

Luke 23:32-38
March 1, 2009

Hampton Baptist
Charles R. Smith

The Seven Last Words of Christ Series

“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

There's a Spanish story of a father and son who had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: “Dear Paco, Meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.” On Saturday, 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers. (Bits & Pieces, October 15, 1992, Page 13) That story indicates a basic truth: we all need forgiveness. That story also encapsulates our gospel lesson for the morning; a loving father was offering forgiveness to many who needed it.

Jesus was crucified between two thieves. We don't give much attention to the other crosses, but there were *three* crosses on that Judean hillside. The cross of Jesus was in the middle. Luke makes a distinction between Jesus and the criminals. He doesn't state that *three* were crucified; instead he recorded that there, Jesus and the two *criminals* were crucified. It is certainly worth noting that Jesus' crucifixion was different from the execution of the thieves. Crucifixion was an unusually barbaric form of execution that was generally reserved for non-Romans. The victim's hands and feet were either nailed or fastened to the cross. We know that Jesus' hands were nailed to the cross from other references after his resurrection. I have been unable to find a Scriptural reference of whether Jesus' feet were nailed or tied to the cross. Halfway up the cross there was a projecting piece of wood, called the saddle, which took the weight of the crucified, for otherwise the nails would have torn through his hands. Often a person would hang alive on the cross for several days, subject to the torture of elements, insects, the jeers of passersby, and physical pain and exhaustion. (Malcolm O. Tolbert. Broadman Bible Commentary, on Luke, John, vol. 9. Nashville: Broadman Press. 1970., p. 178)

Crucifixion was a *horrible* way to die. But Jesus also experienced other trauma on that Friday. He received continual harassment from the people, even from the religious rulers. Even though the rulers should have known better, they still sneered at the one who was being executed for being called the King of the Jews. The privileged scoffed at him; the powerful mocked him. All the while, the other people stood by watching. "He saved others, if he is the Christ, the Chosen One of God, the all-powerful Messiah, then let him save himself," were the taunts of the crowd.

But Jesus did *not* save himself by coming off the cross, by turning the tide of public opinion, or even by annihilating his detractors. If he had done so, his mission would have been thwarted. There are many things that God cannot do without committing divine contradiction and/or negating the laws of the whole wide universe. God cannot stop wars until *we* are ready to stop them, or make people *good* who do not want to be made good, or keep the wickedness of humanity from hurting the innocent. "You've saved others, save yourself." Jesus simply could not reverse the moment; he was fulfilling his mission. Christ had come to die.

The soldiers mocked him; they had already gambled away his only possessions. The clothes of the criminal were the gratuities of the four soldiers among whom he marched to the cross. The person being executed was stripped of his clothing and crucified naked. Every Jew wore five articles of apparel--the inner tunic, the outer robe, the girdle, the sandals and the turban. Four were divided among the four soldiers. There remained the outer robe. It was woven in one piece without a seam. To have it cut up and divided would have ruined it; so, the soldiers gambled for it in the shadow of the cross. It was nothing to them that, in their opinion, another criminal was slowly dying in agony. (William Barclay., The Gospel of Luke. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. p. 285)

These same soldiers mocked Jesus by offering him vinegar, the cheap sour wine drunk by the common people. They joined in the taunts, "Save yourself if you are the King of the Jews. Some king

you are that you cannot even save yourself." They saw Jesus as a frustrated, defeated pretender to Jewish rule. It was customary to write the accusation against the executed person on a placard and affix it to the cross or hang it around his neck. Atop his cross, the placard read, "**This** is the King of the Jews." Even the statement was a mockery, to say that a *king* was being crucified. Some manuscripts record that this placard was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. The intent was for everyone to know that this One who proclaimed divinity and Messiahship was being put to death. Jesus was executed as a rebel against Rome; he was convicted of treason. "We have no king but Caesar," were the words of those who delivered Jesus to Pilate.

And now amid this atmosphere of contempt and distrust at a place called the Skull, Jesus offered a prayer. While hanging between heaven and earth and between two thieves, Jesus called on his Father. While on the cross in excruciating pain, nails in his hands, crown of thorns on his head, the sun beating on his bruised face, exposed to the world, a spectacle stripped of all dignity, dried saliva in his hair, lacerations on his back, Jesus called for God's forgiveness . . . not for himself, but for those who placed him there. I wonder if I could've taken the verbal abuse. The taunts and insults would have angered me to the point of retaliation at some point. The pain of the nails in my hands would have left me delirious. The abandonment of my most trusted friends, the betrayal by Judas and the denials by Peter would have broken my heart. Yet Jesus responded with forgiveness.

From the cross, Jesus asked for grace for those who crucified him, for those who spit on him, hit him with sticks, crowned him with thorns that pierced his brow. Jesus asked God to forgive those who shouted, "Give us Barabbas; we would rather have a murderer released to us than one who gives life." Jesus prayed for those who gambled away his only possessions, for those who betrayed, denied, and deserted him. From the cross, he lovingly remembered those who nailed spikes through his hands, who dropped the cross in the ground causing a tremendous jolt of pain throughout his body, who offered him vinegar while he was dying. He pleaded for God to forgive those who taunted him with insults, who loved their tradition and legalism more than they loved God, whose righteous indignation and religious zeal were more important than a relationship with the divine. Jesus requested mercy for those who had waved palm branches and shouted "Hosanna, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," on the previous Sunday as he entered the capitol city of Jerusalem and then on Friday, they were shouting "Crucify him! Crucify Him!"

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," is also a statement on our behalf. We muddle through our days sometimes not knowing the hurt we bring to the Kingdom of God by our actions and speech. Our egocentric attitudes look for ways to please ourselves rather than reaching out to others. Our inward focus forgets that people are watching us, *hoping* that as Christians we will show them a different way. How often, even today, does Jesus say about us, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do?"

Maybe the place to start is with *how* we forgive others. Never is it a question of smiling and letting bygones be bygones: making allowances for people, excusing them for this or that, overlooking their faults. Worthiness should never enter into the calculations either; whether someone *deserves* forgiveness should not be considered. We are not simply to *put up* with the wrong that is done to us, but we are to *match* it with something that lies far and away on the other side of what we think of as "forgiveness." Instead of responding with contempt, we are to respond with grace. That is the action of Jesus while hanging on the cross. His taunters and detractors certainly did not *deserve* forgiveness, and neither do we.

In like manner we are to forgive others, even when they are unaware of what they are doing. Our response should exhibit the love of God as demonstrated on the cross. Even when the unthinkable has happened, we are to forgive.

Reflecting on Jesus' request for forgiveness from the cross, we should be ashamed at our own behavior. Father, forgive *us* for we know not what we do.