points) and the means of grace (in the seal as a confirmation of faith that Christ gives to those who come to the table by faith; we come in faith for the strengthening of our faith).

In general summary, we can say 1) our contemplations and recollections focus distinctively on the Lord Jesus

2) by preaching the remembrances, 3) and by the blessing of the Spirit through faith, communion a means of grace.

That is communion in general. We can now shift to a specific focus on the Lord Jesus in terms of the first saying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34a). There are seven brief sayings of our Lord spoken while He was on the cross. Each one must have a profound significance, much more than what first meets the eye. The Lord willing, we will make this into a series of communion messages on the seven sayings from the cross.

In this message, we will consider the first saying, which is a prayer. Off the top of our heads, can we recall the seven sayings in a rough and ready chronology? (Perhaps we can first recall the seven sayings and then put them in chronological order). From Luke we know that the sayings begin and end with prayer: Father, forgive them...into thy hands I commend my spirit (23:34, 46). In between, Luke records the Paradise promise to the thief on the cross (23:43). Matthew and Mark record the "why" saying (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:33) and John records the mother/son saying (Jn. 19:25-26), "I thirst" (Jn. 19:28), and "finished" (Jn. 19:30). A rough and ready order in a sketch is (Luke's account is in bold):

Forgive

Paradise

Mother

Why

Thirst

Finished

**Into
thy
hands**

A helpful source on this text is that of Klaas Schilder (*Christ Crucified*, 129-147). We begin in the shallow water of the obvious, and then our thoughts descend quickly into an overwhelming ocean.

1A. Forgiveness is unexpected (cf. context)

Forgiveness, of course, involves deliverance from judgment. Therefore, this word seems to go against the context; it seems out of keeping with the flow of things. It is definitely unexpected. Would we ever guess ahead of time that this would be the very first word that we would hear after the nails pinned the Lord Jesus to the cross. What would you say (if you could speak) immediately after someone stabbed you? Besides crying out in pain, would there not be anger and angry words? Surely, the last thought would be how you could call on God to bless the person who injured you. Put in a much less extreme circumstance, say traveling on a subway, if someone's elbow hit a sensitive spot on your rib cage, what would the first words out of your mouth be?

It does fit what we know about the Lord Jesus to hear Him express words of compassion and mercy.

However, the context makes this word truly unexpected. On the way to the place of the Skull, Jesus had just spoken to the lamenting women about the judgment that will fall on them and their children ("do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children," Lk. 23:28). While on trial just hours before the crucifixion, Jesus told His accusers that they would see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the power of God (Lk. 22:69) and coming on clouds of heaven (Matt. 26:64). In short, He told them that now they judge Him in this small court but He will become universal sovereign Lord and judge of all things as Sabbath king. The one they condemn will be their judge in the courtroom of the heavens and the earth.

When the hatred, deceit, false piety, and lies of the Sanhedrin (when all these things) finally produce the fruit of crucifixion, Jesus retreats from the forceful warnings of judgment. In their place, He speaks forceful words of forgiveness. The reader of this account must stand amazed at these words in this context because forgiveness is unexpected.

2A. Forgiveness is comprehensive

If we search the context, it is impossible to restrict the scope of "them" to the people standing there as on-lookers who do not intervene to save (as done by Calvin). Jesus is referring to the people that did things that led to His crucifixion. Much is contained (compressed) in the words "what they do." The leaders of the nation found false witnesses, the general populace cried out for His blood, Pilate washed his hands, Roman soldiers drove the nails, and the on-lookers did the cowardly thing of doing nothing.

Peter indicts the men of Israel for the crucifixion of Christ at the hands of the Romans: "Men of Israel you crucified and killed [Jesus] by the hands of lawless men (Acts 2:23). Roman and Jew, leaders and followers alike, did these things in ignorance (cf. Acts 3:17). For them Jesus intercedes as soon as they nailed Him to the tree and darkness fell over the whole land like a thick black cloud. Consider all that was done to bring about the crucifixion and the comprehensiveness of the prayer for forgiveness is unmistakable.

3A. Forgiveness is actual

What does it mean to forgive them? What does it mean to deliver them from judgment? This question is much more difficult than it first appears. We must put this snapshot into the larger picture of the mission and ministry of the Lord Jesus. We must understand it in terms of who He is. We must understand it in terms of His work as the great high priest.

If we contemplate for a moment asking ourselves, "Who is it that is dying there on yonder tree," we must come to a deep sense of awe because He is Son of Man and Son of God. He bears "an awful load." He does so as God the Son having come to earth on a mission that involves submission to the will of the Father in heaven. Furthermore, as God the Son, He has a unique relationship to the Father in heaven: He ~~is~~ *the* Son of God. He can say, "Father" in a way that transcends what we say when we address our heavenly Father. Jesus can say, "I and the Father are one." The mission of Christ on earth is therefore one that arises from total agreement and mutual covenant relationship within the members of the trinity.

Therefore, Jesus tells us that when He prays the Father always hears Him (Jn. 11:42). That is, the Father grants what the Son requests, always. The answer to the Son's prayer is in the asking. If He asks, He receives. When He petitions something, the Father gives it. Without a doubt, Romans and Jews, leaders and followers, benefited from this first word from the cross. Forgiveness blanketed every square inch of the land, smothered the darkness, and diffused a bright ray of hope. They were all forgiven!

However, what can it mean to say that Romans and Jews, leaders and followers, were all forgiven? The difficulty of this question emerges from the covenant of redemption. Jesus is the great high priest. He intercedes for those given to Him by the Father and all for whom He died will be with Him in glory. Consider how Jesus stated these things in John 17. 1) A people belong to Christ as His own because the Father gave them to Him so that He may give them eternal life (v. 2). Jesus hereby points us ahead to His reign with all authority as Sabbath king. 2) He does not intercede for the world (v. 9) but He will save and bring to glory all for whom He does intercede (v. 24, "they also" refers to all believers through all ages). 3) This intercession of John points directly to the cross because Jesus identifies the hour and petitions the deep humiliation that will lead to final glory (vs. 1-2). In other words, Jesus tells us that His intercession on the cross will save all for whom He dies. His high priestly intercession will not fail because the Father always hears Him.

How then can we understand the forgiveness granted to Romans and Jews, leaders and followers? We must think that they receive forgiveness. However, we cannot think that they (person to person) are the covenant people who receive eternal life by the death of Christ (though some surely are, cf. Acts 2:36-42). How can we reconcile this difficulty? I know of no better way than to affirm that forgiveness here refers to the pardon, relief, or deliverance from immediate judgment (i.e. actual but temporary). We should expect the wrath of God to strike and crush the enemies of Christ to powder. Wrath does not fall and shake the earth. It does not fall because Jesus prayed to the Father and the Father always hears Him. This is a temporary stay of judgment.

That is what forgiveness means as it flows from the one who suffers on the cross. At the very moment when the stench of sin ascends to the courts of heaven and judgment is sure to fall, Jesus intervenes. When the wickedness of the Romans and Jews has reached its fullness making it ripe for immediate judgment, the petition of Christ secures their forgiveness. Now when the sickle must cut men down like weeds, and when the Father must put those wretches that afflict His Son to a miserable death (cf. Matt. 21:41), it is the Son who intercedes to spare them.

4A. Forgiveness is covenantal

How can we explain this temporary forgiveness? Why spare these murderers? It seems that we can at least attempt to explain by considering the basis for the prayer. It is because they know not what they do. Ignorance is no excuse. What can this mean? There is more here than we can put our fingers on but surely, it points us to what they do not know. They do not know what is going on here. They do not know the great transaction that is taking place. It seems best to accent that content, the content of their ignorance, the content to which their ignorance points us.

This word of forgiveness is necessary for the fulfillment of the eternal covenant of redemption. Their ignorance is like a tiny pebble that we can hold in our hands and hardly see but when we turn around and consider what they are ignorant of; we behold a towering unmovable rock. The purposes of God are unfolding in a monumental way before our eyes: "Father, it is necessary that you spare my enemies from the severity of your wrath in order that you may now inflict your wrath on me. Spare them (that is necessary) so that I may not be spared. Forgive them so that I may not be forgiven." Judgment must fall and it must fall in this dark hour. It must fall on me.

These are marvelous words: Forgive them because they do not know what they are doing but do not forgive me because I know what I am doing. Why does He endure the wrath of God instead of those around Him, afflicting, mocking, taunting, and gambling? He endures the wrath of God for those given to Him by the Father (Jn. 17). There is submission to the Father's will, self-sacrifice, substitution, and love in this first saying from the cross. He endured the judgment for you and me if we cling to Him as the wine and bread of our lives, now and forevermore.

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