

**Father, Forgive Them,
For They Know Not What They Do!
Luke 23:34**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” so says Jesus from the cross.

Who is He asking the Father to forgive? It is assumed by some that Jesus is speaking only about the Roman soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. Is that really the case? From the text, we cannot really tell what the antecedent is, so let us examine Scripture.

In Isaiah, (53:12) it is prophesied *because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.* So, while He is being poured out to death as a transgressor, He made intercession for the transgressors. In other words, He pleads for leniency on behalf of those who committing the atrocity. Jesus himself had instructed people, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt. 5:44 ESV)

What we need to ask is, “Who were the ones who really brought about Jesus’ crucifixion?” The Jewish leaders who held a kangaroo trial, the crowd that cried out, ‘Crucify Him!’? Pilate who gave the final order that He be crucified, even though he mocked the proceedings by claiming to wash his hands of Jesus’ blood?

Of course, Jesus said, “They know not what they do.” So, was Jesus really praying for the soldiers. Did they really know what they were doing? Did they understand that they had nailed an innocent man to that center cross? Did they know that the one over whom hung the sign - *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* – really was the King of kings, Lord and Creator of all life?

These soldiers were hardened in their task. With ruthless efficiency, they nailed Jesus to the cross. They had done this task on numerous occasions. They had ceased to have feelings about the suffering inflicted upon the criminals that they nailed to each cross. They had to become calloused or the nightmares would have been haunting. And why shouldn’t they become callous to the pain they inflicted? Weren’t the men they crucified the most hardened of criminals? The most vile of men? The scum of the earth? Those who deserved to die for their crimes?

Along comes Jesus, a man accused of leading rebellion against Caesar. In the past, many leading such rebellions had committed murder. These soldiers had eased their conscience by believing Jesus to be among the most evil of men, deserving what He received as they drove the spikes through His flesh into the wood of the cross.

They were not the only ones who did not know what they were doing. Only five days earlier, the crowd had shouted and cheered in joy as Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem. Was it a different crowd that demanded Him to be crucified? It is possible that some of the same people were in both groups, going along with the mood of the day and not really understanding why or what they were doing.

Are all the Jewish leaders to blame? Do they really understand that Jesus is truly the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Were they looking for power and a place in society, and so they just did what was expedient, not really contemplating what they were doing?

Did Pilate get it? He was trying to do his job in a difficult territory, Galilee was known for rebellions against Rome. He was afraid of the crowd, he didn’t want a riot. Yes, he could have saved Jesus by proclaiming Him innocent, but to save his own skin and the for sake of peace, he did what He did. Little did He know that He was sending the King eternal to His death.

There are many who had a direct hand in Christ’s crucifixion. Some even attempt to assign blame, who is more at

fault than others who were involved? You and I would like to point out those who are to blame. We like to blame the Jews, and point the finger at Pilate. But then comes Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It isn't just the soldiers, but all those who were responsible for His having spikes driven into the wood behind His flesh, for whom He prays.

If Christ absolves the Jews and Pilate, who are we to despise them. Those who crucified Jesus, He begs the Father to forgive. Who are we to hold against them, what Christ Himself begs to be forgiven?

Of course, many were sinning against the Holy Spirit in the events of the Passion. Scripture is silent about who, but surely there were those who rejected the faith. Although, the Gospel was proclaimed to the Jews for many years following Christ's death and subsequent resurrection, many rejected Christ.

Why was Christ born when He was? Because the players were in place so that He would be crucified. The Jewish leadership, the people living in Jerusalem who would gather in that crowd, Pontius Pilate, the unquestioning Roman soldiers, all these had to be in place and play their part. God knew the decisions they would all make, and brought His Son into the world so that He might be sacrificed to pay for the sins of all mankind.

What does this have to do with you? Was Christ's Word from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," just a prayer on behalf of all those just mentioned?

Do you understand the severity of your sinfulness? Do you understand your place in the scene of the cross? Do you understand your sinfulness being part of the reason for Christ's crucifixion? Isaiah said, *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* (Is. 53:4-6 ESV)

What is your iniquity? Maybe the better question is, "what are your sins?" Yes, their name is legion. Maybe nobody else knows them all, in fact, neither do you. God does! How easy does forgiveness come to you? Do you forgive as Jesus does in these words from the cross? Do you forgive even your enemies? Do you forgive as did Stephen in our reading from Acts, even willing to forgive those who desire to rob you of your life?

After Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer, He instructed, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

If you continue to harbor a grudge, or hold onto your anger against someone, if refuse to be reconciled with someone, if you refuse to forgive someone who has harmed you, then you are sinning. You are saying that what Jesus was accomplishing in our text, was not done for the person whom you will not forgive. An unwillingness to forgive and be reconciled to someone is the same as saying that Jesus did not die for their sins.

Our individual sins are grievous to God, they deserve His wrath. Do you fully grasp in your mind God's wrath against your sin? Look at the cross! See there the consequence of sin, "the wages of sin is death." Sin deserves the agonizing punishment of death. The contempt of the soldiers toward the criminals who they nailed to their crosses, is the contempt you deserve for your sin.

No, you may not have taken the actual life of another human, you may not have stolen the car from another man's yard, or have slept with the spouse of another. Your sins many not appear grievous to the rest of the world, but to God, your sins have earned you agonizing death and His eternal wrath.

How? A gossip ruins another's reputation and is like murder to God. Lust in my heart for my neighbor is adultery – and pornography runs rampant. When God's name flows freely through your lips without any thought to talk to

Him in prayer, praise, or thanksgiving is blasphemy and deserving of death. Anger, jealousy, covetousness, drunkenness, blasphemy, lies, and so much more, flows so easily from us. Each of our thoughts, our words, and yes, even our deeds are stained black with our sin. And Jesus was nailed to the cross because *the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*.

It was less than 24 hours before Jesus was nailed to the cross that He had prayed for you. He prayed for the disciples, but he also prayed for those who would believe in Him through their word – for you. He is true God, who has seen all of time and knows all His creatures. He who formed you in the womb, knew you and *All the days ordained for (you) were written in (His) book before one of them came to be*. (Ps. 139:16 NIV)

You and I do not know all our sins. There are some we have forgotten. There are others we so blithely committed because we knew not what we were doing. Yet today, you came before your God and confessed your state as a miserable sinner. While you may have also spoken those words without thinking, the Spirit moved you to speak them.

From the cross, Jesus, begs the Father, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And the Father answers that prayer in your hearing, He responds to the plea of His Son when He commands His Word be spoken to you, “Your sins are forgiven!”

On the table before you this evening, Christ has set a table. In that meal, He is begging His Father, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” As you eat of His flesh, and drink of His blood shed for you, you receive exactly what Jesus desires for you, the very forgiveness He purchased with His own flesh upon the cross.

Tonight, we meditate upon the first words of Jesus from the cross. When you hear these words, know that they were not meant solely for the soldiers that day, or the rabble gathered on that Judean hillside, or for Pilate, or for the Jews. Yes, Jesus desired the Father to forgive them all, but know this also – that when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," He had you on His mind. Amen.