

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday; February 20, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 23:34 AND ISAIAH 53:12b

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.’”
“He made intercession for the transgressors.”

THE FIRST WORD FROM THE CROSS
The Word of Forgiveness

Had you been in Jerusalem on that fateful Friday long ago, you would doubtless have been brought under the spell of the excitement of the hour. This excitement was born of the fact that three prisoners were about to suffer the death penalty. One of them was a young Preacher from Galilee; the other two were terrorists — members of that fanatical Jewish resistance movement that enjoyed nothing better than to plunge a dagger between the ribs of a Roman sentry up a dark street at midnight.

The crowd, with a natural love of the gruesome, was eager for the show to begin. This eagerness was doubtless heightened by the fact that all three of the doomed men were well known and popular. The two revolutionaries were ardent patriots. Having fought like men, they were determined to die like men; and the crowd naturally looked upon them as national heroes.

The Preacher also had been popular, and indeed, still was in His native Galilee, even though the Jerusalem mob hated Him because he had disappointed their hopes by failing to be “the Great Emancipator” of their nation from the tyranny of Rome. Such hatred resulted in taunts and cat-calls being hurled at the Sufferer on the middle cross.

Today when a modern state executes a condemned prisoner, it is done quickly and painlessly, usually by lethal injection. But the Romans never practiced this strange contradiction of kindness and killing. I would remind you that before they sent a man to the cross, they scourged him. This was such a brutal procedure that often the man would die under the lash before he even got to the cross. It was the deliberate policy of Rome to make executions as painful as possible, as a grim warning to would-be criminals.

When the Romans scourged a man, they bent him double over a post that was something like the stump of a great tree and about as high as a barrel. Head and arms would hang down on one side; legs on the other. A man would literally be tied over the top of this whipping post like a clumsy sack of wheat. His arms and legs, hanging down, were bound tightly around the post so that he could not possibly move. The whip used in scourging was made with leather strips fastened at the end of a wooden handle. Each leather thong was weighted at the tip with chunks of lead or brass. With a soldier’s full swing, the scourge would be laid across the helpless victim’s bare back. Every stroke would cause blood to fly in all directions. The pain was excruciating, and the beaten body frightfully lacerated. Veins and arteries and muscles were laid open.

I mention these horrible things, not to be morbid, but simply to remind you that before they nailed Him to the Cross, and before He spoke His first word from the Cross, our Lord had already endured the agony of the scourge scorching its brand marks into the flesh of His back. The nails had been driven through the quivering flesh of hands and feet, and He was transfixed between earth and sky, already gasping for breath.

Cicero referred to crucifixion as “this most cruel, most hideous of punishments... never may it come near the bodies of Roman citizens, never near their thoughts or eyes or ears!” Devised in the first instance in semi-barbaric Oriental lands, death by crucifixion was reserved by the Romans for slaves and for criminals of the most abandoned kind.

Even the two terrorists hanging on either side of Jesus added their own insults to the vicious howls of the mob and the cruel jibes of the religious leaders. Then something took place that at first silenced one of the terrorists, then changed his insults into prayers.

What happened? The Man on the central Cross is praying! I’m sure the last thing the Roman soldiers expected to hear on Golgotha was a prayer! Usually the victims shrieked with pain, cursed the spectators, and called for the damnation of those who had condemned them to such an awful fate. Sinful men might do that, but Jesus was the holy, sinless God-Man; and He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

The fact that the first word that Jesus uttered from the Cross was a prayer should not surprise us, for His whole life had been steeped in prayer. Times without number He had gone out to the quietness of the hillside, before dawn, in order to commune with His Heavenly Father. At every crisis in His life we find Him in prayer. So, we might almost expect that in this dark and desperate hour He should pray.

And what a challenge our Lord’s faith is to ours. It is relatively easy to trust God when the sky is blue and the birds are singing. But what about the time when life tumbles in around us? Someone has said, “When life knocks us to our knees, we are in a perfect position to pray.”

But when we pray under such circumstances, it is almost invariably for ourselves. In our need we cry, “Lord, help me!” Nor is there anything wrong with such prayers. We are invited to come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in every time of need (Heb. 4:16). If Jesus had prayed for Himself, we would have expected that. But what amazes us is that this first word from the Cross is not only a prayer: It is a prayer for others; and it is a prayer for His enemies.

He did not pray in that dark hour for His loved ones, or for His friends. He prayed for His enemies. Once upon a hillside, in the greatest sermon ever preached, He had said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you...” (Matt. 5:43-44) What He had preached once on a hillside, He now practiced on the grim hill of Calvary!

In all probability, it was while His hands and feet were being nailed to the Cross that our blessed Lord began to pray. Actually, the words were uttered not once, but many times. In the

Greek, the imperfect tense of the verb indicates repeated action — “Jesus kept on saying, Father, forgiven them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” Surely never did such love and sorrow meet to transform an instrument of execution into the world’s greatest symbol of mercy and grace!

We read this morning the awesome story of the death of Samson (Judges 16:23-30). With him there was no forgiveness for his enemies who had blinded him. He would wreak havoc upon them! Using his enormous strength of body, he grasped the two central pillars, which supported the temple roof; and pushing with all his might, the pillars collapsed, and the roof caved in; and we read that “Samson killed many more when he died, than when he lived.” (vs. 30)

Consider this — When Jesus prayed for those enemies who put Him on the Cross, wasn’t He teaching us never to regard anyone as beyond the reach of prayer? If Jesus prayed that even His murderers might be forgiven, then surely, we have encouragement to pray now for friends and loved ones and fellow workers who seem to be so adamant in their rejection of the Gospel. Fellow believers, I say to you, never lose hope! Does it seem a waste of time for you to continue praying for that man, that woman, that relative whose heart is far from God? Does their case seem to become more hopeless every day? Does it look as though they have 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 agnostic or atheist — in a word, an open enemy of Christ. Remember then the Cross. Christ prayed for His enemies that they might be forgiven. Remember then not to look on anyone as beyond the reach of prayer.

Now, I want you to notice something else about this prayer of our Lord; and that is, its incredible power, and the amazing results that it produced. You will recall that less than two months after our Lord’s death on the Cross, Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, stood up boldly before a great crowd in Jerusalem, and as a result of His Spirit-filled message, 3,000 souls came to know Christ as personal Savior. Now I believe that many who heard Peter preach that day had also stood on the slopes of Calvary and hurled their taunts at the dying Jesus. Why do I believe that? Because shortly after Pentecost, Peter, addressing some of those new converts, said this: “You handed Jesus over to be killed, and you disowned Him before Pilate, though he had decided to let Him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the Author of life, but God raised Him from the dead... But brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.” (Acts 3:13-15,17)

Now notice carefully what Peter said — “I know that you acted in ignorance...” And that “ignorance” corresponds with what our Lord prayed — “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” Now remember, this prayer does not mean that those people didn’t know that they were murdering a man. What they didn’t know, in their moral and spiritual ignorance, was the deeper meaning of their awful deed. They didn’t know that they were killing the One Who was dying to save them. Someone has said that the moral mood of modern man is — “Father, forgive me, for I don’t know what I’m doing, and please don’t tell me!”

I believe that as Jesus hung on that Cross, legions of angels were poised in heaven, ready and eager, straining on the leash, as it were, waiting only for a word from the Father to sweep down, destroy the crucifiers, and rescue the beloved Son in Whom His Father was well pleased.

But that command was not given by the Father for two reasons:

1. He knew that Jesus had to die to atone for the sins of His people; and,
2. He wanted to give these people who were acting out of ignorance the opportunity both to hear the resurrection Gospel, and as a result, to seek the forgiveness for which our Lord had pleaded in His prayer from the Cross.

Here, then, is the true explanation of the 3,000 converted as a result of Peter's sermon. It was not Peter's pleading which was the cause, but the Savior's praying — "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

You remember how when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was being stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60), we read that "...he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' "A young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, a bitter enemy of the Christians, was standing by, looking after the coats of those who were throwing the stones, and he was spurring them on. But I believe that when he heard Stephen utter those words of forgiveness to his murderers, the Holy Spirit began to convict Saul; and that was the first step toward the conversion on the road to Damascus of the man who became Paul the apostle of Jesus (See Acts 9). And again, it was an answer to our Lord's prayer — "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Brothers and sisters, the same is true of us. Our Lord prayed for you and me long before we believed in Him. How do I know this? Well, turn to John 17:20. In this chapter which contains what is called our Lord's great High Priestly prayer, He prays first for His disciples, that they might be kept true to the faith; and then in verse 20 He says, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message." Do you believe in Christ because of the apostolic message contained in Holy Scripture? Then you, too, are one for whom the Savior has prayed long before you were ever born!

Now, here in this word from the Cross, God is saying to each one of us this morning — "Have you a forgiving spirit?" Remember, this word of Jesus from Calvary is linked irrevocably to that other word of His in the prayer He taught His disciples — "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." (Matthew 6:12) The literal meaning of the words is, "Forgive us our sins in proportion as we forgive those who have sinned against us." What a solemn warning is therefore contained in this petition. Do you see what it means? It means that if we pray to be forgiven in proportion as we forgive others, and there is someone whom we utterly refuse to forgive, then we are actually asking God not to forgive us!

Martin Luther connects this petition with the saying in Psalm 109:7 which says of the wicked man, "May his prayers condemn him." Isn't it an awesome thought that you can commit sin by getting down on your knees to pray? Certainly, when this prayer for forgiveness is uttered by a bitter and an unforgiving person, it becomes a sin. It is a dreadful thought that a person should ask God not to forgive him, and yet that is precisely what the unforgiving person does when he prays this prayer.

It was George Herbert, that worthy 17th century English divine, who used to say, “The person who cannot forgive destroys the bridge over which he himself must cross.”

The Norwegian author, Johann Bojer, has written a story entitled, The Great Hunger. It is about a Norwegian lad, Peer Hoim, who becomes a brilliant engineer and then falls upon evil days and is reduced to poverty. He becomes a kind of local blacksmith in a poor village. But the old blacksmith already settled there, becomes afraid that this newcomer might snatch any scraps of business and leave him penniless. The two become bitter enemies. Peer had one comfort in his wife, Merle, and Asta, their little child. Standing at the forge one day, Peer hears a shriek from his wife. And there was Asta lying on the ground under the body of a great beast, the old blacksmith's dog; and all he could do was tear the brute away from the little lifeless form underneath. The terrible blow seemed to drive the distracted father into despair and eternal night. Time passed, and the old blacksmith had sown his patch of ground with corn, but the late frost had nipped the shoots. He had no money to buy more seed, and no one would give him any — they called it the judgment of God on him. Then one night, Peer couldn't sleep, and he said to his wife, “I want to see if we haven't half a bushel of seed left.” “What do you want with corn seed in the middle of the night?” exclaimed Merle. “I want to sow the blacksmith's ground with it, and I want to do it tonight when no one will see me. It won't do us any good to see his bit of a field lying bare all summer.”

That is the spirit that Christ challenges us to demonstrate if we would call ourselves by His name: A spirit so gloriously revealed by our Lord Himself as He began His terrible agony upon the Cross. Almost 2,000 years have passed since Calvary, and He Who hung there has become to countless millions of us the Lord of life. I wish I could for a moment help you to see the Cross a little more clearly.

When President Lincoln's body was being brought from Washington to Springfield, Illinois, it passed through Albany, New York. As it was carried through the streets, they say a black woman stood at the curbside and lifted her little son as far as she could reach above the heads of the crowd, and was heard to say to him, “Take a long look, honey; he died for you!”

So, if I could, I would lift up your spirit to see Calvary. Take a long look — He died for you: He paid your debt: He bore the punishment you and I should have borne for our sins. He died so that the forgiving love of a holy God is now offered, full and free, to erase every guilty stain that besmirches your soul and mine.

But remember, and this perhaps, is God's most insistent word to us as we begin this solemn series of devotions: The proof that you and I are forgiven is that we forgive others. If we think that our sins are forgiven by God while we still refuse to forgive somebody else, we are making a fatal mistake; we have never been forgiven. The person who knows he has been forgiven only through the shed blood of Jesus is the person who knows that he must forgive others. He cannot help himself. If we really know Christ as Savior and Lord, our hearts are broken and cannot remain hard and callous, and we cannot refuse forgiveness.

If you are refusing forgiveness to anyone, I suggest that you have never been forgiven; for whenever we see ourselves before God as guilty sinners and realize even something of what

our blessed Lord has done for us, then we will be ready and eager to forgive anybody anything. I cannot withhold it. Indeed, I do not even want to withhold it, for

“Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

And part of that “all” is my willingness, completely and unconditionally, to forgive anyone anything he has done to me.

Jesus on His Cross exclaimed, “Father, forgive them...” The next time you offer the petition, “Forgive us. . . as we forgive,” make certain that you are calling down a blessing and not doom upon your soul.

AMEN.