“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”

Luke 23:32–34

Key Verse: 23:34a

“And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”

For you, what’s the hardest thing about prayer? It might be hard when prayer doesn’t seem to make any difference, or, because it seems to involve too much time, or, too much discipline. For many people prayer is the chance to ask for something impossible, which is also hard when cold realities are staring us right in the face. But one of the hardest things about prayer is to pray for others to be forgiven. Why is it so hard? When people’s behavior is foolish we don’t like to forgive them. When it’s morally or ethically wrong it’s harder still. But it’s especially hard when it brings personal hurt to us. To *pray* for others’ forgiveness, we really have to *want* it. And honestly, at best we’re probably just indifferent about it. In our last lesson in this series on prayer from Luke’s Gospel we want to meditate on our Lord Jesus’ prayer while he was being crucified. What did this prayer mean? What does it mean to us? How can we truly pray the way he did? And why should we? May God speak to us through his word today.

Among the Gospel writers Luke records unique details about Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Only Luke tells us of Jesus’ trial before Herod (6–12,15a). Only Luke tells us of the women grieving as they watched him being led out to be crucified, and Jesus’ words to them (27–31). Luke omits the familiar detail of Jesus being offered wine to drink (Mt27:34,48; Mk15:23,36; Jn19:29). He omits Jesus’ cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt27:46; Mk15:34) Only Luke tells us of Jesus’ conversation with one of the men crucified with him (40–42). And only Luke includes his Jesus’ final cry, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (46)

To understand all this, we need to pay attention to Luke’s point of view. His major theme is that Jesus is a light for revelation to the Gentiles (2:32a). He’s writing to “most excellent Theophilus,” probably a high-ranking Roman official (1:3). He’s out to show the reasonableness and certainty of the Christian faith (1:4), and that it’s not a threat to Roman rule. In line with this purpose, in leading up to the crucifixion Luke focuses on Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Three times Luke mentions Pilate’s words that he found no guilt in Jesus (4,14,22), and adds that Herod, a second examiner, agreed with him (15). To those familiar with Roman justice, this trial was basically overrun by a hostile mob (23). At the cross Luke uniquely records the words of one of the criminals, “…this man has done nothing wrong” (41), and of the centurion, “Certainly this man was innocent!” (47). To emphasize it even more, Luke describes the women mourning and lamenting for him (27b). During his ministry Jesus had gone around doing good (Ac10:38), yet now this great evil was being done to him.

Look at verse 32. Only Luke introduces these two criminals now, just *before* the crucifixion (compare Mt27:38; Mk15:27). Matthew and Mark call them “rebels” or “robbers,” but Luke calls them “criminals.” In Greek the word is much stronger: “evildoers.” In verse 33, at this place called The Skull, they crucified Jesus in between these two men. Putting Jesus in between such men was another gross injustice, a smear campaign to make him “look” guilty. Earlier, Jesus said Isaiah’s prophecy was about to be fulfilled: “And he was numbered with the transgressors” (22:37; cf. Isa53:12). People were manipulating the story for their own evil ends, but even in this, God was fulfilling his own salvation plan.

There was something else Jesus also knew. Earlier, as he approached Jerusalem the final time and saw it, he wept over it. He knew God would destroy the city because they had failed to recognize God’s visitation to bring them peace (19:41–44). Jesus not only didn’t take their rejection personally, he actually wept over what would happen to them. It gives us a glimpse into his heart for them.

Now let’s look at verse 34. At the moment they are crucifying him, Jesus says, “Father, forgive them…” It wasn’t intellectual idealism or some kind of duty; it was his visceral response, not out of anger, but out of love. The word “forgive” in Greek literally means, “Let it go.” This word was used to describe cancelling debt or declaring somebody “not guilty,” wiping their record clean. Jesus is being made to look guilty, but he’s praying that these people be declared innocent. Among the many things to be said about his prayer, let’s think about three.

**First**, crucified Jesus is the source of God’s forgiveness for anyone. For the author Luke, forgiveness of sins is an essential part of the gospel message, so he uses the word in this Gospel 21 times (1:77; 3:3; 5:20,21,23,24; 6:37 [twice]; 7:43,47 [twice],48,49; 11:4 [twice]; 12:10 [twice]; 17:3,4; 23:34; 24:47). In the Book of Acts Luke repeatedly shows how this message of forgiveness was the main point of the apostles’ message (Ac2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). Luke uniquely records Jesus’ parable of the Lost Son; he doesn’t use the word “forgive,” but the parable vividly illustrates God’s forgiveness for unforgiveable people (15:11–32). Later, in this account of the crucifixion, though not using the word “forgive,” Luke shows another vivid example of it when Jesus gives the repentant criminal next to him the promise to be with him in paradise (23:43). Those who seem to have “gone too far” in their sins still have hope because Jesus offers us all forgiveness, if we repent and believe in him. Innocent Jesus who died for our sins in our places and prayed on the cross for our forgiveness is our only source of salvation (Ac4:12).

**Second**, Jesus’ prayer shows us how to view people. One of the things debated about this prayer is the question, “Who is Jesus praying for?” For some, he’s praying only for the ignorant soldiers who didn’t know what they were doing. To these people, the religious leaders knew what they were doing when they carried out their plot to eliminate Jesus. For others, Jesus’ prayer includes even these people. Why do they say so? The key is the word “know”—“they know not.” In Greek the word is literally “see”: “they can’t see.” These religious leaders really were spiritually blind. They couldn’t see what God was doing in Jesus. In their blindness, as Apostle Peter later told them, “…you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you…” (Ac3:14). “They know not” expresses ignorance. Ignorance can be a harsh word, but Luke uses it to express a kind view of people making foolish mistakes (Ac3:17; 17:30).

In saying, “Father, forgive them,” Jesus added that all the people who had a part in crucifying him “know not what they do.” There’s a sense in which all human beings, in our sinful nature, had a part in crucifying Jesus. In our spiritual blindness we don’t want to be under him, we want to live in our own way, we want to remain in our sins, we want to follow the ways of this world, and we think and act randomly. We can’t see that there’s a God who’s really there, holding us accountable. We can’t see how broken and sinful and desperately in need we all are. We often *think* we know what we’re doing, due to our education, training, or life experience, but in an ultimate sense, we really *don’t*. It’s embarrassing, and, scary. But it’s so comforting that Jesus sees us as those who “know not what they do” yet prays for our forgiveness. Matthew 9:36 says he sees us as sheep without a shepherd—ignorant, helpless and vulnerable. This view of humanity isn’t negative but life-giving. It inspires our hearts to pray. If we see people cynically, as inherently selfish and evil, why would we want to pray for them? But if we see people the way Jesus did, we can learn to pray for them to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1Ti2:3,4). This view of people is especially helpful when we have to pray for the people who hurt us.

**Third**, Jesus’ prayer is our example. In praying for those crucifying him, Jesus reveals that he is actually God, who, in his deepest nature is merciful and forgiving (Da9:9; Isa43:25). But in our sinful nature we really can’t pray for those hurting us to be forgiven—it’s just too hard. However, if we’re walking in fellowship with our Lord Jesus through the Holy Spirit, it’s possible for us. Stephen is a good example. As he was being stoned by his persecutors, he fell to his knees, and at his dying breath he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Ac7:60). In the first few hundred years of Christianity, many believers were tortured and martyred for their faith, and they found this prayer of our Lord Jesus a powerful source of inspiration. The Bible calls us to be “imitators of God” and “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us…” (Eph5:1,2). 1 Peter 2:21–24 puts it plainly: “For this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” And Colossians 3:12,13 says, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

We have to evaluate ourselves honestly: Am I really living like this and praying like this? We can get upset and hurt by people in all kinds of ways, and sometimes it happened long ago and is still affecting us, shaping the way we view people and treat them. Whether we have new grudges or old ones, we need to look at our Lord Jesus suffering so much on the cross yet still praying for his enemies. The more deeply we think of him, the more our hearts can be moved to forgive and to pray for the people who may have hurt us. To pray like our Lord Jesus, we need to ask God to help us forgive, and to make it our habit not to meditate on how people hurt us, but to really pray for them to be forgiven. We need to remember how great God’s grace is to us, despite all our sins against him, which makes it so much easier to forgive. This forgiveness is a practical way to experience freedom in Christ, and to walk by the Spirit (Gal5:1,25).

Our Lord Jesus taught us in Luke 17:3,4: “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” He’s telling us our forgiveness needs to be honest and patient and really endless. He wants us to be known in the world as Christians as forgiving people. Sadly, so often this has not been the case. Many in the early centuries couldn’t forgive the Christians who denied the faith during persecution. They demanded strict penance and sometimes never forgave. Some even began wars against their fellow Christians. Today many Christians are best known to be the most judgmental people, not the most forgiving people. The world has changed in many ways, but the gospel hasn’t. If we claim to be followers of our Lord Jesus, we still must walk as he did (1Jn2:6).

Let’s read verse 34a. May God renew in us his forgiving grace through this prayer of our Lord Jesus. May he inspire and empower us to pray like he did, not only for those who hurt us, but for all those today who “know not what they do.”