

A Word of Forgiveness

Words In Red: Seven Last Sayings from the Cross

Luke 23:33-34

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

As you are turning in your Bibles, many of you have what is known as a “red letter edition” Bible. When you get to the New Testament, especially in the gospels, page after page is written in red – these red words are meant to designate the words of Jesus.

The red letter edition of the Bible first appeared in 1899 and it is the result of the creativity and work of a man named Lous Klopsch. Klopsch was the editor of the *Christian Herald* magazine.

He was friends and contemporaries with men like D.L. Moody and T. DeWitt Talmage – both great preachers. In his 18 years of leadership at the *Christian Herald* he raised more than three billion dollars for relief work around the world – we’re talking the late 1800’s, early 1900’s here.

His passion though was getting the Bible in people’s hands. It’s interesting...I was studying about this, this week – and we have many people in this church that work for and serve in the Gideon’s ministry – this is a ministry that puts the word of God in people’s hands – FREE.

You see Bibles in hotels, hospitals, prisons...Gideons distribute Bibles to fire and medical personnel and military. Men in our church like Mike Webber and Larry Forrester and others serve in this incredible ministry – we’re going to highlight the work of the Gideon’s on our missions Sunday later this year.

I say this to say, Klopsch makes a decision in 1899 to distribute Bibles to people so that they can read and understand the God’s Word. The Gideon’s started for the exact same reason, started in the exact same year – that’s MORE than ironic.

God was doing something in the hearts of his people to get his Word in the world.

And Klopsch gets this idea of putting the words of Jesus in red – he wanted people to really know Jesus and so as he was praying and reading his Bible one day, he came across:

Luke 22:20 – “And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

And this is when the thought hit him...as an editor and publisher of the Bible, “why don’t we print all of Jesus’s words in red, the color of his blood.”

This is where the “red-letter edition” began, and this is the heart behind this new series we are starting today: *Words in Red: Seven Last Sayings from the Cross*

We are on the countdown to Easter. Today marks seven weeks until the day we come together and celebrate the resurrection. I know, as believers we celebrate the resurrection EVERY DAY, but Easter is like the Super Bowl!

Illus. Super Bowl – speaking of, I got what I wanted last week! A good game and an Eagles loss!

Look, Easter Sunday is like the Super Bowl, World Series, and NBA Championship – I should prob say here, throw in the World Cup – it’s like all of this combined for the Christian – it’s a big day!

And so to prepare our hearts for Easter, we are going to take the seven statements Jesus made from the cross – “words in red” and look at each one of them in detail in the weeks leading up to Easter.

Now, we know that Jesus was on the cross for six long hours. And in that time, holy scripture records seven statements Jesus made from the cross – they are words in red, NOT simply because he spoke them, but also because he spoke them while his blood was being poured out for the sins of the world.

The first three statements took place while there was still light – if you remember, and we’ll cover this when we get there, at noon on that fateful Friday, the Bible tells us the light turned to complete darkness, and it lasted that way until 3:00 in the afternoon. The final four statements Jesus makes that are recorded for us took place in complete darkness.

The first three statements or sayings Jesus makes has to do with others...he is showing compassion...he is offering forgiveness as we will see today. The final four statements recorded deal with Jesus himself, and what is taking place on the cross.

This series, perhaps more than I’ve done in my three years here is sacred...I would consider what we are covering these next seven weeks, holy ground.

We are in this series making our way to the foot of the cross...ground zero for where God expressed his ultimate love for us.

We see Jesus, the son of God laying his life down...taking on the sin of the world – my sin, your sin. And we see God, the Father accepting Jesus as a sacrifice so that our sins could be forgiven and we could be made right with him.

And speaking of forgiveness, this is the title of today’s message: **A Word of Forgiveness**

Now, let’s make our way to the cross, and I want us to really put ourselves there, and think about what has taken place up to this point.

We know that the pain and torture Jesus went through in the final days of his life on this earth was more than excruciating. The flogging alone was enough to kill a man, never mind the thorns that were placed on his head and the nails in his hands and feet...death by crucifixion:

- was meant to be long...
- it was meant to be drawn out...
- the goal was to show no mercy, inflict as much pain as possible until death eventually came by asphyxiation.

And this was just the physical side of going to the cross. Take in account what Jesus went through emotionally:

- Abandoned by those closest to him...
- Rejected by the very ones that he came to save...
- Ridiculed and mocked by the religious establishment...
- Cursed and tortured by the Romans...

He was stripped of his clothing...hung in a public setting...this is the type of death Jesus endured.

And Luke's gospel records for us the first statement from the cross...the first words we have recorded for us AFTER his beating, AFTER he's been abandoned by his friends...what is he going to say?

Luke 23:33-34a – “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Amazing! The first words from the mouth of Jesus were words of forgiveness. How different this must have been from any man these soldiers had ever crucified.

Crucifixion was usually reserved for hardened criminals...they were paying the due penalty for their crimes. Most criminals hurled insults back at the crowd...most criminals were known for spitting upon and cursing the soldiers killing them.

We see the hostility that resided in most of those being crucified in one of the criminals be crucified next to Jesus.

Luke 23:39 – “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

We'll look at this exchange more in detail next week, but needless to say, you can see the hatred...the bitterness...the sheer anger that is welling up in this criminal.

THIS is what these soldiers are used to hearing. THIS is what these soldiers and the crowd surrounding the cross were accustomed to seeing. Venom...cursing...seething anger.

Totally different is Jesus! Rather than spewing words of anger – and btw, Jesus was innocent...he had never sinned! He didn't even belong on a cross that was meant for a hardened

criminal. Pilate on three occasions (Luke 23:13-25) says, “I find no wrong in the man.” Jesus shouldn’t have even been on the cross!

Hanging there though...he spoke words of love and here we read of him offering forgiveness to the very ones who rejected and are killing him.

Now, before we get into what forgiveness is, let’s take apart the first part of this statement one word at a time. When we do this, we see that it is actually a prayer. Jesus prays, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

When we examine the life of Jesus, we begin to see that his entire life was one of prayer. He wasn’t just praying here at the end of his life because he was in a bind...no, he was praying because it was part of the normal routine of his life! (Luke 5:16 – often/frequently withdraw to desolate places to pray.)

I like to make the point that if Jesus – who was God, needed time alone with his Father to pray, how much more do we!

Interestingly, Jesus’s statements on the cross are bookended in prayer. But this isn’t just any prayer. This is a prayer of what we call: **INTERCESSION**.

Illus. Breakthrough Prayer – I’m reading a book right now called *Breakthrough Prayer* by Pastor Jim Cymbala. I have found few writers that make me desire to spend time alone with the Lord...like when I read them, I want to know the Lord more through prayer. Jim Cymbala is one of them, and this book is a wonderful book about calling on the name of the Lord.

When I am in a discipleship relationship, and I teach people the importance of prayer, I’ll often give them a roadmap to pray – it just helps to focus our mind – how often do we not pray because we don’t know how! The disciples had to ask Jesus, “teach us to pray.”

I teach a few general areas to pray – this is a sermon within a sermon, but if you want a roadmap to pray, break your time of prayer up into these categories. Begin prayer with **CONFESSION**.

This is where we respond to the holiness of God. We see how pure and holy our God is and in light of that how sinful and rebellious we are...and this leads us to confess sin and be restored to a right fellowship with him.

Confession leads to a time of **PRAISE**...this is where we reflect on God’s attributes. We think about his mercy...his power...his goodness. If we dwell on the character of God, it will lead to praise, and this easily flows into...closely aligns with **WORSHIP**.

We worship him just as the angels do, singing songs, bowing down in his presence, lifting our hands knowing that we get the privilege to have a relationship with the God of the universe. We worship him for who he is and what he has done in our life.

This leads to THANKSGIVING, a type of prayer that is concentrated on God's goodness to us. We thank him for his faithfulness in our lives – MUCH to be thankful for!

We then **PETITION** him and ask him to answer prayer...he has told us to ask, seek and knock and so we do knowing that he is a good Father who does not withhold from his children good things. Petition is a part of prayer we ask for daily bread. We're asking for us!

Finally, then we move to **INTERCESSION**. And this is where we ask God to move on behalf of others. We bring people's needs before the Lord. **THIS** is the type of praying that Jesus is doing while on the cross.

And just thinking about this strikes me...this thought moves me! He doesn't have to confess any sin because he is **SINLESS!** He doesn't have to respond to the attributes of God in praise and worship because "in him" the fullness of God dwells!

In his moment of deepest pain and agony:

- He doesn't pray a prayer of petition and ask his Father to intervene on his behalf...he did in the Garden, but not here!
- He doesn't ask his Father to lessen the torture...
- He doesn't ask his Father to remove the suffering...

As a matter of fact, he doesn't pray for himself at all! Instead, he prays prayers of intercession on behalf of all of those that have sinned and will ever sin against him, "Father, forgiven the, for they know not what they do."

J.C. Ryle – "As soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede."

Did you know the prayer life of Jesus on the cross is a fulfillment of scripture. Isaiah 53 is referred to as the "Calvary Chapter" of the Old Testament. Listen to what would be written of Christ seven hundred years before he would ever be born.

Isaiah 53:11-12 – "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors."

Jesus praying that those who oppose him would experience the forgiveness of God is simply another proof that he was exactly who he said he was...prophecy fulfilled! He is the Messiah...he is God!

- You can see it right here from the cross!

- You can hear it in what he prays from the cross!

In this prayer, he uses the word, “Father”. When Jesus came on the scene and taught his disciples to pray using the term, “Father” it was in one sense revolutionary.

No one ever referred to the God of the universe in such an intimate way – and yet this is what Jesus did...this is how he spoke of God. It started with his first teaching on the Sermon on the Mount and continued to the cross.

Illus. What kind of father you had – I don’t know what kind of earthly father you had, but I can tell you our heavenly father is all-together different.

God is NOT some distant deity...he’s not abusive or absentee. God, the Father knows...cares...loves!

And in this moment of excruciating pain physically, emotionally, and spiritually, it’s normal and natural for Jesus to cry out to his Father!

Question: Is God your Father? We’re all God’s children in terms of him creating us...we are NOT all God’s children in terms of relationship. We don’t become children of God by relationship until we believe and receive him into our lives.

John 1:12 – “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

“Father, forgive them.” Now, it’s interesting to me that Jesus calls on God the Father to forgive them. Jesus was God...why didn’t he say, “I forgive you.” Have you ever thought about that?

If you recall when Jesus was walking around in his earthly ministry he had the authority to forgive sins.

Matt. 9:2 – “And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

And then after being questioned by the religious authorities...they said to him, “Who are you? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sin! And the response of Jesus:

Matt 9:6 – “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

Jesus demonstrates he is God. He has the authority and right to forgive sin. Why didn’t he shout for the cross, “I forgive you! You are forgiven!” Why did he call on the God, the Father to forgive them?

Here we see the wonder of our Savior. He lowers himself! Don’t miss what is taking place here. In order to accomplish redemption, Jesus is so completely identifying with man at this moment

and time that he empties himself from his rightful position of authority...he humbles himself, as low as he can go!

This is the truth of **Phil 2:6-8** at work – **“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

We see the greatness of Jesus in this! He gave up his authority as God...he didn't give up being God...he gave up his authority as God to be murdered at the hands of evil men just to purchase our redemption! He willingly laid his life down and this moment on the cross, he is completely identifying with sinful humanity.

This, church is the great love of God! **Romans 5:8** – **“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

He prays, “Father, forgive them...forgive their great sin!” Notice, he doesn't pray that God his Father would judge them. He doesn't pray that God would repay them for what they are doing...he prays and asks his Father to forgive them.

Forgiveness is man's deepest need. It is why Jesus came in the first place – to forgive us and restore us to a right relationship with the Father.

Deep down...at the very root of people's longing and spiritual search - it's forgiveness people want and are looking for!

Jesus sheds his blood on the cross and accomplishes for us something we could never accomplish for ourselves...and that is forgiveness and a restored relationship to our Father in heaven.

When Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them...” He is praying, “God, let my death...let my blood satisfy your wrath...let me pay the full penalty for their sin...”

Jesus knew sin could not simply be overlooked (that's NOT justice). But instead, the cost of sin had to be paid in full and so when he is praying, “Father, forgive...” he is praying, “Father, take it out on me...pave the way for their forgiveness by sacrificing me!”

Think about this: The prayer for forgiveness of the sinner is a greenlight from Jesus FOR God, the Father to continue crushing him.

Do you see why I say this is holy ground? And do you see in this how serious our sin is? It can NOT be swept under a rug! God does not turn a blind eye to our sin. Forgiveness came with a price! It had to be purchased!

Eph. 1:7a – **“In him we have redemption (bought back) through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses...”**

May this truth be seared upon our hearts today! The severity of our sin. It concerns me...for myself included that we take our sin so lightly:

- that sometimes we overlook it...
- that we coddle it...
- that we think this is no big deal...
- no one sees...no one knows...
- it's not hurting me now...
- I've got this under control...

The penalty of sin is the wrath of God...and this was poured out upon Jesus. Sin is a big deal, and it should be a big deal to us!

Praise be to God for the forgiveness he offers. Praise be to God that according to **Psalm 103:12** – **“as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”**

Jesus prays, “Father forgive them...” Forgiveness in simple terms is “letting go” – Jesus, prays, “Father, let them go...don’t hold sin, the offense of sin, and the penalty of sin against them, put it on me.”

Amazing. “Father, forgive them.” Who is them? Well, in the immediate context it obviously includes:

- the Roman soldiers that were actually crucifying Jesus.
- It includes the Jews that put the plan together and shouted cries of “crucify”.
- It includes people like Pilate and Herod who could have stepped in and stopped it, but chose not to.

It’s not just limited to the people who were there that day...it includes me and you. We are all guilty! Our sin put Jesus on the cross! We are in the pronoun “them”!

Philip Ryken – **“There is room for every sinner in the little word “them,” and therefore many people have crawled inside that blessed pronoun to find the forgiveness of their sins.”**

Charles Spurgeon wrote that he loved this prayer and this pronoun “them” because of the “indistinctness” of it. He went on to preach: **“now into that pronoun ‘them’ I feel I can crawl. Can you get there? Oh, by a humble faith, appropriate the cross of Christ by trusting in it; and get in that big little word ‘them’!”**

“Them” includes me and you – “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” This prayer was prayed in the imperfect tense...meaning it was probably words Jesus prayed over and over again from the cross.

- Every time someone cursed him – “forgive them”

- Every time someone mocked him – “forgive them”
- Every time someone reviled him – “forgive them”

He says, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Those crucifying Jesus had no idea the enormity of their ignorance. But just because they were ignorant of what they were doing in the moment did not mean they were not responsible for their sin and would not be held accountable for their sin.

It's true for us as well. We are held responsible and accountable for sin that we knowingly and willingly commit as well as sin that we are not aware of...there are sins of commission as well as sins of omission.

Listen to what evangelist and commentator, **A.W. Pink** wrote in regards to this: **Sin is always sin in the sight of God whether we are conscious of it or not. Sins of ignorance need atonement just as truly as do conscious sins. God is holy, and He will not lower His standard of righteousness to the level of our ignorance. Ignorance is not innocence.”**

So, the first statement from the cross, is a prayer of forgiveness. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Was this prayer answered? YES!

In the immediate context of this passage we see a criminal accepted the forgiveness of God and as we will see next week, Jesus said in **Luke 23:43** – “**Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.**”

Matthew’s account tells us of a soldier that was looking on and in **Matt. 27:54** – “**When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”**”

I believe both of these men are saved and will be in heaven. When Peter preaches at Pentecost and 3,000 are saved, no doubt some of the same people that were shouting “Crucify” are now confessing Jesus as Lord.

God answered the prayer of Jesus! When you trusted in Jesus...when I as an 11 year old boy came to faith in Christ and repented of my sin, God is answering the prayer of Jesus!

Every time someone comes to know Jesus in a personal way and receives the forgiveness of God, Jesus’s prayer is being answered!

Now, very quickly and in closing, there is one main point of application that I would like to make. Let’s give some “shoe leather” to this...we’ve got to walk the truth of this passage out in everyday life!

The application: **The forgiven, forgive.**

Easy application, right? Not really! **Erwin Lutzer** wrote in his book “Cries from the Cross”:
“Forgiveness sounds like a marvelous idea until you are the one who has to do it.”

There is no doubt that many of you listening to my voice have been hurt in life:

- You’ve been betrayed...
- You’ve been lied to...
- You’ve been cheated upon...
- You’ve been abused...

The Bible clearly teaches that because Christ forgave us, we too should forgive others. It doesn’t say that we forget that pain that someone caused us...that’s impossible. What it does mean is that we let go of the offense and no longer allow it to control our lives.

Illus. SMU class last week – my testimony

Jesus teaches us in his prayer that we should pray according to **Matt. 6:12 – “and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**

Did you know that the only elaboration...the only added commentary given in Lord’s prayer is on the subject of forgiveness.

Matt. 6:14-15 – “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Jesus knew this would be a tough subject for us to grasp and really take hold of, but he also knew that for our own spiritual health, we needed to get good at forgiving – AND he left us an example! That’s what we’ve studied today!

Listen: People are going to fail us...precisely because they are not God! We need to understand that those in our life are not perfect. We are all fallible human beings and because of this and because of the sin nature...as a part of life, we will be hurt...offended...and let down by others.

And so, how do we handle this? When someone fails us...when someone sins against us?

We look to the “Words in Red”...and when we see all that Jesus has forgiven us for...and hear how his prayer from the cross and how he extended forgiveness to those hurting him, hurling insults at him, ultimately killing him – when we hear him and see him forgive, we can’t help but to extend that same type of forgiveness to others, no matter the pain...the hurt...or the damage they may cause.

The forgiven, forgive.

Illus. Asbury revival – want revival in your own life – forgive, let go! The forgiven, forgive.

Let's pray together.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.