

## A Prayer for Our Pardon

Luke 23:34

The Rev. Robert Eversull of Chicago once submitted several months' worth of sermon outlines in advance to his local newspaper to appear in his church's running advertisement. He writes:

“At the beginning of September, the church school superintendent requested that I recognize and install the teachers during a Sunday morning worship service. I agreed to do this, but warned him that I had already outlined my sermons for the next few months and at this late date I did not have the time to prepare a special Christian Education Sunday sermon. He affirmed that this was unnecessary and so I sent notice of the installation service to the local newspaper.

“A few days before Christian Education Sunday the newspaper reported: ‘This coming Sunday, the Sunday school teachers of the Oxford Church will be recognized and installed. Reverend Eversull’s special sermon for this occasion is entitled, *Father Forgive Them for They Know Not What They Do!*’”

That story struck home. A number of us have been pouring a lot of energy into building our children’s ministry. We had sixteen this past Wednesday. It was exciting, but I had a few of my own moments of asking, “What have I gotten into? I didn’t know what I was doing.” Of course, those words are more sober in their original context. They were the first words Jesus spoke from His cross. Seven such utterances are collectively referred to as Jesus’ Seven Last Words. This year, I would like to spend the weeks leading up to Easter considering each of them in detail.

As brutal as public crucifixion was, it was not novel in Jerusalem. But, the first words of Jesus from the cross must have been. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Strange reaction. Suffering and provoked beyond our ability to imagine, Jesus uttered a prayer of forgiveness for those responsible – them and us. This prayer included ...

### I. A Pardon for Our Iniquity

... <sup>34</sup>Jesus said, “Father, forgive them ...”

#### A. A Pardon for Disloyal Friends

Nothing poisons close relationships like an unforgiving spirit. A married couple had a quarrel and ended up giving each other the silent treatment. A week into their mute argument, the man realized he needed his wife’s help. In order to catch a flight for a business meeting, he had to get up early. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence, he wrote on a piece of paper, “Wake me at 5 A.M.” The next morning the man woke up only to discover his wife was already out of bed. It was 9 A.M., and his flight had long since departed. He was about to find his wife and *really* break the silence when he saw a note from her on the bed. It read: “It’s 5 A.M. Wake up.”

The story that we call the Passion of Jesus begins in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus agonized in prayer to the point that great drops of blood fall to the ground through His pores, His closest disciples were struggling to even stay awake. Soon, a friend, a man with whom Jesus had spent three years giving freely of Himself, greeted the Lord with a kiss. However, Judas’ greeting was nothing more than a signal so that the onlooking temple guard would arrest the right man.

Peter had claimed, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and death" (Luke 22:33). But, when he had three opportunities to proudly identify himself with Jesus, the boaster shrank like a withering flower, denying he had ever even met Jesus. Only Luke provides this poignant detail:

... Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. <sup>61</sup>The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." <sup>62</sup>And he went outside and wept bitterly. – Luke 22:61, 62

Peter was only one disciple. They all ran when Jesus was arrested. James and John had talked big once. When their mother campaigned for them to receive the seats of honor in Jesus' kingdom, He asked them, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). "Absolutely," they said. And, they would, but not on that night.

Jesus' disciples were weak indeed, but the crowds of Jerusalem were pitifully fickle. Only a few days earlier, they had gotten caught up in the excitement of thinking that Jesus might be the long-awaited King *Messiah*. Many joined His disciples and supporters, spreading garments and palm branches in His path and singing, "Hosanna!" which means, "Save now!"

... "Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

<sup>10</sup>"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest!" – Mark 11:9, 10

But, soon, swayed and whipped to frenzy by the lies of their so-called holy men, many of these same Jews had called for Jesus' death. How weak-minded! How easily manipulated!

One of the deepest hurts we can experience is when people we trust let us down. Take whatever such hurt you may have ever experienced and multiply it a thousand-fold and perhaps you will begin to approach the pain that Jesus must have felt. Who could imagine that the first words out of His mouth would be, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"?

## **B. A Pardon for Devious Foes**

The Sanhedrin, consisting of Sadducees and Pharisees, was the ruling council among the Jews in matters civil and religious. These men were envious of Jesus, threatened by His popularity among the people. They also hated Jesus because He specifically indicted them for their showy, empty, self-righteous displays of religiosity. These were the men who bargained with Judas to turn Jesus over. And, these were the same men who pulled false witnesses out of the woodwork to twist the words of Jesus. It was with their approval that their thugs abused Jesus:

<sup>63</sup>The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. <sup>64</sup>They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" <sup>65</sup>And they said many other insulting things to him. – Luke 22:63-65

The Romans would never allow the Sanhedrin to execute anyone, so Jesus' accusers created a charge that would get the attention of the Roman governor, Pilate. They said, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2). One lie and a half-truth were intended to convince Pilate that Jesus was a dangerous man, a threat to Rome. Pilate didn't buy it and he didn't wish to deal with it. He was delighted when he heard that Herod, the tetrarch over Galilee was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus was from Galilee, so Pilate pawned the matter off on Herod.

Herod was a vile character. This was the same man that had beheaded John the Baptist. Herod had heard a great deal about Jesus and hoped that He might work a miracle, performing like some court jester. Jesus would not even respond to this loathsome fool. When it became clear that Jesus would not turn out to be very entertaining, Herod and his men mocked Jesus, dressing Him in an elegant robe, probably a white robe of Jewish royalty, and sent Him back to Pilate.

Pilate never believed that Jesus was guilty of a capital offense, but he lacked the character to overcome the political pressure that the chief priests put on him. The Romans had a custom of releasing one Jewish prisoner every Passover. Pilate offered to release Jesus or a man being held for insurrection and murder named Barabbas. The people demanded the release of Barabbas. One final time, Pilate told the mob that there were no grounds for a death penalty to be imposed against Jesus, but because they insisted vehemently, Pilate gave in. He ordered Jesus crucified.

Matthew's account tells us that Pilate first had Jesus flogged. The Roman soldiers took further liberties with Him. They dressed Him in a scarlet robe, thrust a crown of thorns on His head and placed a staff in His hand. Mockingly, they revered Him as a king. Then, they took the staff and beat Him on the head with it. Emotionally, it is easier to sanitize the sufferings of Jesus than to reflect on them. Isaiah prophesied graphically hundreds of years earlier, "his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness ..." (52:14). Jesus had been taken to the threshold of physical endurance before He ever faced the cross itself.

Cowardice, jealousy, political maneuverings, infantile curiosity and cruelty – all of these human vices factored into the murder of Jesus. Then He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"? They never saw that coming. How could they have?

Don't you suspect that such a prayer of forgiveness for one's tormentors broke the pattern for most crucifixions? The historian Seneca recorded that "those who were crucified cursed the day of their birth, the executioners, their mothers, and even spat upon the onlookers." He tells of times when the victims of crucifixion had their tongues cut out in order to silence their vile rantings. These soldiers had heard it all and were calloused to all of it. Human life was cheap. To them, Jesus was just one more rebel Jew like the dozens they had crucified in the past. The hammer, the nails, the shrieks of pain, the pleas for mercy - they all went with the job.

Nothing they had seen before could have prepared them for Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them ..." His demeanor was unprecedented in the history of crucifixion and it continued for the duration of the ordeal. It made a deep impression on the leader of the executioners, a man doubtlessly hardened by countless other crucifixions. At the end of the ordeal, "The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man'" (Luke 23:47).

## **II. A Pardon for Our Ignorance**

... <sup>34</sup>Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

## **A. Human Ignorance Could Not Thwart God's Grace**

This scene of soldiers casting lots for the garments of Jesus even as He hung on the cross is a powerful image of the indifference of sinners to what was taking place. They didn't know precisely what they were doing, for their specific actions were things they had done many times before and would do many times again. No Roman soldier ever went home to his wife and, when asked about his day, answered, "Oh, we crucified *Messiah*, Son of God and Savior of the world." No, they were just doing what Roman soldiers stationed in provinces around the world did, crucify local troublemakers. One of the perks of the job was to divide the victim's clothes.

The soldiers were just doing their jobs when they crucified Jesus, but they were not the only ones acting in ignorance. Though it is impossible to cut the Sanhedrinists or Herod the same slack we might extend to the soldiers, they too acted in ignorance. They were acting out of hatred of Jesus and personal insecurity about their status in the eyes of the nation. The Sanhedrin clearly wanted Jesus dead, but they thought they were right. They acted wickedly for sure, but also ignorantly. They did not know that they were playing right into the divine scheme. This was vividly demonstrated on an earlier occasion as the Sanhedrin debated what to do about Jesus:

<sup>49</sup>Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! <sup>50</sup>You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

<sup>51</sup>He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, <sup>52</sup>and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. – John 11:49-52

The significance of what was taking place on Calvary was unknown to those who thought that they had orchestrated the events. Jesus was shouldering sin's penalty on behalf of the entire human race. Jerusalem would observe Passover that year. The blood of thousands of sheep would flow from the temple, and the people would continue to think that the lives of these innocent animals were somehow appeasing an angry God. But, the blood of this perfect Lamb of God would be all the restitution a forgiving God would require for the sins of the whole world.

Jesus would take up His life again, demonstrating His power over sin and death. The Gospel would be preached. Those who believed would finally understand that the ancient system of sacrifice was only a symbol of the genuine Atonement between man and his Creator secured by the Son of God. What Jesus prayed from His cross reflected what God was willing to do, and what He very much remains willing to do, to intercede for the forgiveness of ignorant sinners.

## **B. Still, We Are Culpable for Our Ignorance**

There is a necessary sense in which we are ignorant of the ways of God. We are not God. His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. It is not possible that we would always be able to see the hand of God working in our good deeds, much less through our sins. However, our ignorance is greatly compounded by its moral dimensions. Sinners do not typically seek God with a yearning to empty themselves as an expression of worship. Typically, the god sinners yearn after is one who will validate them in their pride, willfulness and wrongdoing.

Jesus desires to bring cleansing to our lives just as He desired to bring it to the lives of those who crucified Him. Still, even as He prayed, He knew that forgiveness could only come as ignorance was lifted, resulting in repentance. There is a strong link between repentance and the illumination of our ignorance. As we see sin for what it is, we turn from it. Repentance can never be thought of as a one-time event but as a daily struggle. We came to Christ because we came to recognize that our sin estranged us from a holy God. As we mature, the insidious nature of sin becomes more evident, driving us to deeper repentance. To fail to give ourselves to this process is to trivialize the sacrifice of Christ, much like casting lots for garments as the Savior suffers.

Are we ever guilty of trivializing the suffering of Jesus through ignorance? When we engage in some private sin, we may think that it is a matter of very small consequence, a slight deviation from our best intentions. We don't take it seriously because in the back of our minds, we think that we can make up for it later. That is profound ignorance about what sin does to us. In truth, it is more likely that we will have begun on a moral drift that very well could lead to disaster.

Are we ever guilty of trivializing the suffering of Jesus through ignorance? Because we are worn down, insecure about ourselves or just unguarded, we snap harshly at someone. Hey, it happens. They'll get over it. Perhaps, they will if they are more gracious than you. Perhaps, they won't. Might you have wounded a spirit that does not easily recover? These are small, everyday matters in your eyes, but only because when you sin in such a way, you don't really know what you do.

Are we ever guilty of trivializing the suffering of Jesus through ignorance? A little peccadillo, we all commit them. At least, that's the take on this earthly plain. We figure that Jesus just rolls with the punches. He is patient with us, an awfully good sport, but do we really know what we are doing? Is it possible that on some level above this earthly plain, heaven sees our willful sins as continued acts of open rebellion? Might the heart of our heavenly Father be grieved? Might we need forgiveness we never think to ask for because we really do not know what we're doing?

Are we ever guilty of trivializing the suffering of Jesus through ignorance? Do you understand that an explosion of temper here, an ethical lapse there or a pattern of inconsistency might have consequences of a kingdom nature? You might prefer to think that they will be easily overlooked because people these days have too much on their minds to pay attention to what you're doing, but if you think that way then you need God's forgiveness whether you know it or not. The world stands opposed to the cause of Christ, and our lapses damage His reputation of in the world.

We can sin pretty seriously even when we don't know that we're sinning, (or, at least sinning in a big way). It is not my intention to awaken in anyone an anxiety that he may stumble just one sin too far without even knowing that he did it. The grace of God is bigger than that. The grace of God is measureless. But I do want you to understand that even our smallest sins are a big deal in the eyes of Him Who sees realities beyond what we can detect. I do want you understand the vastness and glory of God's grace, but I am convinced that it cannot truly be appreciated until we begin to understand the depths and the pervasiveness of sin. We need God's grace even when we don't know we need it.

Thankfully, Jesus was providing such encompassing grace when He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."