

A Lesson on Forgiveness (Luke 23:34)

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The well-known southern preacher R. G. Lee was visiting Gordon's Calvary, near Jerusalem, possibly the site where Jesus was crucified. Lee told his Arab guide he wanted to walk to the top of the hill. At first the guide tried to discourage him, but when he saw that Lee was determined, he went along with him. Once on the crest, the minister removed his hat and stood with bowed head, greatly moved. "Sir," the Arab guide asked abruptly, "have you been here before?" "Yes!" replied Dr. Lee. "Two thousand years ago."

Dear friend, we were all at Calvary when Jesus Christ died on the cross. This is because it was on the cross of Calvary where Jesus Christ bore the penalty (wrath of God) for your sins and mine (1 Pet. 2:24). We were there in the mind of God as the satisfying sacrifice was being made on our behalf. Folks, we should return to Calvary and remind ourselves of the great sacrifice that was made on our behalf.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord
Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble,
tremble, tremble, tremble
Were you there when they crucified my Lord.”

Yes, in one sense, we were all there! Let us never forget it. Let us never lose sight of the wonder of it all!

In this study we want to discover that we should follow the example of Jesus and forgive others.

This is seen in two ways.

I. In the love of Calvary's cross

As we come to the text for today (Luke 23:34), I cannot pass over the Calvary text without commenting on it. The cross of calvary portrays love and forgiveness.

Luke 23:33-34

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors (*evildoers, criminals*), one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

The place “called calvary” means the place of the skull or cranium. According to the New Testament, Jesus was crucified at a spot outside Jerusalem called Golgotha, which in Aramaic means “place of the skull.” Many Christians refer to the site of the crucifixion as Calvary. Perhaps the configuration of the land resembled a skull, or perhaps it was so named because it was the place of death, and a skull is often used as a symbol of death. Whatever the case may be Jesus was crucified on Calvary.

Dear friend, I still believe in the hill called Mount Calvary! And I thank God for Calvary. For it's the blood that sets me free! Oh praise His name, I've never been the same – since I came to Calvary.

If your life has never changed since you were saved, then you never came to Cavalry! Why are people so confused, dissatisfied, broken over sin, and going to hell? It's because they have never been to Calvary. They have never been forgiven and changed by the blood of Jesus Christ setting them free from their sins. Have you ever been to Calvary? Has the blood set you free? It's still the cross, it's still the blood that saves people and makes them fit for Heaven.

The Bible states: “there they crucified him.” There is no lingering over the terrible details of the crucifixion in this Gospel account. But we know that it was a horrible, painful, slow death that was beyond description. The Scriptures simply informs us that they crucified our Lord. Dear friend, I should have been crucified. I should have suffered and died. I should have suffered the penalty for my own sins, but Jesus took my place. Amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree.

In the words of John W. Peterson: “There is no greater love!”

And it's Christ's love for us that sets up the lesson of forgiveness that Jesus is going to teach. But in our first point we learn about the love and forgiveness of Calvary. The message is clear about Calvary. It says: "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so."

II. In the lesson on forgiveness.

We now come to our main text and lesson on forgiveness. While they nailed Christ to the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Imagine this. You were nailed to a cross, and the spikes went through your hands and feet. You were in excruciating pain and agony. What would you do and say? Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus demonstrates forgiveness in three ways.

1. By practicing what He preached (loving our enemies).

What did Jesus teach about during His earthly ministry?

Luke 6:26-28

"Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets. But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you."

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you." Why? Because it is a sure sign you are not living a godly life or faithfully proclaiming the message. It is in the very nature of the gospel to offend the ungodly. Those who receive their praises from the world are fellow-travelers with the false prophets of the OT who tickled the people's ears, telling them what they wanted to hear. They were more interested in the favor of men than in the praise of God.

Now the Lord Jesus unveils to His disciples a secret weapon from the arsenal of God—the weapon of love. The demonstration of love means to do good to those who hate you, to bless and pray for those who curse you,

to pray for those who are nasty to you, and ever and always to turn the other cheek.

F. B. Meyer explains it like this:

In its deepest sense love is the perquisite of Christianity. To feel toward enemies what others feel toward friends; to descend as rain and sunbeams on the unjust as well as the just; to minister to those who are unprepossessing and repellent as others minister to the attractive and winsome; to be always the same, not subject to moods or fancies or whims; to suffer long; to take no account of evil; to rejoice with the truth; to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things, never to fail—this is love, and such love is the achievement of the Holy Spirit. We cannot achieve it ourselves.

The world knows how to deal with people it does not like.. It used to be called jungle warfare or the principle of retaliation. But the world does not know how to deal with the person who repays every wrong with a kindness.

“Pray for them which despitefully use you” (Luke 6:28). This is exactly what Jesus was doing when he was suffering on the cross. Don’t you think Jesus was practicing what He preached when He said, “Father, forgive them” to the very ones who had crucified Him?” Indeed, Jesus practiced what He preached and all of us as preachers should take note of this. God expects us to live out what we give out!

Don’t be like the dentist who told me to stop eating hard pretzels because they could break my teeth. Then he smiled and said, “Don’t do as I do but do as I say.” In other words, he was not practicing what he preached.

Jesus did not live a hypocritical life. He always practiced what He preached. He lived a genuine life yielded to the truth. We must do the same. Again, we must live out what we give out. If we talk about love and forgiveness, then we should live out love and forgiveness in our daily experience. This is what Christ was doing as He hung on the cross. He was practicing what He taught others to do – to love those who persecute and mistreat you.

We should love our enemies enough to pray for their salvation, to pray that their lives will be saved by grace and transformed. We should pray for opportunities for them to hear the Gospel and that God would change their lives. If we practice what we preach, like Christ, we will have a heart for those who might be talking behind our back, telling lies about us, and making fun of our Christianity. Jesus teaches us that we must pity them, pray for them, express kindness to them. When you do, then you will be like Jesus!

The admonition in these verses reminds us of Christ's words in Matthew 5:44–48. "But I say unto you, 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; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more *than others*? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Romans 12:19-20 brings out this same truth:

"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves (*don't take matters into your own hands and get revenge on others*), but *rather* give place unto wrath (*the wrath of God to work – not our wrath*): for it is written, (Deut. 32:35) Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head."

These words are easy to read but can be very difficult to practice. Surely we need to pray and ask God for love as we try to show kindness to our enemies. Will they take advantage of us? Will they hate us more? Only the Lord knows. Our task is not to protect ourselves but to obey the Lord and leave the results with Him.

Paul referred to Proverbs 25:21–22 as he urged us to return good for evil in the name of the Lord. The "coals of fire" refer perhaps to the feeling of shame our enemies will experience when we return good for evil. Heaping

burning coals on his head figuratively describes doing good that results in the conviction and shame of the enemy. The expression alludes to the old custom of carrying burning coals in a pan. When one's fire went out at home, a person would have to go to a neighbor and request hot coals that he would then carry home on the head.

Carrying the coals involved some danger, discomfort, and uneasiness for the person carrying them. Nevertheless, they were the evidence of the neighbor's love who had given the coals to him. As children of God, we must live on the highest level—returning good for evil. Anyone can return good for good and evil for evil. But the only way to overcome evil is with good. If we return evil for evil, we only add fuel to the fire. And even if our enemy is not saved or changed in the process, we have still experienced the love of God in our own hearts and have grown in grace.

Dr. Wiersbe shared this story:

“A friend of mine once heard a preacher criticize him over the radio and tell things that were not only unkind, but also untrue. My friend became very angry and was planning to fight back, when a godly preacher said, ‘Don’t do it. If you defend yourself, then the Lord can’t defend you. Leave it in His hands.’ My friend followed that wise counsel, and the Lord vindicated him.”

Jesus demonstrates forgiveness in three ways.

2. By prophetically fulfilling the Scriptures.

While being nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This act of amazing grace and forgiveness may have actually been part of what was prophesied to happen centuries ago. In forgiving these people as He hung on the cross, not only was Christ practicing what He preached and taught (Luke 6:27–28), but He may have been fulfilling prophecy when He gave this specific prayer of forgiveness. This was a prayer that was prophesied to take place hundreds of years before it happened.

Isaiah 53:12

“Therefore will I divide him *a portion* with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Remember that this is actually a prophecy of the Messiah suffering and dying on the cross for His ancient people – the Jews. He is speaking directly to Israel and dying for the nation. Of course, Christ’s death included to the Gentile masses of humanity as well, but this relates specifically to Christ’s Jewish brethren.

The phrase “because he hath poured out his soul unto death” speaks of the Son’s substitution for lost humanity which here is a reminder that Christ dies for His own Jewish people): Jesus was not a martyr, nor was His death an accident. It was a divinely appointed death. He was God’s sacrifice for the sins of His people. The fact that He “was numbered with the transgressors” is important. Historically we know that Jesus was numbered with the two thieves upon the cross, but He was not like them. When the text says “and he bare the sin of many” it speaks of substitution for the multitudes of lost Jewish sinners. This is not the “many” with the exclusion of others but the “many” which simply means the great masses of Jewish people. Of course, by extension Messiah’s death on the cross would provide substitution for all of lost humanity (1 Pet.2:24).

The Bible also says, “and made intercession for the transgressors.” Here is where Jesus’ prayer on the cross is prophetically anticipated. In a specific way this intercession included His prayer on the cross for His Jewish brethren. The intercession refers to the prayer of the crucified Savior! When Jesus was crucified He prayed, “Father forgive them (His own Jewish people), for they know not what they do.” This was a prophetic prayer that Jesus prayed for a specific people when He was being nailed to the cross and hung on the cross. Jesus gave an intercessory prayer for those who actually crucified Him – His own people.

John 19:15 says: But they cried out, Away with *him*, away with *him*, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar.

In a prophetic and personal way, Jesus was praying for the lost Jewish nation who had rejected Him and crucified Him out of ignorance.

It's very probable that our Lord's intercessory prayer on the cross postponed God's immediate judgment on the nation of Israel for almost forty years, giving them additional opportunities to be saved before the Roman judgment came upon them (Acts 3:17–19). Here Jesus was praying for His own people who were responsible for His own crucifixion.

There are some prophetic overtones in this prayer on the cross. It was a specific prayer for a specific people – the Jewish nation who had rejected Him.

John 1:11 declares:

“He came unto his own, and his own received him not.”

But Christ made intercession for His own Jewish brethren in the flesh as He was being nailed to the cross! In other words, Jesus made intercession for the sinners who actually crucified Him! So, this prayer of Jesus was a fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures. Of course, we must not conclude from this prayer that those who sinned against Jesus were automatically forgiven because He prayed. Certainly both the Jews and the Romans were ignorant of the enormity of their sin, but their ignorance would not exclude them from God's wrath and judgment for their sins.

The Scriptures prophesied of many events surrounding Christ's death. The death of Christ was not an afterthought. It was not a mistake. Revelation 13:8 says that He was the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” And His prayer for Israel's forgiveness was prophesied to take place while He experienced crucifixion. The cross was no accident. It was planned and purposed in the divine counsels of the Godhead from eternity past.

On the morning of May 29, 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conquered Mt. Everest, the highest mountain peak in the world. Nobody has ever really “conquered” Isaiah 53, for there are always new heights to reach. The important thing is to know personally God’s righteous Servant, Jesus Christ, whose conquest of sin is the subject of this chapter.

3. By personally asking the Father to forgive.

“Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). How does Jesus’ prayer to the Father apply to our lives today?

A. We should experience the presence of the Father.

When Jesus used the term “Father” He was speaking of His relationship to the Father, fellowship with the Father, and partnership with the Father. The term “Father” relates to several things.

- Relationship

You don’t need to know Greek to understand this. One evangelist said the only Greek he knew makes hotdogs in Greenville South Carolina. The point is this. Jesus had a unique relationship with the Father and He proclaimed this relationship to both the foes and friends that surrounded Him at Calvary.

Of course, Jesus was proclaiming equality with God. Father!

John 10:30 “I and my Father are one.” Jesus taught that the Father and Son are one in substance, being, existence.

John 1:1

“In the beginning was the Word (*eternal existence of Christ with the Father*), and the Word was with God (*communion of Christ with the Father*), and the Word was God (*deity of Christ with the Father – sharing the existence of God*).

The verb “was” is indicating that at the beginning of the universe, the Word (Jesus Christ) already was in existence.

In John 1:1 it declared that “the Word was with God” (sharing eternal fellowship with the Father and Trinity) and “the Word was God” which means Jesus was sharing equality with the Father as God for He was the living revelation and divine exegesis of God’s very being and existence (John 1:18). In other words, all that is true of the divine nature of the Father is also true of the divine nature of the Son.

The order of the words in the Greek language is literally, “And God was the word.” John places God first because he wants to emphasize that “God” was what the Word (Jesus Christ) actually was in His eternal being and existence. This is the natural climax of his three-fold statement.

The JW Bible (New World Translation) translates this verse “the word was a god” promoting polytheism. But there are not Greek texts that share this heretical and soul-damming reading about Jesus Christ. The claim of the JW’s is there is no definite article before “God” in the Greek language (the God) and therefore this should be translated “a god.” But their bias is clearly seen. The lack of a definite article does not demand the translation of “a god” but simply emphasizes the nature and quality of the Word (Christ) who was being described. Again, the text literally reads: “And God was the Word.”

Here is the point. Jesus claimed to possess an equal relationship with the Father (sharing God’s existence with the Father) and this is why the Jews wanted to stone Him to death (John 10:30-31). A son shares the same likeness and nature of his Father. Thus, when Jesus proclaimed that He was the Son of the heavenly Father, He was claiming equality with the Father in the Godhead.

Father also relates to:

- Fellowship

Father is a term of endearment and points to the fellowship that Christ had with the Father. The Father said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). There was an intimate fellowship between the Son and the Father. Both communed together as a father would commune with his son. It was the closest and most intimate relationship the world has ever known. We cannot fully enter the depths of this sacred communion and fellowship.

How close are you to the Father today?

James 4:8

"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *ye* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *ye* double minded."

"My God and I go in the fields together
We walk and talk and good friends should and do.
We clasp our hands, our voices ring with laughter,
My God and I go in the meadows hue."

- Partnership

Often a father will bring his child into his business as a partner. At Calvary both the Father and Son were working together in partnership to bring redemption to a world of ruined sinners. The Father planned it, the Son supplied it, and the Spirit applied it to our lives. There was a partnership within the Godhead as it related to our redemption. Jesus said that He came to do the Father's will ("my meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish His work (John 4:34). Jesus also said "I must be about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49) and it was the Father's business that brought Jesus all the way to Calvary! There was a real partnership in our redemption.

B. We should express forgiveness toward our fellow man.

Father, "forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

In Matthew 6:12 Jesus told His disciples to pray:
“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Are we ready and willing to forgive as Christ forgave when He was crucified on the cross? Are we willing to forgive someone even when we know they will never come and apologize to us? The Jews and Romans were crucifying the Son of God out of ignorance. But Jesus was willing to forgive them. Many times when people wrong you in some way, they won't come back and apologize. Folks, they are not coming back!

Now what are you going to do about it? Are you going to wallow in unforgiveness, bitterness, and resentment the rest of your life? I know people who live this way. They are miserable wretches! If Christ could forgive His enemies then how can we permit bitterness to occupy our hearts? If we want to be more like Jesus we will possess a forgiving heart and be freed from bitterness and malice toward others.

Ephesians 4:32 commissions us:
“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who were killing Him (Luke 23:34) and He actually forgave one of the men sentenced to die with Him (Luke 23:43). What a testimony this is for each one of us today. In contrast to the hate and rejection expressed in crucifixion, Jesus manifested love and forgiveness for those who crucified Him.

A young boy in Korea was a houseboy for some American soldiers. Sometimes they thought it was funny to play harmless jokes on him. They would tease him. They would tie his shoestrings together. They would lock him out of the house. Eventually they realized that their practical jokes were not viewed as funny by the boy so they apologized. He said, “That's okay, I will stop spitting in your soup now.”

Folks, we need to get the goat off our back and forgive!

C. We must understand the failures of the foolish.

Jesus reminded the Father: “they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Like Paul who was persecuting the church and thought He was doing God’s will and bidding, like the communists of today who are persecuting the church worldwide, they do not know what they are really doing! In other words, they are ignorant of spiritual realities and righteousness.

1 Corinthians 2:14

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (*the unsaved man is incapable of understanding how the Bible fits into his life – not able to see the relevancy of the truth*).

Vance Hanver said:

“The natural man knows nothing more about the Bible than a wooden statue of an Indian outside a cigar store.”

It was true – “they know not what they do.” This means the soldiers and Jewish people in general were not aware of the full scope of their utter vileness or wickedness and their own spiritual ignorance. They did not recognize Jesus as the true Messiah (Acts 13:27, 28). They were blind to the light of divine truth. 1 Corinthians 2:8 reveals, “For if they had known (understood it), they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Their ignorance certainly did not mean that they deserved forgiveness. However, Christ’s prayer for them while being crucified demonstrated His desire to forgive others and express grace and compassion toward them.

Many years ago, I was asked to conduct what was basically a pagan funeral of unsaved people. I tried to bring the Gospel into a pagan background. One man passed by and put a bottle of beer in the casket. Now, what could I say about such an action as this? Only one thing. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!” We must understand the failures of the foolish and be willing to reach out to them in spite of their sinful failures and foolish actions and love them as Christ did. We should love them and witness to them and desire them to be saved. Remember: We were once like them!!

“Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died
On Calvary.”

In Matthew 26:53, while on the cross, Jesus said:

“Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?”

When Jesus came to Calvary He looked at the Roman soldiers and saw a hammer (carpenter’s tool) in their hands. He knew what was coming. Then He looked up into heaven and realized that there were twelve legions of angels prepared for battle. The armies of Heaven were ready to launch battle against man and make an end against man and planet earth. They were waiting for the word of Jesus to destroy the soldiers, but it never came. Instead, they heard something else, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

What a lesson of mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness. May we learn the lesson as well and apply it to our own lives today. When we do, we will be more like Jesus. As God’s people, we also need to forgive one another and keep moving forward in our Christian life.

Dr. John R. Rice, a great evangelist now with the Lord, was asked to conduct a revival meeting at a Baptist church in Woodbine, Texas. Divisions and strife had broken the heart of the pastor until he had resigned and left. The county missionary, hoping to see the church revived and God’s work made prosperous, asked Dr. Rice to come and preach the revival services. He found the whole community of Christians divided. One or more deacons had had fist fights in the quarrel that had reached nearly every home. Many had taken a vow never to return to the little church.

Dr. Rice never did find out most of the details of the division. But with a burden in his soul, he preached against sin, urged God’s people to clean up their lives, and pleaded with them to make peace with their neighbors.

Night after night he preached. Those who had been angry at others were now angry with him.

One morning, a woman in the community started to make a telephone call to tell Dr. Rice just what she thought of all his meddling in their affairs. But her nineteen-year-old son stopped her and said, "Mother, you are wrong! I have just been out in the woods to pray. I know Brother Rice is right. If we Christians do not get right with each other, we can never have a revival. I for one am going to try to get right." His mother did not make the phone call.

It's time to forgive and go on with our lives. If we want to be more like Jesus we will express forgiveness toward others.