

Late one summer evening, in Broken Bow, Nebraska, a weary truck driver pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop. The waitress had just served his food when three tough looking, leather jacketed motorcyclists—of the Hell’s Angels type—decided to give him a hard time. Not only did they verbally abuse him, one grabbed the hamburger off his plate, another one took a handful of his french fries, and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it. How would you respond? Well, this trucker did not respond as one might expect. Instead, he calmly rose, picked up his check, walked to the front of the restaurant, put the check and his money on the cash register, and then walked out the door. The waitress put the money in the till and stood watching out the door as the big eighteen-wheeler drove away into the night. When she returned, one of the bikers said to her, “Well. He’s not much of a man, is he?” She replied, “I don’t know about that. But he sure ain’t much of a truck driver. On his way out of the parking lot he ran right over three motorcycles.”

It’s not surprising that these words—the first words spoken by Jesus from the cross—were a prayer. What is surprising for some and disturbing for others is what he prayed: “*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*” For whom was Jesus praying? And who was the “them” Jesus was asking God to forgive?

He was, of course, praying for the soldiers who cruelly tortured him and nailed his flesh to the cross and who were preparing to gamble for his clothes.

*“Father, forgive them.”*

He was also praying for the crowd who were beginning their verbal assault on him. Luke mentions that they were deriding him, shaking their heads and mocking him. For them he prayed, “*Father, forgive them.*”

Then there were the religious leaders who, because of their own jealousy and spiritual blindness, conspired with the Romans to kill him, just as the false

prophets of Jeremiah's day sought to kill him. For these hypocritical religious leaders he prayed, *"Father, forgive them."*

Absolutely astounding! Can you even imagine such mercy? That Jesus would pray for **them** as he hung on the cross is one of the most powerful images that is found in the entire Bible. But there is someone else included in Jesus' prayer; someone for whom Jesus was pleading from the cross for God's mercy to be extended. We too are among **them** that Jesus was praying for as he said, *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*

There's an old gospel hymn that asks, *"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"* In a profoundly spiritual sense, the answer to that question is, "Yes, we were there." The entire human race was there at the Crucifixion of Jesus. His death was an event that transcends space and time. Jesus' prayer gave voice to what Jesus was doing on the Cross. He was offering himself to God his Father as a human sacrifice—an atonement for sin. In this moment he was both the High Priest presenting an offering for the atonement of the whole human race and yet Jesus himself was the sacrifice. This sacrificial act was for those who had come before and for those who would come after, just as much as it was for those who audibly heard his words that day.

You and I were there when they crucified the Lord. In a real sense, Jesus was praying, "Father, forgive Karl. Forgive Dave and Diane and Kathy and Tony. Forgive those in our church and those on the streets. Forgive those in the suburbs and those downtown. Forgive those in our country and those on the complete opposite side of the world. Father, forgive them!" This is the power of the words Jesus cried out from the cross: They were prayed not only for those who stood by the cross, but for all of us—for all humanity.

With that in mind, consider these two additional truths that the last words of Jesus teach us. **The fact that Jesus devoted one of his last utterances to a prayer for our forgiveness tells us something very significant: WE NEED FORGIVENESS.** It wasn't just those around the Cross who needed forgiveness. We need forgiveness, too. Our desperate need for forgiveness and

for God's merciful willingness to forgive are two of the major themes of the Bible. We need forgiveness because we are sinners. We do sinful things.

**Sin** is a word that many people prefer not to use today. We prefer something softer, like *a mistake in judgment* or *a slip up*. The Hebrew word for sin is *chata* (חָטָא), which literally means "to miss the mark" or "to fail" when translated into English. *Hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) is the Greek word used in the New Testament to represent sin, which also essentially means "to miss the mark." It's not just a single action, but rather a broader concept of sin as a state of being or a tendency to continue falling short of God's standard. The word implies that God has a way we were intended to live that we haven't followed.

The second truth that we must not miss is that on the Cross Jesus **MODELED FORGIVENESS**. It's one thing to **TEACH** about forgiveness; it's quite another to **MODEL IT**, to **SHOW US** how to forgive, to say through one's actions "This is what forgiveness looks like."

Jim Cymbala has been the pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle in Brooklyn, New York for 50 years. Jim can personally relate to Jesus' last words on the Cross as a *model for us to imitate* in our own lives. He tells the following story: It was Easter Sunday, and I was so tired at the end of the day that I just went to the edge of the platform, loosened my tie and sat down and draped my feet over the edge. It was a wonderful service with many people coming forward to receive Christ. The counselors were talking with all these other people.

As I was sitting there, I looked up the middle aisle, and in about the third row was a man who looked about fifty, disheveled and filthy. He looked up at me rather sheepishly, as if saying, "Could I talk to you?" We have homeless people coming to Brooklyn Tabernacle all the time, asking for money or whatever. So as I sat there, I said to myself, although I am ashamed of it, "What a way to end an Easter Sunday. I've had such a good day, preaching and ministering, and here's a fellow probably wanting money to buy more cheap wine.

He walked up. When he got within about five feet of me, I smelled a horrible smell like I'd never smelled in my life. It was so awful that when he got close, I would inhale by looking away, and then I'd talk to him, and then look away to inhale, because I couldn't inhale facing him. I asked him, "What's your name?" "David" he said.

"How long have you been on the street David?"

"Six years."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-two." He looked fifty; his hair matted; front teeth missing; wino breath; eyes slightly glazed.

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"Abandoned car."

In my back pocket I keep a money clip that holds some credit cards and some cash. I fumbled to pick out a bill—thinking I would give him some money. I didn't want to bother one of our volunteers because they were busy talking and praying with others. Usually, we don't give money to people. We usually take them to get something to eat. But I took the money out. David pushed his hand in front of me and said, "I don't want your money. I want this Jesus, the One you were talking about, because I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die on the street."

I completely forgot about David, and I started to weep—for myself. I was going to give a couple of dollars to someone God sent to me. I could make the excuse that I was tired. But there is no excuse. I was not seeing him the way God sees him. I was not feeling what God feels. But oh, did that change! David just stood there. He didn't know what was happening. I pleaded with God, **"God, forgive me! Please forgive me. I am so sorry to represent You this way. Here I am with my practiced sermon points, and You send somebody to me. and I'm not ready for it. Oh, God, forgive me."** Something came over me and as I wept, David began to weep. He fell against my chest as I was sitting there. He fell against my white shirt and tie, and I put my arms around him, and there we wept on each other. The smell of his person became a

beautiful aroma. What I thought the Lord was making real to me that day is this: *If you don't love this smell, I can't use you. This is why I called you where you are. This is what you are about. You are about this smell.*

Christ changed David's life. He started memorizing Scripture. We got him a place to live and hired him to do maintenance at the church and we got his teeth fixed. He was a handsome man when he came out of the hospital. After 6 days he was detoxed. He spent Thanksgiving at my house. He also spent Christmas at my house. When we were exchanging presents, he pulled out a little thing and he said, "This is for you." It was a little white handkerchief. It was the only thing he could afford.

A year later, David got up and talked about his conversion to Christ. The minute he took the microphone and began to speak, I said, "The man is a preacher." The next Easter Sunday, we ordained David. He is an associate minister of a church in New Jersey. Jim Cymbala writes, "I was so close to saying, Here, take this money; I'm a very busy preacher. We can get so full of ourselves. We all need forgiven so much for so many things," Jim writes.

As for me, no matter how many times I have heard or read Jesus' words from the Cross, I always wonder if I have completely and totally forgiven anyone who has hurt me. Forgiveness is some of the hardest work we will ever do as followers of Jesus, because forgiveness will cost us something. Forgiving is probably the most Christ-like thing we will ever do. And, as Jim Cymbala realized, after we forgive others, we will no doubt be faced with a much harder task—forgiving ourselves as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Understand that when Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them...*" he wasn't only speaking about the soldiers, or the crowd who shouted, "*Crucify him,*" or the religious leaders who were beneath the Cross of Jesus that afternoon. He was talking about us! It's really not hard to live the life of a Christian person. **It's impossible.** It's impossible without relying totally and completely on the forgiveness of Jesus. Perhaps today we ought to pray a new prayer: "***Father, forgive me; for I do not know what I have done.***" Amen.