

FORGIVEN

Luke 23:26-56

Key Verse: 23:34a

“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”

Barabbas was set free, and Jesus, completely innocent, was condemned in his place. One of the questions you were asked a few minutes ago was, “Put yourself in Barabbas’ shoes. How would you feel?” Barabbas was sentenced to death, so I could only imagine that someone like that would feel relieved and thankful. Most of us, if not all of us, have never been to jail, much less been convicted of a life sentence. But even though we have never gone to jail, we all have a death sentence hanging over our lives. No one who ever lived on earth was free from death. In fact, everyone living today, all 7.5 billion of us, are under 125 years old, and anyone older has died. But there is good news. Just as Jesus was able to release Barabbas from his death sentence, he is able to release us from ours through the forgiveness of our sins. This is the very thing he came to do, and this is the reason he is in the situation we see before us now.

Look at v.26, **“As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.”** Criminals condemned to be crucified carried their own crosses, but Jesus was weakened to the point that he could not carry his own. He had been arrested very early in the morning, went through several trials. He was struck in the head several times with a staff, had part of his beard pulled out and was painfully flogged. He was whipped with many lashes across his back, with a whip which had pieces of bone and metal attached to the ends. This would tear the skin, and cause a major loss of blood. Often people could go unconscious from such a brutal beating, but to make sure Jesus made it to the cross, the Roman soldiers forced another man Simon to help him carry it.

(v.27-31) As Jesus was being led from Pilate’s palace through Jerusalem to the site of the cross, a large crowd started to follow, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned said to them, **“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed! Then ‘they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?’”** Jesus had in view the coming destruction of Jerusalem, which was the judgment of God for their sins. It would be a time so dreaded, that the

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blessings of motherhood would be reversed, that people would flee from the city with nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. It would be a time of great trial and tribulation.

Jesus had pity on the women who were weeping, and told them to weep for themselves and their children. He warned them of the coming judgment. We have a problem in this world, and that is sin. Sin at its core is disobedience and rebellion toward God. When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, chaos ensues. Sin is the reason a mob has formed and is forcing Jesus to his crucifixion. Sin is the reason he was wrongfully condemned. Sin is just as bad today as it was in Jesus' day. We don't have to look far to see the devastating effects of sin. In Chicago, shootings today occur over petty disputes. Someone may have gotten disrespected at a party, or made fun of in a You Tube video. Others might be retaliating for others who were shot. Last week there were 7 people killed in Chicago by gunfire, and 4 of them were by retaliation. But sin is also in our hearts. Pride, lust, envy and greed can cause us to hurt one another. It is for these things the judgment of God is coming. Sin must come to an end. It must be judged. But how will we escape, if we are so entangled in sin? This is why we need to be forgiven. The cross shows us the cost of our sins.

Verses 32-33 say, **“Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left.”** The price for sin is death. When we turn from God, the One who gave us life, what can we expect? So there was Jesus, hung on the cross, bloodied, beaten beyond recognition, with a crown of thorns thrust on his head. He suffered the most painful form of punishment and execution ever devised by man. It was anywhere from 7 to 9 feet tall, and the victim was literally nailed onto the cross. His outstretched arms were nailed at the wrists to the crossbar, and his feet nailed together onto the pole. Because the body was hung, Jesus had to push himself up by his arms and feet to take a breath, but each breath would be extremely painful because of the nails. The trade-off for one breath of air was a jolt of extreme pain. Ultimately, the cause of death on the cross was suffocation, as the person might give up or become unconscious and unable to breathe. Now why was Jesus on the cross? Because he came to pay the cost of our sins. Our sins nailed him to the cross. That was the point of his suffering: he was taking on himself the sins of the whole world. He was beaten, mocked, flogged. He was condemned and sentenced to death. He was crucified. Though he was righteous, and did not deserve the least of these trials, he was treated like a sinner – like the two criminals who were hung right next to him. He did not save himself, so that he could save us.

Let's read v.34a, **“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”** This was Jesus' prayer for those who nailed him to the cross.

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This was Jesus' prayer for all of us. This is an extraordinary prayer. Who can pray like this? Only the Son of God can. His mission was to take away the sins of the world, and he did it on the cross. Why did he pray this prayer? Because it was the will of God. It was the will of God to have mercy on you. It was the will of God to forgive your sins. It was the will of God to make you holy. And Jesus was in perfect alignment with that will. In Hebrews 10, we see this: **"[Jesus] said [to God], 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all...For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."** Jesus' once for all time sacrifice of his body has made us perfect forever. That is the result of his prayer, **"Father, forgive them."** Let's just take a little bit more out of Hebrews to understand what is going on. Heb 10:15-18, **"The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First, he says: 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds. Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.' And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sins is no longer necessary."** This is the forgiveness of sins: Our sins and lawless acts God will remember no more. We have been given a clean, perfect and spotless record. It is a permanent clean, perfect and spotless record. The forgiveness of sins covers all our sins, making us perfect in the sight of God.

This forgiveness is to be received by faith. First, let's look at those who did not have faith, from v.34b-38: **"And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.' The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.' There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the King of the Jews."** All of these provide a testimony to us of who Jesus is. Their primary attacks are based on who Jesus said he was. Jesus is God's Messiah. Jesus is the King of the Jews. Even the sign above his head, which is intended to mock Jesus, actually testifies that he is the King of the Jews. (By the way, when you hear the term King of the Jews, think: King of God's people). Jesus declared himself to be these things. Do you believe it or not? These folks obviously didn't.

Now look at the exchange between the two criminals who hung with Jesus on the cross, and take note of the faith of the penitent criminal. Verses 39-42, **"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him, 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting**

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what our deeds deserve. **But this man has done nothing wrong.’** Then he said, **‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’** This man makes 3 confessions of faith. First, he says, **“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.”** He confessed his sins. Most people you might know don’t think that they are sinners, but if we are truly honest, we should confess our sins. The second confession he makes is, **“This man has done nothing wrong.”** Despite what everyone else was saying, this criminal knew Jesus was innocent. The third confession is the most remarkable. He says, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”** He could only say these things by faith. Everyone denied that Jesus was the King and Messiah, but this criminal affirmed Jesus’ kingdom. He also acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God – because here he is, about to die, but he believes that Jesus can do something about it. He may have heard Jesus’ prayer, **“Father, forgive them,”** and believed it.

Jesus did not respond to any of the mockers, but he responded to this man of faith. In verse 43, **“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’”** His faith was rewarded with forgiveness. Remember that this criminal did something worthy of the death penalty. This shows us that there is no person too bad, and no sin too great, that cannot be forgiven by one who repents and believes.

In verses 44-46, Jesus completes the work of bringing us back to God. Look at v.44-46, **“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until the three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last.”** The curtain of the temple was torn in two. The way has now been opened for all of us to come to God. Jesus has broken the barrier that separated us from God. We don’t have to go to Jerusalem to see God. We don’t have to bring a sin offering for a priest to go into the temple to pray to God on our behalf. We can see God, and know God by knowing Jesus. We can do this anywhere with Bible in hand. It was made possible by Jesus’ death. He trusted in God to the very end. He was obedient to the point of death. His last words were, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** There, he offered up his perfect life to God. He gave his perfect spirit to God. And God accepted it as the atonement for all our sins. Jesus made peace between us and God. He reconciled us to God, and restored our relationship. Because of what Jesus has done, we are encouraged all the more to approach God, to come to the throne of grace. O Come to the Father through Jesus the Son!

We watched Jesus ascend to heaven, spiritually, in v.46, and now we turn our attention back to earth, back to the scene of the cross after Jesus gave up his spirit. Look

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at v.47-49, **“The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, ‘Surely this was a righteous man.’ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.”** When we honestly consider Christ crucified on the cross and believe in it, our lives cannot be the same. The forgiveness of Christ transformed their lives. Here were three groups of people who witnessed the cross, and it impacted all of them in a different way. But I believe that these were people who believed, and their lives were transformed. The centurion was immediately changed. He praised God, and confessed, **“Surely this was a righteous man.”** This was the same as saying, “Surely, this was the Son of God.” Then there was the crowd, who beat their breasts and walked away. I don’t think this included the rulers who stirred up the crowds, I think these were the people that were agitated by them to condemn Jesus. They were pricked to the heart. They knew something was wrong with what they had done. In the book of Acts we find many of these people repenting and believing in Jesus. Third there were women who knew him. They did not leave, but they stood at a distance. They loved Jesus, but his death brought fear. Yet, they would be the first witnesses of his glorious resurrection.

There was another man, named Joseph of Arimathea. He was a closet Christian, but perhaps convicted by what had happened at the cross, he came out of the shadows. He was a member of the Council, he was among the top 70 rulers of Jerusalem. He did not consent to rest of his party’s actions to kill Jesus. Verse 51 also describes something interesting about his character. He himself was **“waiting for the kingdom of God.”** I am not sure if he believed the resurrection, but he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He boldly went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. This could be career suicide. He could lose his job, he could also be kicked out of society for what he did. But he honored the body of Jesus. He wrapped it in linen cloth, and placed it in a tomb meant for himself one day. Usually, crucified criminals were left to hang as food for the crows, or given a dishonorable burial, but Joseph gave Jesus an honorable burial. The women, who once stood at a distance, were given courage with Joseph and followed him.

A modern example of the transforming power of the forgiveness of Christ is a man named Chuck Colson. For those of you who don’t know him, he served under the Nixon administration and was known as Nixon’s hatchet man. He was the guy who did all the dirty work. He was called the “evil genius” of an “evil administration.” In those times, he was the second most vilified man behind President Nixon. His conversion experience came in 1973, around the time he was facing arrest for his role in a political

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scandal. A friend of his read an excerpt about pride from CS Lewis' book, Mere Christianity, and he said it perfectly described him. Later, when he got in his car, he broke down and cried. He was convicted of his sin, his attitude towards others, and his own selfishness. He wanted to know God and come clean. He was 42 years old when he put his faith in Christ. This change in his life led him to found Prison Fellowship International, now the world's largest Christian ministry network serving the criminal justice system. He was helping prison inmates find Christ. He authored 30 books, founded another organization, the Colson Center for Christian Worldview, a research organization, and Breakpoint, a Christian radio program still broadcasting in 1400 outlets today. He passed away in 2012 at the age of 80, but his ministries to share the forgiveness of Christ continue on.

How about you? Have you received the forgiveness of Christ for your sins? Are you among those who stood far off, witnessing the death of Jesus? Many of his own disciples were not there. They were in hiding. But when they met the risen Lord, who forgave their sins, they became the pillars of the church. Or are you among the crowd, who got swept up in the moment, and persecuted Jesus? They were forgiven, and became children of God.

Forgiveness isn't just a one-time event, but is ongoing until Christ comes again. Jesus even teaches us to pray, forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors, daily. That's actually why I like the whole statement that Jesus makes: **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,"** because we may often stumble day to day, in the weakness of our flesh. We do not deliberately sin. Jesus didn't say, "Father, forgive them, for they know exactly what they're doing." The only expectation for deliberate sin is judgment (Heb 10:27). So here's where my testimony comes in. I thank God, that he has delivered me from my deliberate sins, sins I had deliberately committed before I got married. I was in bondage to alcohol, tobacco and pornography. It was shameful. But today, I can thank God that he remembers them no more, and I thank God for the death of those desires so that he doesn't see them anymore. There are times now, that I will say something insulting or thoughtless or careless, sometimes in joking with others. Like Isaiah, I am a man of unclean lips. There are times I get into a fit of anger, if I feel offended, or when I hear about some bad news in the family. Punctuality is also a small vice I have, but I thank God that my shepherd corrected me. For all these things, I need forgiveness, almost daily – so I thank God for Jesus, who lives forever to make intercession for me. I thank God for Jesus' death on the cross, which is sufficient for all my sins, past, present and future. Again, I don't sin deliberately, brazenly, because that is using grace as a license to sin. But I do need the forgiveness of God daily, until he comes again. I thank God that in Christ, my sins and

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lawless acts he remembers no more. This gives me confidence to make prayers and petitions, and to serve him day by day. And because all my sins are forgiven and paid for in Christ, I have a joyful hope and expectation in the coming kingdom of God.

In conclusion, we were all sentenced to death for our sins, but Jesus came to die on the cross to pay the price for us. He prayed, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”** so that God will wipe clean our record of sin, and remember them no more. We receive this forgiveness by faith in Jesus Christ. There is no more condemnation, or expectation of wrath, but a blessed assurance as our relationship with God has been restored. Instead of death, we will live forever. These old bodies of sin will one day be changed, into the new bodies of the resurrection. This is the new life of the forgiven in Christ.