

## **The Essence of Forgiveness**

November 24, 2013

Luke 23:33-43

Jamestown, VA, was the first permanent settlement in the new world, and some of their religious practices were rather interesting.

For instance, they had 2 hour church services every day except Sunday. The Sunday service lasted for 5 hours! Everybody had to attend. Missing church was considered a sin and was dealt with severely.

The penalty for missing a service was the loss of food rations for a whole day. A second absence resulted in a public whipping. And the penalty for missing 3 times was to be placed in the stocks daily for 6 months!

Historians tell us that research has not revealed anyone in Jamestown Colony ever missing church 3 times.

During the colonial days, in almost every colony, those accused of “sin” could be publicly disgraced and branded on the forehead or on the cheek. Things are certainly different today, aren't they?

In his book, "Whatever Became of Sin?" noted psychologist Dr. Karl Menninger wrote, "The very word 'sin,' which seems to have disappeared (from our language), was an ominous, serious word . . . but the word went away.

Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?"

Now none of us would like to return to the Puritanical punishments, but don't you think maybe the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction?

We've emphasized love, grace, and forgiveness, but say little about sin and punishment. And the result is that many today view God as a doting old grandfather who would never hold people accountable for sin. In fact, our attitude seems to be, "God will forgive me; that's His job!"

With that in mind, go with me for a few moments to the morning Jesus was crucified. Recall some of the passage that I just read from Luke.

"Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left.

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

H. G. Wells wrote a story entitled, "The Country of the Blind." In it he tells about a hidden valley shut off from the rest of the world by very high cliffs. That valley was inhabited only by blind people, and no one there had ever been able to see.

A lost and weary traveler stumbled into this country of the blind, and stayed with them for a while. As he lived among them, he found himself falling in love with a blind maiden, and began considering the possibility of marriage.

But the blind people thought that this man who could see was strange. They felt that his mind was cluttered and confused, distracted by his ability to see. So they insisted that if he wanted to continue living among them, he would have to have his eyes put out and become as blind as they.

For a while the man thought that he would be willing to do that. But one morning he got up and saw the beauty of the sunrise, the mist rising from the valley floor, the dew glistening on the petals of the flowers, and he realized that he could not stay in the country of the blind. So he climbed out of the valley and returned to the world of sight.

When Jesus came into our world he saw things that the world was unable to see. He thought thoughts that the world had never thought. He did deeds that the rest of the world could not do.

And our world could not stand that. It tried to pull him down to its own level. But Jesus refused to be a part of the darkness of this world.

But there the story loses its analogy, because Jesus did not run away from our darkness. Instead, he conquered it. And the place where that victory occurred is a hill called Calvary, Golgotha, the "place of the skull," on an old rugged cross.

Each of the gospel writers covers different aspects of that crucifixion event, and they record different things that Jesus said during that horrible ordeal.

Taken together, we learn that Jesus spoke 7 times while hanging on the cross. And his first words were those that we read just a few moments ago, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Now we have heard and read those words many, many times, and they are certainly meaningful to us. But I think that a lot of people misunderstand what he is doing. And it is important that we don't misunderstand. Or, put positively, it is most important that we DO understand.

So what is Jesus doing? Well, the answer would seem obvious, "Jesus is praying." But wait a minute. People don't usually pray while hanging on crosses. We pray in gardens. We pray in church buildings & synagogues. We pray where we can get away from the noise and confusion of the world and think clear thoughts. But we don't pray on crosses.

You curse on crosses. You scream on crosses. You cry on crosses. You experience pain on crosses. You certainly don't pray to forgive others on crosses.

You might not be aware that the Romans worshiped revenge as one of their gods. They were constantly waging war on countries that had done them wrong, seeking revenge.

The Jews felt much the same way. Part of their law was "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Blood for blood." You don't hang on a cross and pray for others. You especially don't pray for their forgiveness.

And yet, that appears to be exactly what Jesus did as He hangs suspended between heaven and earth, dying on the cross.

Have you ever wondered, "What kind of mind dreamed up crucifixion?" I look at some of the things we call "entertainment," for example, the horror movies that are produced today, and I wonder, "Who in the world thinks these things up?"

And I have to say in all honesty that my impressions of these come from the previews that are shown. I would not choose to watch the whole thing – just not my cup of tea.

I grew up in an age when monsters were people like Frankenstein. You almost laughed at them because they were funny, not fearful. But today, all kinds of grotesque things parade before our eyes. Who sits around and thinks these things up?

Who thought up the cross? Who thought about a person having nails driven into his hands and feet, watching him die a slow death that drags out over hours and sometimes days? What kind of twisted mind thought up something like that?

Jesus hangs there, experiencing the result of man's twisted thinking, and what does he do? He begins to pray.

Now I want you to notice something – not to try to make you Greek scholars, but to help you understand something important here.

In the Greek text, Luke uses an unexpected verb tense when he wrote, "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them.'" The verb tense of the word "said" expresses "continuous, repeated action."

It was not just once that Jesus prayed this prayer, but many times. Again and again he prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

I wonder how many times he prayed it? Did he pray it when they whipped him with the cat o nine tails? Did he pray it when they thrust a crown of thorns on his head, put a purple robe around his shoulders, and mocked him by saying, "Hail, King of the Jews"?

Do you suppose he prayed that prayer as he was carrying his cross up the hill? Did he pray it as they were driving nails into his hands & feet?

Did he pray it as he was hanging there, his life's blood dripping to the ground? Do you suppose he prayed that prayer when he looked into the angry faces shouting, "If you really are the Son of God, come down from the cross"? How many times did Jesus pray that prayer?

Luke says that it was not just once, but again and again He prayed, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

So Jesus was praying, but I wonder if we understand what he was praying for? I have to tell you that I honestly think there have been some false conclusions about that.

Some have said that Jesus was praying for a blanket pardon for all the people who participated in his crucifixion. He was just going to forgive everybody who had anything to do with it.

But I don't believe that, because God never forces his forgiveness on anybody. He is not going to walk up to a cursing, mocking priest shouting "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" and say, "I'm going to forgive you whether you want to be forgiven or not."

Jesus pays the price, and God offers forgiveness. It is free to any who want it. But he never forces it on anyone.

And I don't believe that Jesus is excusing ignorance when he says, "...they don't know what they are doing."

Do you know that there are some people who think that we ought to keep quiet about Jesus; for example that Christians should never send missionaries to foreign cultures, because if we tell people about him, then they are accountable to God for what they know.

So they're better off if they don't know anything. Then God will just excuse their ignorance. But that is not what Jesus is praying at all.

In Acts 3:17-19 we hear the words of Simon Peter as he preaches shortly after the Day of Pentecost. "Now brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders....Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out..."

Peter is saying, "You acted in ignorance. No question about that. But He doesn't go on to say, "Jesus prayed for God to forgive you, so you are all forgiven." Instead, Peter says, "Now repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out." Repentance is the key to forgiveness.

Another misconception -. Some have even suggested that Jesus is actually rewarding those who crucified Him.

They reason, "It was God's will that Jesus die for the sins of men, and these were simply carrying out the will of God by hanging him on the cross. So they deserve a reward instead of condemnation."

I can't accept that, either. That's blasphemy. They were not performing the will of God. They were performing the will of men. Granted, God took their terrible crime and transformed it into forgiveness and redemption.

But those who crucified Jesus were following their own selfish interests, not the will of God.

So what is it that Jesus is praying for? When he prays, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing," what is he really praying for?

To answer that we need to understand the word that is translated "forgive" in this verse. There are different words used in the New Testament for "forgive."

One word means "to forget, to wipe out completely." God does promise to wipe away our sins and forget them, never to remember them again. But that is not the word that is used here.

The word that is used here is found also in Matthew 19:14. There it is used when children are brought to Jesus, and the apostles try to keep the children from coming to Him. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them."

The word that is translated "let" in "Let the little children come..." is the same word translated "forgive" when Jesus said "Forgive them" on the cross.

So what is Jesus saying? He is not saying, "Forgive the little children." He is saying, "Let them come. Don't interfere. Don't stop them. Don't hinder them from coming."

That same word is used again in Matthew 27:48-49, talking about the soldiers at the cross. It says, "Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink.

But the rest said, "Leave Him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save Him."

There's that word again, and this time it is translated, "Leave Him alone." The word is used the same way in both places. "Don't interfere. Don't stop the children from coming. Don't wet his lips with a sponge."

That is exactly what Jesus is saying on the cross when He prays for them. He is asking God, "Don't rush to show your wrath. Hold your punishment. Don't interfere."

How would a righteous God feel when a wicked world crucifies His Son?

Well, how would you feel? I would be angry, and if you or I were God there would probably be a few lightning bolts flying in that crowd!

But when Jesus prayed that prayer, God held back his wrath. And even now the prayer of Jesus is still being honored. God is still holding back His wrath.

"Hold back the wrath," Jesus prayed. "Give Roman soldiers who drive nails into the hands a chance to repent. Give angry crowds a chance to get right with God.

Give all of the sinning and evil people a chance to be redeemed. I'm paying the price, Father. Hold back your wrath. Give them the chance to repent, to be forgiven, and made new."

Isn't that exactly what Peter is telling us in 2 Peter 3:9 when he says, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"?

You and I are here today because the prayer that Jesus prayed 2,000 years ago is still being honored by God.

That's why the sun shines on the good and the bad. That's why the rain falls on the just and the unjust. That's why sometimes evil people seem to prosper while good people don't.

But one day God's wrath will be unleashed. And what happens to us then depends on what we have done with Jesus.

For 2,000 years Christians have been proclaiming the message that Jesus paid the price for their sin. Maybe we'll have another 2,000 years to preach the message. Maybe we won't.

Right now, though, that prayer is still being honored. Right now forgiveness is still offered. God will never force it on you. But He offers it, makes it available, and paid the price for it. It is ours for the taking.