

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Seven Last Sayings of Christ: A Plea for Forgiveness

Scripture: Luke 23:33–34

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Because of the physical rigors of crucifixion, Christ spoke only with great difficulty during His final hours on the cross. Scripture records just seven brief sayings from the Savior on the cross, but every one of them reveals that Christ remained sovereignly in control, even as He died. And each of His sayings was rich with significance.

Over the next two weeks, as the church prepares to celebrate the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, we'll look closer at each of His last sayings from the cross. Today, we'll start with His plea for forgiveness.

A Plea for Forgiveness

As He hung on the cross, Christ issued a plea for mercy on behalf of His tormentors. Luke records that shortly after the cross was raised on Calvary—while the soldiers were still gambling for His clothing—He prayed to God for forgiveness on their behalf.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:33–34).

J.C. Ryle wrote,

These words were probably spoken while our Lord was being nailed to the cross, or as soon as the cross was reared up on end. It is worthy of remark that as soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede.

While others were mocking Him—just as the taunting and jeering reached a fever pitch—Christ responded in precisely the opposite way most men would have. Instead of threatening, lashing back, or cursing His enemies, He prayed to God on their behalf.

Priestly Intercession

As with so many of the details surrounding Jesus' death, this priestly intercession on behalf of His own killers was done in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: “He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, *and interceded for the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12, emphasis added).

The whole meaning of the cross is summed up in this one act of intercession. “For God did not send

the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:17). Certainly any mortal man would have desired only to curse or revile his killers under these circumstances. One might even think that God incarnate would wish to call down some thunderous blast of judgment against such wicked men. But Christ was on a mission of mercy. He was dying to purchase forgiveness for sins. And even at the very height of His agony, *compassion* filled his heart.

The phrase “for they do not know what they are doing” does not suggest that they were unaware that they were sinning. Ignorance does not absolve anyone from sin. These people were behaving wickedly, and they knew it. Most were fully aware of the *fact* of their wrongdoing. Pilate himself had testified of Jesus’ innocence. The Sanhedrin was fully aware that no legitimate charges could be brought against Him. The soldiers and the crowd could easily see that a great injustice was being done, and yet they all gleefully participated. Many of the taunting spectators at Calvary had heard Christ teach and seen Him do miracles. They could not have really believed in their hearts that He deserved to die this way.

But they were ignorant of the *enormity* of their crime. They were blinded to the full reality that they were crucifying God the Son. They were spiritually insensitive because they loved darkness rather than light. Therefore they did not recognize that the One they were putting to death was the Light of the World. “For if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8).

How was Jesus’ prayer answered? In innumerable ways. The first answer came with the conversion of one of the thieves on the cross next to Jesus (Luke 23:40–43). Another followed immediately, with the conversion of a centurion, one of the soldiers who had crucified Christ (Luke 23:47). Other answers to His prayer came in the weeks and months that followed the crucifixion—particularly at Pentecost—as untold numbers of people in Jerusalem were converted to Christ. No doubt many of them were the same people who had clamored for Jesus’ death and railed at Him from the foot of the cross. We’re told in Acts 6:7, for example, that a great number of the temple priests later confessed Jesus as Lord.

A Token of Mercy, Not a Divine Shortcut

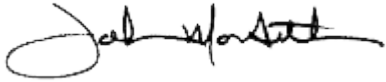
It is important to understand that Jesus’ plea for his killers’ forgiveness did not guarantee the immediate and unconditional forgiveness of everyone who participated in the crucifixion. He was interceding on behalf of all who would repent and turn to Him as Lord and Savior. His prayer was that when they finally realized the enormity of what they had done and sought the heavenly Father’s forgiveness for their sin, He would not hold the murder of His beloved Son against them.

Divine forgiveness is never granted to people who remain in unbelief and sin. Those who clung to their hatred of Jesus were by no means automatically absolved from their crime by Jesus’ prayer. But those who repented and sought forgiveness, like the centurion, or the thief on the cross, or the priests, or the people in the crowd—all who later embraced Him would find abundant mercy in answer to Christ’s petition on their behalf.

Christ’s prayer was a token of mercy offered to all who heard. He prayed aloud for their sakes (cf. John 11:42). Their sin was so unfathomably heinous that if witnesses had not actually heard Him pray for His killers’ forgiveness, most might have assumed they had committed an unpardonable

offense.

The forgiveness Christ prayed for is freely offered to all (Revelation 22:17). In fact, God is *eager* to forgive repentant sinners. The prodigal son's father is a vivid picture of God's eagerness to forgive. The Lord pleads for every sinner to be reconciled to Him (Ezekiel 18:3–32; Acts 17:30; 2 Corinthians 5:20). To those who repent from sin, He promises to lavish freely with forgiveness. If that offer was extended to those who murdered the very Author of life, how much more is it available to us today?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel W. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from *The Murder of Jesus*.)

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