“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM”

Luke 23:26–56

Key Verse: 23:34a

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

Have you ever felt ignored? Despised? Used? When someone said or did something that hurt you, how did you respond? Did you just keep quiet? Did you boil with anger? Did you lash out? Some people actually dream of getting revenge. Without God, we human beings all tend to treat each other badly. So in life, all of us will be hurt in one way or another. How we respond is crucial. Luke tells us that the death of Jesus on the cross was for us to receive forgiveness. It was the light of God in this dark world. When we’re forgiven, we’re also supposed to forgive. When we show such forgiveness, we spread God’s light. But how can we experience God’s forgiveness? And how can we pray for people who hurt us? May God open our hearts to hear Jesus’ prayer. When we do, may it change us.

Look at verse 26. At first Jesus was carrying his own cross. But after the flogging and loss of blood, he fell under its load. At that moment there was an innocent bystander, Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country for Passover. Cyrene was a prosperous port city in modern-day Libya, North Africa. It had a Jewish immigrant population. Simon may have been a God-fearing Gentile who’d learned from the Jewish immigrants and now was seeking God himself. Because he was from North Africa, many believe he was a black man. The Roman soldiers in their blind racial prejudice treated Simon like a slave. It says they “seized” him. Simon had no choice. He suddenly had to turn around and go back outside the city, carrying someone else’s cross. It was so unfair. But through this experience he and his family became Christians (cf. Mk15:21; Ro16:13). Simon identified with innocent, suffering Jesus. The Roman soldiers’ forcing him to carry the cross was an evil act of oppression. But God used it for good. It points to so many suffering, oppressed people in the Gentile world who’d also see the light in suffering Jesus (2:32). Simon shows us how to live as true Christians: deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus (9:23).

Look at verse 27. These were not the women who followed Jesus from Galilee caring for his needs; they were women of Jerusalem. They couldn’t bear to see any Jewish man publicly humiliated by Gentiles. They were mourning and wailing in the streets as an act of protest. Since Simon was carrying his cross, Jesus was no longer struggling with it. Read verse 28. Jesus didn’t accept these women’s weeping. It means his crucifixion is not just a sorrowful event; it’s the good news to all who believe. But why should these women instead weep for themselves and for their children? Read verse 29. When he said, “…for the time will come” he was predicting the future destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Jesus’ prediction came true. During the Roman siege, all food was cut off, and people resorted to eating their own children. At that time women wished they had never even borne children. Read verse 30. The suffering would be so intense that people would ask the mountains and hills to fall on them to annihilate them quickly. Jesus is quoting the prophecy of Hosea 10:8 and applying it to the future destruction of Jerusalem. It also describes the time when he will come again (Rev6:16). Read verse 31. Jesus is saying that if people could be so evil to him during good times, imagine how evil they’d be during a time of great suffering.

Earlier, Luke tells us that Jesus had wept over Jerusalem, seeing its horrible future (19:41–44). Jesus knew God would do this to them because they were rejecting God’s Messiah. He also warned his disciples about it (21:20–24). He said that at that time they should flee the city instead of trying to defend it. What should we learn from Jesus’ words to these women? Rejecting Jesus seems to be no big deal. But that’s not true. There’s a future reality coming: those who reject Jesus one day will experience the full fury of God’s wrath.

Look at verse 32. In addition to Simon, there were two criminals in the procession also carrying crosses. It’s not likely that there were plans to have any executions that morning. But when they decided to execute Jesus, they suddenly brought these two men out also. Read verse 33. It wasn’t enough for them to crucify Jesus; they also put him in between two criminals, to make him look as guilty and shameful as possible. Even this fulfilled prophecy; Jesus himself had mentioned it a few hours earlier (22:37; Isa53:12). Jesus bore the guilt and shame of being crucified in between criminals not just to fulfill prophecy but to take away all our shame and guilt. People seem to be happy and free, but underneath, so many are suffering from deep shame and guilt. It all started when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden and hid themselves. Only Jesus who was crucified in our places can take away our deeply rooted shame and guilt. When we believe in him, we may suffer many things in this life, but in the end, the Bible says we’ll never be put to shame, because Jesus took it away for us (Ro10:11).

Crucifying Jesus in between criminals also reveals the evilness in humanity. It was widely known that Jesus was someone who had gone around doing good and healing all who were suffering under the power of the devil (Ac10:38). It was widely known Jesus was merciful and tender toward those who were sick and hurting. But in response, people did as much evil to Jesus as they could. People still can be unbelievably evil and ungrateful (cf. Isa52:14–53:1).

While they were crucifying him, what did Jesus do? Read verse 34. We’ve heard it so many times that we’ve become numb to it. But his prayer is actually shocking. How could Jesus pray for such evil people like this? While copying the Scriptures, some scribes got so upset that they scratched these words out of the earliest manuscripts. But Jesus had taught us to pray like this. In 6:27,28 he said: “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” He also said: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (6:37). Now, while they’re driving the nails into him, Jesus is practicing his own teaching to forgive those who mistreat us.

It’s so hard to forgive. Sometimes it takes us a long time to do it. But Jesus forgave immediately. How could he? He said, “...for they do not know what they are doing” (cf. Ac3:17). Of course these people knew they were crucifying him. But they didn’t know who he was, that he was the Son of God. They didn’t know what a great crime they were committing against God. Sin makes us blind like that. We can’t see that all our sins are actually sins against our Creator God (15:21; cf. Ps51:4a). When we don’t know what we’re doing, we’re foolish and confused. When we don’t know what we’re doing, we’re hurting those who are so good to us. When we don’t know what we’re doing, we’re lost. Jesus saw sinful people not with critical, judgmental eyes, that we deserve hell, but with a broken heart, that we don’t know what we are doing. Jesus wasn’t forcing himself to pray; it came from his heart: he really *wanted* these people, and us, to be forgiven. He had the heart of the father for his prodigal son (15:20). Jesus wants us to learn to see people like he did, so that we can sincerely pray for them.

What does it mean to forgive? In Greek it means to release or let go. It’s like letting a criminal go free, or cancelling a debt. Jeremiah 31:34b says, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” It’s like wiping a slate clean. Forgiveness is that radical. We wish God could just forgive, without Jesus having to go to the cross and suffering so much. But the Bible tells us that while God is so forgiving, he’s also just. For God to forgive, there had to be a just payment for sin. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, while being crucified, was taking the punishment for our sin, so God can freely forgive us by his grace (Ro3:23–26). Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus’ forgiveness on the cross is like a salve to our wounds. We’re wounded by others, but mostly we’re wounded by our own sins. Our sins against God make us spiritually sick and paralyzed. But Jesus’ forgiveness has the power to bring us true healing. His forgiveness opens our eyes to see God as our loving heavenly Father. His forgiveness takes the hatred and bitterness out of our hearts and fills us with love. His forgiveness gives us hope for ourselves, hope for others, hope for this world. Luke strongly emphasizes that the good news of Jesus is mainly that he came to bring all people God’s forgiveness (1:77; 3:3; 24:47; cf. Ac2:38; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18).

How can we experience Jesus’ forgiveness on the cross personally? Some people don’t realize how sinful they are; they’re self-righteous. To such people, Jesus’ forgiveness isn’t so meaningful. But when we realize that Jesus had to be crucified because of *my* *sins*, we can come to see how sinful we really are. Other people think they’re too sinful, that they’ve committed too many sins for God to ever forgive them. But when we realize that Jesus took all our punishment on the cross in our places, we can come to see that his forgiveness is even for me. We each need to hear Jesus on the cross praying for us, “Father, forgive them.”

Some people may think forgiveness is too basic, even weak. But actually, forgiveness is as essential to spiritual life as food is to physical life. To be spiritually healthy, each day we need to remember how Jesus personally forgave all my sins through his death on the cross. To be spiritually healthy, each day we also need to be showing his forgiveness to others. Ephesians 4:32 says “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” If there’s anyone who has hurt us, no matter how unfair or painful, we should not suppress or ignore it; we should forgive.

In verses 35–56 Luke describes how the rulers, soldiers, criminals, nature and a centurion reacted to witnessing Jesus crucified. Their responses were varied. It tells us that not everybody responds well to his crucifixion. The rulers sneered at him. They made fun of his ministry of saving others. The soldiers offered him wine vinegar to spite him and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Even one of the selfish criminals joined in and said, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Most rulers are really good at saving themselves at the expense of others. But Jesus, our true King, saved others at the expense of himself. If we want to help save others today, we’ve got to imitate Jesus who didn’t save himself.

At this scene of Jesus’ crucifixion there was an unusual person. He was one of the criminals next to Jesus. It’s one of the most beautiful parts of today’s passage. Read verses 40,41. As he witnessed what was happening this condemned man heard Jesus’ prayer to forgive his enemies. Surprisingly, his spiritual eyes began to open. When he heard his fellow criminal insulting Jesus, he rebuked him and stood on Jesus’ side. Read verse 42. What he’s asking is amazing! How can this condemned man ask such a thing? Somehow, witnessing what was happening he had gained even a little bit of faith in Jesus. By faith he asked Jesus to remember him, meaning to somehow let him into his kingdom. Honestly, asking dying Jesus for this after living a life of many crimes and sins seems a bit too much. But this man dying on a cross for his own crimes is a great example of a sinner reaching out only to the mercy of Jesus by faith. How did Jesus respond to him? Read verse 43. This is even more amazing! How could Jesus say that such a man would be with him in paradise “today,” just as he was? It’s simple: it’s because of his amazing grace of forgiveness, and because this man had faith. Jesus always welcomes repentant sinners who have simple faith. This dialogue between this criminal and Jesus is a classic illustration of the gospel. There’s nothing good we ever could do to deserve to enter God’s kingdom—no ritual, no good work. All we need is faith in Jesus and his mercy.

In verses 44,45 the sun stopped shining on account of the injustice of Jesus’ execution. The temple curtain also was torn in two. Hebrews 10:19,20 reads, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body…” Through Jesus’ death on the cross, we now can have confidence to come into the presence of the Most Holy God. Read verse 46. Jesus died victoriously, trusting in God. He died committing his life into God's hands. Many people responded so poorly, even though they saw and heard all these things. But look at verse 47. Even a hardened Roman centurion was moved, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” Regardless of who we may seem to be, we need a pure heart like this man had, to truly appreciate Jesus crucified. In verses 50–53 we see how Joseph of Arimathea responded to Jesus' execution. Joseph was a man of faith. He didn’t give in to peer pressure. He risked his position and even his security to ask Pilate for Jesus’ body. He served Jesus in his death, caring tenderly for his crucified body with his own hands, and honored him with a decent burial. What a beautiful faith! Other eyewitnesses there could also testify to the truth of Jesus’ death.

Let’s read verse 34a again. May God help us to deeply experience Jesus’ forgiveness on the cross and be healed. May God also help us learn to see people the way Jesus did and pray for them from our hearts.