

# *“Father, Forgive Them”*

SEVEN STATEMENTS FROM THE CROSS (#1)

Luke 23:33-38

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## Introduction:

I would imagine that very few (if any) of us here this morning have ever witnessed an execution, and yet most of us know that the accounts we read are very similar to one another as we have seen them portrayed in the movies and on television. We realize that the government is very precise concerning how and when an execution takes place. Here in Wisconsin, of course, the death penalty was abolished in 1853. In fact, Wisconsin was one of the earliest states to abolish the death penalty, and we are the only state that has performed only one execution in our history. Since our admission to the Union in 1848, the only execution carried out in Wisconsin was that of immigrant farmer John McCaffary, who was hanged on August 21, 1851, in Kenosha County, for drowning his wife. According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 people witnessed the execution. According to reports from the time, before a white hood was placed over his head, Mr. McCaffary said in a low voice, **“I was the cause of the death of my wife, and I hope my fate will be a warning to you all....”** And with that, the sheriff placed a rope around his neck and hoisted him into the air. We are told from accounts at the time that the crowd watched McCaffary struggle for five minutes and after eight minutes doctors began checking his pulse which they found had slowed slightly. The doctors then checked McCaffary’s pulse for another ten minutes until he was finally declared dead. Due to the public outcry over how long it took him to die, that was the first and the last execution to ever take place under Wisconsin law.

But when it comes to any execution, most of want to know what the person said. We want to know whether they maintained their innocence, whether they asked for forgiveness, whether they said goodbye to their family and friends. We want to know, because we know that there is a value to a person’s last words.

With this in mind, this morning I would like for us to start a series of lessons looking at the last words of Jesus from the cross. He was nailed to the cross at 9 o’clock in the morning, He died at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, and during those six hours, the Lord (as He shed His blood for the sins of the world) made seven statements from the cross. I would like for us to start with the first statement this morning, and then I would like for us to continue over the next several weeks until we have considered all seven statements. And as we study, we will have a much better understanding of who Jesus is, why He came into the world, what He did when He was here, why He

died as He did, and what all of this really means for those of us living in south-central Wisconsin nearly 2,000 years later.

But in order for us to fully understand the importance of Jesus' last words, we do need to remember how He died. The Lord did not die in a hospital surrounded by his family and friends (as a majority of people die today), but He died very publicly on a cross at the hands of Roman soldiers. Crucifixion in the First Century was different from today's executions, because each crucifixion was designed to be as public as possible. Today, executions are not televised, they are not done outdoors anymore, but they take place with just a few family and friends, a few public officials, and maybe a few lawyers. But in the First Century, a crucifixion was normally carried out along a main road, and it was designed to be as horrific and as memorable as possible. The Romans wanted a big crowd, because it helped remind the public that Roman government was not to be messed with. They wanted the people to know that the penalty for breaking Roman law was brutal and extreme. Sometimes the process went on for days, and Cicero, a famous Roman historian, said that, **"It is the most cruel and shameful of all punishments."** From history, we know that the Romans researched it well—they considered hanging, and death by the sword, and boiling in oil, and so on, but they decided on crucifixion because it was the worst possible way to die. It was excruciating. In fact, the word excruciating goes back to crucifixion. The word literally means, **"out of the cross."** And so when we use the word **"excruciating,"** we are referring back to the cross and how painful it was.

The crucifixion of Jesus, therefore (as the Son of God), was the darkest scene in all of human history. The Bible tells us that in spite of living a perfect life that the Lord was rejected in every possible way. At His birth, there was no room at the inn. Shortly after His birth, a Jewish king tried to have Him killed. When He grew up, He came back to His hometown of Nazareth to preach, and the Bible explains that they tried to throw Him off a cliff. Everywhere He went, the Jewish leaders chased Him down and tried to turn the crowds against Him. And then, after having lived a perfect life, Jesus was declared innocent three times by the Roman Governor Pilate before being handed over to be crucified. Our Savior was then nailed to the cross and hung up in the air to die.

As you can see, our passage for this morning's lesson is found in **Luke 23:33-38**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1649**. And just to emphasize the fact that Jesus was innocent, please just notice what the Roman Governor said in **verse 4**. After hearing the accusations and questioning the Lord, Pilate said, ***"I find no guilt in this man."*** Consider also **verse 14**, where Pilate said, ***"You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him."*** And then after continuing to press Pilate to crucify the Lord, the Bible says (in **verse 22**), ***"And he said to them the third time, 'Why? What evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him.'"*** And yet in spite of declaring him innocent three times, Pilate gives in to the crowd, and that brings us to our text for this morning—**Luke 23:33-38**. The Lord has already been beaten to within an inch of His life, He has been cursed, He has received the crown of

thorns, He has had His beard yanked out, He has been spat upon, He has been ridiculed, He has carried His own cross to the site of the crucifixion. In my own mind, I can picture the angels of heaven all standing by with their swords drawn, ready to vaporize the entire world if necessary—just waiting for the word—just waiting for permission to do so.

But as He is nailed to the cross, writhing in anguish and pain (as we sometimes sing), the Lord raises Himself up to speak. He has no energy to waste. Everything He says will be of the utmost importance. What will He say? Will He curse the soldiers? Will He defend His innocence? Will He call down those angels? If you will, please look with me at **Luke 23:33-38**...

***<sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. <sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" <sup>38</sup> Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS."***

***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*** For just a moment this morning, I would like for us to study what this means for those of us assembled here today.

**I. And first of all, I would like for us to notice that THE FIRST THING JESUS SAID FROM THE CROSS WAS SPOKEN IN THE FORM OF A PRAYER.**

In fact, as we look at the seven statements from the cross, we find that three of the seven were prayers. Jesus, of course, was known as being a man of prayer. In fact, in the four gospel accounts, we have fifteen prayers of Jesus recorded (Luke records 11 of the 15). The Lord's public ministry began with a prayer. You might remember that immediately after Jesus was baptized He prayed. It is appropriate, then, for Jesus to also end His earthly ministry with a series of prayers—even as He hung on the cross and was slowly bleeding and suffocating to death.

As we put this in context, we realize that prayer during a time like this would have been extremely unusual. Normally, we pray where we can get away from the noise and confusion of the world—we pray where we can be alone. But we find here that Jesus was praying on the cross. And when we look at the tense of the verb here at the beginning of **verse 34**, we discover that this was not just one prayer, but we find that, ***"Jesus was saying..."*** In other words, throughout the process of crucifixion, Jesus continued to say (over and over again), ***"Father, forgive them; for they do***

***not know what they are doing.***" This was something that He repeated numerous times over those six hours that He was hanging on the cross—perhaps even through the scourging, as He carried the cross, as they beat Him in the face, as they took off His clothing, as they held Him down, as they hammered in the nails, as they dropped the cross in the hole, as they taunted Him on the cross, as they offered Him the sour wine, as the soldiers divided up His clothing, as they gambled for his seamless inner garment, as they mocked Him for claiming to be the King of the Jews—over and over again, ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

According to Roman historians, we know that it was common for those who were crucified to cry out all kinds of curses—all kinds of blasphemous words—they would curse their parents, they would curse the soldiers. In fact, Cicero wrote that the executioners would sometimes even cut out the tongues of the criminals so that they would not have to deal with all of the hateful things that were said. And yet we look at Christ, and we are amazed at the contrast! Instead of hurling profanity back at the crowd, the Lord's first words from the cross came in the form of a prayer. Or, in the words of Peter (an eyewitness) from **1 Peter 2:23**, referring to Christ, that, ***"...while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously."*** First of all, therefore, we find that the Lord's very first statement from the cross came in the form of a prayer. And what an example for us today! We know how easy it is to turn on God when we go through some terrible experience. We all know people who turn away from God in times of suffering, but the example of Christ tells us that even in the worst experience we can still call upon God as our ***"Father."*** Even on the cross, the Lord addressed God as His ***"Father"*** and went to His Father in prayer.

**II. There is a second basic idea here in this first statement from the cross, and it comes in the fact that this first statement was A REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CRUCIFIXION.**

As I understand it, literally this is a request for God the Father to hold back—to be patient, to allow those responsible a certain length of time to reconsider and to have a chance at salvation, to hold back on the wrath, to hold back on the punishment. And here we see such a contrast from what we often see from someone who is at the end of life. We remember Samson's last prayer in **Judges 16:28**, where Samson called out to the Lord and said, ***"O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, O God, that I may at once be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes."*** How easy it would have been for Jesus to say something similar, and yet He did not. But instead, He begged God that those responsible for the crucifixion could somehow be forgiven. In other words, the Lord did exactly what He told His followers to do in the Sermon on the Mount (in **Matthew 5:44**), ***"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*** He was doing it! In fact, one writer has said that this one statement proves beyond all doubt that Jesus was divine, that He was the Son of God. Only the Son of God could have made a statement like this. There was no resentment, no anger, but Jesus was

interceding with a request for forgiveness. Over and over again, ***“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”***

We may not realize it right away, but Jesus was actually fulfilling the prophecy that was made by Isaiah more than 700 years earlier. As brother Mike read for us this morning, in **Isaiah 53:12**, the prophet comes to a climax with the very last verse and says that the Suffering Servant would be, ***“...numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.”*** In other words, He spoke up on their behalf, and that is exactly what we see here with His very first statement from the cross, ***“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”***

So many people needed God’s forgiveness. The Jewish leaders, for example, needed to be forgiven. King Herod, the Roman puppet king, needed to be forgiven. Pilate, the cowardly politician, needed to be forgiven. The Roman soldiers, simply following orders, needed to be forgiven. The mob, those who were shouting insults, needed to be forgiven. The disciples, those who had abandoned the Lord as they ran for their own lives, needed to be forgiven. ***“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*** And really, any of us who have ever sinned also need to be forgiven for the role that we played in the crucifixion. Obviously we were not there, but the Scriptures teach that Jesus died ***“for us.”***

***Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him (Isaiah 53:4-6).***

In other words, if we have ever sinned, then we had a part in the crucifixion. As Paul taught in **Romans 3:23**, ***“...all [of us] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Jesus, therefore, was on the cross in our place. We were responsible for it, and we need forgiveness for what happened that day.

But it is interesting that in this plea for forgiveness, Jesus recognizes the fact that, ***“...they do not know what they are doing.”*** In other words, even those who were there were oblivious to the seriousness of what they were really doing. Or, as we might say today, they did not have a clue. They did not understand. And really, our sin is almost like a skunk—a skunk doesn’t understand how bad he smells! And perhaps in a slightly similar way, those who crucified the Lord did not fully understand the seriousness of what they were doing. They didn’t get it! Think, for example, about the soldiers in this passage who cast lots and divided up the Lord’s garments among themselves. In **John 19:23-25**, John’s account tells us that, ***“...the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece. So they said to one another, ‘Let us not***

tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be'; this was to fulfill the Scripture: **'THEY DIVIDED MY OUTER GARMENTS AMONG THEM, AND FOR MY CLOTHING THEY CAST LOTS.'** Therefore the soldiers did these things." Here was the Son of God shedding His blood for the sins of the world, and the soldiers were going about life as if nothing was wrong. Their main concern was that they get a little bonus. It was customary for the soldiers to divide up a victims clothing. They divided up the outer garments among the four of them, but then they got to the seamless inner garment, and they realized that it wouldn't be as valuable if they tore it into four pieces, so they rolled the dice for it. So callous! They are guilty, but they have no idea what they are really doing.

Certainly Pilate knew he had sent an innocent man to die—that's why Pilate washed his hands, that's why Pilate declared the Lord innocent three times. But Pilate did not have the full understanding of what it meant to crucify the Son of God. We think of Judas. Judas also knew that what he was doing was wrong—that's why he tried to return the 30 pieces of silver, that's why Judas took his own life. But in a similar way, even Judas was perhaps not able to see the full impact of what he had done. **"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."** The same is also true of our sins today. Sure, we may know that what we are doing is wrong, but if we fully understood the impact of each sin—the fact that each sin put the Son of God on the cross—if we truly knew the impact, we probably would not even sin in the first place. **"Father forgive them; for the do not know what they are doing."** That statement should cause us to pause and reconsider the real cost of our sin.

### **III. Finally, this morning, as we consider what this first statement from the cross really means for us, I'd like for us to consider the question of WHEN THE LORD'S PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS WAS ANSWERED.**

And we need to remember as we study this question, that these people were not in a saved relationship with God as soon as Jesus worded the prayer. In other words, forgiveness is not simply approving of sin. Forgiveness does not involve changing the definition of sin. Forgiveness does not mean that we just overlook sin. Perhaps some would suggest that this is what Jesus is doing here. However, I would suggest that the Lord's prayer for forgiveness was answered in a powerful way on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**. Only seven weeks later, Peter stood up in front of thousands of people and said, ***"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."*** Now please notice: Peter does not say, **"But you are all forgiven because Jesus prayed for it."** No! These people were still guilty. In fact, in **Acts 2:37** the Bible says that, ***"...when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'"*** Peter then said to them (in **verse 38**), ***"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the***

***name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."***

Those who had murdered Jesus wanted to know what they needed to do to be forgiven, and Peter told them that they could have their sins washed away if they would have a change of heart and if they would allow themselves to be baptized in the name of Christ. In **Acts 2:41**, the Bible then says that, ***"...those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls."***

***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*** That prayer was answered when 3,000 people realized what they had done and were buried with Christ in baptism.

Can you imagine the scene that day? Can you imagine Peter as he finishes that sermon, as perhaps someone runs up to Peter and says, ***"But I spit on the Lord as He walked by. Is there any hope for me?" "Change your heart and be immersed for the forgiveness of your sins."*** "But I slapped His face. Is there any hope for me?" ***"Change your heart and be immersed for the forgiveness of your sins."*** "But I'm on the Sanhedrin, and I actually voted to put Jesus to death. Is there any hope for me?" ***"Change your heart and be immersed for the forgiveness of your sins."*** "But I was in the crowd shouting 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' Is there any hope for me?" ***"Change your heart and be immersed for the forgiveness of your sins."***

And the good news for us this morning is still the same. We can also be forgiven for our part in what happened that day. Peter's message to us is just as true today as it was then, ***"Change your hearts and let each one of you be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins might be forgiven" (Acts 2:38)***.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close, I would like to point out just a few very practical ways that this passage means something for all of us here this morning:

First of all, we are reminded this morning that ignorance of God's law is no excuse for sin. In other words, even though we may not even know something is wrong at the time, we can still be held accountable. If you have ever had a ticket for speeding, then you may know this from personal experience. I know I got my one and only ticket in Elburn, Illinois, when I was on my way back to Tennessee after Labor Day weekend. It was early on Monday morning. I was getting back up to speed after a stop sign, and I thought that stop sign was Elburn—I thought I was leaving town. But when I crested the hill doing 40-something in a not-so-40-something speed zone, the unmarked car with the blue lights reminded me that ignorance is no excuse. In the same way, those who actually crucified the Lord did not realize the full impact of what they were doing. The Lord prayed that they would be forgiven. They did not

know what they were doing, but forgiveness was still necessary. So, first of all, ignorance of God's law is no excuse for sin.

Secondly, I would also suggest that this passage raises the bar for how we deal with our enemies. I don't know how many enemies you have. I know I've had a few here and there. But here is Jesus, in the blood, and sweat, and agony of what is going on and somehow He is able to pray for those who are doing it to Him. It would have been so easy to take revenge, just as we might have been tempted to do, but the words of Paul remind us, ***"Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord"*** (**Romans 12:19**). The Lord's example certainly does raise the bar for how we deal with our own enemies.

But then thirdly, I would also suggest that the Lord's example here also raises the bar concerning how we deal with each other. If Jesus could pray for His enemies, then certainly we can also be very patient with each other as brothers and sisters in the church. In **Ephesians 4:32**, the apostle Paul said, ***"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."*** In that statement, we hear an echo of what Jesus said on the cross. This is what Jesus was demonstrating for us. If He can forgive us, then certainly we can also forgive each other.

I am so thankful for your kind attention this morning, and Lord willing, next Sunday morning we will be able to continue by looking at the second statement that Jesus made from the cross.

But for now, the good news is that we can be forgiven based on what Jesus did for us on the cross! If you are already a Christian and are having some special struggles that you would like for us to pray about, you can let us know by writing it down and bringing your concern to the front. We would be glad to pray with you as a congregation. On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian, we would invite you to obey the gospel. The good news is that Jesus died, He was buried, and He was raised up on the third day. We follow His example by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are ready to make that lifelong commitment, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)