

“Father, Forgive Them”

Luke 23:33-35

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for November 10, 2024

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In the first of seven sermons about the last words of Jesus, Stephen Davey explores the radical nature of Jesus’ preemptive forgiveness of those who wronged Him, and the eternal impact of His forgiveness to us as well. Only the supernatural power of God could inspire such a response in the midst of such horrid suffering.

Last words can be profound words, enlightening words, even humorous words.

Sometime ago, my bride gave me a book entitled “Famous Last Words.” It’s a record of the last words of kings and queens, politicians, business tycoons, criminals, educators and philosophers.

One entry related to Lady Nancy Astor who became the first woman to win a seat in the British Parliament in 1919. She had a wonderful sense of humor and while lying on her death bed, she briefly came out of an unconscious state to find all her family standing there around her bed. She smiled and said, “Either I’m dying, or this is my birthday.”

She tangled often in Parliament with Winston Churchill. On one occasion she said that if she were his wife, she would poison his drink. Churchill responded that if he were her husband, he would drink it.

Ray Robinson, [Famous Last Words](#) (Workman Publishing, 2003), pp. 15

Last words can be tragic words.

Like Voltaire, the French atheist who predicted in 1728 that the Bible would fade into oblivion over the next 100 years and the Bible would go out of use. Fifty years later, after he died in 1778, his home was purchased by the Geneva Bible Society and his own presses were used to print Bibles.

But when he died, his last words were, “I am abandoned by God and man.”

Last words can be angry and bitter words.

The day Karl Marx died on March 14, 1883, his housekeeper knew he was dying and said to him, “Tell me your last words and I will write them down.” Marx exploded in anger and said, “Last words are for fools who haven’t said enough. Now get out!”

Warren W. Wiersbe, [Jesus’ Seven Last Words](#) (Back to the Bible, 1981), p. 5

Last words can be revealing words—revealing the passion of a person’s life.

Like P.T. Barnum of Barnum and Bailey, whose last words before dying were, “What were today’s receipts?” In other words, *how much money did the circus bring in today?*

Ibid

Last words can be despairing words.

William Porter, otherwise known by his pen name—O. Henry—was a famous short story writer and outspoken unbeliever. He cried out in terror as he died, saying these final words: “Turn up the lights. I don’t want to go ... in the dark!”

Robinson, p. 58

Perhaps some of the most tragic final words were uttered by John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Abraham Lincoln. He was chased down and finally cornered in a tobacco barn on April 26, 1865. The soldiers set fire to the barn and Booth was spotted inside and shot by one of the men. When he was dragged out of the burning barn, dying from his wound, still barely alive, he held up his hands, looked at them and said, “Useless ... useless.” And then he died.

Ibid, p. 11

Last words are realistic words—eternally revealing words.

There are no final words that can compare with the depth and meaning and significance of Jesus Christ’s last words before His death on the cross.

In our last study, we watched as Jesus walked up that hill called The Skull. The Greek word is *kranios* which gives us our word “cranium,” for “skull.” The Aramaic word for skull is Golgotha, and the Latin word gives us the word “Calvary.”

Charles R. Swindoll, [The Darkness and the Dawn](#) (Word Publishing, 2001), p. 125

According to the Gospel accounts, it’s 9:00 a.m. when Jesus is nailed to the cross. He will hang there for 6 hours before giving up His life as a ransom payment for sinners like you and me.

Now Luke is the only Gospel writer who records the Lord's first statement early on. If you'll turn to **Luke chapter 23**, you might write in the margin of your Bible next to **verse 34** the time stamp of 9:00 a.m.

During the first 3 hours—between 9:00 and noon—Jesus will make three statements. Then as darkness covers the face of the earth, during the final three hours, Jesus will deliver four final statements.

They are the most profound final words ever uttered in human history. I have prayerfully decided to spend one sermon on each of these seven profound statements.

They are surprising, caring, agonizing, baffling, exhilarating final words.

One author wrote that Jesus delivered seven sermons from His wooden pulpit—this rough-hewn Roman cross.

Stu Epperson, Jr., [Last Words of Jesus](#) (Worthy Publishing, 2015), p. 4

Now to help us track our way through this first statement, I want to organize our thoughts along 3 major points.

And the first one is so obvious we might miss it, I'll simply call it:

Jesus' Routine

Luke writes in chapter 23 and at verse 32:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Luke 23:32-34a

The first thing Jesus does is pray.

He began His ministry with prayer (Luke 3:21) and now He's ending His ministry with prayer. This is simply His pattern, His relational routine with His Father in Heaven. And what a routine to challenge us today.

Keep in mind that this prayer on the cross isn't for Himself; He's praying for His cruelest enemies.

Charles Spurgeon, [Christ's Words from the Cross](#) (Baker Book House, reprint; 1984), p. 16

Back in the 1800s, Pastor Charles Spurgeon called this prayer the crowing jewel in the Lord's diadem of love.

Ibid

And the crown jewel isn't so much the fact *that* He prayed, but *what* He prayed.

And that's our second point to make here. We have His routine, and now secondly, we have:

Jesus' Request

Look again at verse 34:

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, ..."

Luke 23:34a

One of the things that makes this prayer request so moving is that the tense of the verb indicates continual, repeated action.

Swindoll, p. 126

In other words: as Jesus is being nailed to the cross beam, He's praying, "Father, forgive them ..."; as they lift him up, sit Him on the saddle then nail each of his feet to the vertical beam, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them." As the religious leaders and spectators surround Him to mock and curse Him, He's praying, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing!"

The typical victim of crucifixion would alternate between raging and cursing at the soldiers and pleading and begging for their lives and then cursing all over again.

But Jesus Christ wasn't just any victim; instead of praying, "Father, judge them; Father, bring punishment down on them; Father, pay them back!", He's praying, "Father, forgive them."

Wiersbe, p. 8

The placard above His head declares the reality of His royal position in three languages: Jesus of Nazareth is the King of the Jews.

But His opening words on the cross reveal He's our Great High Priest; He is interceding for others.

Now this prayer request is **reflecting two qualities** that are important to observe.

First: His prayer request is fulfilling prophecy.

Actually, there are a number of prophecies fulfilled here at Mount Calvary. ***Luke writes in the last part of verse 34:***

And they cast lots to divide his garments.

Luke 23:34b

This fulfills the prophecy of Psalm 22:18:

... they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Psalm 22:18

Then another prophecy is fulfilled from Psalm 22:16:

... a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet—

Psalm 22:16b

But get this: 700 years before Jesus hung on this cross and prayed this prayer request, the prophet **Isaiah wrote** this of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah:

... and [He] was numbered with the transgressors ... and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53:12b

Jesus wasn't just praying – He was applying scripture to His own life in obedience as He interceded for sinners . . . Jesus is fulfilling prophecy.

Secondly, Jesus is practicing what He preached.

Verse 34 again where:

... Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, ..."

Luke 23:34

Who is the **"them" in** "Father, forgive **them, they** know not what **they** do."? Who are they?

In the immediate context it would be these Roman soldiers. They don't know what they're doing. It's possible in this tighter context that Jesus is moving these soldiers from the guilt of capital murder to involuntary manslaughter. And the law of Moses would allow them to flee to the city of refuge.

Hebrews 6 informs us that Jesus is the city of refuge.

But in a broader sense, which includes everyone from Pilate to Herod to Judas to the crowd to you and me, imagine anyone in this condition praying, “Father, forgive *them!*”

Jesus had preached out in the open air—on the Mount of Olives—His famous Sermon on the Mount, and in that sun-bathed scene, with flowers growing nearby and birds flying overhead as illustrations, Jesus preached, “**You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’**” (Matthew 5:43).

Jesus preached, “Love your enemies, and do good ... and you will be like the sons of [God], for He is kind to the ungrateful and [to] the evil” (Luke 6:35).

Jesus preached on that same occasion, “Bless them that curse you, and pray for them who spitefully use you” (Matthew 6:28).

It’s one thing to preach all that from the sunny Mount of Olives; it’s another thing to practice it in the cruelty of Mount Calvary.

Adapted from Clovis G. Chappell, *The Seven Words* (Baker Book House, 1952), p. 11

This prayer will convict the crowd and these Roman soldiers. They never expected this! They were calloused to the crucifixion scene.

It was just one more day on the job. Four of them had been assigned the crucifixion of Jesus and these two partners of Barabbas, in addition to a Centurion who made sure it all went according to plan.

This was standard practice for them. History reveals that Rome crucified more than 1,000 people this same year.

But this day will be different. They’re going to experience an earthquake, as well as sudden, supernaturally imposed darkness. They will overhear the conversion of one of the thieves.

But before any of that happened, these hardened Roman soldiers had already discovered something was different about Jesus; they had never had a crucified man pray for *them!*

Matthew inserts this interesting comment that after nailing Him to the cross, after joining in with the mocking and then gambling for His clothing, the soldiers began **to keep watch over Him (Matthew 27:36)**.

Why? They didn’t need to guard Him; He wasn’t going to escape. Chuck Swindoll writes on this text, “I would suggest that the praying of Jesus had caught their attention. Their ears were accustomed to the bitter curses of the victims; their hearts were hardened against the cries of dying men. But they had never heard a victim praying ... for them.”

I would agree. These soldiers had no idea that the Mediator between God and man was hanging there above them; they don't know that they were gambling there on the ground for the tunic of none other than the Eternal Divine High Priest.

Jesus prayed for them.

But keep in mind that this prayer for "them" would extend throughout time—past, present and future—as Jesus bore the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

One author wrote that this prayer was like a rock thrown into a lake, forming at first a small circle, and then widening out into a wider ring, and soon a larger sphere, until the whole lake felt the ripple effects.

So included in this prayer of intercession would have been:

- the Jewish leaders.
- the corrupt Supreme Court Justices of the Sanhedrin.
- the deserting disciples.
- the malicious mob.
- the three thousand who will believe on the Day of Pentecost as the church is created.
- the entire fallen race of Adam.

But most importantly and eternally significant is that "Father, forgive *them*" includes you and me!

Look at your Bibles here at **verse 34** and write your own name there in the margin, "**Father, forgive** Sam, or John, or Susan or Cindy." I have written here in my Bible, "**Father, forgive Stephen!**"

Why? Because you and I were just as responsible for His death; because your sin and mine put Him there.

And when you believe that and accept that gospel truth, then Jesus' prayer applies to *you!*

Now let me go on to say that this moment isn't just a monument of His forgiveness, it is a model for us to follow.

Spurgeon again wrote on this text, “Let us go to Calvary to learn how we may be forgiven, and then let us linger there to learn how we may forgive others.”

Epperson, p. 18

The apostles’ picked up on this application. ***The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:***

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ... 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.

1 Peter 2:21, 23

This is a reference to Christ on the cross, and it’s a clear statement that *His ministry is to become our model.*

To the Ephesians, Paul wrote,

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Ephesians 4:32

Now let’s be honest: at the slightest offense we’re ready to retaliate; we’re quick to defend our rights; to fight back; to stand up for ourselves. Can you imagine being unjustly condemned, stripped naked, beaten within an inch of your life, then impaled on a cross, and even *conceive* of the idea of forgiving anybody?

Adapted from Swindoll, p. 129

Who does that?

The first martyr of the church age, by the name of **Stephen**, prayed as he was being stoned to death: ***“Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).***

Who does that?

Robert Smith is one of our beloved guest preachers whose son was murdered by a young man who’d come in to rob a convenience store. Robert put himself on this murderer’s visitation list, so that he could visit him and give him the offer of forgiveness from himself, and most importantly, from the Lord.

Who does that?

Steve Saint has spoken here in the past. His missionary father was speared to death by the Auca Indians he was trying to reach. Steve's mother forgave them and returned to minister among them, along with another widow by the name of Elizabeth Elliott.

Steve would later write of these warriors coming to faith in Christ, and one of them who had been involved in the killing of his father would become an elder in the church and then personally baptize Steve. Steve would later write, "I have a home among these people, and some of the very men who speared my father to death have become grandfathers to my children."

Epperson, p. 16

Who does that?

Those who see the Lord on this cross, not just as a monument for their own forgiveness, but as a model for forgiving others.

And we're the better for it as we forgive others.

It's interesting that even our world has caught up to the relationship of physical effects that relate to biblical truth. Bitterness and revenge and unforgiveness and envy can impact us in more ways than one.

I read recently that the Mayo Clinic has connected forgiving others with better health; imagine that.

Ibid, p. 17

One author put it profoundly when he wrote: "Unforgiveness is like pouring a cup of poison for your enemy and then drinking it yourself."

So, what's Jesus doing here?

First, He's fulfilling prophecy as He intercedes for others.

Second, He's practicing what He preached.

Now for the sake of our outline, we've noted the **routine** of Jesus in the matter of prayer.

Then we've noted the **request** of Jesus for their forgiveness.

And now:

Jesus' Reasoning

Notice again verse 34:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Luke 23:34

Jesus prays here as if He's arguing on everyone's behalf, like a lawyer arguing before the court, "Let me give you the reason why you should forgive them."

Wiersbe, p. 10

"They don't know what they're doing."

Today we'd say, "They didn't have a clue."

Swindoll, p. 131

And in a sense that was true.

- Peter will soon preach in Acts 3:17, "I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers."
- Paul will say later on in Acts 13:27 that they crucified Jesus because "they did not recognize Him or understand the prophets."

But don't misunderstand: ignorance doesn't remove the consequences of sin—of violating the law.

Jesus didn't pray here, "Father, forgive them because they are innocent."

Ignorance is not the same thing as innocence.

Arthur W. Pink, The Seven Sayings of the Savior on the Cross (Baker Book House, 1958), p. 14

There are still consequences.

Have you ever been traveling and you reached a little town and the speed limit suddenly dropped from 55 to 35 and you didn't see the sign? That didn't matter to the policeman, did it?

I remember Christmas break my freshman year of college. I bummed a ride with three other college students who lived in my hometown and we decided to take turns driving the car that belonged to one of them.

This car was really cool. It was a souped-up Camaro with mag wheels and a powerful engine.

I was the last person in line to drive, and it was finally my turn. Now the only problem was, the speedometer was broken.

You don't believe me either. It really was.

Now it was dark by the time I had my turn, the other students were sleeping, and I just took off.

I knew I was going fast. Soon there were blue lights flashing in my rear-view mirror.

The policeman was an older gentleman, and he wasn't happy. He asked me if I knew how fast I was going. I said, "No sir, the speedometer is broken." He said, "You probably broke it; you actually passed me 3 miles back. I clocked you going 100 miles an hour."

My life flashed before my eyes.

So, I just started talking. I told him that we were college students heading home for Christmas break; we had been away from home for such a long time, and we were so anxious to be going home to our dear mothers—you get the point. He softened up some, but still gave me a ticket for speeding, but not at the speed I had been going.

Jesus says here, and I think this applies more narrowly to them here at this scene:

- They were ignorant of the reality of His Deity; they couldn't comprehend He was the Son of God.
- They were ignorant of this moment in human history; this was the hinge moment of redemptive history.
- They were ignorant of the sweeping impact of the cross of Christ.

Chrysostom, the church father in the 4th century, preached on this text and said, "They were not only ignorant about who He was but also about the mystery of salvation that was being accomplished through this event."

Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, [The Crucifixion of the King of Glory](#) (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021), p. 274

Yes, they were accountable for their rejection of Christ, but this prayer effectively declared that even those involved in the crucifixion were not beyond the reach of forgiveness.

"They know not what they do" is an amazing offer of grace.

This is the truth to this day:

- Our sin is greater than we know.
- Our depravity is deeper than we can understand.
- Our need for Christ is more desperate than we realize.

Apart from Christ, you are in greater trouble with God, greater danger of His coming judgment than you can imagine.

Listen, we're not saved today because we grasp the depth of our depravity—we never will. We just admit we're depraved sinners.

We're not saved because we fully understand the height and depth and reach of God's grace—we never will. We just accept the gift of His grace.

Jesus offers *forgiveness* and declares the reality of our *ignorance*, but His offer must still find our personal *acceptance*!

And some of these people here in this scene will believe and accept His offer of grace and forgiveness:

- Three thousand people on the day of Pentecost.
- Many priests will believe.
- Members of the Sanhedrin will believe.
- Pharisees will believe in Christ.
- Even one of these Roman soldiers will believe before this day is over.

The pardon is offered, but the pardon still had to be accepted.

In 1833, the U. S. Supreme Court made an interesting decision. It had to do with George Wilson and James Porter. They had robbed a U. S. mail train and were caught, brought to trial, found guilty and sentenced to be hung.

James Porter went to the gallows first and hung by the neck until dead.

George Wilson's friends interceded on his behalf and President Andrew Jackson issued a formal pardon.

The charges resulting in the death sentence were completely dropped. But incredibly, George Wilson refused the pardon!

The sheriff didn't know what to do. You can't hang a pardoned man. But Wilson refused to accept it.

This had never happened before. So his case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court.

The case was decided, and Supreme Court Justice John Marshall wrote the following opinion, "A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential; and delivery is not completed without acceptance."

And with that, George Wilson ended up dying.

Here's the offer: ***"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."***

Your sins are more vast in number than you can possibly know, but you can go free if you accept His offer—His pardon.

At the end of your life, your last words, your only hope, will be in what Jesus did for you.

Let me tell you what the last words were of this pastor I've quoted a couple of times today.

Charles Spurgeon pastored in England until his death at the age of 57. But just before he died, on January 31, 1892, his last words were these: "Jesus died for me."

Warren W. Wiersbe, [Jesus' Seven Last Words](#) (Back to the Bible, 1981), p. 5

"Jesus died" isn't enough. Pilate knew that; the Jewish leaders knew that; Satan knows that.

No, Jesus died *for me*. Have you said that to Him? "Jesus, I believe you died for *my sins*; you died for *me*." If you haven't, why don't you say that to Him, today?

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Study Guide

Summary

In this sermon, we explore the profound significance of Jesus Christ's first statement from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," as recorded in Luke 23:33-35. The sermon delves into the power and depth of last words, contrasting the final utterances of historical figures with the unparalleled impact of Jesus' words. Jesus' prayer on the cross is highlighted as a testament to His routine of prayer, His request for forgiveness, and His reasoning behind it. The sermon emphasizes that Jesus' prayer was not only a fulfillment of prophecy but also a model for us to follow in forgiving others. It challenges us to recognize our own role in Jesus' crucifixion and to accept His offer of forgiveness, urging us to live out the grace and forgiveness we have received.

Key Takeaways

- Last words often reveal the true essence of a person's life. Jesus' final words on the cross are the most profound in history, offering forgiveness to His enemies. This act challenges us to consider the legacy we leave behind and the words we choose to speak, especially in moments of trial and suffering.
- Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them," serves as a model for us to forgive others. Despite the cruelty He faced, Jesus practiced what He preached, demonstrating that true forgiveness is possible even in the most unjust circumstances. This challenges us to extend grace and forgiveness to those who wrong us, reflecting the heart of Christ.
- Jesus' actions on the cross fulfilled numerous prophecies, underscoring the divine plan of salvation. His prayer for forgiveness was prophesied by Isaiah, showing that Jesus was not only aware of His role but actively fulfilling Scripture. This reminds us of the sovereignty of God and the assurance that His promises are always fulfilled.
- Jesus' prayer highlights the depth of human ignorance and sin. We often fail to grasp the full extent of our depravity and our need for Christ's forgiveness. Recognizing this truth should lead us to a deeper appreciation of His grace and a more profound commitment to living in light of His sacrifice.
- Jesus' prayer extends an offer of forgiveness to all, but it requires personal acceptance. Just as a pardon must be accepted to be effective, we must receive Christ's forgiveness to experience its transformative power. This takeaway challenges us to examine our hearts and ensure that we have truly embraced the grace offered through Jesus' sacrifice.

Discussion Guide

Bible Reading:

- Luke 23:33-35

Observation Questions:

1. What is the significance of Jesus' first statement on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," as recorded in Luke 23:34?
2. What prophecies are fulfilled by Jesus' actions and words on the cross, according to the sermon?

Interpretation Questions:

1. In what ways does Jesus' prayer on the cross serve as a model for forgiveness, and how does this challenge your understanding of forgiveness?
2. How does the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus' actions on the cross reinforce the divine plan of salvation?
3. How does the sermon explain the necessity of personally accepting Jesus' offer of forgiveness, and what are the implications of this acceptance?

Application Questions:

1. Reflect on a time when you found it difficult to forgive someone. How can Jesus' example on the cross inspire you to extend forgiveness?
2. Consider the legacy you want to leave behind. What steps can you take to ensure your words and actions reflect the grace and forgiveness of Christ, especially in challenging times?
3. How can you incorporate a routine of prayer like Jesus' in your daily life, and what impact might this have on your relationships and spiritual growth?
4. Jesus' prayer extends an offer of forgiveness to all. Have you personally accepted this offer? If not, what might be holding you back, and how can you address these barriers?
5. How can you actively live out the grace and forgiveness you have received from Christ in your interactions with others, both within and outside the church community?