

“The Words of Lent 1”

(Heaven’s Best Gift)

Isaiah 59:1-2

Luke 23:34

Scripture Lesson from the OT: “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear.”

Scripture Lesson from the NT: “And Jesus said, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

This is the word of the Lord for the people of God.

There is a story told about an old man who was on his death bed. As he lay there, he had a thought to call his lawyer and doctor immediately. Within an hour both the man’s doctor and lawyer were present at his bedside. The dying man’s breathing had become labored by this time, but he remained silent. Finally, the attorney leaned over him, spoke up and said, “Sir, what did you need us for today?” The man gathered his remaining strength and gasping for breath said, “Nothing particular, I’ve heard that Jesus died between two thieves. I just wanted to know what it felt like.”

Had you been present in Jerusalem on the first “Good Friday” in 33 AD, you would have very likely been caught up in the excitement of the day. There were three men who were to be executed on that day for having committed crimes against the provincial governor of Judea and the imperial Caesar of Rome.

One of them was a prophet from Galilee, the other two were thieves who may have been associated with the political group known as the Zealots. The crowd, whipped to a frenzy with bloodlust, were eagerly awaiting the gruesome spectacle as part of the afternoon’s entertainment.

All three of the men to be executed were well known to the people. The Zealots were Jewish patriots who were going to their deaths in defiance of the Romans.

The prophet was well known too, but for some reason His good deeds produced an irrational anger that inspired the crowd to hurl verbal insults in an ever rising crescendo that soon included the taunts of the other two men beside him.

Then something happened in this place of death that silenced one of the men, and changed his attitude from persecution to prayer. What happened that made the difference, you may ask? The answer to your question is that the third man in the middle prayed, and the prayer he prayed was this: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The fact that the first word spoken by Jesus on the cross was a prayer should not come as a surprise to us. His habit had been a habit of prayer since the days of being "about His Father's business" as a young boy. It would only be natural for Him to pray during this dark hour. Even those who never lift an eye toward heaven when the seas of life are smooth, and calm will not refuse a word or two offered to the Almighty in their behalf when the storm is howling around them.

There is a sense in this hour that Jesus' prayer is merely instinct. "When all around our soul gives way" as the hymn says, there is little we can do but to instinctively call out that some invisible hope will catch us before we fall.

But when we do pray under such circumstances, it will invariably be a prayer for ourselves in our hour of need. And so, we cry out, "Lord, help me!" And He will help us because the throne of grace is always available to us that we may find mercy and rest for every need in every hour.

We might have expected that Jesus' prayer would have been such a prayer in His own hour of darkness. But such was not the case on that first Good Friday. The first word of prayer spoken by Jesus from the cross was not for Himself at all, but for others. "Father, forgive them, He said, for they know not what they do."

In his prayer, He did not ask God for deliverance from His own suffering, or for the suffering of His friends and family. He asked God's deliverance from suffering for His enemies, who were about to kill Him. He prayed for the soldiers, and the governor, and the high priest, and the howling mob that had nailed Him to the bloody wood of the cross to die. It was upon the shoulders of these sin-filled hate-twisted murderers that he heaped great burning coals of fire when He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Once before on the Mount of Olives we heard Him say, "Love your enemies and pray for them that despitefully use you." On another day, we heard Him tell His disciples that they were not to forgive just once or even seventy times, but "seventy times seven" teaching us that forgiveness is to flow from our hearts like pure water gushing from a living stream of life.

What Jesus had preached on the mountain, He now practiced on the bloody hill of Calvary. As I pondered the love and grace of our Lord in the face of such injustice, it occurred to me that in asking for forgiveness for His enemies, Jesus was petitioning His Father to give heaven's best gift to hell's worst criminals.

The story Luke tells in his gospel is a story about a man who had committed murder. Yet, because he was a man who had a certain political influence, he received a full pardon by the governor of the state. However, despite the pardon, he remains a murderer, his hands still stained with innocent blood.

However, unlike the pardon from the governor, when God forgives the sinner, He does something more for the sinner than mere forgiveness, does something for the sinner that transcends the condemnation of the sentence. For He not only forgives the sinner, but takes him fully back into His confidence as if he had never sinned at all.

Thus, instead of seeking justice for Himself, which under God's law Jesus had every right to do, He prayed for heaven's best gift for His enemies by extending them a mercy and a grace that took no measure of the depth of their sin.

"Father, forgive them" He said, "for they know not what they do."

What then shall we say of this depth of forgiveness?

What then shall we say of this depth of forgiveness that we may receive it for ourselves and then extend it to our brothers and sisters?

What then shall we say of this depth of forgiveness that has drawn us out of the pit of hell and restored us to the highest confidence of heaven?

In Genesis 3:8 we read, "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day."

The story of God and the story of humans in the garden is a story about the relationship that existed between them.

In Eden, God gave humans original blessing and divine favor in exchange for a little yard work. God said to them, "Take care of my garden and I will take care of you." God wanted a relationship with His creation that was to be enjoyed in the company of His appointed high priest. This was the "first estate" of Adam.

Of course, we all know the rest of the story, about how the humans fell from God's grace, and sin entered the world, and how God made His plan to restore the garden to its original perfection. This divine story of family reunion is a story of the grand scope of forgiveness that is needed to restore a broken relationship.

So, what then is the forgiveness that Jesus prayed for? The forgiveness that Jesus prayed for is the same forgiveness that God gave the humans in Eden, the forgiveness that is needed to restore a broken relationship. And because God is love, God's forgiveness forgives in a way that no human forgiveness can by expunging the ugliness of our past as if it never happened.

God's own promise from the bible is, "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). Thus, we see that God treats our failures the same way Jesus treated the failure of His friends in the Garden of Gethsemane. He continues to walk alongside us in our worst failures as if we had not failed.

Now, since forgiveness is the means of restoring a relationship for the sake of future fellowship, it should be understood by us to be the grant of a new lease on life. As a forgiven people of God, we are granted a new lease on life to walk again with Him just like we did in old times in the garden.

When Jesus prayed on the cross for the forgiveness of His enemies, He was asking His heavenly Father to grant them a new lease on life that would restore their former friendship to how it was before. I think it is significant to mention that Jesus prayed for God's forgiveness of His enemies with an absolute confidence that full forgiveness under heaven was possible for them despite their sin.

I would have you notice too that when He prayed for Himself in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed a conditional prayer beginning with the word "if." "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me" He prayed (Matthew 26:39).

But here on the cross of Calvary He did not ask “if” God’s forgiveness was possible for murderers, and do you want to know why? The answer is that He knew it was possible because as God’s Son, it was already in His own heart to give it to them.

He knew that what He was offering to them on earth His Father was also offering them in heaven. Thus, Jesus was able to ask for heaven’s best gift for hell’s worst criminals.

And then, as if to clarify to the reason why God should grant His request to forgive them, He added, “For they know not what they do.” I think it is a fair question for us to ask in what sense did these men possibly not know what they were doing?

Did Pilate, in washing his blood-stained hands, not know what he was doing?

Did Judas, in receiving his thirty pieces of silver, not know what he was doing?

Did Caiaphas and Annas in spinning their dark web of lies, not know what they were doing?

No, there was not one of them who could plead their innocence due to ignorance. Yet, Jesus made allowance for them all in this way.

And we might understand Jesus’ forgiveness of their evil deeds as the supreme act of divine love, but to grant them pardon because they had somehow misunderstood the gross evils they had committed is too hard for us to accept. In what sense could they have possibly been ignorant?

The answer to this question from Jesus’ perspective is that, of course they knew that what they were doing was wrong, as do we all when we have sinned, but what they did not know, and could not have imagined, was the magnitude of their guilt in the court of heaven.

When Jesus prayed for them this way, His prayer was, “Father, please help them to see how desperately they need forgiveness, for they have committed a sin that is foul and black beyond their understanding, a sin that is not merely against their brother but is also against You, their heavenly Father.”

Dear friends of God, is this not the truth of every sin we have ever committed? Is it not true that every sin we commit is not just against a brother or a sister but also against God?

Who among us can measure the breadth and depth of even one seemingly small and insignificant sin, whether it be a promise unkept, or deed undone, or a word carelessly spoken, or a judgment hastily made, or the comfortable lie told that unknown numbers of others will reap the whirlwind of its evil in due season?

If this prayer of our Lord, given in perfect confidence for heaven's best possible gift for us can then be answered in a world of sin, how are we to make this answer possible? This is a great question you ask, and I'm glad you asked it!

The first, and perhaps the most difficult hurdle that must be faced in answering this question is found in our desire to seek heaven's best gift for ourselves. The fact that we are willing to receive it is not nearly so important as the realization of our need to want it for ourselves. So, I ask you: "How much do you want heaven's best gift?" How much "hubris" are you willing to give up to receive it for yourself?

I know y'all have heard this before, but it is a truth that bears repeating. We cannot, and will never receive the forgiveness that we need for heaven's best gift except through the confession of our sin to God *and to each other*.

This demand of heaven should never be seen by us as a mean and heartless judgment of a narrow-minded God coming through the insane ranting of an itinerant preacher. This is the very nature of things established by divine order in the created world. It is the willingness of our souls to allow God the chance to have a part in our lives. Only those who openly acknowledge their need for forgiveness from their sins will allow God the chance to give them heaven's best gift.

Forgiveness from sin is the gift of God freely offered to every human, but only those who are intimately acquainted with their own sin will be willing to accept this gift. Thus, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel for sinners, and sinners only. This is to say that unless you are a sinner you can have no part with Him.

In fact, if your sins have not rendered you broken and repentant, then it is not possible for forgiveness to be heaven's best gift. It was the offer of heaven's best gift in the prayer of Jesus that silenced the taunts and derision of the condemned man next to Jesus, turning his attitude of persecution into an attitude of penance.

During the crusades in the 12th century, Geoffrey of Bouillion learned that his mortal enemy, Reynald of Lyon would pass near his castle with only a small detachment of soldiers. Geoffrey saw that this was a good time to take revenge on his avowed enemy, and he was determined not to let it pass.

As Geoffrey spoke of his plan in the presence of his chaplain, the chaplain tried in vain to persuade him “by the love of God” to give it up. In his argument, the chaplain spoke at length of the sin of unforgiveness to no avail.

Finally, seeing that his words of wisdom had no effect, he said, “My lord, since I cannot persuade you to give up this foul plan of yours, will you at least consent to come with me to the church that we may pray together before you go?”

To this request Geoffrey agreed, and as he and the chaplain knelt together at the altar, the chaplain asked Geoffrey to pray with him the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. “I will” replied Geoffrey, and they proceeded together accordingly, “Our Father who art in heaven...” until they came to the petition, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...” where Geoffrey went silent. “My Lord, you are silent” said the chaplain, “Will you continue to repeat the prayer with me?” “I cannot,” said Geoffrey. “Well then,” said the chaplain, “Jesus cannot forgive you, for He Himself has prayed this prayer to His Father.

Therefore, you must either give up your plan for revenge on your enemy, or give up saying this prayer. For to ask God to forgive you as you forgive others is to ask Him to take revenge on you as you take revenge on your enemies. In either case, go, now my lord and may your prayers be answered.”

After a long moment of silence, Geoffrey said, “No, I will not go until I have finished my prayer.” And so, he concluded his prayer saying, “My God, my Father who art in heaven, forgive me that I may forgive him who has offended me, and lead me not into farther temptation, but deliver me from all my evil thoughts.”

“Amen” said Geoffrey and “amen” said his chaplain! It was later said of Geoffrey that he understood the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer better than any clergyman in the Holy Land. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

In Luke’s gospel Jesus tells a story about a father who once prepared a feast and invited both of his sons to come and dine with him. One son had been a rebel and was somewhat rough around the edges.

The other was, at least on the surface, a decent and upright young man who had always done his duty. The younger son was a spender, the older son was a saver. You can readily see under these circumstances, how the older son would see himself as the better of the two brothers by the measure of his own judgment.

Yet, Jesus tells us that it was the young rebel that accepted his father's invitation to come to the feast, while the older brother shut the door on his brother and his father and remained angrily outside. Why do you think he acted this way?

Was it perhaps because he was offended that the father had set such a low standard for right conduct, and cared nothing about his son's bad behavior?

Was it perhaps because he knew that the father was a rebel too, and somewhat rough around the edges himself, and so had a soft spot in his heart for the younger son?

Or was it perhaps that the door of forgiveness opened of its own accord because the rebellious son had at last seen how his waywardness had separated him from his father's love, and had come home finally, confessing his sin with his lips and his heart? Can you see what Jesus is trying to tell us here?

The door of forgiveness that was opened to the younger brother through confessing his sin, was closed to the older brother by his claim of righteousness. The door to heaven's best gift was open to both of them, but only one chose to enter in. In the end, both men would finally confess their sin before God with one admitting of it, while the other denied it.

The question for y'all today is: "Which one of them is you?" And while I know that no self-respecting Christian would ever admit of being the younger brother; will you at least admit of your guilt as the older brother?

The way of forgiveness is open and the path to salvation has now been cleared.
And Jesus said, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do."

Amen and amen.