

“Conversations on the Cross”

Reading: Isaiah 53:7-12; Luke 23:13-34

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Last words can be very significant. The last words of a book can leave you feeling satisfied, or they can leave you disappointed. The last words that a person speaks in this world are something we take seriously. Even condemned criminals are given the chance to say their final words. Sometimes people are remembered for having humorous last words, or ironic last words, or poignant last words. John Wesley's last words are remembered as being, "The best of all is, God is with us!" Those are good words to end your life with. Of course, not all of us know what our last words will end up being. You certainly don't want to have a heated argument with a loved one over whose turn it is to do the dishes, and then drop dead of a heart attack; those would not be good last words. We don't always get to choose our last words, but I hope mine will be a good reflection of my life. As a pastor who officiates at funerals from time to time, I take that job very seriously: the words of a funeral are, in a sense, a "last word" about a person, even though they will hopefully be remembered and spoken about by the people they leave behind.

Last words can be very significant. For many years, preachers have looked at the story of Jesus' life and meditated on His last words before He died. Traditionally, we focus on seven "last words," the seven words on the cross. They are not actually the last words of Jesus, of course, because He is alive today and is still speaking to us through His Spirit. And His seven last words do not refer to the final seven actual individual words He said; we're looking at seven statements He made from the cross. And we should note that none of the four accounts of Jesus' life include all seven of these statements, so it's hard to know exactly the order in which He said them. But the authors of the gospels chose their words very carefully, and maybe that's doubly true of Jesus' statements on the cross. They probably did not record these last words just for the sake of accuracy; they wanted us to see something about Jesus through these statements He made.

Crucifixion is a particularly nasty way to die; one of the ways it could kill you slowly was through asphyxiation. When you're hanging from your stretched-out arms like that, you're forced to inhale, which means you have to push yourself up every time you want to breathe out. And if you're nailed to the cross, and if you've been beaten and flogged and are bleeding, every breath is a struggle. So when Jesus spoke on the cross, He did so intentionally, deliberately, with a purpose, because He wanted us to see something about what He was doing there.

There are seven of these statements from the cross, and each one is significant. We'll be looking at each one in turn during this season of Lent, with the last one falling on Easter Sunday. But Jesus wasn't crucified in isolation. Crucifixion was a public event: criminals were executed in public places to remind people of who was in charge. If you went to the market one day and saw a bunch of revolutionaries being crucified along the way, that would be a pretty effective motivator not to join their revolution. So while Jesus was making these final statements, people were passing by and hearing them. And in addition, then, people were talking back to Him. There was, in a sense, this conversation taking place between Jesus and the crowds about what this crucifixion meant. So while we are meditating on the words Jesus said *from* the cross, we're also going to be using a devotional book by Ellsworth Kalas during the week to meditate on the words people spoke *to* the cross. Jesus

said words to explain the meaning of what He was doing; how did people respond? We're going to be looking at that conversation this Lenten season.

And to get us started, the first word from the cross is what concluded our reading from Luke 23 today: while Jesus is in the process of being betrayed, slandered, mocked, abandoned, and murdered, He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." This is an appalling thing to say. Surely He can't actually mean for God to *forgive* them. Surely these people who are murdering the Son of God can't get off so easily. They're not asking for forgiveness. They're not repentant. In fact, they're not even finished with their sin. Surely there must be something about the biblical context or the culture of the time or the Greek or Aramaic grammar that would give us further insight into what Jesus *really* meant, because of course He could *not* have meant to ask God to really forgive them. So I spent some time digging into the Greek text of this passage, and I looked closely at the context, and after my research I learned that what Jesus *really* meant was, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

We might be tempted to think that this is just another example of Jesus being super-holy, saintlike, holier than you or I could ever hope to be, and so it doesn't really have implications for our behavior. Maybe we can mitigate what He's saying by claiming that you and I could never be expected to behave like that. Jesus can forgive His attackers because, well, He's *Jesus*, but I'm just human. But no, remember, Jesus didn't say anything on accident on the cross; He wants us to see something critically important about the character of His kingdom and what He is doing on that cross. If we were to look at Acts 7, in which the story is told of Stephen, the first Christian martyr after Jesus, we see Stephen's last words before he dies from stoning: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen was hardly the last Christian martyr to forgive his murderers; there have been many others throughout history. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" is integral to the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

The more natural thing to do in that situation would be to try to pull some sort of victory out of death. "You won't get away with this!" we might yell. "You'll pay for this!" Maybe we would call down curses upon our attackers, wishing them a similarly painful death to the one they're giving us, or hoping that their family suffers. Their crimes will surely not go unpunished. They may be victorious today, but justice will win in the end, and then they'll be sorry. But no, Jesus lets them off apparently scot-free. This is forgiveness that is inexcusable in its extravagance. Its implications are shocking. It shows a radical love for unrepentant, dangerous enemies. It shows an unshakable hope in nothing but God's ability to save us in the worst possible circumstances. Is this the kind of forgiveness Jesus wants us to exercise?

Again, crucifixion was a public event. There were people gathered at or passing by the foot of the cross who heard this last word. I cannot help but wonder what some of them thought when Jesus made this statement. Of course we can't really put ourselves into their heads, but we can imagine what we would have done if we were there.

A few, not many, of Jesus' disciples were there that day. Many of them had given up a lot to follow Him, and they were expecting Him to come to a better end than this. They'd seen Jesus perform some incredible miracles. Forgive them? Why not call down fire from heaven? Why not

Speak a word and start the heavenly conquest of the fallen kingdoms of the world? Why not purge the world of its sin by bringing righteous fire? How can He forgive these people so easily?

There were soldiers there, too, the ones tasked with crucifying Him, guarding Him, and acting as a display of the eternal power of the Roman Empire. I imagine them thinking, “He thinks we don’t know what we’re doing? Of course we know!” These were professionals. They were carrying out the decrees of their superiors. They were putting down the dangers to society of these religious nuts. They knew exactly what they were doing.

And there were people passing by, some of them stopping to watch the scene unfold. Some of them made fun of Jesus, maybe a few felt some sympathy or wondered how the life of such a promising young rabbi could have come to this. I imagine some of them finding it ironic that Jesus is now calling on God as His Father. Jesus is not in a position to expect God to listen to Him. Clearly, Jesus was in the wrong. Clearly, God has abandoned Him. Clearly, He cannot be the Messiah we hoped He was because His methods led Him here, and this will be the end of Him. He’s in no position to expect God to forgive anyone.

And yet Jesus’ word is, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Don’t hold this against them. Don’t penalize them. Give them the benefit of the doubt. They think they understand what they’re doing, but they don’t. They’re so caught up in sin that they can’t even see the truth of their actions. Let their viciousness be overcome by your love, Father, so that the world may see that there is a new kingdom.

If you were there at the cross on that day, how would you react? I think you could probably guess based on how you react when people hurt you. Jesus is calling us to love others so deeply and trust God so completely that we would forgive as He forgave. There is no room in His kingdom for bitterness, holding a grudge, spite, a vengeful spirit, or hate. The natural thing is to want payback; Jesus calls us out of that. He points us to the fact that those who hurt us, even when they mean to hurt us, don’t really know what they’re doing. None of us do. None of us can see all the consequences of our actions, especially when our actions are clouded by sin. And Jesus on the cross cuts through that cloud with a message of radical forgiveness.

This Lenten season, we are called to live such a life. Lent is a season of examination, self-denial, confession, and repentance. It’s a season of change, a time to commit yourself to God in a deeper and more serious way than ever before. Today of all days, when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, as we are confronted by the consequences of the cross — the shed blood and the broken body of Christ, and the extravagant grace of God on display for us — today, we must examine our love for others and our trust in God. Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.



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