

**Luke 23:34a**

When a dying man speaks, people will listen. They may not have listened before, but they will now. What is his last request? What words of wisdom will the dying man utter? People want to know.

If this is true of men, then how much more so with God. As God was dying on the cross He spoke seven times. Scripture records His words for us, and we would do well to listen. For the words of Christ are words of eternal life.

For our Wednesday Lenten services, along with Holy Week, we will listen to Christ on the cross. And as we do we will ponder the truth that what He speaks, He speaks for us. Tonight we listen as St. Luke records for us these words of our Lord in chapter 23 verse 34, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Forgive who? Who is the "them" that our Lord is praying for? The soldiers? The ones crucifying Him?; who are not being gentle with His bruised and bleeding body; who are pounding nails into His flesh with reckless abandon.

Or what about the Chief Priests, and the Scribes, and the Elders? Are these the "them" in "Father, forgive them"? These men who are laughing at Him; mocking Him; who brought Him to Pilate to be crucified in the first place; who are not sorry at all for what they have done, but are quite glad that He is finally being put to death.

Or perhaps the thieves are the "them" He is praying for. Those two criminals who are getting their "just desserts," who deserve to die for their crimes.

Yes, they are all "them" in "Father, forgive them." And so, too, are you "them." Christ died, says the Scriptures, for all sinners. No one is left out when Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them."

But why? Why should His Father forgive? They didn't care. They weren't sorry. They were mocking Him. We mock Him. Our life shows that we don't care. We ignore Him. We disrespect Him. We live without sorrow over our sins.

It matters not. God doesn't forgive you because you're sorry. God doesn't forgive you because you love Jesus. He doesn't forgive you because you care, or because you try to be good. He forgives you for one reason—because on the cross, as He was dying for you, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." And you are also "them."

But how? How is the Father to forgive? Is Jesus asking His Father to overlook our sins? Is He asking His Father to ignore the wrongs we have done? No. That's not forgiveness. To forgive is not to erase, or ignore, or pretend it didn't happen. Our sins did happen; they do happen; and they will happen.

When Jesus says, "Father, forgive them," He is asking His Father to charge Him with all the wickedness that we have done. The blame that you and I try to avoid; that we place on others, Jesus puts on Himself. "Blame Me Father," He prays, "for what they have done wrong. I'm the one who did it, not them."

The guilt that burdens our conscience; that keeps us awake at all hours of the night; that makes us regret our past actions, Jesus takes to Himself. “I am the guilty one Father,” He prays, “not them, it’s Me.”

The punishment that we can’t even picture because it’s too horrible, but which we deserve—every bit of it because of our sins against God, Jesus accepts for Himself. “Punish Me Father,” He prays, “and let them go. Let Me suffer hell in their place.”

All that Jesus was praying for when He said, “Father, forgive them.” Those words didn’t just slip out of His mouth by accident. He wasn’t out of His mind with pain when He prayed them. He knew exactly what He was saying. He knew exactly what He was doing. That’s why He came. Not to be served, but to serve. To give His life as a ransom for all.

He came to be the one accused; the one condemned; the one crucified. He came to be blamed; to be caught “red-handed.” He came to be punished. That’s why the Father sent His Son. And that’s why the Son said, “Yes, Father, all this I gladly suffer.”

When a dying man speaks people listen. When the Son of God prays while dying, His Father listens. And His answer is “Yes.” Yes, Son, they are all forgiven. I forgive them for every sin. His resurrection from the grave was the Father’s joyful answer. Raising His Son from death tells us that He accepted His prayer for us.

And so now what? Now that we know we are forgiven, how do we live? May we live in sin with impenitent hearts? May we say, “since I’m forgiven, I can do whatever I please?”

Yes. But let me ask you this—what pleases you O child of God? Having nothing to fear; no condemnation, no punishment, because Christ took it all in your place, how do you desire to live your life? It is not you who lives but rather Christ. He who died for you, who prayed for your forgiveness, and who in Holy Baptism gives you that forgiveness along with eternal life—it is He who lives in you, to live a life pleasing to God the Father.

And He who did all this for you never ceases to pray for you. His words from the cross, “Father, forgive them,” are always on the lips of your Savior. He never stops pleading for you. He is always before His Father’s face showing Him His nail-scarred hands—“for this one I died, dear Father, forgive them their sin.”

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We may not know what we’re doing when we sin against God. We may not know how often and how great a wickedness our sins really are. But Jesus knows what He is saying when He prays, “Father, forgive them.” He knows who He is praying for—He’s praying for you. He knows who He is dying for—He’s dying for you. So be at peace. You are forgiven. Amen.