

Luke 23:26–34 (NIV)

²⁶ As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.

²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ ³⁰ Then

“ ‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!”
and to the hills, “Cover us!” ’ ”

³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Matthew 18:21–22 (NIV)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Forgive them. Forgive them first. Forgive them fully. It is God who hangs nailed to that cross. And these are his first words? What sort of God is this?

You know how the story goes. After being condemned by Pontius Pilate, Jesus is led to the place of crucifixion. Bleeding, beaten, scourged, and humiliated Jesus is dressed in rags with a crown of thorns on his head. He must carry the crosspiece to which he will be nailed.¹ But Jesus is too weak to bear the weight and still walk ahead to Golgotha. As he makes his way through the shouting crowd, a visitor from the countryside is pressed into service and made to carry the cross, following behind Jesus. This man, Simon of Cyrene, cannot really know the privilege that has been accorded to him. The church tradition is that this Simon did indeed come to understand just whose cross he carried.

As they make their way, Jesus turns to some women who mourn and wail for him. Somehow, Jesus finds the strength to speak to them. “Weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children,” he tells them. Indeed, profound terror and sadness bitterness will soon be thrust upon them.²

Jesus arrives at the place called the Skull, Golgotha, sitting just outside the city wall atop a stone quarry. There, alongside two other men, he is nailed to the crosspiece, which is then lifted up and dropped onto the upright, to which Jesus’ feet are then nailed. As probably all could see, Jesus is near death. He will not last more than a few hours more. Too much blood has been spilled. Too much pain endured.

Every moment in which we try to comprehend this scene and its meaning must flow from our conviction that this man, Jesus, nearly dead on the cross, was and is God himself, one with the Father and one with the Spirit. How could it be that the Creator and Lord of All, the Lord God Almighty, should take on human flesh, much less allow

¹ No man could carry an entire cross. The Romans typically left the upright post in place permanently. If nothing else, it served as an ever-present reminder of how Rome dealt with troublemakers. Still, even the

² In less than forty years, Jerusalem would be burned by the Romans and hundreds of thousands of Jews killed in the great revolt of the late 60’s AD.

himself to be tortured and crucified? What sort of Father allows such a horror to proceed?

What must be the first words said in the face of such cruelty and depravity? What must God say to those who pour out their fears and hatreds on an innocent? . . . Words of judgment? Condemnation? Righteous Wrath? Vengeance?

No . . . simply this . . . *forgive them, forgive them, forgive them.*

Forgive *who* we ask? The soldiers. Yes! Pilate. Yes! Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders. Yes! The crowds. Yes! You and me. uuuuhhh . . . and we nervously glance away. The old gospel spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The only honest answer any of us can give is yes. As a holocaust survivor once said, "Some are guilty; all are responsible."

One of the worst dangers confronting western culture is that increasingly we are losing sight of human darkness, at least in ourselves, our friends, our families. We see so much wrong in this world and yet we are blind to our own participation in that wrong. Richard John Neuhaus wrote:

We would draw the line between ourselves and the really big-time sinners. For them the cross may be necessary. For us a forgiving wink from an understanding Deity will set things to right. But the "big time" of sinning is in every human heart. We make small our selves when we make small our sins. Fearing the judgment of great evil, we shrink from the call to great good. Like Adam, we slink away to hide in a corner. Like the prodigal son, we hunker down behind the swine's trough of our shrunken lives. But then he came to his senses. He remembered who he was in his former life, in his real life. There is no way to have that dignity restored except through the confession of that dignity betrayed.

Still we hold back from confession, holding on to the tattered remnants of our former dignity. The more Adam hides from his shame, the more he proclaims his shame. What ludicrous figures we sinners cut. It is all so unnecessary; it only increases the complicity that we deny. We act as though there is not forgiveness enough. There is more than forgiveness enough.³

Oh yes, we are all at the foot of that cross. We don't admit or even comprehend our own guilt and, yet, we are forgiven . . . *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.* To comprehend the deepest and truest nature of Him-Who-Made-Us, we look to the cross and these words of forgiveness. This is true love, God-love, for all to see and to hear.

In his faithfulness to the vocation given him by the Father, Jesus has gone to the very heart of darkness – and upon arriving he speaks words of forgiveness. He had told Peter that his disciples must forgive without limit (that's what is meant by "seventy times" Matt. 18:22). But Jesus goes further. Not only does he forgive – he forgives first. He doesn't ask if the people are sorry for what they have done, if they are going to straighten up and strive to do better. Jesus simply forgives first, right out of the gate. No equivocation or quid pro quo.⁴

The odd thing is that we often don't much like to be forgiven first. Ever had someone tell you "I forgive you" when you were darn sure you hadn't done anything that needed forgiving? Ever found yourself refusing to forgive someone 'cause they hadn't shown any remorse for the terrible wrong they had committed against you? . . . See what I mean. *Forgive first* is challenging and even threatening. But it is God's way, thankfully.

Should it not be our own way? . . . Forgive first.

³ Richard John Neuhaus. *Death On A Friday Afternoon Meditations On The Last Words Of Jesus From The Cross*. Basic Books. 2000.

⁴ This point that Jesus forgives first was driven home to me by William Willimon in his excellent book, *Thank God Its Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words of Christ*, Abingdon Press, 2006.

The Challenge of Forgiveness

In his commentary, *Matthew for Everyone* (in the St. Andrew library), N. T. Wright tells a story that speaks to the challenge of forgiveness. You might read all of Matthew 18:21-35 before going on.

Many years ago I was working in a student community. I sometimes assisted in leading worship or preaching for one particular group of students. They were theological students, training for ministry, but shared their accommodation with others from a wide range of subjects—and with a wide range of ideals and standards. I had agreed, some while before, to preach at a midweek service in which the assigned reading, as I knew long in advance, was the passage we're now looking at. What none of us knew was that it was going to be frighteningly relevant.

That week there was a near-riot. Some of the other students living in the residence had been behaving very disruptively. They were making it almost impossible for their colleagues to sleep at night, to study during the day, or to have any peace and quiet. Most of the students didn't even like to invite friends round because the place was so unpleasant. A difficult atmosphere developed as some of the Christian students simply wanted to 'forgive' the troublemakers, in other words not to deal with the problem, while others wanted to make an angry protest, to demand their rights to live in peace and to insist that the disruptive students were dismissed or at least suspended.

So on that weekday lunchtime, at our regular service, you could have heard a pin drop when we heard Matthew 18:21–35—the passage now in front of you—as the main reading. And my heart was thumping as I stood up to preach about it.

It's a long time ago, and sadly I can't find the notes of what I said. But the lesson of the story is so massive and obvious that I don't really need to look it up. There are several ways of putting the point. Every time you accuse someone else, you accuse yourself. Every time you forgive someone else, though, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you. From God's point of view, the distance between being ordinarily sinful (what we all are) and extremely sinful (what the people we don't like seem to be) is like the distance between London and Paris seen from the point of view of the sun. And so on. We can all relate to that.

The key thing, as I have already said, is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and 'forgive and forget' as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one's goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is your own experience with forgiveness? Have you ever been forgiven for something you didn't think you did? How did you react? What do you think might happen if we forgave first, before looking for repentance or remorse?
2. How hard is it to see yourself as responsible for Jesus' death on the cross? As the holocaust survivor wrote, "Some are guilty; all are responsible." The only reason Jesus ended up on that cross was God's determination to deal with human sinfulness and reconcile *each* of us to him.
3. I sometimes meet people who have a very difficult time truly accepting and believing that they have been forgiven, that nothing they've done in the past lies outside the power of God's grace. Why do you think that this can be so difficult to accept? How can we make God's forgiveness seem more concrete and certain? If we accept that the ground of our forgiveness is the cross, how can we help others to see that there could be no better demonstration of the depth of God's love? The limitations lie in our own abilities to receive, not in God's ability to give. Perhaps forgiving must *precede* our heart's ability to truly embrace forgiveness, not the reverse. To put it another way, perhaps we can't really experience forgiveness until we have forgiven. . . . *Forgive First!*
4. Finally, how do we avoid the trap of believing that "anything goes" since we are going to be forgiven anyway? Do you think a heart that truly trusts and loves Jesus could ever adopt such an attitude? How would you help a new believer to understand that the appropriate response to God's grace is obedience, and not the obedience of a willing, but reluctant, law-keeper, but the obedience of a loving heart?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 1 Samuel 24: 8-12 & 26:21-25 David forgives Saul for trying to kill him.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Nehemiah 9 The people of God gather to confess their sins to a forgiving God (v. 17 contains a well-known description of God's forgiveness and love).</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 2: 1-12 Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic. This would have been shocking to those watching – who can forgive sins but God?!</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul urges the Corinthian church to forgive and call home someone who had done something bad enough to be removed from the church.</p>
<p>Friday, Ephesians 4:17-5:20 Instructions in Christian living. Note esp. v. 32.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying 1 Samuel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our Current Series:

Seven Events That Shaped the New Testament World

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
