Father, Forgive Them!

Luke 23:26-56

Key Verse 34: Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

What is the symbol of Christianity? It is the cross. It was originally the cruelest instrument of death penalty ever. Today we are talking about the cross and death. You may already begin to feel heavy and burdensome, because it is about the cross. But it is not about your cross, rather the cross of Jesus who won the victory over sin and death. Jesus, the Son of God, suffered and died for us. Let’s go to the cross of Jesus, look at Jesus, and listen to what he said!

1) “Don’t weep for me!”

Much had happened already at this time point. Jesus had been arrested while in the Garden. A mock trial had been conducted before the high priests. Then he had been taken to Pilate, to Herod, and then to Pilate by those who wanted to see him crucified. He had been scourged, beaten, and flogged brutally. He had been spat upon and treated with such cruelty that he hardly resembled a man. And he had been forced to carry the very cross on which he would die. At this point Jesus was too drained to carry the cross and needed help.

Look at V.26. The Roman soldiers seized a man named Simon from Cyrene in Northern Africa on his way to Jerusalem. Carrying the cross to the crucifixion site was physically exhausting as well as shameful and humiliating. For Simon, it was a bad day, bad timing, and bad luck. At best, he thought that he would help a miserable Jesus on his way to death. But later he became a real Christian. So what looked like an unfortunate happening to him at first became the turning point and most blessed day in his life.

Now a large number of people followed him, including some women who mourned and wailed for him. They felt sorry and pity towards Jesus. However, Jesus, despite suffering through the worst injustice did not welcome the women’s pity. V.28. “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.” There is nothing wrong with having sympathy and pity for others. I believe many of us will have pity for Jesus and cry when we watch a movie such as the Passion of the Christ. When we see just how much Jesus went through, we are often brought to tears. However, Jesus told them: Don’t weep for me, don’t cry for me; weep for yourselves and your children.

Up until the last minute of his life, Jesus had a burden for the lost and hurting people. In verses 29-32, Jesus was warning of the horrible destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus’ heart was broken because of the coming judgment upon their unrepentant hearts. Jesus wanted them to weep over their sins in repentance.

Do you weep? Jesus is telling us to weep for our sins. When we hear about the suffering of Jesus on the cross, we should not weep for Jesus, but weep for ourselves and our sins. I pray that we weep for our sins and for our nation, as you see the cross of Jesus. Godly weeping and repentance over our sins will bring us comfort and peace later.

2) “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!”

Now look at verses 32-33. “Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 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.” Luke does not describe Jesus’ crucifixion in detail. He simply says, “They crucified him.” Crucifixion was the most painful and excruciating death possible. It was designed for a death penalty for slaves, worst criminals, and non-persons. We know that nails were driven into Jesus’ hands, probably through the wrist, to attach his body to the cross.

Now Jesus was crucified and hung between heaven and earth between criminals. What a shocking moment! The righteous Jesus “was numbered with the transgressors” (Luke22:37). Who can understand Jesus’ suffering on the cross? For proud sinners, the way of the cross is always confusing, disgusting, and offending. Under the cross, people reveal their mindset clearly.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, 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.” And one of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

The same taunt and insults came to Jesus from three directions: From the Jewish rulers, from the Roman soldiers, and from one of the dying criminals. They all questioned Jesus’ identity and power: If you are the Christ, save yourself! It was the same temptation that the devil challenged Jesus with at the beginning of his ministry. It was the devil’s last temptation for Jesus to save himself. It is the same temptation we are all facing. People say, "Show your glory; show your wisdom and power!"

The cross is a stumbling block to Jews who seek the signs; the cross is foolishness to Gentiles who seek wisdom and power (1Cor1:23). Jesus was despised and rejected by mankind. Isa53:3 says, “Like one, from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem”. People asked Jesus to come down from the cross and prove his power, but Jesus did not save himself. Why not? It was to obey God’s will and save us. For Jesus to save himself would mean to come down from the cross and to punish sinners right away. “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1Cor1:24-25).

As Jesus was hanging on the cross in extreme pain and humiliation, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus prayed on that cross. What did Jesus pray for? Is he pronouncing a curse upon those who crucified him? No. He didn’t say, “Smite my enemies” He did not pray for their punishment.

What is our natural response when someone hurts us? It is to hurt that person back, or at least to wish that they get hurt. Human history is full of revenge. Jesus did not respond normally. Instead, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” “Don’t hold this against them.”

Here Jesus was living up to his own teaching. Jesus said in Luke6:27-28, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Who was the “them” Jesus was praying for? He was praying for Judas, who betrayed Him. He was praying for the Jewish leaders who had him falsely arrested, who hit him, spit on him, and said lies about him. Jesus was praying for the crowd who yelled, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Jesus was praying for Pilate who found Him innocent, yet still gave Him up to be crucified. Jesus was praying for the soldiers who whipped Him, mocked Him, spit on Him, and nailed Him to the cross. Jesus was praying for those who mercilessly and senselessly divided up his clothes under the cross. Jesus was praying for all of these: “Father, forgive them!”

Jesus is also praying for you and me and every other sinner. He is upon the cross as our – as your and my – representative. He is there because of our sins.

We often do not know what we are doing in sins. While doing sin, we think that it’s ok. The apostle Paul was a persecutor and a slanderer of the church and he thought he was right. But while he was stoning Stephen, Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”(Acts8:60). There he heard the prayer of Jesus forgiving his sins. After meeting the Risen Christ, his life was totally changed.

Paul says in 2Cor5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Our sins deserve punishment, but Jesus took that punishment on our behalf to free us from guilt and judgment. I praise the Lord for his sacrificial love. Praise the Lord for his forgiving love!

3) “Today you will be with me in paradise!”

One criminal hurled insults at Jesus. But the other criminal saw Jesus quite differently. He defended Jesus, rebuking the rude criminal: Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong” (40-41).

This man stood on the side of truth. He admitted that he was a sinner getting what he deserved. And he knew that Jesus was innocent. At his last hour he trusted Jesus and confessed that Jesus was indeed the king of the Jews who would establish his kingdom. So he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He knew that death was not the end for Jesus. He hoped that it would not be the end for himself either.

How did Jesus answer to his request? Look at verse 43. Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus accepted this man’s request. I heard someone raising the question: Is it fair that such a terrible sinner can be saved at the last hour? I must say: Yes, this is the wonder of the cross! God’s forgiving love makes possible what is impossible with man. Everything is possible in Jesus.

No matter what situation we are in or what we’ve done, Jesus is willing and able to forgive us and give us paradise because of his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus promised that he would not drive away anyone who comes to him in humble faith (Mt11:28; Jn6:37). Rather, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom10:13). The way of salvation is so simple. The cross of Jesus is the transforming power of God. Jesus, the Crucified, is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” The gospel of the cross is the power of salvation for everyone who believes (Rom1:17)!

4) “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Look at verses 44-45. It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. For the last three hours, the sun stopped shining. It was not a solar eclipse, for solar eclipses do not occur at Passover time. It was a strange darkness. The fact that Jesus had to die is a dark moment in history. Sin is a dark reality in our world. But alongside the darkness the new history opened up. The curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Through Jesus’ broken body and shed blood temple sacrifices are no longer necessary. By his death Jesus opened a new and living way to God. Now we can enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (Heb10:19-20).

At the moment of Jesus’ death, he called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. Jesus’ last words reveal that he went the way of the cross to the end in accordance with his Father’s will. Jesus died with no regrets for he accomplished his Father’s will.

The Roman centurion at the cross testified to Jesus’ death. Seeing what had happened, he praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” He was deeply impressed. He knew that Jesus was innocent and had been wrongly killed. He knew that Jesus was no ordinary man.

Remember, someone loves you so much and he gave his life for you and this is God, the Lord of lords. Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” In this way, Jesus became a curse for us before God. My sin, not in part but the whole has been wiped away by Jesus’ sacrificial death. The cross of Jesus offers an opportunity of a new life. Jesus promised, “Today you will be with me in paradise!” God begins a new walk with us. Everything is possible with God!

Here is a beautiful song about the cross: Jesus paid it all, All to him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow.

Praise Jesus! Let’s look at Jesus and listen to him and call out to him in faith. Let’s claim and share the promise of salvation in Jesus with all people, especially with college students!