

The Word of Forgiveness

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“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

MAN HAD DONE HIS WORST. THE ONE BY WHOM THE WORLD was made had come into it, but the world knew Him not. The Lord of Glory had tabernacled among men, but He was not wanted. The eyes which sin had blinded saw in Him no beauty that He should be desired. At His birth there was no room in the inn, which foreshadowed the treatment He was to receive at the hands of men. Shortly after His birth Herod sought to slay Him, and this intimated the hostility His person evoked and forecast the Cross as the climax of man’s enmity. Again and again His enemies attempted His destruction. And now their vile desires are granted them. The Son of God had yielded Himself up into their hands. A mock trial had been gone through, and though His judges found no fault in Him, nevertheless, they had yielded to the insistent clamoring of those who hated Him as they cried again and again “Crucify Him.”

The fell deed had been done. No ordinary death would suffice His implacable foes. A death of intense suffering and shame was decided upon. A cross had been secured: the Saviour had been nailed to it. And there He hangs — silent. But presently His pallid lips are seen to move — Is He crying for pity? No. What then? Is He pronouncing malediction upon His crucifiers? No. He is praying, praying for His enemies — “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

This first of the seven cross-sayings of our Lord presents Him in the attitude of *prayer*. How significant! How instructive! His public ministry had opened with prayer (Luke 3:21), and here we see it closing in prayer. Surely He has left us an example! No longer might those hands minister to the sick, for they are nailed to the Cross, no longer may those feet carry Him on errands of mercy, for they are fastened to the cruel tree; no longer may He engage in instructing the apostles, for they have forsaken Him and fled; — how then does He occupy Himself? In the Ministry of Prayer! What a lesson for us.

Perhaps these lines may be read by some who by reason of age and sickness are no longer able to work actively in the Lord's vineyard. Possibly in days gone by, you were a teacher, you were a preacher, a Sunday-school teacher, a tract-distributer: but now you are bed-ridden. Yes, but you are still here on earth! Who knows but what God is leaving you here a few more days to engage in the Ministry of Prayer — and perhaps accomplish *more by* this than by all your past active service. If you are tempted to *disparage* such a ministry remember your Saviour. *He* prayed, prayed for others, prayed for sinners, *even in His last hours*.

In praying for His enemies not only did Christ set before us a perfect example of how we should treat those who wrong and hate us, but He also taught us never to regard any as *beyond* the reach of prayer. If Christ prayed for His murderers then surely we have encouragement to pray now for the very chief of sinners! Christian reader, *never lose hope*. Does it seem a waste of time for you to *continue* praying for that man, that woman, that wayward child of yours? Does *their* case seem to become more hopeless every day? Does it look as though they had gotten *beyond* the reach of Divine mercy? Perhaps that one you have prayed for so long has been ensnared by one of the Satanic cults of the day, or he may now be an avowed and blatant infidel, in a word, an open enemy of Christ. Remember then the Cross. *Christ* prayed for His *enemies*. Learn then not to look on any as *beyond* the reach of prayer.

One other thought concerning this prayer of Christ. We are shown here the *efficacy* of prayer. This Cross-intercession of Christ for His enemies met with a marked and definite answer. The answer is seen in the conversion of the three thousand souls on the Day of Pentecost. I base this conclusion on Acts 3:17 where the apostle Peter says, "And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers." It is to be noted that Peter uses the word "ignorance" which corresponds with our Lord's "they know not what they do." Here then is the Divine explanation of the three thousand converted under a single sermon. It was not Peter's eloquence which was the cause but the Saviour's prayer. And, Christian reader, the same is true of us. Christ prayed for you and me long before we believed in Him. Turn to John 17:20 for proof. "Neither pray I for these (the apostles) alone, but for them also *which shall believe on Me thro' their word*" (John 17:20). Once more let us profit from the perfect Exemplar. Let us too make intercession for the enemies of God, and if we pray in faith we also shall pray effectively unto the salvation of lost sinners.

To come now directly to our text: "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

1. HERE WE SEE THE FULFILLMENT OF THE PROPHETIC WORD.

How much God made known beforehand of what should transpire on that Day of days! What a complete picture did the Holy Spirit furnish of our Lord's Passion with all the attendant circumstances! Among other things it had been foretold that the Saviour should "make intercession for the transgressors" (Isa. 53: 12). This did not have reference to the present ministry of Christ at God's right hand. It is true that "He is able

also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25), but this speaks of what He is doing now for those who have believed on Him, whereas Isaiah 53:12 had reference to His gracious act at the time of His crucifixion. Observe what His intercession for the transgressors is there linked with — “And He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

That Christ should make intercession for His enemies was one of the items of the wonderful prophecy found in Isaiah 53. This chapter tells us at least ten things about the humiliation and suffering of the Redeemer. It declared that He should be despised and rejected of men; that He should be a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; that He should be wounded, bruised and chastised; that He should be led, unresistingly, to slaughter; that He should be dumb before His shearers; that He should not only suffer at the hands of man but also be bruised by the Lord; that He should pour out His soul unto death; that He should be buried in a rich man’s tomb; and then it was added, that He would be numbered with transgressors; and finally, that He should make intercession for the transgressors. Here then was the prophecy — “and made intercession for the transgressors;” there was the fulfillment of it — “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He thought of His murderers. He pleaded for His crucifiers; He made intercession for their forgiveness.

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

2. HERE WE SEE CHRIST IDENTIFIED WITH HIS PEOPLE.

“Father, forgive them.” On no previous occasion did Christ make such a request of the Father. Never before had He invoked the Father’s forgiveness of others. Hitherto *He forgave* Himself. To the man sick of the palsy He had said, “Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee” (Matt. 9:2). To the woman who washed His feet with her tears in the house of Simon, He said, “Thy sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48). Why then should He now ask *the Father* to forgive, instead of directly pronouncing forgiveness Himself?

Forgiveness of sin is a *Divine* prerogative. The Jewish scribes were right when they reasoned “Who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mark 2:7). But you say, Christ was God. Truly; but Man also — the God-man. He was the Son of God that had become the Son of Man with the express purpose of offering Himself as a Sacrifice for sin. And when the Lord Jesus cried “*Father forgive them*” He was on the Cross, and *there* He might not exercise His Divine prerogatives. Mark carefully His own words, and then behold the marvellous accuracy of Scripture. He had said “The Son of Man hath power *on earth* to forgive sins” (Matt. 9:6). But He was no longer on earth! He had been “lifted up *from the earth*” (John 12:32)! Moreover, on the Cross He was acting as our Substitute: the Just was about to die for the unjust. Hence it was that hanging there as our Representative He was *no longer in the place of authority* where He might exercise His own Divine prerogatives, therefore takes He the position of a *suppliant* before the Father. Thus we say that when the blessed Lord Jesus cried, “*Father, forgive them,*” we see Him absolutely *identified with His people*. No longer was He in the position “on

earth” where He had the “power” or “right” to forgive sins; instead, He *intercedes* for sinners — as we must.

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, *for they know not what they do.*”

3. HERE WE SEE THE DIVINE ESTIMATE OF SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENT GUILT.

Under the Levitical economy God required that atonement should be made for sins of ignorance. “If a soul commit a trespass, *and sin through ignorance*, in the holy things of the Lord; then he shall bring for his trespass unto the Lord a ram without blemish out of the flocks, with thy estimation by shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for a trespass offering: And he shall make amends for the harm that he hath done in the holy thing, and shall add the fifth part thereto, and give it unto the priest: and the priest shall *make an atonement for him* with the ram of the trespass offering, and it shall be forgiven him” (Lev. 5:15,16). And again we read, “And if ye have erred, and not observed all these commandments, which the Lord hath spoken unto Moses, even all that the Lord hath commanded you by the hand of Moses, from the day that the Lord commanded Moses, and hence-forward among your generations; Then it shall be, if ought be committed *by ignorance* without the knowledge of the congregation, that all the congregation shall offer one young bullock for a burnt offering, for a sweet savor unto the Lord, with his meat offering, and his drink offering, according to the manner, and one kid of the goats for a sin offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for all the congregation of the children of Israel, and it shall be forgiven them; for it is ignorance: and they shall bring their offering, a sacrifice made by fire unto the Lord, *and their sin offering* before the Lord, *for their ignorance*” (Num. 15: 22-25). It is in view of such scriptures as these that we find David prayed, “Cleanse Thou me from *secret faults*” (Psa. 19:12).

Sin is always sin in the sight of God whether we are conscious of it or not. Sins of ignorance need atonement just as truly as do conscious sins. God is Holy, and He will not lower His standard of righteousness to the level of our ignorance. Ignorance is not innocence. As a matter of fact ignorance is more culpable now than it was in the days of Moses. We have no excuse for our ignorance. God has clearly and fully revealed His will. The Bible is in our hands, and we cannot plead ignorance of its contents except to condemn our laziness. God has spoken, and by His Word we shall be judged.

And yet the fact remains that we *are* ignorant of many things, and the fault and blame are ours. And this does not minimize the enormity of our guilt. Sins of ignorance need the Divine forgiveness as our Lord’s prayer here plainly shows. Learn then how high is God’s standard, how great is our need, and praise Him for an Atonement of infinite sufficiency, which cleanseth from *all* sin.

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them *for they know not what they do.*”

4. HERE WE SEE THE BLINDNESS OF THE HUMAN HEART.

“They know not what they do.” This does not mean that the enemies of Christ were ignorant of the *fact* of His crucifixion. They did know full well that they had cried out “Crucify Him.” They did know full well that their vile request had been granted them by Pilate. They did know full well that He had been nailed to the Tree for they were eye-witnesses of the crime. What then did our Lord mean when He said, “They know not what they do?” He meant they were ignorant of the *enormity* of their crime. They “knew not” that it was the Lord of Glory they were crucifying. The emphasis is not on “They *know not*” but on “they know not *what* they do.”

And yet they *ought* to have known. Their blindness was inexcusable. The Old Testament prophecies which had received their fulfillment in Him were sufficiently plain to identify Him as the Holy One of God. His teaching was unique, for His very critics were forced to admit “Never man spake like this man’ (John 7:46). And what of His perfect life! He had lived before men a life which had never been lived on earth before. He pleased not Himself. He went about doing good. He was ever at the disposal of others. There was no self-seeking about Him. His was a life of self-sacrifice from beginning to end. His was a life ever lived to the glory of God. His was a life on which was stamped Heaven’s approval, for the Father’s voice testified audibly “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am *well pleased*.” No, there was no excuse for their ignorance. It only demonstrated the blindness of their hearts. Their rejection of the Son of God bore full witness, once for all, that the carnal mind *is* “enmity against God.”

How sad to think this terrible tragedy is still being repeated! Sinner, you little know what you are doing in neglecting God’s great salvation. You little know how awful is the sin of slighting the Christ of God and spurning the invitations of His mercy. You little know the deep guilt which is attached to your act of refusing to receive the only One who can save you from your sins. You little know how fearful is the crime of saying, “We will not have this man to reign over us.” You know not what you do. You regard the vital Issue with callous indifference. The question comes today as it did of old, “What shall I do with Jesus which is called Christ?” for you *have to* do something with Him: either you despise and reject Him, or you receive Him as the Saviour of your soul and the Lord of your life. But, I say again, it seems to you a matter of small moment, of little importance, *which* you do. For years you have resisted the strivings of His Spirit. For years you have shelved the all-important consideration. For years you have steeled your heart against Him, closed your ears to His appeals, and shut your eyes to His surpassing beauty. Ah! *you know not WHAT you do*. You are blind to your madness. Blind to your terrible sin. Yet are you not *excuseless*. You may be saved now if you will. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and *thou* shalt be saved.” O come to the Saviour now and say with one of Old, “Lord, that I might receive my sight.”

“Then said Jesus, Father, *forgive them*, for they know not what they do.”

5. HERE WE SEE A LOVELY EXEMPLIFICATION OF HIS OWN TEACHING.

In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord taught His disciples “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and *pray* for them which

despitefully use *you* and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Above all others Christ practised what He preached. Grace *and truth* came by Jesus Christ. He not only taught the truth but was Himself the truth incarnate. Said He, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). So here on the Cross He perfectly exemplified His teaching of the mount. In all things He has left us an example.

Notice Christ did not *personally* forgive His enemies. So in Matt. 5:44 He did not exhort His disciples to forgive their enemies, but He *does* exhort them to “pray” for them. But are we not to forgive those who wrong us? This leads us to a point concerning which there is much need for instruction today. Does Scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not. The Word of God says, “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and *if he repent*, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, *I repent*, thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:3,4). Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender *before* we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first “repent,” that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it. But suppose the offender does not repent? Then I am not to forgive him. But let there be no misunderstanding of our meaning here. Even though the one who has wronged me does not repent, nevertheless, I must not harbor ill-feelings against him. There must be no hatred or malice cherished in the heart. Yet, on the other hand, I must not treat the offender as if he had done no wrong. That would be to condone the offence, and therefore I should fail to uphold the requirements of righteousness, and this the believer is ever to do. Does *God* ever forgive where there is no repentance? No, for Scripture declares, “If we *confess our sins* He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). One thing more. If one has injured me and repented not, while I cannot forgive him and treat him as though he had not offended, nevertheless, not only must I hold no malice in my heart against him, but I must also *pray for him*. Here is the value of Christ’s perfect example. If we cannot forgive, we can pray for God to forgive him.

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

6. HERE WE SEE MAN’S GREAT AND PRIMARY NEED.

The first important lesson which all need to learn is that we are sinners, and as such, *unfit* for the presence of a Holy God. It is in vain that we select noble ideals, form good resolutions, and adopt excellent rules to live by, until the sin-question has been settled. It is of no avail that we attempt to develop a beautiful character and aim to do that which will meet with God’s approval while there is sin between Him and our souls. Of what use are shoes if our feet are paralyzed. Of what use are glasses if we are blind. The question of the forgiveness of my sins is basic, fundamental, vital. It matters not that I am highly respected by a wide circle of friends if I am yet in my sins. It matters not that I have made good in business if I am an unpardoned transgressor in the sight of God. What *will* matter most in the hour of death is, Have my sins been put away by the Blood of Christ?

The second all-important lesson which all need to learn is how forgiveness of sins may be obtained. What is the *ground* on which a Holy God will forgive sins? And here it is important to remark that there is a vital difference between Divine forgiveness and much of human forgiveness. As a general rule human forgiveness is a matter of leniency, often of laxity. We mean forgiveness is shown at the expense of justice and righteousness. In a human court of law, the judge has to choose between two alternatives: when the one in the dock has been proven guilty, the judge must either *enforce* the penalty of the law, or he must *disregard* the requirements of the law — the one is justice, the other is mercy. The only possible way by which the judge can both enforce the requirements of the law and yet show mercy to its offender, is by a third party offering to suffer in his own person the penalty which the convicted one deserves. Thus it was in the Divine counsels. God would not exercise mercy at the expense of justice. God, as the judge of all the earth, would not set aside the demands of His Holy law. Yet, God would show mercy. How? Through One making full satisfaction to His outraged law. Thro' His own Son taking the place of all those who believe on Him and bearing their sins in own body on the Tree. God could be just and yet merciful, merciful and yet just. Thus it is that "grace reigns *through righteousness*."

A righteous ground has been provided on which God can be *just* and yet the justifier of all who believe. Hence it is we are told, "Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day; And that repentance and remission (forgiveness) of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46,47). And again, "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13: 38,39). It was in view of the Blood He was shedding that the Saviour cried, "Father, forgive them." It was in view of the atoning sacrifice He was offering, that it can be said "without shedding of blood is no remission."

In praying for the *forgiveness* of His enemies Christ struck right down to the root of their *need*. And their need was the need of every child of Adam. Reader, have *your* sins been forgiven? that is, remitted or sent away. Are you, by grace, one of those of whom it is said, "In whom *we have* redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:4)?

"*Then* said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

7. HERE WE SEE THE TRIUMPH OF REDEEMING LOVE.

Mark closely the word with which our text opens: "Then." The verse which immediately precedes it reads thus, "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left. "Then, said Jesus, Father, forgive them. "Then" — when man had done his worst. "Then" — when the vileness of the human heart was displayed in climacteric devilry. "Then" — when with wicked hands the creature had dared to crucify the Lord of Glory. He might have uttered awful maledictions over them. He might have let loose the

thunderbolts of righteous wrath and slain them. He might have caused the earth to open her mouth so that they had gone down alive into the Pit. But no. Though subjected to unspeakable shame, though suffering excruciating pain, though despised, rejected, hated, nevertheless, He cries, "*Father, forgive them.*" That was the triumph of redeeming love. "Love suffereth long, and is kind . . . beareth all things . . . endureth all things" (I Cor. 13). Thus it was shown at the Cross.

When Samson came to his dying hour he used his great strength of body to encompass the destruction of his foes; but the Perfect One, exhibited the strength of His love by praying for the forgiveness of His enemies. Matchless grace! "Matchless," we say, for even Stephen failed to fully follow out the blessed example set by the Saviour. If the reader will turn to Acts 7 he will find that Stephen's first thought was of himself, and then he prayed for his enemies — "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. *And* he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:55, 60). But with Christ the order was reversed: *He* prayed first for His foes, and last for Himself. In *all things* He has the pre-eminence.

And now one concluding word of application and exhortation. Should this chapter have been read by an unsaved person we would earnestly ask him to weigh well the next sentence — How dreadful must it be to oppose Christ and His truth *knowingly!* Those who crucified the Saviour "knew not what they did." But, my reader, there is a very real and solemn sense in which this is *not* true of you. *You know you ought to receive Christ as your Saviour, that you ought to crown Him the Lord of your life, that you ought to make it your first and last concern to please and glorify Him. Be warned then; your danger is great. If you deliberately turn from Him, you turn from the only One who can save you from your sins, and it is written, "If we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins. But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Heb. 10:26, 27) .*

It only remains for us to add a word on the blessed *Completeness* of Divine forgiveness. Many of God's people are unsettled and troubled upon this point. They understand how that all the sins they had committed before they received Christ as their Saviour have been forgiven, but oftentimes they are not clear concerning the sins which they commit *after* they have been born again. Many suppose it is possible for them to sin away the pardon which God had bestowed upon them. They suppose that the Blood of Christ dealt with their past only, and that so far as the present and the future are concerned, they have to take care of that themselves. But of what value would be a pardon which might be taken away from me at any time? Surely there can be no settled peace when my acceptance with God and my going to Heaven is made to depend upon *my* holding on to Christ, or *my* obedience and faithfulness.

Blessed be God, the forgiveness which He bestows covers *all* sins — past, present and future. Fellow-believer, did not Christ bear your "sins" in His own body on the Tree? And were not *all your sins future* sins when He died? Surely, for at that time you had not been born, and so had not committed a single sin. Very well then: Christ bore your

“future” sins as truly as your past ones. What the Word of God teaches is that the unbelieving soul is brought out of the place of unforgiveness into *the place* to which forgiveness attaches. Christians are a forgiven *people*. Says the Holy Spirit: “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord *will not* impute sin” (Rom. 4:8)¹ The believer is *in Christ*, and there sin will never again be imputed to us. This is our place or position before God. In Christ is where *He* beholds us. And because I am in Christ I am completely and eternally forgiven, so much so that never again will sin be laid to my charge as touching my salvation, even though I were to remain on earth a hundred years. I am out of that place for evermore. Listen to the testimony of Scripture: “And you being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He (God) *quicken together with Him (Christ)*, having forgiven you *all* trespasses” (Col. 2:13). Mark the two things which are here united (and what God hath joined together let not man put asunder) — my union with a risen Christ is connected with my forgiveness! If then my life is “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3), then I am forever out of the place where *imputation* of sin applies. Hence it is written, “There is therefore now *no condemnation* to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1) — how could there be if “*all* trespasses” have been forgiven? None can lay *anything* to the charge of God’s elect (Rom. 8:33). Christian reader, join the writer in praising God because we are *eternally forgiven everything*. *

*It should be added by way of explanation, that it is the judicial aspect we have dealt with. Restorative *forgiveness* — *which* is the bringing back again into communion of a sinning believer — dealt with in I John 1:9 — is another matter altogether.

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