

## First Word From The Cross.

Text: Luke 23:34

Suggested Hymns:

82 Pt. 1, 311, 84, 293, 160

1) There is forgiveness

2) Forgiveness is an example of Christianity

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 23:34, ***34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It is a most remarkable incident that is recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the Book of Numbers. We are told there that, when opposition arose against the priesthood of Aaron, God commanded the heads of the twelve tribes to take a rod and place it on the Ark of the Covenant, and he whose rod during the night would blossom and yield forth almonds, should be regarded as the chosen one for the priesthood.

And, behold! the rod of Aaron budded, blossomed, and bore, and the tribe of Levi was recognised as the one from which the priests and the high priests should be taken.

Just as that dry and naked rod of Aaron, so another rod, the tree erected on Calvary's mountain, blossomed and brought forth lovely and hallowed fruit, among which may be regarded the seven words spoken by the Saviour in His agony on the cross.

Every word that fell from His blessed lips is indeed important and significant, and yet there attaches to these seven utterances a special solemnity. They are the last words of a dying Person, which, spoken at such a time, have always been thought worthy of particular regard.

They are the words of no ordinary person, but of the Holy One of Israel, who never during the days of His visible journey on earth, pronounced one idle and unprofitable word, and certainly not in death.

They are words, for the most part, which thousands of years before had been proclaimed by the prophets as words that would be spoken by the Messiah. They have been described as the ‘constellation of seven stars,’ brightening and lightening up the darkness of Golgotha’s night, as the ‘seven trumpet blasts’ of the Gospel, heralding the grace and truth that came by Christ Jesus. All of which invites us to a reverent and attentive survey of them. Let us today consider the *First word from the cross*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### 1. There is Forgiveness

To begin the analysis, note carefully that our Saviour does not say, “forgive them,” but, “*Father, forgive them.*” The agony Jesus was enduring, the shameful treatment He had to submit to, was not only directed against Him; it was a blow directed just as much against the Father who had sent Him.

And Jesus knew full well that His holy and righteous Father would not regard indifferently this act of blood-guiltiness. The earth had once already opened her mouth and devoured that ungodly company of Korah<sup>1</sup> in the wilderness, carrying them down, body, soul, and possessions, into the pit when they had dared to rise up in rebellion against His servants Moses and Aaron. How much more would the Father’s anger burn against these impious murderers of His Anointed One.

Our Lord foresaw already, as it were, the clouds of vengeance gathering for vindictive justice, the hand of the Most High stretching out to seize hold upon these malefactors to grind them to powder, when just in time, the Son grasps the uplifted arm and plaintively asks for a continuance of the Father’s mercy, and an extension of respite, a little longer time for forgiveness.

What an exemplification of merciful forbearance, such as the world never before had witnessed! For ages it was the common sentiment to render evil for evil, to recompense injury with injury, “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*”<sup>2</sup> Revenge, resentment, retaliation, to do as you were done to yourself, was the common doctrine and practise. Fathers on their death-beds or at the altar made their sons swear to take vengeance on their enemies.

Yet here was the most infamous wrong, the most shameful insult that fiendish malice could devise, and its innocent Victim is lifting up His voice to the great Father Almighty mercifully to forgive the perpetrators of it.

Long ago Jesus had indeed taught men: ***“Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”***<sup>3</sup> But this morality of the Sermon on the Mount had been considered, as the world still inclines to consider it, a beautiful dream.

There have been many teachers who have said such beautiful things; but what a difference there is between preaching and practise! Not so with Jesus. He practised what He taught. He is the one Teacher of mankind in whom the sentiment and the act completely coincide.

It was Voltaire, of all unbelievers the most contemptible and mean, who, when a comparison was once drawn between the Greek philosopher Socrates and the death of Jesus Christ, remarked: ***“Socrates died like a hero, but Jesus Christ died like a god.”***

Truly, how sublimely it presents to us the character of that divine Petitioner who in the hour of woe, when the nails were crashing their way through His tender hands and feet, excruciating pain smarting in every nerve, the guilt and crime of His enemies before His agonising eyes, yet He pleaded with His Father, asking Him to forgive them!

Continuing our analysis of this prayer, we find that our Lord offers for the forgiveness of His enemies the argument: ***“for they do not know what they do.”*** ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”***

We ask, *Whom did Jesus mean by them?* It is this question which has given occasion for much difference of opinion. Some have thought that those whom He had in view were the soldiers who were inflicting this punishment upon Him, and only they.

But St. Peter, in one of his addresses after the day of Pentecost, when speaking under the inspiration of God, said, ***“Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers.”***<sup>4</sup> This settles that particular question.

Our Lord meant all who had been guilty in that nefarious transaction. For them all He prays, and upon that ground stated, ***“for they do not know what they***

*do.*” Those four soldiers, His executioners, including their centurion, poor sinners, they did not know what they did.

In their land no Sabbath had smiled, no prophet had preached, no angel had flamed, and no daily sacrifice had foreshown *“the Lamb of God”* taking away the sins of the world.

They were only a litter of Roman wolves, human brutes with dead souls inside them, iron machines worked by their masters. Some day perhaps one or the other of them, as he looks back on this deed, will say: *“So foolish was I and ignorant; I was as a beast before Thee.”*

But all of them were ignorant, and while they were fastening the Saviour to the cross and finishing their business by casting lots for His garments, they did not know what they were doing.

The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, although he knowingly violated his office and the law he was pledged to uphold, did not know that he was crucifying the Son of God. The Jewish people in general, deceived by their rulers, did not know what they were doing.

Even those rulers, for the most part, although they might have known if they had been what their office called for, did not know what they were doing. Even the high priest and the chief rulers, none of them fully knew the greatness of their wrong.

With their mistaken notion about the grand old religion that the Messiah should come with scenic splendour, grand pomp, and display, they did not know that Jesus who came to them clad in a workingman’s clothes, was the Lord of the angels, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Lord of the Temple, and the Lord of Glory.

They did not know; and Jesus asked that they might have forgiveness because they really did not know what they were doing. They might have known and should have known; yet they did not know. And not only for them, but for all sinners, for all times, the Saviour uttered that gracious prayer.

How so? We, too, all of us, are included; for did we not, all of us, crucify Him? What was it that nailed Jesus to the cross? What was the real cause of which those executioners, Pontius Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the rabble, were

the instrumental cause? The answer is sin. Oh, the comfort that lies in this First Word from the Cross for us!

Guilty as they all were, and because they were guilty, the merciful Saviour, as the divine Advocate, pleads for them at the throne of His Father in fulfilment of that ancient prophecy in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, which reads, “***And made intercession for the transgressors.***”<sup>5</sup>

But was the prayer answered? Were they forgiven for whom Jesus prayed? What became, then, of that judgement of which Jesus had warned the women who bewailed Him? Did not that judgement fall upon them? It did; but let it be remembered what occurred before it was inflicted.

Let us bear in mind that a prayer for forgiveness cannot be answered without an effect in those prayed for. Unless they repent and seek pardon for themselves, how can God forgive them? The prayer of Jesus therefore meant that time should be granted to them for repentance and that they should be provided with providence and with preaching to awaken their consciences.

To punish so an appalling crime as the crucifixion of His Son, God might have caused the earth instantly to open and swallow up the sinners. But no judgement of that kind took place.

As Jesus had predicted, Jerusalem perished in indescribable throes of agony, but not till forty years after His death; and in this interval the pouring out of the Holy Spirit of Pentecost took place, and the apostles began their preaching of the Kingdom at Jerusalem, urgently calling the nation to repentance.

Nor was their work in vain; for thousands believed, among them a great company of the priests. Indeed, did Christ’s prayer not bear precious fruit almost immediately after it was spoken? Hanging by His side was a reviling thief. When he heard that prayer, he relented, confessed, and received the promise of a place in paradise.

At the foot of the cross stood a Roman centurion. That prayer of the Crucified led him to confess Christ as the Son of God. Yes, not only for a few individuals only nor for a nation or a generation, but for the whole race of mankind, in all ages and lands, that prayer avails; for thus says the Lord’s apostle: “***if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.***”<sup>6</sup>

*“Father, forgive them,”* is still His prevailing prayer. And what consolation and encouragement it gives us! For certainly, if there is pardon and mercy for those who shed His blood with wicked hands, He will certainly not withhold it from us, His children, as with heartfelt sorrow we ask His forgiveness.

## **2. Forgiveness Is An Example Of Christianity.**

Secondly, forgiveness serves as a wonderful and impressive example of practical Christianity. It is indeed a hard lesson for us to learn. Why? Because our hearts are so hard, so spiteful, and so irreconcilable.

The natural man reasons that every one is to be paid in his own coin. As others do to us, so we are disposed to do to them. If they are good and gracious to us, we are more or less ready to reciprocate; but if they are stern and exacting to us, nature’s impulse is to render the same in return.

How prone we are, when some one offends us or makes us feel small so that we carry the memory of it in our hearts, brood over it, and plot retaliation and revenge! Alas, how often church-members, who profess to be Christ’s disciples, cherish spite and grudging and malice in their heart!

Yes, mournful, but true, they remain away from the Lord’s Table for months and even years because they harbour ill feeling and are not ready to make an earnest effort at reconciliation. Truly, the prophet is right when he says in Jeremiah 17:9, <sup>9</sup> *“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”* Shame upon it!

Is this the spirit of Christ? As stated, this is a very hard lesson to learn, and yet it can be learned. How? Only of Jesus who spoke this word on the cross, only of Him; only when His grace has conquered and melted and won our hard heart.

Only when we realise, to speak as in our Catechism, *“we sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment,”* yet we are richly and fully forgiven, that our hearts are so disposed, *“So we on our part will heartily forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.”*<sup>7</sup>

Our Saviour’s prayer was not a common prayer. There is life and power in it, and no one can sincerely repeat it or that petition which is equal to it, *“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,”* but

receives in his heart the strength to overcome malice and spite and to do as his Master did.

It was so with Stephen, the first Christian martyr; when the stones came raining thick and fast upon his prostrate body, his dying breath spent itself in the prayer: ***“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”***<sup>8</sup>

Of the Lord’s apostle James, it is said that when his enemies had hurled him from a pinnacle of the Temple and, because he was not killed by the fall, began to stone him, he cried, ***“I beseech Thee, Lord God, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”***

Of Louis XII of France it is related that, when he became king, he caused a list to be made of his persecutors and marked against each of their names a large black cross. When this became known, the enemies of the king fled.

But the king, hearing of their fears, caused them to be recalled with the assurance of pardon and said that he had put a cross beside each name to remind him of the cross of Christ, so that he might endeavour to follow the example of Jesus who prayed for His murderers, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”***

Yes, it was of Jesus that thousands of others have learned it, and you and I can learn it. Oh, that we might all learn it more fully, that as a fruit of today’s meditation, this sublime example of the dying Saviour might be indelibly impressed on our hearts and find practical application in our lives!

A mighty advance in Christian discipleship we have made when these proud and stubborn hearts and wills of ours have become more merciful and forgiving. On a grave there was this beautiful inscription: ***“He gave, and he forgave.”*** A noble Christian is the person, whose life may be inscribed in that sublime manner.

Then, too, may we learn from this first word of Christ on the cross the avoidance of harsh judgement. How ready we always are to attribute evil purpose and design and motives to others!

How ready we are to take exceptions to undesigned indignities and to assume that they were intentional slights! What a reproach we receive against such judgements from Christ on the cross!

Jesus hears the outrageous words of His enemies, He sees their insolent gestures, He feels their piercing cruelty in hands and feet and head, and yet He forgives them and prays for them.

Beside this marvellous love, how mean and unchristian is our touchiness and uncharitableness and harsh judgements!

We thank You, O Lord, for this first word on the cross with its sublime lessons. May it be eternally blessed to us! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 16:31-33

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>4</sup> Acts 3:17

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 53:12

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 2:1

<sup>7</sup> Lord's Prayer, 5th Petition

<sup>8</sup> Acts 7:60