

## **Final Words, One Father, Forgive Them**

*Luke 23:32-34*

### **1. What is Jesus doing?**

- *Isaiah 53:3, 4, 8, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12,*

- praying...
- praying...continuously
- fulfilling prophecy
- identifying with you and me

### **2. What is Jesus praying for?**

- *Acts 3:17-19*

- don't excuse them
- don't hinder them
- don't be angry with them

### **3. Who is Jesus praying for?**

- Roman soldiers
- Angry crowd
- All sinning and evil people

### **4. What does this mean for me?**

- *Ephesians 4:32*

- I can be forgiven!
- I can forgive!

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**West Valley Church**  
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## **Final Words: When Love Spoke From the Cross<sup>1</sup>** **“Father, forgive them...”**

A person's last words can tell you quite a bit about the person saying them. Take for example these last words of some famous people:

Entrepreneur P. T. Barnum, founder of Barnum's and later Barnum and Bailey's Circuses, died in 1891. His last words were, "How were the receipts from the show today at Madison Square Garden?"

Writer Oscar Wilde, died in 1900 saying, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do." I guess the wallpaper won.

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..."

Before he slipped into a coma and died 9 days later, Sir Winston Churchill, the statesman who is famous for his commencement address of "Never give up!" died in 1965 with these last words. "I'm bored with it all."

When Joan Crawford, the actress, was dying, she was filled with anger when her maid began to pray out loud for her. Ms. Crawford said, "Don't you dare ask God to help me!"

Compare those statements to these:

John Wesley, one of the world's greatest preachers, spoke his last words as he died. He said, "The best of all is, God is with us!"

D.L. Moody, one of the greatest modern preachers, had this to say when he died: "Earth recedes, Heaven opens before me!" His son, Will, thought his father was dreaming. "No, this is no dream, Will. It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death, it is sweet. There is no valley here. God is calling me, and I must go."

A person's last words say a lot about him or her, don't they? That's why we are starting a sermon series studying the most important last words of all: those of Jesus, called, "Final Words: When Love Spoke From the Cross."

These words came right from the heart of Jesus. *Every* word He spoke, he chose carefully. So you can be sure his final words reveal a great deal. Russ Robinson and Bill Donahue are

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<sup>1</sup> Sources:

Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005

Adam Hamilton, *Final Words from the Cross* Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2011

Ken Heer, [Luke: A Commentary for Bible Students](#) (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)

David Neale, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2013 William Barclay, [The Gospel of Luke](#), *The New Daily Study Bible* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)

authors who said, “It is sometimes said that when one faces death, one’s conversation reveals his or her deepest passions, hopes, and dreams. That’s why we go out of our way to honor dying wishes. In His final hours, Jesus gives us clues to His chief concerns.”<sup>2</sup>

There were seven statements that Jesus made from the cross; we’ll look at each statement per Sunday, and we will look at them in the order Jesus spoke them.

And right out of the gate it is important to know that in the Bible, the number seven is a perfect or complete number, so we’re being told plainly that Jesus’ statements from the cross were perfect; they were complete. That also tells us that they are important and worth understanding.

So let’s take a look at the first of the seven; the scene is that Jesus had been brutally beaten, tortured, deprived of food and water for hours by the time the spikes were driven through his hands and feet, nailing him onto the great wood beams of the cross. Trust me when I say that it was horribly violent and abusive to Him.

We pick up the story in Luke 23:32-34 –

“Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him. When they came to a place called The Skull, they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.” (Luke 23:32-34, nlt)

I’m telling you there is so much packed into each one of the seven statements, and we’re definitely starting out that way with this one; so let’s take a look at this amazing and powerful statement by asking some questions of the text, starting with...

## 1. What is Jesus doing?

Jesus has been horribly and mercilessly tortured, beaten, slashed, sliced, and mutilated by the hands of men. Remember that Jesus is God, so the hands holding the hammers are the hands that Jesus created. Jesus, through the Father, lovingly and tenderly formed these men’s hands in their mother’s wombs, and now those same hands are holding the whips, nails, hammers and spears that are tearing into their Creator’s flesh. When the first red blood spurted from Jesus’ hands and onto the soldier’s hands and hammers, the mouth of Jesus was forming the words to a prayer for pardon. He’s...

- **praying ...**

If it were you and me, we would be praying for ourselves. We’d pray, “God help me. God deliver me. God take away the pain.” But not Jesus; He’s not praying for Himself. You’d think He would be. But no, he’s praying for *them*—the ones who are killing Him: the soldiers. He’s praying for the ones who ordered His killing: the religious leaders. He’s praying for the ones who deserve it: you and me. His first thought is not to pray for himself

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2001), p 29

but to plead for those who are in need of forgiveness. When man had done his worst, Jesus prayed. Not for justice or revenge. When man was merciless, Jesus prayed for mercy for man.

But there's more to His prayer. You see, the language is something called the imperfect tense. It is not a one-time prayer. It means that Jesus wasn't *just* praying for their forgiveness, He was praying for it...

- **... continuously.**

It wasn't just a one-time request. When the nails tore through his tendons, sending lightning bolts of pain through His body, He closed His eyes and prayed, 'Father, forgive them.' When the cross was dropped into place between two criminals, he prayed, 'Father, forgive them.' When they divided up His only earthly possessions – His clothes – right below Him as He hung there, He prayed 'Father, forgive them.' While the people jeered at Him, He prayed 'Father, forgive them.' When the soldiers mocked the Lord of life, He prayed 'Father, forgive them.' When the sarcastic sign saying, "This is the king of the Jews" was hammered above His head, he prayed, "Father, forgive them."

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Jesus' nature was to pray. When His ministry was inaugurated with His baptism, as His public ministry began, we see Him praying. The Bible says that at that moment, "as He was praying, heaven was opened." During his three-year ministry Jesus flooded Heaven with His prayers. His preaching and teaching urged His followers to do the same. So we see that His time on earth ended with His continuous prayer for their forgiveness.

But here's the thing: Jesus never stopped praying this. *Right now*, at this very moment, the Bible says, Jesus still prays. Hebrews 7:25 says that right now Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, and He lives to continuously pray for us – to intercede for us.

Prayer permeated everything Jesus did, and everything He *still* does. He is praying for us.

There's something else Jesus is doing, and that is that He's...

- **fulfilling prophecy.**

There are over 300 detailed prophecies in the Old Testament about Jesus. The book of Isaiah was written over 700 years before Jesus was even born, and yet in chapter 53 alone there are at least 10 pinpoint prophecies about the suffering of the Savior:

- Verse 3 tells us He would be despised and rejected by men.
- Again in verse 3, it says He would be a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.
- Verses 4 and 8 say He would be afflicted by God because of our sins.
- Verse 5, He would be pierced for our transgressions.
- Verse 7, He would be wounded and bruised by men. And it also says He would be led like a lamb to slaughter and be silent before His accusers.
- Verse 9 said He would be buried in a rich man's tomb.
- Verse 10 prophesizes that He would be a guilt offering.

- Finally verse 12 prophesizes that He would be numbered with the transgressors and *He would pray for those transgressors* – which is exactly what he is doing here.

When Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they’re doing,” He was fulfilling a precise prophecy from Isaiah 53:12:

“For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”  
(Isaiah 53:12)

There’s something else that Jesus is doing here. He’s...

- **identifying with you and me.**

When Jesus prays this prayer, who is he praying to? The Father; He’s asking the Father to forgive them. What’s really interesting about this is that, up until this point, Jesus *Himself* always offered forgiveness to others, but now He’s asking God to forgive others. That tells us something really significant, because Jesus had the authority to offer forgiveness all on His own. That’s because He is God and was without sin. For example, in Matthew 9, when Jesus saw the faith of the paralytic and his friends, we’re told that Jesus “said to the paralytic, ‘take heart son; your sins are forgiven’.” When Jesus saw the woman who had been caught in adultery, he told her she was forgiven. So why wouldn’t Jesus directly pronounce forgiveness here? Why is he asking the Father to do it? It’s because Jesus has identified with people by becoming our sin-substitute. He has taken our sin upon Himself, and His death is the ransom for our sin. Jesus has become sin for us; one of us.

When Jesus ministered on the earth, He had the power and authority to forgive sins because He knew that soon they would be dealt with on the cross. So there he was on the cross, interceding on behalf of hard-hearted people like you and me as He pleads for the Father to forgive us as he hangs on the cross. *He who needed no forgiveness died for those of us who are condemned without it.* 2 Corinthians 5:21 says:

“For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 5:2)

So now that we know what Jesus is doing by praying continuously, fulfilling prophecy, and identifying with us, the next question we need to answer is...

## 2. What is Jesus praying for?

First, let me say that there have been some wrong answers to that question. You might think Jesus was asking God to forgive them because of their ignorance. Nope. One of the things Jesus *was* praying, was...

- **Don’t excuse them.**

Jesus was NOT asking God to excuse them. Not at all.

Jesus was not praying for a “blanket pardon” for all the people who participated in His

crucifixion, and here's why: God won't forgive unless we ask for it. Forgiveness is something you have to ask for in order to receive. Yes – Jesus suffered and died for our sins, yes, God offers forgiveness. It *is* free to any who want it, *but* – He never forces it on anyone. We have to want it and ask for it.

I also don't agree with the idea that Jesus is excusing ignorance when He says, "they don't know what they are doing." If this were true, then ignorance would be bliss—we'd all be better off if we didn't know anything at all about Jesus, because God would just excuse ignorance.

I remember when I patrolled for the Oregon State Police and would pull someone over for speeding and they would say, "Don't write me a ticket because I didn't know what the speed limit was." Do you know what I would say? "Ignorance is no excuse for the law." It's not – the law is the law whether you know it or not. Romans 3:19-20 says:

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (Romans 3:19-20, niv)

Neither the law nor Jesus excuses their guilt due to ignorance – nor ours.

In fact, in Acts 3:17-19 we hear the words of Simon Peter as he preaches shortly after the Day of Pentecost.

"Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:17-19, niv)

Peter is saying, "You acted in ignorance. No question about that. And when you acted in ignorance you fulfilled what God had foretold through the prophets – that Christ had to suffer for the sins of all the people." But Peter does *not* say, "Jesus prayed for God to forgive you, so you are all forgiven now." Instead, Peter says, "Now even though you were ignorant, you are responsible, so repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

We have to admit responsibility for our sin and ask for forgiveness.

So what *is* Jesus praying for? When He prays, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing," what is He really praying for?

To answer that we need to understand something about the word "forgive." There are different words used in the New Testament for "forgive." One word means "to forget, to wipe out completely." Yes, God does wipe away our sins and forgets them, never to remember them again. But that is *not* the word that Jesus uses.

The word that is used here is found also in Matthew 19:14. There it is used when children are brought to Jesus, but the apostles try to keep the children from coming to Him. So "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.'" The word that is translated "let" in "Let the little children come..." is the *same* word translated "forgive"

when Jesus said "Forgive them" on the cross. So what is Jesus saying? He's saying, "Father...

- **don't hinder them.**

He is saying, "Let them come. Don't stop them. Don't hinder them from coming. Don't stand in their way. Don't interfere. Let them come freely to us." Jesus is asking the Father to not stand in their way of their coming to Him. He's saying, "Father, I'm taking their sin, so don't be angry with them; don't let your wrath hinder them."

So with that, Jesus is also saying...

- **don't be angry with them.**

That same word for "forgive" is *also* used again in Matthew 27 when the soldiers reached up with a sponge filled with vinegar to wet the lips of Jesus. That verse says, "Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. But the rest said, *Leave Him alone*. Let's see if Elijah comes to save Him." There's that word again for "forgive", and it's translated, "Leave Him alone." In both cases it's the same word Jesus used: "Don't interfere. Don't stop the children from coming. Don't wet his lips with a sponge."

Here is exactly what Jesus is saying on the cross when He prays for them: He is saying to God, "Don't rush to inflict your wrath upon these people. Hold it back. Don't interfere with what's going on here; leave them alone."

Let me ask you: how would a righteous God feel when a wicked world crucifies His Son? How would *you* feel if you watched your own son be brutally tortured and murdered when he didn't even deserve it? Read your Old Testament; God would be angry—VERY angry. And His wrath would be unleashed on the ones doing this to his One and Only Son. But when Jesus prayed that prayer, God held back His wrath. Even *now*, to this day, the prayer of Jesus is still being honored. God is *still* holding back His wrath because of his love when Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them."

So who's the "them"? ...

### **3. Who is Jesus praying for?**

The Greek language is a *very* detailed and specific language. For instance, there are five words to describe love, and there are 30 or 40 endings you can put on those words to make them even more defined. But in this prayer, the language is *not* specific here about who the "them" is. *It's oddly unspecific.*

And God—He's pretty specific. He had prophets foretell Jesus' life and death in great detail hundreds of years before. God personally knit you together in your mother's womb, and he even knows the number of hairs on your head. He knows the number of days of your life. God is always intentional and specific.

But here, there is *nothing* specific about the "them." That's on purpose. For sure, Jesus

prayed, "Father, Don't excuse them, but let them come. Give the...

- **Roman soldiers**

...who are driving the nails into my hands a chance to repent. For sure Jesus is praying, give the...

- **angry crowd**

...a chance to repent – leave them alone so they can have a chance to ask for forgiveness and get right with you Father. For sure he's praying, give...

- **all sinning and evil people**

...a chance to be saved and redeemed. Let them still come to you for forgiveness. I'm suffering for them, Father. Give them the chance to be forgiven, cleansed, and made new."

Listen: I tell you the absolute truth: the only reason You and I are here today is because of this prayer that Jesus prayed 2,000 years ago; it is *still* to this day being honored by God in heaven.

That's why today the sun shines on the good and the bad. That's why the rain falls on the just and the unjust. That's why sometimes evil people seem to prosper while good people don't. Because God is still answering Jesus' prayer to give each of us time to repent and ask for and accept God's forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice. The Bible says that God is holding back because he's not willing that *any* should perish apart from forgiveness and new life and that all would come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9) *But* – the Bible also says one day that will end.

Listen: there *is* coming a final day when the praying, nail pierced hands of Christ will be taken away, and God's wrath *will* be unleashed.<sup>3</sup> Judgment *will* happen. And what happens to us *then* – depends on what we have done with Jesus *now*.

For 2,000 years His disciples have been going into the world telling people that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead and is alive today for us. For 2,000 years devoted Christians have been inviting people to come to the Father and be forgiven of their sins. *You* are here and hearing this truth today.

*Maybe* we'll have another 2,000 years to preach the message. Maybe we won't. But here's one thing we do know: right now, Jesus' prayer is still being honored. Right now forgiveness is still offered. It's not a blanket pardon and he's not excusing your ignorance; He offers forgiveness and it is available – Jesus suffered and died so you could have it. It is ours for the taking. That's why the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 6:2 that *today* is still the day for your salvation; *today* is the day to be forgiven.

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples: Revelation 6:17, 14:10-11; Romans 1:18, 2:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Zephaniah 1:15

That's why every Sunday I say how much God loves you – because maybe, just maybe, there is someone here who only now has come to realize that Jesus died on that cross for you. Jesus prayed for you while he was on the cross. He prays for you now. His Spirit is inviting you to come to him right now, today. He is waiting to see what you are going to do.

So...

#### **4. What does this mean for me?**

This is always the key question to ask and answer, because this Good News is for you. The Bible speaks to you. Christ suffered, prayed, and died for you. So what does this mean for you and me? Well best of all, it means...

- **I can be forgiven!**

The invitation is extended. You and I are here because Jesus prayed for you and me: "Father, forgive (Mike) for he doesn't know what he's doing." Put your name in the blank. Jesus still prays this continuously for you, he fulfilled prophecy for you and identified with you. God is not excusing your sin; you still deserve condemnation and eternity apart from him. But God has opened the way for you to come to him, he won't hinder you and he is not angry with you; he loves you. And because his Son did this for you, his offer of forgiveness is available right now for you. You can be forgiven and set free to a brand new, abundant life. Will you accept, or will you continue to reject His forgiveness?

Right now bow your heads and prepare your heart. *You, right now, can be the answer to Jesus' prayer on the cross.*

*(Lead in prayer of forgiveness.)*

There's one more thing that all of this means to you. Not only can I be forgiven, but...

- **I can forgive!**

Someone has said that forgiveness is the virtue we profess to believe but fail to practice. In the book, "What's So Amazing About Grace," the author writes this: "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"<sup>4</sup>

That's exactly right.

The word "forgive" is borrowed from the world of commerce and banking. It means to cancel a debt or to pardon a loan. Notice that the word forgive contains the word "give." To forgive is to *forego* or cancel the debt of someone so that they never have to pay us back for what they've done to us, and it is to *give* grace to someone who doesn't deserve it. If we choose to not forgive, we can end up letting our anger and resentment metastasize into bitterness. Unforgiveness also blocks God's ability to forgive us. Remember the prayer that

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan Publishers, Nashville, TN 2023, (p. 86)

Jesus taught us to pray: “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

It is precisely because Jesus prayed for us, for our forgiveness, that we can *forego* and *give*; we can forgive.

The key to forgiving others is to understand how much Christ has forgiven you. The Bible tells us that exactly:

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32, niv) (*repeat*)

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 culture, a character, a community of forgiveness and wants West Valley Church to be an oasis of forgiveness.

If we had been at the cross that day, *we* would have been holding the nails. We would have been jeering and cheering. We’re not that much different. We would have been swept up in it all just the same. We’re not any better than they were. 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. You both need 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 most deeply. It cost Jesus His life to forgive us. 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 forego the debt and give grace to those who have sinned against us.

And here’s the thing: God may call us to perform this unnatural act of forgiveness over and over again until we learn the grace of continual forgiveness, just like Christ prayed on the cross and repeatedly prays, “Father, forgive them.”

Let me give you a simple exercise that might help. On a piece of paper, write two columns. Label the left side column “Hurt,” and in it, write down all the things, all the people, and the memories from the past that have hurt you so deeply. Then, let the right column be labeled “Action taken.” Pray about each hurt, each person, remember Christ’s prayer and forgiveness for you, and then make a decision: in the right column next to that hurt or person, write: Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven.

When you’re all done put it in your Jesus Box. Or put it somewhere that it will remind you, because in some cases you are going to have to do it over and over. Jesus told his disciples they would have to do it 70 times 7 times (Matthew 18:21-22)—meaning to keep on praying it and keep on doing it, just like Jesus does. You may not feel like it. You may not even believe it. But take the first step and say it.

That’s when we really have been forgiven, when we can forgive.

A couple last things: forgiveness is *not* forgetting. One saint said it this way: “I distinctly remember forgetting it.” You won’t always be able to forget, but you can forgive and choose to let it go by the help of God.

Secondly, forgiveness is free (or else it isn't grace). But trust is earned. If someone has hurt you, forgive them freely. It doesn't matter if they deserve it or not. That's grace. But forgiveness does not mean that you will blindly trust them; it means that you will open the door for trust to happen – *if* they want it.

Let me pray for us.

*Thank him for his last words from the cross: powerful and precious gifts to us, of forgiveness. May we accept it and be people who forgive – who forego debt and give grace.*

**Benediction:**

“Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.” (Colossians 3:13, nlt)