

Famous Last Words ZCC 5.3.15

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” (Luke 23:34) “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43) “Dear woman, here is your son.” (John 19:26) “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Mark 15:34) “I am thirsty.” (John 19:28) “It is finished!” (John 19:30) “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” (Luke 23:46)

I don't know all the ins and outs but I know that in court a person's dying declaration has some special significance. Normally we have the right to confront our accusers but dying declarations have special significance and maybe special power in the courtroom.

I suppose that the assumption is that as we are dying that we wouldn't want to go out lying, but I'm not absolutely sure.

Jesus' final days and weeks of teachings have special significance in my mind. He was trying to get the disciples to understand all that was going on and what would happen. I think that his dying declarations also carry a lot of weight for that reason. These were the things on his mind and on his lips in the middle of his suffering and his rejection and his abandonment.

Then there is the fact that he said them from the cross. The cross is arguably the most important feature—the most important item—in Christianity besides God himself in the form of Father, Son and Spirit.

You have certainly heard of the “seven words” of the cross before, but I want to look again at them with you over the next week or two or three.

Traditionally, the seven words from the cross are called: 1. Forgiveness, 2. Salvation, 3. Relationship, 4. Abandonment, 5. Distress, 6. Triumph and 7. Reunion.

Today, though, let's do a quick overview and then look at the first word—which is the overarching reason for the cross. Forgiveness.

One of the great things about the Bible in general and the Gospels in particular is what appears to be the lack of intentional harmonizing.

For instance, did you ever notice that there are, basically, two different accounts of the creation and that they are not exactly the same? The creation story as we have it may have come from the oral traditions of the northern kingdom AND the oral traditions of the southern kingdom.

When the Northern kingdom was carried off and some of the people and scholars escaped to the southern kingdom, it is believed that they undertook the task of writing down their oral traditions and that they included any variations—with no prejudice.

For me that says more for the voracity—or the truth—of both traditions.

It is the same with the Gospels. Not one of them is exactly like the other.

When we have eye-witness style accounts, there are significant variations and I find that to be a good thing. It makes them come to life and it makes them seem more real, more truthful.

One of the things policemen learn early on is that if every person who witnessed an event tells the same story, it is probably a rehearsed lie. So I personally like the fact that they didn't "get their story together" but instead reported what they saw or what they were told.

It is the same with the 7 words. In order to get them all, you have to read all the Gospels.

In Matthew and Mark he says: *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*

In Luke: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise* (in response to one of the two thieves crucified next to him.) *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit* (last words)

In John: *Woman, behold your son: behold your mother* (directed at Mary, the mother of Jesus, either as a self-reference, or as a reference to the beloved disciple and an instruction to the disciple himself.) *I thirst* (just before a wetted sponge, mentioned by all the Canonical Gospels, is offered.) *It is finished* (last words.)

Let's look quickly at the first saying-- *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals -- one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.*" (Luke 23:32-34)

First of all—in the literal sense, let's acknowledge that the Romans DID know what they were doing in the basic sense. They were experts at execution and at crucifixion. They might even have been bored by it all. Maybe this team had already conducted several crucifixions that week already. The first time they saw a crucifixion they may have been moved by its brutality, but now they were probably calloused—emotionless.

So, they begin with the cruel process of nailing the criminal to a cross, then hoist him up, the cross swaying forward, then back until it is secured with wedges at the bottom to hold it upright in the hole.

Then the boredom comes. They then sit around the base waiting for the criminal to die -- sometimes for days.

To pass the time they gamble, deciding by a casting of lots who will be awarded the victim's last possessions. If they are really bored, maybe they taunt the criminal a bit—maybe not because they certainly can see that some don't deserve this fate—though they would never say so and risk joining them.

That is the scene.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Let's stop right here for a minute and let's say that together:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

What is Jesus saying?

It is certainly a prayer and if you and I were in his situation, we would pray. Almost ANY person would pray in his situation—even if they were SLIGHTLY religious. "MY GOD! HELP ME!"

Wouldn't you pray like that?

I would. But what did Jesus pray? Let's say that together again:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Complete unselfishness. Concerned for the people who are responsible for crucifying him. Asking God to forgive them. His body is in great pain and great peril. But their souls are in danger and he thinks of them.

Love.

The essence, the being, the Being, the over-arching theme and person-hood and action and thought and of Jesus is love. From that love comes words of forgiveness.

So he calls to God the Father to take away their sin. He calls him in tender love and in respect. He doesn't call him God—the generic term for a deity. He doesn't call him LORD, which is a term of honor and respect—the word used instead of YHWH or Jehovah by the Jews when they read the scripture. He doesn't call him "Almighty God" as we often do in our prayers nor does he call on the Creator God.

"Daddy!"

It is a term of love and relationship and trust. It is a term of endearment. It is the name Jesus used in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before.

Daddy, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Who? Who are "they?"

Soldiers?

He could be praying for the Roman soldiers. They did this often—destroying life almost without a thought. Still they didn't make the judgment. They were simply following orders. They were guilty, no doubt, but maybe not as guilty as some. They had no choice.

It is notable that after the fact, they did realize that this man was different. Matthew records the words of the Centurion as *Surely he was the Son of God!*

It could have been the soldiers he was forgiving. Or Pilate.

He had actually broken the law to make this happen. He had found Jesus innocent yet given the order that he be crucified. Innocent and sentenced to death based on the pressure the Jewish leaders put on him. His fear of a riot "forced" him to do it.

When he signed the paper to have Jesus killed he then went to the basin and washed his hands.

Was Jesus asking his daddy to forgive Pilate for the weakness of his character?

The chief priests and scribes were the most guilty, wouldn't you say? They were the greatest force behind the crucifixion.

He cleansed the temple and took away a major source of their riches. He embarrassed them over and over. They paid Judas to betray him. They arrested him in the garden. They encouraged the mob to shoot for his death and encouraged false testimony. Maybe he was asking God to forgive them. Wow! How powerful would that be?

They were the ones who caused this and yet maybe he was asking for forgiveness for them.

Pharisees and Sadducees were his earliest enemies. The Sadducees sought to discredit him and outwit him and prove him wrong but they couldn't. Matthew says that the Pharisees were the first to plot the death of Jesus. He was not who they expected and he didn't say or do what they expected. He had to go.

As a sidebar—maybe we should acknowledge that these groups were religious and righteous and that they were trying to meet God's standards for faith and worship. Just like we are.

Maybe we should acknowledge that if Jesus showed up today, many church leaders would oppose him openly. Some might plot to destroy him. The real Jesus is just too threatening to established religious power that resists change.

Maybe he was asking forgiveness for these who were so religious that they were blind and deaf—but not dumb. The Sadducee and Pharisees.

Maybe all of them. The soldiers and the priests and Pilate and the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

What does Jesus say?

From Mark 10: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

But when you think about it, we are really the ones that sent Jesus to the cross. Sins, corruption, weakness, pettiness.

Left to own direction and action, we are lost. The gate to eternal life is exceedingly narrow, he tells us. In Matthew 7 Jesus says that few find it on their own. Without Jesus' decision to take our sins upon himself, the Righteous for the unrighteous, none of us could be forgiven.

Jesus was under no illusions. He knew exactly why he came to earth. He explained it with utmost clarity to his disciples in Mark 10: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

They—and you and I made the cross necessary. We are all the ones he prays to forgive.

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Does God hold those who put Jesus to death responsible for their sins?

He is a just God, so the answer is “yes.” They had seen Jesus' miracles and heard the Truth spoken by the Son of God himself and had yet sought his death. The rope of justice was long enough to hang them all—and still is.

They understood that the crucifixion was a dirty business. Their hearts were corrupt—they were blinded by what THEY wanted.

But they still didn't understand the magnitude of their sin.

Paul explains in First Corinthians: *None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

Paul himself had persecuted Christians and had witnessed and even caused their deaths. Because he didn't understand.

He tells Timothy: *Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.*

What we learn from Jesus' “first word” is that God is love. What we learn from the “first word” is that his love is put into action through mercy. He is more merciful than any of us deserves.

Every group we have talked about and every person in those groups has enough sin to condemn them—including us. But God is looking deeper. He has made a way that we do not deserve, because he knows that if we really knew the truth, we would embrace his Son.

Jesus' prayer on the cross says that God's ways are WAY above our ways. It says that God has found a way—made a way—to forgive us.

What IS forgiveness? The Greek word means “to send away.” In common use in those times, it meant “to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, cancel, remit, pardon.”

The word was used in legal documents to describe releasing a person from an office, severing a marriage obligation, or canceling a debt that was owed.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus uses the word in the context of debt: *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

He is speaking of sins as a debt owed to God which must be paid.

The Lord's Prayer asks God to cancel our debts -- as we cancel others' debt of sins committed against us.

In Matthew. the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant illustrates the concept of forgiveness in terms of massive financial debt owed to a king.

As Jesus begins the last phase of his earthly life—dying on a cross hung between earth and heaven—he prays for all of us who put him there.

He calls out to his Father:

Daddy, forgive them.

And today we ask the same, Father, forgive us.