



Father, Forgive Them

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"The Saviour made no murmur of complaint. His face remained calm and serene, but great drops of sweat stood upon His brow. There was no pitying hand to wipe the death dew from His face, nor words of sympathy and unchanging fidelity to stay His human heart. While the soldiers were doing their fearful work, Jesus prayed for His enemies, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' His mind passed from His own suffering to the sin of His persecutors, and the terrible retribution that would be theirs. No curses were called down upon the soldiers who were handling Him so roughly. No vengeance was invoked upon the priests and rulers, who were gloating over the accomplishment of their purpose. Christ pitied them in their ignorance and guilt. He breathed only a plea for their forgiveness, -'for they know not what they do.'

Many here have heard numerous sermons regarding 'Father, forgive them.' But as a people, as followers of Christ, I pray that we will never tire of the grand theme-'Father, forgive them.'

How many here have ever heard of Pastor Bill Tucker? He is the president and speaker for The Quiet Hour Magazine. I was looking through the March edition when I came upon an article, written by Pastor Tucker, about the last words of Jesus, with 'Father, forgive them', as the underlying theme. I read the article and I was immediately impressed to keep this close to my heart. That is why I am presenting this message today. The truths discovered in those three words, 'Father, forgive them,' has such a heart-

wrenching/soul-searching impact on those that hear and believe, I would say that it leads to the most important theme found in Scripture. And where do we find the most important theme found in Scripture? John 3:16-"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." I would like to look at those three words more closely. Let's begin with the first word-FATHER. Did you know that in the old testament God was never addressed as Father. There are passages where He is spoken of as a Father, but He is never addressed as Father. Not until we come to the New Testament and the life of Jesus do we find God addressed as Father. This is the term that Jesus used when He prayed, and this is the word He taught His followers to use. An example of this would be the "OUR FATHER" prayer. In the book of Matthew alone, Jesus used the word Father-in relation to His Father in heaven-43 times! While on earth Jesus lived as a son in close relationship with His Father, and He taught that this relationship is available to all of us. This means that we are brother and sisters of Christ! Do we ever use the term brother or sister when we are talking about fellow believers, loosely or nonchalantly? GOD FORBID! We are brother and sisters of Christ! This is how closely Jesus identifies Himself with humanity. So, from the cross His words were like the words of an elder brother interceding on the behalf of younger siblings:"Father," He says,"remember that You are their Father as well as My Father." "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Father, these people, these brothers and sisters of mine, these children of Yours, sometimes they go their own way. But Father, you love them as I love them. They are your children, Father.

Let's take a look at Christ's second word in the phrase,"Father, forgive them." That word, 'forgive', is a huge word, particularly in this setting at the cross. It's one thing to forgive someone who asks forgiveness. It's another thing to forgive people who do not want or ask or deserve forgiveness. The Roman soldiers, the Jewish religious leaders, and the careless spectators did not seek forgiveness. They did not feel any need of it. Neither did they deserve forgiveness when their fiendish deed is measured against the great love of God. Jesus was not talking about ordinary forgiveness. He was talking about extraordinary, divine compassion that treats people better than they deserve to be treated. But what about ourselves? Are we not brothers and sisters of Christ? What if something was said or done against us, even by our own brothers and sisters in Christ? Are we to keep it inside and let it fester until we lose sight of Christ's gift of forgiveness. Are we to let it fester until all of our brothers and sisters are grossly infected with the disease of unforgiveness? Once again, GOD FORBID! Our Father has forgiven us! May we always, always, always forgive one another. Our Lord Jesus Christ would not have it any other way.

There is a story that comes from French history that illustrates Jesus point for divine compassion and forgiveness: Father Pierre stood in the courtroom and heard the verdict,"You are guilty of murder." The citizens of the country were outraged. How could a man of the cloth murder a poor widow, especially when she had willed her possessions to him! But the evidence indicted him. The gardener had found the priest's torn and bloody cassock buried on the grounds of his dwelling. "As I stand before God, I am innocent," Father Pierre said, but he offered no proof. The court ordered Father Pierre sent to prison, but the other prisoners despised him. Finally, when one prison was closed, Father Pierre asked to be sent to Isle Saint Louis where only leprous prisoners resided. For five years he lived among the lepers, ministering to their needs. One day a new prisoner arrived. Father Pierre looked into the man's disfigured face and asked,'Friend, what can I do for you?' "I am Gruscailou; I am the one who did it," the leper blurted out. 'Did what?' the other lepers asked as they gathered around. The truth tumbled out. Gruscailou, Father Pierre's gardener, had worn the priest's cassock to get into the widow's house and rob her. When she recognized him, he murdered her. Then Gruscailou had rushed to Father Pierre to confess his sin. For 20 years the priest had kept the confidence given him. He suffered the punishment

the gardener should have suffered. Father Pierre had treated Gruscailou far better than he deserved.

And God treats us better than we deserve, and that's the kind of forgiveness Jesus was talking about as He hung on the cross and looked down on the people mocking Him. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." All of us stand in the mob at the foot of the cross. All of us are guilty of murdering God. Anytime and everytime we set ourselves against God we are nailing Him to the cross. We are saying, 'I don't need You God. I can run my own life.' Sometimes, we don't even realize what we're doing, that we are spitting in the face of our Creator. There is no human ruler on earth who would not punish such terrible insubordination. Yet Jesus does not ask that we be punished as we deserve. Instead, He takes our punishment for us and as the blows of our punishment fall, He cries out, "Father, forgive them."

I guess all of us are familiar with Isaiah 53:5 where we read, "He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed." Jesus has counselled us to accept forgiveness from God and to demonstrate forgiveness towards each other. I invite you today to prayerfully read over the parable of the Unmerciful Servant found in Matthew Chapter 18 and beginning with verse 21. Did you know our salvation could hinge on this parable? It is a truth we must never forget. Have you (when I say You, I mean myself as well)-Have you ever said or done something to a friend that caused a rift between the two of you? Or has a friend said something or done something to you that has caused a rift between your friend and you. Either way, it hurts doesn't it? You feel troubled, upset, torn apart. If you caused the rift, then more than likely you will decide you need to apologize, so you go to your friend and ask forgiveness. You have a knot in your stomach, but when you hear those words, 'I forgive you,' it's as if a heavy load is being lifted from your shoulders. Instantly, you feel better. And what if your friend did something to you- that hurt you? We would like that friend to come to us to ask for our forgiveness. But what if that friend doesn't come to you? We need to take Jesus' example. Look to the cross. The cross of forgiveness. "Father, forgive them." Forgiveness heals one emotionally and even physically. Forgiveness brings peace of mind by getting rid of guilt, and the result is better health. To a paralytic Jesus first said, 'Your sins are forgiven.' Then He added, 'Rise up and walk.' Jesus understood the healing power of forgiveness. Forgiveness is what Jesus' life was all about. Over and over again you find Him bringing the peace and healing of forgiveness to the people. Most of those people asked for healing and forgiveness. But what about the ones standing around the cross who did not ask for forgiveness?

Which leads us to the third word in the phrase, 'Father, forgive what? Father, forgive THEM.' Even to the unrepentant, even to those who turned their backs on Him, even to those who laughed at Him, even to those who shouted, 'CRUCIFY HIM,' even to those who did not understand what they were doing, Jesus extended forgiveness. To THEM out there. "Father, forgive THEM," He said. And He died to prove that He meant what He said. Jesus' death provided forgiveness for anyone and everyone. THAT'S what the Bible calls "God's grace." God's grace is a concept foreign to human thinking. Just imagine if you will, as brothers and sisters of Christ, if we were to think along these lines. We know that there are many seekers out there who are earnestly desiring to know the truth, to know a better way of life. What would happen if we were to hope that they would never accept God because they were such bad people. What if we were to say, "If he comes to God, then I suppose God would forgive him for all that awful stuff that he's done, and then I'd have to forgive him too. I don't know if I could do that." What if you or I were to think that someone was too sinful to be forgiven. If that is our thought then we need to go back to the foot of the cross. Sometimes, that's how we think, that some people are not deserving of forgiveness. But that's not how God thinks or acts. Look at the cross and you'll see God demonstrating grace and

forgiveness far beyond our understanding. He supplies forgiveness not only to me and you but to THEM. THEM out there. Everyone in the world! THEM the seekers. THEM the searchers. THEM that God is calling out. "Father, forgive THEM," provides enough forgiveness for the worst of sinners. No matter what I have done, no matter what you have done, no matter what THEY have done, forgiveness is available. Let's look to the cross. The cross of forgiveness! Let us examine ourselves and not look at other peoples faults.

Perhaps you feel that you have sinned too greatly for Jesus to forgive. Perhaps there is someone who has hurt their family verbally or physically. Maybe there is someone who has hurt a friend. Maybe there is someone who has been hurt by a friend. It could be that there is someone who is torn up inside with guilt and remorse. In all of these cases, you'd like to have forgiveness and peace, but you're sure you're too bad. Jesus is talking to you when He says, "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM!"