

The last words of a dying person are normally not forgotten. A person's closing comments reveal their pain and agony. They reveal their values, priorities, and inner 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." President Grover Cleveland, "I have tried hard to do the right." Joan Crawford was filled with anger when her maid began to pray out loud and said, "Don't you dare ask God to help me!" Louis Mayer, the film producer, gave his philosophy of life (and death) when he said, "Nothing matters. Nothing matters." Leonardo da Vinci, when surveying his life's work, said, "I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have." 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..."

Tonight, we are not interested in what a General or Hollywood celebrity said before they died, but rather the last words of Jesus Christ. These weighty words dropped from his lips while his sacrificial blood splashed on the ground. Most of the 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. Thus, we address ourselves this Lenten Season. Seven Words He Spoke. Tonight, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

The word "forgive" is borrowed from the world of commerce and banking. It means to cancel a debt or to pardon a loan. You find the word "give" in forgive. To forgive is to cancel the debt of someone so that they never have to pay us back for what they've done to us. It's to give grace to someone who doesn't deserve it.

But wouldn't you agree? 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". We are 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 and your desire to get even. Giving up your right to punish someone for what they've done to you. "My husband does the same irritating thing, over and over again. I am not going to forgive him, I am going to make him suffer for a while, for what he has done." "She didn't mean it? Oh, come on, she knew exactly what she was doing. She doesn't deserve my forgiveness. Well, maybe if she comes to me groveling on her knees. Maybe. Otherwise I'll never speak to her again." Husbands and wives are great at digging up the past and throwing it in their partner's face everytime a heated argument occurs. Obviously, they are holding on to that issue, and haven't really forgiven the person for it yet.

But what about Jesus? Hanging from the cross of Calvary, Jesus says, "Father, Forgive them for they know not what they are doing? How could he be so forgiving? So Kind? Consider what they were doing to him. The Roman soldiers had pounded spikes through his hands and feet and hoisted the cross into the air. And even as Jesus was speaking those words the soldiers were gambling for his clothing. Could I be so forgiving? Could you?

What were they doing? People stood watching. Was this Good Friday

crucifixion a sideshow for some? Who among the crowds came forward to help? Who spoke in the Savior's defense? Not even his disciples. Could I be so forgiving of those who stood by and did nothing to help me? Could you?

What were they doing? The rulers, and religious dignitaries sneered and said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Son of God." There were God's own servants, and now they were mocking God's chosen servant, the Christ. It doesn't get much lower than that. Could I forgive those who mocked me? Who hurt me? Or would we lash out in anger? Curse our enemies? Vow to get even?

During his public ministry, Jesus taught, Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Forgive 77 times. On the cross, the first words from his mouth, were, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing. Your Savior and mine practiced what he preached. His word of forgiveness condemns my unforgiving heart, because I know I can't love and forgive the way he wants. All too often, I don't even want to. I don't even try. It is for my unforgiving spirit that Jesus hung on his cross.

You might ask the question, if Jesus had the ability to forgive sins, why did He call on his Father. It's because Jesus has identified with His people and is about to give His life as the sin substitute. His death is full payment for the penalty of sin. He pleads with the Father to accept the sacrifice of His blood on our behalf. He is our representative. He who needed no forgiveness died for those of us who are condemned without it. 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing. This cry of Christ displays to us the ignorance of the human heart. Jesus is the Messiah. He is the only means of salvation. Only through Him would and could the promises of God be fulfilled. But they knew not what they were doing. The actions on this day display the the blindness of the human heart. Jesus recognized that those who had crucified Him did not really know what they were doing. 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. They did not know that they were killing the "Lord of Glory."

While they didn't know, they should have known. The prophecies were numerous and very clear. His teachings were profound and filled with wisdom and authority. His miracles should have convinced them. His perfect life and love should have removed all doubt about His identity. There was no excuse for their ignorance.

It seems that in past winter Olympics there was some scuttle butt about some athletes using performance enhancing drugs. The person in charge of the drug testing said, "There is no excuse for ignorance." This "zero tolerance" policy means that it doesn't matter if an athlete says that he or she didn't know that a supplement or drug was illegal. If it's in their system, they will be disqualified. Ignorance is not an excuse.

Friends, we all have something in our system. It's called sin. We have no excuse and can't plead ignorance because ignorance is not the same thing as innocence. God has revealed Himself and has made things plain. He has zero tolerance for sin. Romans 1:20: says, "...that men are without excuse." Even though we may plead ignorance, our sin must be punished and paid for.

The cry from the cross shows the great love of Jesus for sinners. What would we do in the hour of man's worst treatment of us? Would we pray for their forgiveness or would we curse them and ask God to destroy them? This brings us to the sober reality of

His deity. Only God could love like this. Samson in his dying hour destroyed his enemies. Christ in His dying hour prayed for his. Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith, failed to fully follow Christ's example. Stephen's first thought was of himself, and then he prayed for those killing him. While his enemies were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" But with Christ the order was reversed: He prayed first for His enemies, and then for Himself.

Yes, there he hangs on the cross of Calvary. No longer can His hands minister to the sick, for they are nailed to the tree. No longer can His feet carry Him on errands of mercy, for they are fastened to the wood. No longer can He instruct His disciples, for they have forsaken Him and fled. But one thing He can do, and does — He prays! He prays for His murderers. In doing this, He shows us, He teaches us, that no one is ever beyond the reach of prayer. 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.

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.

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. Let me give you a simple exercise that might help. On a sheet of paper, write the words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing" on the top. On the left side, write down all the things, and the people, and the memories from the past that has hurt you so deeply. When you're finished, add one word in large letters to the right of each offense: Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven. When you're all done, take the paper and rip it up.

Who is the "them" Jesus is praying for? He is praying for Judas who betrayed Him. He is praying for the Jewish leaders who had Him falsely arrested, who hit Him, spit on Him, and said lies about Him. Jesus is praying for the crowd who yelled, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Jesus is praying for Pilate who found Him innocent yet still gave Him up to be crucified. Jesus is praying for the soldiers who whipped Him, mocked Him, spit on Him, and nailed Him to the cross. Jesus is praying for all of these: "Father, forgive them..." Jesus is also praying for you and me.

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.