

## Words of Life from the Cross: A Pardoning Word

A sermon based on Luke 23:34

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

Three of the hardest words in the English language, in my opinion, are....any guesses? *I forgive you*. Can you say them with me? "Alright, not so hard to say, Pastor." Except I didn't say they were the hardest to say. Rather, in my opinion, "I forgive you," those are three of the hardest words to really mean, especially as we look at the way God wants us to forgive others. Would you agree?

Over these next few Sundays, we're going to look at the words Jesus spoke from the cross...words of life from the cross. And as hard and heart-breaking as some of those words will be for us to hear, the words he speaks today may be the toughest for us to intimate and imitate in our lives...the pardoning word, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

Can you imagine? Can you picture the scene? The time has finally arrived. A betrayal by a "friend," the joke of a trial by the Jewish religious leaders, the contrived attempt by Pilate to grant a pardon, the lashes, the beatings, the vile ridicule and scorn, the excruciating and labored walk to Calvary...it's all led up to this point...the crucifixion.

Yet, even as the hammer blows drive the nails through His flesh into the wood, Jesus is heaven-bent on forgiveness. The very first words out of his mouth, not the colorful language we'd maybe let slip, not a cry for God to extract his vengeance on his enemies for this unjust act. Simply, ***"Father, forgive them."*** What else would you have expected? He had taught His disciples to pray as though forgiveness depended on them: ***"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."*** He even underscored this petition, to emphasize the meaning: ***"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."***

When Peter sought to limit his forgiveness to a "generous" seven times—seven times my brother sins against me; seven times I forgive him—Jesus raised him seventyfold: ***"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*** Jesus told a parable of a servant who had been forgiven this massive debt but turned around and refused to forgive the smallest of debts to his fellow servant, only to have his own unforgiveness come back to him, and then he followed it up by saying, ***"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."***

Jesus had taught forgiveness. Now he did forgiveness. And all that makes it clear for us...forgiveness is never merely an option for the disciple.

Hear that again. Forgiveness is never merely an option for the disciple...for the believer...for you and me. Yet our humanity, turned away from God and corrupted, really wants nothing to do whatsoever with forgiveness. We're quick to condemn, slow to forgive, long on holding grudges. We seek our "pound of flesh," wanting to get even and settle the score. Our reflexes are not geared to letting go, which is what "forgiveness" means at its core: Letting the thing go. Leaving it be. Pulling the plug on your anger or your desire to get even. It's literally dropping dead to the matter as though it had never happened.

We don't naturally do that, though. Not us, who are natural-born bookkeepers of the wrongs committed against us. And I know that's not just me, who has the ability to forget almost anything else except when someone has done me wrong. Because there's power to control there. We store our grievances up for another day when they might become useful, especially when energized by an accusing "always" and "never." You always do this; you never do that.

We learn to nurse the wrongs committed against us like a pet, even long after we have forgotten the offense. "I'm not speaking to him. I don't remember why, but I'm not speaking to him. I will never forgive him. I don't even remember what he did, but all I know is I will never forgive him." We withhold a comforting word of pardon when the person isn't sorry enough, or when we assume they're just going to do the same thing over again...hurt us again. We say no to forgiveness when they haven't shown they're really sorry or when they haven't really apologized in the way we think they should. Or even the word of forgiveness forced through clenched teeth without one ounce of real feeling behind it. How sad. How sinful.

Unforgiveness...denying forgiveness hardens the heart. That's what makes it so spiritually toxic and debilitating. The heart that's been softened and opened to God's forgiveness becomes calloused and calcified in unforgiveness. That's why Jesus is so hard-pressed to make forgiveness a key petition in the disciples' life of prayer. **"Forgive us as we forgive."** He knows the obstacles. He knows the reluctance. He knows you.

And so he lovingly reminds you...and me, over and over, to keep the channels of forgiveness open, both vertically and horizontally. Like Paul writes in Ephesians, **"Be kind and compassionate to each other, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you."** The forgiveness you speak is the forgiveness you've heard spoken to you from God. It doesn't start with you, but with God. Think of it like we are merely conduits, pipelines, directing that forgiveness to others where they've sinned against us. But the forgiveness comes from God, for only God can set a heart free to forgive.

**"Father, forgive them..."** What sort of man is this who's so bent to forgive? He's the Son of Man, humanity restored to the image of God, reflecting God's perfect forgiving love to the world in our human flesh. He's the perfect Forgiver, the Absolver above all others, who came to forgive men their sins, even the sins committed against Him.

As the soldiers nailed Jesus to the wood of His cross and stood it upright in the ground, with a convicted criminal on either side, He speaks that first word of life, a pardoning word of forgiveness. **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** Oh, they knew exactly what they were doing. This was not their first rodeo. They were following orders, administering the harshest punishment they could for an abhorrent crime.

They didn't know who they were doing that to. Didn't matter to Jesus. Even as they gamble for His garments, even as those passing by mock Him and offer Him sour wine to drink, He forgives them. Every sin, every blasphemy against Him, He forgives. Your sins against Him, in all the ways you drive those nails into His hands and feet, He forgives you.

You see, His prayer to the Father is for you, too. Hear it as your own. Jesus pleads for you before the throne of grace, showing the wounds of His own crucifixion, bearing your sin. **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** To be honest, we don't know what we're doing. We have

no idea of the damage we do to others and to ourselves. We have only a small inkling of our own sinfulness, and even that we manage to rationalize away. Our deadness runs so deep, we even think we're doing God a favor when we pound away at our fellow man. And this word comes back to us against the background of cruel hammer blows, mockery, and scorn: ***"Father, forgive them."***

It's a sweet, divine melody played against the disharmony of this world. A new song sung against the devil's lie and the old song of our sin. You hear it, too, in the Absolution at the start of the service or in times of personal absolution with me. Father, forgive him; forgive her. Jesus insists on it. He demands it. He petitions the Father for it, and the Father always gives the Son what He asks for. The world is forgiven because Jesus prays for it to be forgiven, and He prays for it through the blood of His sacrifice.

He looks at our inhumanity to our fellow man—our killing fields, our genocides, our needless, brutal wars, the atrocities in our streets, the slaughter of our innocents in abortion, the ways we hurt and harm our neighbor—and He prays, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

And that pardoning prayer reconciles; it makes whole again; it restores the enemy. God and man are reconciled, made at one, at peace in Jesus. In His body He carries the sin; from His mouth He speaks the pardoning word that delivers forgiveness. No conditions, no expectations, no hesitance...not even waiting for the "I'm sorry." This is the pardoning word of the Church, His Body, the Word that invigorates the Church and her ministry. ***"If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."***

It's a pardoning Word you've been baptized into...a Word that washes away your sin and cleanses you from all unrighteousness. Forgiveness freely given by God, freely received through faith, is also freely distributed in love. The same forgiveness flowing from the heart of Jesus flows through your forgiven heart set free to forgive those who sin against you with the same priestly intercession, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."***

This first, pardoning Word sets the stage for all of Jesus' other words of life from the cross. It unbars the door, turns the key to the prison. You are free precisely because you are forgiven. And so we can say again and again and again, "I forgive you." And it's not hard. And we mean it. Amen.

Let's pray... **Lord, for Your pardoning Word, forgiving those who tortured You, forgiving us who have sinned against You, forgiving a world that knew You not but wished You dead, we give You thanks and praise, most holy Jesus. Enable us to imitate you and freely forgive as we've been forgiven. Amen.**