

Words from the Cross

Xtk YrC November 20, 2022 Luke 23:33-43

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“When they came to the place called the skull they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his left and one on his right.” The death of Jesus is not an accident. There is no unforeseen series of events or honest mistakes which lead to him being condemned and killed.

No, Jesus is arrested by the temple guards, brought before a religious court, questioned, condemned, and handed over to the Roman Governor. Jesus is then questioned again, brought before a crowd and mocked, convicted even though he is innocent, and taken for execution. All of it is deliberate, intended, and even desired by those who bring about Jesus’ death.

For let’s make no mistake about it. The religious leaders who despise Jesus know exactly what they are doing when they arrest him and falsely accuse him of crimes in the trial they hold. The crowds who reject Jesus know what is going to happen when they refuse to allow Pilate to release him. Pontius Pilate knows exactly what he is doing when he decides to ignore the injustice happening and condemns Jesus to death. The Roman guards know what they are doing when they beat Jesus, mock him, and drag him to the cross to be killed.

The crucifixion is not an accident, a misunderstanding, or an unintended consequence. The crucifixion is deliberate, it is intentional, and it is the end everyone who hates Jesus wants. So Jesus is taken to the place of public execution, despite having done nothing wrong, and is nailed to a cross to suffer a painful and humiliating death in full view of everyone. And on the cross Jesus says “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

On the cross, Jesus is rejected, abandoned, and scorned and he chooses to forgive. On the cross, Jesus suffers injustice, pain, and cruelty and he chooses to forgive. On the cross, Jesus knows full well the hate and jealousy of the people who condemn him and he chooses to forgive them.

Jesus takes the worst they do to him and refuses to allow that to change who he is and what he has come to do. He looks beyond the horror of the moment and sees what God intends for the world. He knows what God is saying through the cross which is why from the cross, Jesus forgives.

He forgives the religious authorities who lie and scheme. He forgives the crowds who are fickle and unthinking. He forgives the governor who is selfish and weak. He forgives the guards who are bullies and cruel. He forgives the people who gather to laugh and enjoy his suffering. Jesus forgives them for their wrongdoing, for their actions, for their sins. And while that is amazing, surprising, and unexpected above everything else that is good news- because it means that Jesus forgives us as well.

Because at the cross we see what forgiveness really is and what it means for our lives. And honestly we're not worried about being forgiven for the things we didn't mean, the times we acted out of ignorance or a misunderstanding, the occasions when we tried to do what was right but it turned out wrong. We expect that because we meant well that those things will be forgiven.

But the times we were cruel, thoughtless, and knew exactly what we were doing and did it anyway are a different story. The times we acted with motives and intentions that were selfish and heartless haunt us. Because we were deliberate, we were intentional, we were wrong and we didn't care. And we aren't so sure God will forgive us for those sins.

And yes, I know we have excuses. We were tired, we didn't mean it, we weren't thinking. But none of that takes away what we did. When we did wrong or ignored wrong happening. When we let evil thrive through our action or inaction. Those times, that part of ourselves we worry that God will not forgive.

But Jesus shows us on the cross that the forgiveness of God is greater than what we have done and what we have said. Jesus shows us that the mercy of God is for the times we consider unforgivable because God sees us not as sinful and irredeemable but as precious and worth the time and effort to save. And so Jesus forgives.

And if that was all that our lesson for today said that would be news we could hold tightly to and proclaim for all to hear. That in the cross of Jesus we can find the forgiveness we need to let go of the past. That in the cross of Jesus there is mercy undeserved and unearned. That in the cross of Jesus we are released from our mistakes and failures. But "Father forgive them" is only part of what Jesus says from the cross.

The criminal on one side of Jesus begins to mock and scorn him and the criminal on the other side silences the bitter criminal with the truth that Jesus deserves none of what is happening while they deserve to be punished for their crimes. And that criminal does not excuse his crimes, does not demand Jesus do anything, he simply turns to Jesus and asks to not be forgotten. And Jesus says to him. "Today you shall be with me in paradise."

Because Jesus forgives those who deserve punishment for their sins. But more that Jesus offers new life. For at the cross there is mercy and freedom from the sins of the past. And at the cross there is grace and a new life which is possible by and through God's love for us.

And no we do not deserve it, we have not done anything to earn it, and we are not receiving it because we are smart enough, strong enough, good enough or because we come from the right families or go to the right churches. The new life which is given through Jesus is ours because God offers it to us with the forgiveness. If you will forgiveness releases us from the past and grace gives us the possibility of a future.

And to receive that forgiveness, to experience that grace all we have to do is turn to Jesus and receive it, believe it, and welcome it into our lives. That's all we have to do to begin the new life Jesus offers and become the people God asks us to become. For Jesus is crucified so that we can see that no evil is so great that God cannot forgive. And Jesus rises from the grave so that can believe that God's love can not be stopped and that grace can give us a new life.

That is the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the message that the king of kings and the lord of lords came to earth to proclaim and to show in his life and through his words. That is the good news which Jesus dies to share with the world. That is the good news which has changes the lives of disciples down through the ages

So listen to the words of Jesus from the cross and and believe that those words are true. Hear what Jesus says and know that the invitation is for you and your life. And then embrace the forgiveness which Jesus offers and be released from the guilt and pain and regret that you carry. Grab hold of the grace that Jesus offers and receive that new start which the love of God makes possible.