

The First Word—Forgive! (Series on the 7 words from the cross)

Luke 23:32-38

Introduction:

- A. Meditations on the 7 words used to be every Good Friday—3 hours—12-3PM.
- B. This first word, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Is a strange thing to come first from the lips of Jesus as he hung on the cross.
1. We would expect anything but this.
 2. Willimon says, “And don’t you find it curious that the first word, the very first word that Jesus speaks in agony on the cross, is ‘Father, forgive.’? Such blood, violence, injustice, crushed bone, and ripped sinew, the hands nailed to the wood. With all the possible words of recrimination, condemnation, and accusation, the first thing Jesus says is ‘Father, forgive.’ Earlier he commanded us to forgive our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We thought he meant that as a metaphor.”¹
- C. This sort of “preemptive” forgiveness doesn’t sit well with us—especially in the church.
1. We want our pound of flesh.
 2. Unfortunately, the church is the only army in the world that shoots its own wounded.
 3. “When there is injustice, wrong done, first get a lawyer then get even. Second—no fourth or fifth—consider the possibility of forgiveness, after there has been restitution and compensation. Or we say, ‘the offender has first got to be made to see that what he has done is wrong, very wrong. Sin has got to be named and claimed, owned as sin.’ Yet from the cross, Jesus forgives precisely because they/we don’t know sin as sin. Jesus doesn’t just forgive, he preemptively forgives.”²
 4. That this is the first word of Jesus is interestingly at odds with us. For us, if we forgive at all, it is a distinctively secondary word. First, ‘Let the offender ask for forgiveness, say that he is sorry, then comes forgiveness.’ But at Calvary, no one asked to be forgiven. Nobody said, ‘I’m sorry,’ or ‘Oops. I guess we’re executing the wrong rabbi, forgive us.’ And yet, Jesus said first, ‘Father, forgive.’”³
- D. We are listening in on one of the most intimate conversations within the heart of the trinity.
- E. We place great emphasis on the dying words of a loved one.
1. Why was this word of forgiveness first?
 2. Could it be that this is the most difficult lesson for us to learn?

¹ Willimon, William, “Thank God It’s Friday”, Abingdon Press, 2006

² Ibid.

³ Ibid

3. Could it be that this is the lesson we most need to get right in our own personal lives and in the church?
4. In one of Augustine's sermons he said that some of the people in his church passed over the phrase, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" in the Lord's Prayer. They knew they would be lying if they said that out loud. They were unwilling to promise God that they would forgive. (This is the only part of the Lord's Prayer Jesus commented upon.)

F. How do we handle mistreatment or sin by others?

1. Do you take legal action?
2. Do you resort to personal revenge or retaliation in either word or deed?
3. Do you respond by developing an attitude of resentment which eventually leads to self-pity and then to despair in your heart?
4. Do you respond with an attitude of hostility that develops into deep bitterness and hurtful hate? This is the path to murder.

G. Jesus is our example—"Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

1. In the OT forgiveness is divine—very little human forgiveness there—it meant "to cover up, blot out, to lift up a burden, to send away."
2. In the NT—our standard for conduct—Jesus adds several new elements:
 - a. We repudiate (relinquish) the right to retaliate.
 - b. We seek to restore a ruptured relationship.
 - c. We return good for evil.
 - d. We seek to heal a broken fellowship.
 - e. We seek to offer grace to those who have done wrong.

Jesus insisted that his disciples practice forgiveness.

A. Jesus taught that forgiveness of others is a condition for receiving forgiveness from God.

(Matt. 6:14-15--In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.)

1. It is only when we grant forgiveness to others that we can receive forgiveness into our own heart and life.
2. When we refuse to forgive, we destroy our capacity to receive forgiveness.

B. Forgiveness is to be granted as an act of grace on the part of the injured person.

1. We cannot wait until the one who injures us deserves forgiveness to bestow the gift.
2. It must be an act of grace on our part.
3. "If God's going to wait to talk with me until I first admit that I'm a sinner, the conversation will never occur. I'll be too defensive, too deceitful in my guilt. I'd

rather die. ‘Did you conspire to kill the Son of God?’ ‘Who me? Why are you always picking on me? I’m doing the best I can.’ So, the first thing we hear is, ‘you are forgiven,’ then ‘can we talk?’”⁴

4. As Christians we confess our sin not in order to receive forgiveness, but because we are forgiven.
 5. If we grasped this concept, wouldn’t it revolutionize the church?
- C. Forgiveness must not be limited. (Matt. 18:21-35—scary parable of the unjust servant) God is eager to forgive all our sins, and we must be willing to forgive all the sins and injuries that are inflicted upon us.

The importance of a spirit of forgiveness.

- A. The primary benefit that comes as a result of forgiveness is experienced in the heart of the one who does the forgiving. (They say that sometimes you need to forgive in order to get the wrong doer off your back, in order to breathe, in order to start over.)
- B. But we see something different at work here with Jesus in this first word. “Jesus forgives, not in order to get away from us murderers but in order to get close to us, in order to save us. He asks for forgiveness, not as a strategy for a more fulfilling life but because, as the Son of God, Jesus knows it to be the very nature of God to forgive.”⁵
- C. The practice of granting forgiveness is essential for a healthy emotional life on the part of the injured person.
1. Harboring hate and hostility is unhealthy and destructive.
 2. Forgiveness helps to purge those destructive emotions from our life.
- D. Forgiveness is essential for a successful marriage and home life.
1. Even the best spouses mistreat each other on occasion.
 2. Children mistreat parents and parents mistreat children.
 3. The practice of forgiveness is the only thing that can heal the small broken relationships from day to day.
- E. The practice of granting forgiveness is essential for effective Christian witness.
1. How many people are turned off from the church and thus turned away from Christ because the church has a critical, judgmental, and unforgiving spirit in it?
 2. We are our own worst enemies—like I said, we shoot our own wounded.
 3. People will believe in the forgiveness of God only when they see it practiced and when they feel the results of it in their personal experience.
- F. The practice of granting forgiveness is essential for maintaining the fellowship of the church.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

1. The church is made up of sinners who are mistake-makers. We might be going on to perfection, but none of us have arrived there yet.
 2. We in the church say unkind things and do unkind things from time to time.
 3. The church is a community of the forgiven and the forgiving.
- G. The practice of granting forgiveness is essential for power in prayer.
1. An unforgiving spirit throws up a road block between us and God.
 2. Jesus made forgiving others a condition for us to receive forgiveness.
 3. If we harden our hearts with an attitude of hostility, we shut ourselves off from the grace of God.

How can we develop a spirit of forgiveness?

- A. Realize that forgiveness goes against our nature—we are much better at anger, hostility and resentment—forgiveness requires faith and practice—and a good dose of humility.
- B. The first word from the cross gives us an example of how to grant forgiveness to those who have mistreated us or done wrong.
- C. What actions can we take right now that will help us develop a forgiving spirit?
1. Recognize and acknowledge that an unforgiving spirit is contrary to the will of God. It goes against the mind and example of Christ.
 2. Recognize and decide that forgiveness is the only sane way to deal with painful experiences.
 3. Recognize that forgiveness is God’s divinely ordained method to purge hate from our hearts. To harbor hate and to carry a grudge is to face life with the self-destruct button already pushed. No one wins when hate rules.
 4. Realize that a forgiving spirit can be a powerful creative force for good—for both the forgiver and the forgiven.
 5. Recognize that our Lord’s forgiving us of our sins is the basis upon which we are to practice forgiveness toward others. (Col 3:12-14--So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.)

Conclusion:

- A. Is there someone you need to forgive? Do it right now. Don't wait another moment.
- B. Do you have an unforgiving spirit? Do you want to be a person who forgives others and experiences God's forgiveness? Confess the sin of unforgiveness to God and ask God to give you a forgiving spirit.
- C. The unwillingness to forgive can keep a person out of heaven, and it can turn others away from God.
- D. The neglect to forgive others can create a little hell in your heart in the here and now.
- E. If you would go to heaven when this life is over, and if you would experience the joy of heaven in the here and now, then look to Jesus' pattern in this matter of granting forgiveness to those who mistreat you. With the help of God, practice forgiveness. By doing so, you follow the pattern of Jesus Christ. By practicing forgiveness you will become a conduit through which others will experience forgiveness, both human and divine.