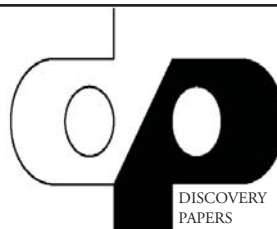


# FORGIVENESS FROM THE CROSS

**SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS**



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Luke 23:32-37  
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In New York City, there is a church called St. Patrick's Cathedral that has been around for almost 150 years. It is a beautiful building that takes up an entire city block with spires that rise 330 feet from street level. The cathedral property was originally given to the church in the 18th century, lost through bankruptcy, and later repurchased by a young Irish priest who managed to raise the money to save this church during an intense famine in Ireland. This magnificent church is a testament to the glory of God.

Across the street from St. Patrick's Cathedral is the Rockefeller Center of New York City. This area was developed by the Rockefeller family, one of the richest families to ever live. It covers 22 acres of land and is made up of 19 buildings. It contains buildings for Bank of America, Radio City Music Hall, and several television studios. At one entrance to the center, directly across from St. Patrick's Cathedral is a 15 foot tall statue of the Greek Titan Atlas holding up the heavens. This statue represents the strength and power of mankind to literally "hold up the world." This magnificent center is a testament to the glory of man.

On Good Friday, it is the custom of the priests and deacons of St. Patrick's cathedral to lie prostrate on the floor in front of the cross at the altar. They gather in worship of the God-man who was crucified. During this service, the massive front doors of the church are left open. So if you attend the Good Friday service at St. Patrick's Cathedral, you are presented visually with a dramatic choice.

If you look toward the cross, you will see people arranged in submission to a symbol that recalls God's own choice to submit to the powers of this world. A crucified God.

If you look out the doors you will see an icon of the incredible strength of man welcoming you to a cathedral of commerce and achievement. A powerful man.

Which do you choose: a powerful man or the crucified God; strength or humility; life or death?

This is the choice that we face every day of our lives. We live in a world and a culture that tells us to succeed, to conquer, to become powerful. We are told that we can do it. But if we have put our faith in Jesus, then we worship a God who submitted to humiliation, torture, and death

for the sake of love. Every day we have to choose which path to follow: the path of strength or the path of humility.

This Wednesday begins a season prior to Easter that Christians call Lent. Lent is the forty days, not counting Sundays, before the celebration of Easter. Historians think that Lent was celebrated as early as the 2nd century AD. It seems to be a tradition that goes back to the time of the Apostles. The specifics grew and changed for a few centuries. The Council of Nicea formalized Lent in 325 AD. Finally, by the end of the fourth century, celebrating 40 days prior to Easter was common. These were to be days of prayer and fasting. The goal was repentance and preparation for Easter.

So this year, we at PBC are going to try and take seriously a season that has been celebrated by the Church for at least 17 centuries. We don't normally pay all that much attention to Lent around here, so it will be a bit of a different thing, but I think we'll find it fruitful. It's interesting to note that Lent was celebrated several centuries before Advent ever came about. But because we live in a culture that is far more interested in Christmas than Easter, it seems much more normal for us to celebrate Advent.

One of the things we have done to help us pay attention to this season is to put together a devotional book with readings and reflections for every day of Lent beginning this Wednesday. The other thing that we're doing is this sermon series that will cover the season of Lent and conclude with Easter morning.

The title of this series is *Seven Last Words* and what we'll be doing is looking at the last words of Jesus that he spoke while he was on the cross. If you combine the accounts from all four gospels, you get seven different things that he said from the cross during his crucifixion. Each week we will take one of these statements as the text for our message that morning. You're probably familiar with most of these statements.

The complete list of seven, in the order that we'll be looking at them is:

Luke 23:34:

**"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."**

Luke 23:43:

**“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

John 19:26, 27:

**“Dear woman, here is your son...Here is your mother.”**

Mark 15:34:

**“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

John 19:28:

**“I thirst.”**

John 19:30:

**“It is finished.”**

Luke 23:46

**“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”**

My hope for us is that this will be a unique time for us to consider what really happened at the cross. A few weeks ago, Steve Zeisler preached from 1 Corinthians 2:2, where the apostle Paul says this: “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” That is our goal for this series: to know Christ and him crucified. It’s simple. Yet as I’ve been preparing these messages, I’ve found myself going deeper into some central theological issues than I haven’t gone through since being at seminary. What is the nature of forgiveness? What does atonement really mean? How does Jesus’ death reconcile us to God? What does it mean that I participate in Christ’s death?

It has been fascinating and humbling to look at these statements in some detail. At first, I was scared for this series because I was only preaching on a single sentence and didn’t know if there would be enough to say. Now I realize that we can barely scratch the surface of the depth and meaning of the crucifixion in seven weeks. I can’t possibly say all there is to say in thinking about the cross.

So I’m excited for us as a community to recognize this season. We live in a world that teaches us to carry the world on our shoulders. Every day we face encouragements to be strong, get good grades, make a lot of money, impress those around us, achieve as much as we can. We live in an Atlas world, but we come here to worship and acknowledge that that is not how we were created. We come here to worship a God who was crucified. To lie down, our faces on the floor, in humility before the real God of the world

who humbled himself to the point of death. Every day we have to make that choice. My hope is that during this season of Lent, we would understand more clearly the heart of Jesus as he hung on the cross and we would be encouraged to choose the way of the cross over the way of the world that we live in.

## The Mystery of The Cross

The first statement that we’ll be looking at during this series is recorded only in the gospel of Luke. It seems to be the first thing that Jesus said from the cross. As we look at it, we’ll see that this makes sense because it forms the basis of what really happened when Jesus died. Let’s start out by reading from Luke to hear this statement in its context.

Luke 23:32-37:

**<sup>32</sup>Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. <sup>33</sup>When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup>Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. <sup>35</sup>The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.” <sup>36</sup>The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar <sup>37</sup>and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”**

So this is Jesus’ first statement from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” That’s a remarkable thing to say as you’re being punished for a crime that you didn’t commit. That’s a remarkable thing to say when you haven’t eaten in 18 hours, you’ve been beaten within an inch of your life, you’ve suffered severe blood loss, and you’ve just had two nails driven through what one physician claimed is the most painful place in the entire body to be punctured. Regardless, this is what Jesus says at the beginning of three hours of hanging on the cross before he dies.

As remarkable as this statement is, it also makes sense that this is the first thing Jesus says from the cross. It’s appropriate that Jesus asks for forgiveness as he begins the action that makes forgiveness possible for anyone who believes in him. If there is one thing that the cross is about, it is forgiveness. Ask anyone from a kindergartner to a senior who have been to church more than a few times why Jesus had to die, and they will answer with the simple answer “Jesus died for my sins.” If you have to give a simple

answer to explain Jesus' death on the cross, then that's a pretty good one. Ephesians 1:7 says "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with riches of God's grace." The cross is about forgiveness.

So on the one hand, this is a pretty simple statement. But as we look a bit closer at what Jesus says here, we find some interesting observations and are left with some significant questions.

Jesus begins by addressing God as Father and asking God to forgive the people around him. Forgiveness is a huge theme in the gospel of Luke—more so than the other gospels. In fact, no book in the Bible talks more about forgiveness than Luke. Throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus has been the one forgiving. Jesus forgives the sins of a crippled man let down through a hole in the roof by his friends (Luke 5:20). He forgives the sins of a sinful woman who interrupted his dinner with an important Pharisee (Luke 7:47). He teaches his followers that if a brother sins against you and repents even seven times in a single day, they still must forgive him (Luke 17:3-4).

Luke spoke a lot about forgiveness. Luke is the only gospel author to include this statement from the cross, "Father, forgive them." This statement raises a lot of questions. We looked at this passage in our weekly Pastoral Staff Bible Study and came up with a bunch of complicated questions.

Why doesn't Jesus forgive them himself? Why does he ask the Father to forgive them? Who is he asking God to forgive? Is it the Romans who put him on the cross, the Jewish leaders that begged for him to be killed, the people who got carried away in the disappointment of his ministry and screamed for crucifixion, or all of them?

What was he forgiving them for? Crucifying him? Not realizing who he was? Mocking them? And what did he mean that they didn't know what they were doing? They knew they were crucifying someone. Did they not realize who he was? Or didn't they understand the significance of their action? Did their ignorance make them less guilty somehow? Was that why they are supposed to be forgiven?

It's also interesting that no one has asked for forgiveness. Was God supposed to forgive them even if they didn't say they were sorry? Does God forgive us even if we don't say we are sorry? What does that mean for us? Do we have to forgive people even if they don't say they are sorry?

It seems like a simple statement, but it's actually quite complicated. That is what we are going to find in most of these statements as we look into them. Each of these statements is like a fuse that gets lit and then ends up

exploding into huge questions about some of the central ideas of our faith. You'd think we'd understand what it means that Jesus died for our sins and on one level we do. But once you get past that level, you realize that it is incredibly complex.

My first encouragement for us is to be comfortable with all these questions. I often say that if I understood everything about God, then he couldn't be God. If I understood everything about what happened one Friday afternoon in Palestine, then it wouldn't be worth believing in. There has to be some depth to it; something supernatural or some kind of mystery. We can't be afraid of the questions. We need to enter into the mystery of the cross.

We need to be OK asking questions because questions lead us to humility. Questions bring us to God; asking, wondering, and trying to figure it all out. One of the things that I find most unappealing and ungodly in people of faith is the notion that they have it all figured out. We don't want to approach the cross of Christ with the posture of Atlas: holding everything on our shoulders, having it all figured out. We need to approach the cross in humility and awe. The cross leads us to worship, not complete understanding.

I wish I could stand up here and say, "This is some really confusing stuff that Jesus said. He is after all the Son of God—you'd expect it to be confusing. But don't worry, I have a seminary degree. That means I understand the Son of God. Just listen close and take good notes and I'll clear up everything for you."

But I can't say that and I shouldn't. This statement from the cross is incredible. It's rich and deep and in some ways unexplainable. How could Jesus say this? Forgiveness is a mystery. We are brought to our knees as we reflect on it. We are brought to humility.

Humility is different than ignorance. It's not that we can't know everything. The New Testament speaks of a mystery that has been revealed. Just because we can't grasp everything about what Jesus meant doesn't mean that we can't get it. Just because we don't have all the answers doesn't mean we don't have some of the answers. Our world goes to extremes. They either know everything or the whole thing is unknowable. There are religious know-it-alls who are on one side of things claiming that they have all the answers to all the questions of everything. But there are also those who would say that we can't know anything and that God is a complete mystery. So who is to say that one person is right and another is wrong.

Real, authentic Christian faith—the kind of faith that has been held through the centuries by followers of Jesus



Christ—does not lie in either extreme. We believe in a God who is a mystery, but who has revealed himself. Paul speaks of, “The mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed” (Romans 16:25-26). But he also says, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Some of you think that you have all the answers, but as you come before the cross you know that you don’t. This stuff is bigger than any of us. Some of you wonder if we can really know anything about God. The New Testament claims that we can. We are humble, but not ignorant.

Keeping this in mind, what can we know from these words of Jesus? What does he mean? I’d like to suggest two things for us to learn from these words on the cross. They aren’t the only two things we learn, but they are some of the most basic. First, we need what Jesus is asking for. We need forgiveness. Second, the Father answers this prayer and God offers us forgiveness. Each of these ideas is familiar yet deeper than we could ever get to the bottom of.

## Admit Our Guilt

Do you realize how confrontational it is to offer someone forgiveness? Imagine that you arrive at work tomorrow and a co-worker says to you, “I forgive you for last week.” What do you say? Do you say “thank you”? What if you don’t know what he’s talking about? As far as you can remember, you didn’t do anything that needed forgiveness. What right does this person have to say that you did something wrong and then to have the audacity to forgive you for it? This offer of forgiveness would probably make you mad.

That’s because forgiveness implies guilt. Think of how the people who attached a bloodied Jesus to the cross heard this statement. He’s forgiving them? He’s the one being punished for a crime. We are the ones executing justice here. People being executed ask to be forgiven. They don’t ask for the executioners to be forgiven. We don’t need forgiveness. We aren’t the guilty ones.

And that’s exactly the problem. No one thinks they are guilty. Everyone in our world would agree that something is wrong with the world. We live in a world with problems. Nobody will deny that. I don’t know anyone who wouldn’t agree with the statement, “We live in a broken world.”

Do you know that feeling when you turn on your computer and it doesn’t do what you wanted it to do? One thing that makes me really frustrated is when technology doesn’t work. Many of you know that I really enjoy technology. So when it doesn’t work, I can get consumed trying to make it work. In fact, I’m so driven to make it

work that I often spend much more time fixing it than I will ever save by using it. I hate brokenness.

There is no denying that our world is broken, but here’s an interesting side note on brokenness. When we say that the world is broken, it implies that we can imagine what it might be like if it worked. There is some innate sense of hope within us, some deep understanding of how this world is meant to be that lives within each of us. That’s why we say that the world is broken instead of just saying that it is what it is. We know this world could be so much greater and we’re all frustrated that it is broken.

Here’s where people get stuck. Although it’s easy to say that the world is broken, it’s much harder to get people to admit that they broke it. Kids are a great example of this. You can walk into a room with a broken toy and ask them who broke it and none of them will admit to it. They’ll observe that the toy is broken, but none of them will have any idea how it became broken.

We’re the same way. We have a hard time admitting that we broke anything. We’ll say that it was broken when I got there. We’ll say that someone else broke it. And here’s the thing: sometimes Christians are the worst at this. So many of us are trying so hard not to break anything that when we do, we really don’t want to admit it. Or maybe we’ve broken a few things, but surely we’ve done more good than harm, right?

Jesus’ first words force us to acknowledge that we share in the responsibility of this broken world. Jesus asks for forgiveness and we have to face the reality that we need it. We’ve done a bunch of good things, we’ve tried hard, but we’ve still broken our world. We need to admit our need for forgiveness. We need to admit our guilt.

Remember that they were religious people who Jesus constantly needed to remind about their need for forgiveness. That’s us. We need to realize that the world is broken and we broke it because we are part of the problem. Sin is a disease, not just an activity and we’ve got it.

Admitting our guilt is about humility. It’s not about beating ourselves up. The biblical word for it is repentance. We’ll talk more about finding repentance with freedom in a few weeks. What we’re talking about here is simply an attitude of humble repentance. It’s something that should characterize us and it’s rare. I’m not sure that anyone I know would say it characterizes me. But I want to grow in it: quickly confessing to someone that I’ve wronged; asking forgiveness from my kids or wife when I’ve been selfish or angry; admitting my pride.

David Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times

and he wrote an interesting article this week about our country's newest sports sensation, Jeremy Lin (who incidentally has roots in the PBC youth group). He was writing about Lin, but his point was about Christians in professional sports. He is not a believer, but he points out that being a superstar athlete and professing Christianity are at odds with each other. He correctly recognizes the point we're trying to understand here.

Following Christ is about humility and repentance. Professional sports are about confidence, strength, and victory. Professional sports follow the statue holding the cosmos on his shoulders. Christians bow before a crucified God. There is a conflict. We live in a world that praises independence. The soldiers around Jesus wanted him to rally for a miracle come-back. "Save yourself," they shouted. But he didn't. He asked God to forgive them and chose humility over strength. Humility is humiliating. But it is possible to live in a world of strength and follow a God of humility. That's what we're after here.

If the cross is about forgiveness, then it can mean nothing to us unless we acknowledge that we need it. But needing forgiveness is weak and you can't advance your career with that type of attitude. There are not many people impressed with humility. It's so much easier to choose the statue standing tall than the savior dying slowly. Coming to the cross means admitting our guilt.

## Receive God's Forgiveness

Here's the beautiful thing about what is happening at the cross. It's difficult to admit our guilt, but once we do, something else follows immediately. Jesus is asking his Father to forgive and he's doing what it takes for his Father to answer that prayer. So for us, this word begins with admitting our guilt and immediately continues with receiving forgiveness. That's our final encouragement: to receive the forgiveness of God.

The word "forgiveness" itself is a fascinating word. It literally means "to let go" or "to leave something." It is used throughout the New Testament when someone leaves a place or walks away. Jesus uses it on the cross when he said that he let go of his spirit to his Father. It is used frequently in financial settings in the context of cancelling a debt and we do the same thing when we talk about a debt. We say that a loan can be forgiven. When this word is used to refer to forgiveness, it means the same thing. It is letting go of the debt that a wrong creates. In the New Testament, it's most often used of divine forgiveness: the kind of forgiveness that God offers.

One of the mysteries of the cross is how Jesus' death

brings us forgiveness. It's easy to say that Jesus died for our sins. But what does that mean? Theologians call this "the atonement" and there are lots of different ideas of what the atonement is all about. We'll come back to those in a few weeks. For now I just want us to understand that this is about atonement.

"Atonement" is also an interesting word. Sometimes you will hear people talking about atonement and they'll say it means "at-one-ment." Honestly, I always thought that was a fancy word trick that Christians liked to pull. Like saying that "justified" means "just as if I'd" never sinned. But actually, that is where the word atonement comes from according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Atonement is about restoring relationship and becoming one with someone from whom you have been separated.

So then forgiveness isn't just a transaction. It isn't just a debt that is being paid. Forgiveness happens in relationship. Atonement is about becoming one again with someone else. We need forgiveness, not because we've violated some abstract legal code, but because we've rebelled against our Father. It's a relationship that has been broken, and a relationship that needs to be restored.

I think that is why Jesus asks his Father to forgive the people here instead of simply pronouncing forgiveness. Throughout his ministry, Jesus could pronounce forgiveness as God himself. In fact, at one point, his declaring forgiveness was interpreted as a claim to divinity. But on the cross, the wrong being done is not his to forgive. He is dying as a man. He is dying as atonement for the guilt of each and every human against the Father. It is the Father who must forgive. It is the Father who must receive back his rebellious children.

This also helps us to understand how Jesus asks for forgiveness even though these people haven't yet expressed repentance. Forgiveness between God and his creation isn't exactly like the forgiveness of a debt. It isn't like a transaction in a heavenly bank ledger. The Father can't pronounce this kind of forgiveness on someone who doesn't want it. Forgiveness is about a relationship and in the context of a relationship, forgiveness has to involve both parties. Jesus is asking the Father to offer forgiveness, but it still has to be received.

Think back to your co-worker walking into work tomorrow and telling you that he forgives you for last week. You can't really accept that forgiveness unless you admit that you've done something that needs to be forgiven. That's repentance. Forgiveness is one part of a relational dynamic that isn't complete without repentance. So Jesus asks his Father to forgive, but that forgiveness isn't complete until it is received. And receiving forgiveness

begins with repentance.

Here's how C.S Lewis explains it.

*The demand that God should forgive [a man bent on evil] while he remains what he is, is based on a confusion between condoning and forgiving. To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, to treat it as if it were good. But forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus asks the Father to forgive these people, but for that forgiveness to be complete, they must accept it. Accepting forgiveness is impossible without an admission of guilt; without repentance. We cannot be reconciled to the Father unilaterally. No relationship can exist on the basis of only one party. A relationship between two parties must involve both of them.

So now we see this circle. If Jesus is asking for us to be forgiven, then we have to start by admitting our own guilt. That means repentance. Now we realize that it has to start there because we can't ever truly receive God's forgiveness until we've come to a place of humble repentance before him.

This is where it gets personal for us, because this applies to our own relationships as well. I've actually been thinking a lot in the last several months about forgiveness. I'm in the midst of several personal situations and am trying to work some of this stuff out. How can you forgive someone who has hurt you? How does the relationship ever get better? How many chances do you give someone? How can you tell if someone is really repentant or just faking it?

These are some hard questions. I think this is part of the mystery of forgiveness. There is no formula to forgiveness, but what is clear from the New Testament is that there is some kind of relationship between forgiveness and repentance. If someone has wronged me, for me to forgive in a way that restores our relationship, that forgiveness must be accepted and it must involve repentance. It has to be a two-way process.

That doesn't mean that there isn't something meaningful I can do in my own heart, as far as how I feel towards that person. How I feel toward someone can affect the relationship. I can turn over my desire to avenge that wrong to God. I can let go of my anger. I can release the wrong as far as it concerns me. I can do something significant apart from their repentance. Maybe they did something to hurt me. Maybe they refuse to repent. Or maybe they aren't even alive anymore. There is real work I can do in my heart, but the kind of forgiveness that repairs a relationship

involves repentance.

What we find out is that my own repentance in receiving God's forgiveness plays a role in my being able to forgive others who wrong me. When I am able to admit my guilt before God and then receive his forgiveness, that cycle gives me a new ability to forgive others. The humility that the cross creates in me helps me to forgive others.

This is why Jesus says in Matthew 6:14, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." It's not that God's forgiveness of us is based on our forgiving others. It's that the same thing makes both of them possible: humble repentance before God. That repentance leads us into the freedom of receiving God's forgiveness and the freedom of forgiving others.

## Conclusion

This is the mystery of forgiveness. This is the first thing that Jesus asks for from the cross. It's incredibly simple, but it's also impossibly deep. This is a mystery. Don't be afraid of the big questions; ask them. Talk about what you think this all means, but know that there are limits to what we can understand. We must be content with the humility of not knowing it all. We must allow questions to draw us into the awe and worship of God.

And at the heart of this mystery, we find a crucified God. We find a man in pain asking God to forgive the ones who caused his pain and we realize that we have a choice. We can walk away or we can choose the way of Atlas who carries the cosmos on his shoulders. We can achieve. We can win. We can be strong.

Or we can come to this cross on our knees. We can admit our guilt. We can acknowledge our brokenness. We can come in repentance and in that repentance we can receive forgiveness. We can know that we have been brought back into relationship with God the Father through the Son's sacrifice and the Spirit's power.

What will you choose? Will you come to the cross in repentance? Will you receive this forgiveness? Will you come back to the Father? Will you be at one with him again?

All of this requires humility. Honestly, I'm not sure exactly how to foster this type of humility in our lives. I know I need it. I think you do too. But for centuries this season has been a time to ask God to grow humility in his people. Sitting at the cross seems like a great place to learn humility. May that be true for us as we reflect on

Jesus' words from the cross. May God grow humility and repentance in us during this season of Lent.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, Copyright © 1940), 122.

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