

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Luke 23:34

Rev. Brian Bill

March 1-2, 2014

This feels like the winter that will never end, doesn't it? All this bad weather is causing a lot of problems in relationships. With all the snow and the drifts and the wind and freezing temperatures I heard that Sheila Kuriscak has become quite concerned about Pastor Ed. Apparently he's done nothing but just stare through the kitchen window. She told me this week that if *it gets much worse, she may just have to let him in!*

I think they're going to need some help with forgiveness, don't you? Unless she leaves Ed outside until spring comes or he freezes to death.

When someone dies a frequent question is this, "*Did he or she say anything at the end?*" The last words of a dying person are normally never forgotten. Some enter eternity without saying anything, while others utter sentiments that summarize their values, priorities, and innermost thoughts.

- Right before P.T. Barnum died, he asked, "*How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?*"
- Humphrey Bogart's last words were, "*I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis.*"
- General John Sedgwick, who fought in the Civil War, had his final words cut off in mid-sentence as his soldiers were seeking cover from some sharpshooters. This is what he said, "*They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist...*"
- Pancho Villa, the Mexican revolutionary, sighed, "*Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something.*"
- Karl Marx turned to his housekeeper, who had urged him to tell her his last words so she could write them down, and shouted, "*Go on, and get out. Last words are for fools who haven't said enough.*"

This weekend we're beginning a series on the final cries of Christ from the Cross and they're definitely not the words of someone who didn't say enough when He was alive. The Savior's shouts are riveting and piercing, beautiful yet shocking.

These weighty words were spoken from the lips of our Lord while his sacrificial blood splashed on the ground. Most of his time on the cross was spent in silence and yet seven sentences are recorded for us. While his body was wracked with pain, his throat parched with thirst, He had no energy to waste on trivial matters. Each word serves as a window to help us understand Christ and the cross better. We're going to dwell on each one of these solemn sentences in order to prepare ourselves for our Epic Easter services – we'll have two on Saturday night and two on Easter Sunday morning.

By the way, Ray Pritchard has written a new 40 day e-devotional called "Lord of Glory" that is available for free at www.keepbelieving.com. This devotional on the names of Christ is designed to help us get ready for Easter. We'll post a link on the Edgewood Facebook page.

The first three cries from the cross take place between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and noon:

1. ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."*** (Luke 23:34)
2. ***"Today you will be with me in paradise."*** (Luke 23:43)
3. ***"Dear woman, here is your son."*** (John 19:26)

From noon to 3:00 p.m., there was darkness over the land. And then Jesus uttered his final words:

4. ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** (Matthew 27:46)
5. ***"I am thirsty."*** (John 19:28)
6. ***"It is finished."*** (John 19:30)
7. ***"Into your hands I commit my spirit."*** (Luke 23:46)

These words convey the rich doctrines of Christianity: forgiveness for the unforgivable, salvation by faith alone, honoring your parents, the humanity of Christ and His substitutionary death, the fulfillment of Scripture, the justification of the believer, and the absolute certainty of eternity.

The Final Hours

Let's set the scene by recounting the events leading up to the crucifixion. I was helped in my understanding by a physician who studied the details of the last 12-18 hours of Jesus' life (www.worldramp.net/~dnaquin/Jesus-death.htm). Following the last supper, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He poured out

his distress to the Father as He went through a deep spiritual struggle. Luke 22:44: ***“And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”*** The loss of blood and sweat would create the beginning stages of dehydration. An angel appeared at this point and gave Jesus strength (verse 43).

Jesus was then arrested and faced a trial sometime after midnight. He was led away with His hands bound, the same hands that had healed the sick. Luke 22:63 tells us that Jesus was blindfolded and beaten while the soldiers mocked Him. He then faced a second trial with more illegal proceedings. Jesus is now exhausted by lack of sleep, abuse, loss of fluids, and ridicule.

In an attempt to appease the people, Pilate has Jesus scourged. This was not something that was ordinarily done as part of the crucifixion. Roman law allowed the prisoner to be beaten to the point of death as measured by a rapidly increasing pulse and an irregular respiratory rate. These whips had a small piece of metal attached to the end and would chip and gouge out chunks of bone and tissue. His skin would be stripped into long, ribbon-like segments, causing profound arterial bleeding. The images from the *Passion of the Christ* movie convey how terrible this was.

A crown of six-inch long thorns was then pressed deeply into His scalp. This would cause additional blood loss, which would deepen His state of shock. A purple robe, the color of royalty, was thrown across Jesus’ shoulders and back. This may have served as a temporary compressive dressing, helping to congeal the blood pouring from his gaping lesions. The mockery continued as the soldiers spit on Him and beat Him with reeds, hailing Him as “King of the Jews.”

Pilate now succumbs to the manipulation of the religious leaders, and Jesus is condemned to death by crucifixion. The purple robe is stripped away, which would be like ripping off a surgical dressing, causing the wounds to bleed freely once again. Jesus is given the 100-pound crossbeam to bear to the place of the skull, Golgotha. Thankfully, someone is enlisted to help carry this piece of slivered timber.

Luke 23:33 gives a very brief statement about the crucifixion. In fact, in the Greek, only three words are used to describe it: ***“And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals – one on the right hand and the other on the left.”*** They placed Jesus on the middle cross to signify that of the three, He was the most worthy of death.

He no doubt experienced severe muscular pain in his upper extremities that only got worse as his joints separated. He could draw air into his lungs but could not easily exhale. As carbon dioxide accumulated, progressive degrees of asphyxiation would occur and a build up of lactic acid would create violent muscle spasms throughout His body. In order to take a breath, Jesus would have to push up on the nail in his feet, forcing an up and down motion as the open lacerations on his back would scrape against the rough timber of the cross. It is from this position that Jesus uttered His final seven shouts.

According to Roman historians, it was very common for those who were crucified to utter blasphemies and words of wrath toward those who were involved in the execution. Seneca, a contemporary of Jesus, recounts that those crucified would normally curse everybody, including their own mothers and fathers. The Roman philosopher Cicero writes that the executioners would sometimes even cut off the tongues of the criminals so that the soldiers would not have to hear their vindictive verbiage.

Listen to Peter's perspective on how Jesus responded in 1 Peter 2:23: ***“Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.”***

Jesus could have rightly prayed, *“Father, consume them. Wipe them out.”* There was certainly on Old Testament precedent for this kind of imprecatory prayer. What happened at Golgotha was unforgivable. They had crucified the Son of God. What could be worse than that?

Begins With Prayer

Please turn to Luke 23:34 and listen to these words of grace and mercy as Jesus gasped for air, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”*** Let's say phrase slowly together and then let it linger in the air, imagining how those who first heard these words would have understood them.

I want to point out a few things about this prayer.

1. Father-directed. Even on the cross, Jesus used his favorite term: ***“Father.”*** He is crying out with tender trust. This title reveals relationship and reminds us of what He prayed the night before in Gethsamene: ***“Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not my will, but yours be done.”***

Don't miss the importance of this for our own lives. Before we can move to forgiveness we must first cry out to our Father. Forgiveness is ultimately about our relationship with Him, not something we conjure up in our own strength.

2. Focused on others. Jesus isn't asking for anything for himself. When the first red drops of blood squirted on his hands and splashed on the soldier's hammer, the blessed mouth of Jesus formed the words to a prayer for pardon. His request was not for Himself but for *"them"* – and us. His first thought is to plead in prayer for those who are in desperate need of forgiveness. When man had done his worst, Jesus prayed, not for justice, but for mercy.

The public ministry of Jesus began with prayer at his baptism in Luke 3:21: *"...And as He was praying, heaven was opened."* He flooded heaven with His prayers during His three-year teaching time, urging His followers to do the same. His time on earth ended with an unselfish prayer for forgiveness. And, as Hebrews 7:25 says, He *"always lives to make intercession for us."* Prayer permeated everything He did, and still does.

3. Fullfillment of prophecy. Over 700 years before Jesus was even born, Isaiah gave some pinpoint prophecies, one of which is that the Savior would pray for sinners. Check out Isaiah 53:12: *"And He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."* By the way, the fulfillment of prophecy helps us not only understand that Jesus is the promised Messiah; it also removes any doubt about the truthfulness of the Bible.

4. Filled with mercy. Jesus recognized that those who had crucified Him did not really know what they were doing: *"...for they do not know what they do."* While His enemies knew full well what they meant when they cried out, *"Crucify Him. Crucify Him,"* they were ignorant of the enormity of their crime. 1 Corinthians 2:8 says, *"For had they known, they would not have crucified the king of glory."*

I want you to notice that Jesus doesn't pray that the Father would just forget about what they were doing because they didn't really mean it. He specifically requests "forgiveness" because they are responsible. They, and us, are in need of release from our debt to a holy God.

Peter, in Acts 3:17, told those who were responsible for the death of Christ that they acted in ignorance. And yet, in 3:19, he said, *"Repent therefore and be*

converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

5. Fleshed out today. This prayer was answered when the centurion put his faith in Christ at the foot of the cross and when one of the crucified criminals next to Him called out for salvation. This prayer was answered in a profound way on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:41 where we read that 3,000 were saved after a sermon. Stephen modeled this prayer right before he died when he cried out in Acts 7:60: **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”** This prayer was answered again when Paul, who was responsible for Stephen’s death, met Jesus in Acts 9 and was converted.

And, this prayer of forgiveness is fleshed out tons of times when individuals turn to the Lord in repentance and invite Him to be their Savior. At that instant, God the Father applies the blood of Jesus and declares the person forgiven.

It’s Your Move

I remember seeing a billboard years ago that showed a picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, His head bowed. In big, bold letters, the caption read: *“It’s Your Move!”* I want to close with two questions that I pray will help you make your move.

1. Have you been forgiven? If Jesus can forgive those responsible for killing Him, then He can forgive you! No one is beyond the reach of His prayer of forgiveness. *No one is good enough to save himself and no one is so bad that God cannot save him.*

On Tuesday during our team time Pastor Jeff asked the rest of the staff for some advice. A former student that he ministered to some 7 years ago had sent him a Facebook message and was asking for some help because he was afraid that he may have committed the unforgivable sin. Here’s part of their conversation...

Man: *I’m worried that God does not love me because I have hated him and ruined so many souls...I’m afraid there is no forgiveness for me.*

Jeff: *Dude (that’s so millennial) this is very honest and real...let me reassure you that God loves you and always has room for you. Christ’s death on the cross paid for every sin, past, present, and future. So do not worry for one second that you are beyond forgiveness. God is for us, with us, and never far from us. If you look through Scripture the life of Paul is almost exactly what you are saying about your*

own life. I would encourage you to check out his conversion story. This was a guy who literally killed Christians and God changed everything about his life.

Later on Wednesday, this young man rededicated his life to The Lord and posted this on Facebook: *“I’m never going back to who I had been.”*

Forgiveness frees us, doesn’t it? The truth of the matter is that we’ve all done something to disqualify ourselves from a relationship with God. But Jesus has made a way. His prayer for your forgiveness was answered by the Father and can be activated in your life the instant you reach out to Him in faith and receive Him as your Savior.

2. Have you forgiven others? Someone has said that forgiveness is the virtue we profess to believe but fail to practice. Elizabeth O’Connor writes: *“Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be.”* She’s exactly right.

C.S. Lewis put it like this, *“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.”* Listen. *Forgiven people forgive others.* If the Father has forgiven you, how can you not forgive others?

The word “forgive” comes from the world of commerce and banking where it refers to cancelling a debt or pardoning a loan. Literally it means, *“To let go free or to send away.”* Actually, in the word *forgive* is the word “give.” To forgive is to cancel the debt of someone and to give them freedom so that they never have to pay you back for what they’ve done to you. It’s to give grace to someone who doesn’t deserve it.

The key to forgiving others is to understand how much Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32: ***“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*** In order to forgive we must remember our forgiveness. Come back to the cross and hear the first shout from the Savior: ***“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”*** Just as Jesus forgave the unforgivable, so can we, and so must we. Jesus established a religion of forgiveness and wants the church to be an oasis of forgiveness.

By the way, one of the reasons Edgewood is committed to global evangelization and the mobilization of missionaries is precisely because people need to hear about the forgiveness that only Christ can provide. Jason Kratochvil and Manuel Rosales

will be sharing Sunday night about how God is freeing people through forgiveness in the country of Nicaragua. I sent Jason an email this week and asked him to share a forgiveness story.

Jocabet is a 30 year old woman who started attending our church about 2 years ago. After attending faithfully for one month Jocabet placed her faith and trust in Jesus and accepted Him as her Savior. Once a year our women have a retreat in which they go to a nearby camp for two days and focus on fellowship and growth in Christ. Jocabet went on this year's retreat. During the retreat there is always a time in which the ladies share personal testimonies. The ladies were a little shocked when Jocabet, a new attendee and a new Christian, said she would like to share.

She shared how during her 10 years of marriage her husband had cheated on her multiple times. She grew so angry with him that she decided to find someone and cheat on him also. It was about this time that Pastor Manuel's mother invited her to church. In church she learned about what sin was. She realized that she was a sinner and in need of forgiveness. She was amazed by Christ's love, death on the cross, and willingness to forgive her of all her sin. She shared that when she accepted Christ she realized that she was not the only one who [needed] forgiveness. She went to her husband and asked him for his forgiveness for cheating on him and told him that she had already forgiven him.

The change in her life was so evident that he had to come to church to see what was going on. It was a short time later that he also accepted Christ. Christ forgave them both, they forgave each other, and their souls and marriage were saved.

She told the ladies that she sat one day reflecting on Christ's forgiveness and was brought to one of the hardest moments in her life. During her adolescence she had been repeatedly molested by her father over a period of several years. Through her teenage and adult years she was so angry with her father and grew to really hate him for what he had done to her. Now this concept and understanding of forgiveness had given her a totally new outlook on everything. She told the ladies that she decided to forgive her father with Christ's help. She said that for the first time, for as long as she could remember, she felt totally free. Her testimony simply concluded with, "I am so thankful for Christ's forgiveness."

If we had been at the cross, we would have been holding the nails. We would probably clap and cheer. We're not that much different. We're not that much

better. The secret of forgiveness is to understand that in the ultimate sense, between you and the person who hurt you, there's really no difference at all.

I was struck by something Ray Pritchard said about this particular cry from the cross...

Those tortured words sweep away all our shabby excuses. They reveal the barrenness of our heart; they rip the cover off our unrighteous anger and show it for what it is. Many of us say, "If only the people who hurt me would show some remorse, some sorrow, then maybe I would forgive them." But since that rarely happens, we use that as an excuse to continue in our bitterness, our anger, and our desire to get even.

Consider Jesus on the cross. No one seemed very sorry. Even as he said those words, the crowd laughed, mocked, cheered, jeered. Those who passed by hurled insults at him...No one said, "I was wrong. This is a mistake. We were such fools." And yet he said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

That is precisely what we must say if we are going to follow Jesus. We must say it to people who hurt us deliberately and repeatedly. We must say it to those who intentionally attack us. We must say it to those who casually and thoughtlessly wound us. We must say it to those closest to us, to our husband or wife, to our children, to our parents, to our friends, to our neighbors, to our brothers and sisters, to our fellow Christians.

I'm not suggesting that it's easy to forgive. It's easy to preach about it; it's much more difficult to practice it. But let's start by forgiving the people who have hurt us so deeply. To forgive us cost Jesus His life. To forgive others will cost us something too. We'll have to give up our anger, turn away from our bitterness, release the right for revenge, and decide by a conscious choice that we will forgive those who have sinned against us. And, God may call us to perform this unnatural act of forgiveness over and over again, 7 times 70 times and maybe even 7 times 7,000 times.

As I reflected on this cry from the cross, here's what I wrote down: *Because Christ forgives the unforgivable in me, I must forgive the unforgivable in others.*

Putting into Practice

Let's move from preaching to putting forgiveness into practice right now. Would you please close your eyes?

- **Repent.** Turn from your sins and determine to go in a new direction.
- **Receive.** Ask Christ to forgive you for your sins. Believe that He died in our place as full satisfaction for all your sins. Receive the free gift of forgiveness by asking Him to save you right now.
- **Reflect.** Jesus prayed, "***Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.***" Whose face appears on the back of your eyelids? Ask yourself this question: *Who's the 'them' in my life? Who's the 'they' that need forgiveness?* Get that name in your head.
- **Release.** Let it go. Give grace. Forgive and set the "them" and the "they" free right now.

Will your last words be filled with forgiveness? Will you forgive or not? Will you die unforgiven by the Father and with unforgiveness in your own heart?

I was struck by the final words of William Pitt, a British statesman: "*I throw myself on the mercy of God, through the merits of Jesus Christ.*"

When Samson neared the end of his life his rage caused him to take others with him when he died. Jesus wanted to take his enemies to life through his death and so He prayed for them and then He died for them. John 15:13: "***Greater love has no one than this, that He lay His life down for His friends.***" As someone has said, "*It was not the nails that held Jesus to the cross. His love did that.*"

Let's stand and sing about His unfailing love.

Invitation Song: "Unfailing Love"