



Someone has said that “a Christian ought to live every day as if Jesus just rose from the dead yesterday and He’s returning tomorrow.” And we’re just in the short meantime.

We want to so live with the shadow of His cross looming over us and with the dawning of His return on the horizon. So let us focus now our adoring thoughts on our Savior as He dies for us on the cross.

[Luke 23](#) beginning at verse 26: *And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"*

³²Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."



³⁹*One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* ⁴⁰*But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"* ⁴¹*And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."* ⁴²*And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* ⁴³*And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

Praise God for His living, powerful Word!

Jesus had already gone through the worst imaginable nightmare before the events we just read. He had been beaten to a pulp. His back had been torn to shreds by a whip that had pointed, bony pieces on the end of it that would tear into the flesh and sinews of His back and leave it raw, lacerated. The front of His body would have been covered with searing of the whip. His face disfigured and swollen as the beard had been literally torn from His face. His head was crowned with thorns six inches long, stuck under His skin. But that was just the beginning. After all these things, Luke tells us in [verse 33](#) there at "*the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him...*"

The words are so nondescript. Just another day in the life of a Roman soldier. They had done this countless times before: put one hand here, the other hand there, wrap a rope around the arms and legs. And then drive a spike into the forearm side of each wrist. Another spike through the legs. And lift up the cross, carefully position it over the deep hole and let it drop. They knew not what they were doing.

"Stricken, smitten, and afflicted,
See him dying on the tree!
'Tis the Christ by man rejected;
Yes, my soul, 'tis he, 'tis he.



'Tis the long-expected Prophet,
David's Son, yet David's Lord;
By his Son God now has spoken:
'Tis the true and faithful Word."

([Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted](#), By: Thomas Kelly)

They did not know who He really was. They did not know what they were really doing. As the hymn writer says:

"Tell me, ye who hear Him groaning,
Was there ever grief like His?
Friends through fear His cause disowning,
Foes insulting his distress:
Many hands were raised to wound Him,
None would interpose to save;
But the deepest stroke that pierced Him
Was the stroke that Justice gave."

([Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted](#), By: Thomas Kelly)

No one was expecting to hear Jesus speak in a time like this. Up until now, *"like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth"* ([Isaiah 53:7](#)). But then He speaks seven profound sayings.

The depth of meaning in these sayings is so unfathomable that for 2,000 years, volumes have been written about them and still have not exhausted the meaning of our Savior's words from the cross. Words that prove that Jesus was in full possession of His faculties until the very last moment when He made His last will and testament -- He was of sound mind and judgment. Words that proved that Jesus understood the meaning of His death. That this death would be an atonement for the sins of the world. Words that make clear that Jesus did not die in despair wondering, "Is it worth it?" But He knew His mission would be accomplished. He



was not a victim. No one took His life from Him. He laid it down by his own authority.

And they are words that demonstrate there is none like Jesus in compassion and in mercy. While He is dying on the cross He is thinking of others. He is loving the very ones who were crucifying Him. And we have an astonishing example of this wondrous love in the first saying of Jesus from the cross here in verse 34. The prayer of our Saviour for His enemies. Look at it there in the Bible. [Verse 34](#): *And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Now before I draw out three instructive lessons from this simple prayer, I'd like us first to pause and ponder just what a remarkable revelation it is to know that Jesus was praying from the cross. The very fact that He was praying and then added to that fact who He was praying for - His persecutors - this speaks volumes to us about our Savior's character. What tenderness; what selflessness; what almighty love as He is being poured out like water; as all of His bones are out joint. We do not hear Him groaning in His own agony, feeling sorry for Himself, but instead pouring out His soul, being numbered among the transgressors, He makes intercession for them.

Someone has said "as soon as the blood of the great sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, [J.C. Ryle](#)).

Isn't that beautiful? As His soul is being poured out, as His blood is poured out, His heart is being lifted up in prayer to the Father for His enemies. In [Luke 3](#), we read how Jesus' public ministry began with prayer; here we see His public ministry closing in prayer.



His hands can no longer go and minister to the sick because they are nailed to the cross. He can no longer run after the needy and the poor because His feet are fastened there, too. He can no longer go onto the mountain side and teach the multitudes the wondrous things of God, for His tongue cleaves the roof of His mouth. Even if He could teach, all His disciples had left Him and fled.

But His ministry has not come to an end. In fact it has reached its climax now as He continues doing what He has been doing throughout His life, praying without ceasing. Now at the pinnacle for sinners, Jesus continues and empowers that ministry through His prayers, which by the way should encourage us though a time will likely come when we're no longer physically able to do all the things that we once enjoyed doing in ministry. Though we may be set aside and infirmed physically, a great ministry remains for the saints that they can engage in as long as God gives them the presence of mind to do so and that's the ministry of intercession. It is not to be despised.

Jesus prayed without ceasing so prayer was His instinctive response in the moment of His most severe agony and it should be our response, too, whenever we're discouraged. Notice that Jesus prays for others, not for Himself. He doesn't say a word in His own defense. We don't hear Jesus saying, "Father look at what they are doing to Your beloved Son. Look at how they are treating One who loved them so. Judge them Lord. Break their teeth. Destroy them."

We don't hear prayers of imprecation. We don't hear prayers calling down God's wrath. Instead we hear, "*Father, forgive them. Forgive.*" He doesn't scold them. He doesn't ask: "Why are you doing this? Why do you pierce the hands that multiplied the bread and the fish for you? Why do you nail the feet that pursued you with steadfast love and mercy all the days of your life? Why do you mock the man whose words always blessed you?" No scolding. No cursing. Just "*Father,*



forgive them. Forgive them.” He prays in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in 53:12: “Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.”

And every departed sinner who’s ever lived, including you and me, is the direct result and answer to Jesus prayer: *“Father, forgive. Forgive them.”*

Now as we prepare our hearts to come to the Lord’s Table and to receive this bread and this cup, there are three instructive lessons I believe the Lord would have us take deeply into our hearts and ponder, to kindle our adoration. To melt our hearts where we perhaps are growing embittered. Where we are estranged from people who have perhaps offended us. We have here three lessons that will go very far toward humbling us and restoring to us the joy of our salvation.

1. My need for forgiveness is infinitely greater than my awareness of guilt

The first is this: We need to understand from this prayer that my need for forgiveness -- your need for forgiveness -- is infinitely greater than my awareness of guilt. Perhaps more simply, I need to be forgiven a lot more than I realize I need to be forgiven. Jesus understood this, *“Father, He said, forgive them.”* Why? *“For they know not what they are doing.”* They did not know at the time the full extent of the wickedness they were doing. Oh, yes, they knew they were crucifying a man; a man they regarded as an imposter. But they did not realize they were crucifying their own Messiah. The Lord of Glory. The Creator of the Universe – the One who flung the stars into space. The One who was giving them their very breath at that moment. Who could call down legions of angels from heaven to deliver Him and destroy them. They did not realize.



[First Corinthians 2:8](#) says: *“None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”* They didn’t know fully what they were doing. And I’d like you to think about your own life and think about the time when you were living under the dominion of sin, under the delusion of Satan. When you were living in that state of mind that [Ephesians 4:17](#) describes like this: *We were walking “in the futility of their (our) minds. They are darkened in their (our) understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them (us), due to their (our) hardness of heart.”*

We’re going to see this a little more as we move along, that this ignorance is not excusable. It doesn’t let us off the hook. It’s a guilty ignorance – it’s there because of the hardness of our hearts but it is an ignorance none the less. It is a darkness of understanding. It brings futility to our minds. All of us to some extent under the dominion of sin were ignorant of what we were really doing.

Think of it. When you were living in sin, did you know how awful sin was? Did you see sin for what it really is? I started sinning at a very young age. As a little child I knew sometimes that I was doing wrong things but I did not know at that time that I was offending a Holy God. Move into your teenage years when perhaps you began plunging into greater wickedness. You felt those twinges of conscience but did you know that you were rebelling against your Creator; that you were despising His wisdom; spurning His love; profaning His holiness? Yet that is exactly what we were doing.

[Spurgeon](#) once said, “There is an abysmal death in sin. You can not see the bottom of it. When we rolled sin under our tongue as a sweet morsel, we did not know all the terrible ingredients compounded in that deadly bitter sweet. We were in a measure ignorant of the tremendous crime we committed when we dared to live in rebellion against God” ([Christ’s Plea for Ignorant Sinners](#)). We didn’t know. We



supposed we thought of sin but lightly. We did not suppose that its evil was very great until we saw in the cross of Christ that our sin required the very death of the Son of God in order for it to be atoned, covered, forgiven.

Not only did we not realize the awfulness of our sin, we also did not comprehend the greatness of God's love for us. When you were living under the dominion of sin, did you realize that you have been chosen by God before the foundation of the world? That you should be holy and without blame before Him in love? Did you know that He set His love upon you from all eternity and that Christ His Son agreed to come and pay for your ransom on the cross?

“From heaven He came and sought (you)
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought (you)
And for (your) life He died.”

[The Church's One Foundation, by Samuel J. Stone & Samuel S. Wesley](#)

Did you realize when you were sinning then, that you were sinning against the eternal law of infinite compassion? Did you know that you were grieving Christ in His Spirit? That you were stabbing to the heart the lover of your soul? That you were wounding Him practically in every act of sin, taking the hammer and nail, fastening Christ to His cross? Did you understand then the trust of what we sing with these words:

“It was my sin that held Him there until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life; I know that it is finished.”

[How Deep the Father's Love for Us](#)

Neither did we know how self-righteous we were. Some of us were thinking in those days, “Well, I go to church. I've been baptized. I've been confirmed. I partake



of the sacraments. I even pray and read my Bible and you know what, I'm pretty good." Is there anyone here who thought in times past, "You know, I don't have any particular sins to confess? I have no real reason to bow my face in the dust before God's awful majesty and to tremble before His holiness. Because I'm really a pretty good person. I'm quite religious. I do good." And did you know that in thinking those thoughts you are highly insulting Christ, the Lamb of God, saying that His blood poured out for you was a waste on you? That it was not needed? That you had no need of His great salvation? No, we did not know what we were doing. Someone has said it well, "We knew we were doing wrong but we did not know all the wrong we were doing." We had an awareness of guilt but we had no idea how much we needed to be forgiven. And our ignorance is no excuse.

[Many of these thoughts were adapted and updated from a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, "Christ's Plea for Ignorant Sinners," which can be found online at <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/2263.htm>]

We just got back from a wonderful few days in Arizona where you can legitimately drive 75 miles an hour down the highway or more I suppose. If I decided to fly down here at 80 miles an hour on Randall Road and the South Elgin police pulled me over, if I were to say to them, "But I did not know that the speed limit was 45." Would they say, "Oh, okay, then you're excused?" Or would they say, "The law requires that if you're going to drive a car, you need to know what the laws are. And whether you knew the speed limit or not, you are accountable for speeding."

You see, ignorance of God's law is not an excuse. In fact, as we read the whole of Scripture, our ignorance is a culpable ignorance. It is a guilty ignorance. We do not know because we *will* not know. We do not know God's will because we don't want to know God's will. If we were wise, we would, from early on in life, realize that we've been created by God and that life exists for His glory. We should



say, "It is a matter of first importance that I learn and discover what the will of God is. I do not want to proceed through the course of my life in ignorance, instead I want to know His Word." *"How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word"* ([Psalm 119:9](#)).

And so if we were wise, we would say from our earliest days, *"I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you"* ([Psalm 119:11](#)). But instead we plunge forward in the course of our lives, leaning on our own understanding, not acknowledging Him in any of our ways, and we plunge into all manner of sin and don't even know where we're going. We now know that we need forgiveness because God has opened our eyes. But do any of us know how much we need it? Do any of us realize the extent of our sin and shame? I don't. But this I know, [Psalm 130:3-4](#), *"If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."*

I do not know how much I need to be forgiven but I know from Scripture that my need for forgiveness is infinitely greater than my awareness of guilt.

2. Christ's plea for my forgiveness preceded any desire on my part to be forgiven

The second lesson from Jesus' words is that His plea for my forgiveness preceded any desire on my part to be forgiven. We see this in this prayer. Imagine the look on the Roman soldiers' faces as they lifted Christ up on that cross and set it in its hole. Imagine what they were thinking when He said, *"Father, forgive them."* Have they ever heard a criminal do this before? I imagine they've heard criminals cursing them, spitting on them, despising them, fighting against them. But I don't think they've ever heard anyone whom they've crucified praying for their forgiveness. It might have been stunning to them but the striking thing as we look



at the text is that they weren't asking for forgiveness. They weren't taking the initiative here. He was asking forgiveness for them. Their hands were stained with His blood at that very moment while Christ's heart was soaked in mercy toward them. Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus prays, *"Father, forgive them."* Before we pray *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner"* ([Luke 18:13](#)).

"While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" Paul says in [Romans 5:6](#). He prayed for us when we could not pray for ourselves. He prayed for us when we were crying out "crucify Him." He took the initiative and He could pray like this with confidence because even as He utters this prayer, His arms are stretched out and nailed to the cross; His blood is being poured out in order to make the answer to His prayer possible. Jesus is dying to receive the answer to this prayer, *"Father, forgive them."* His death on the cross is the basis of every answer to that prayer. Every sinner who has ever been pardoned by God has been pardoned because of the ["perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, to every believer the promise of God."](#)

And so because Jesus took the initiative and because Jesus prayed like this for people who were not even yet aware of their need, and people who were not even yet asking for it, we know that if He prayed for pardon for such great sinners, then ["The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives."](#) Because Jesus prayed for His enemies, *"Father, forgive them"* while they were crucifying Him, the greatest sin that has ever been perpetrated by humanity in this world, we know that there is no sin so great that our Saviour can not forgive it. We know there is no sinner so wretched, so vile, who can not through the grace of God, through repentance, find that though their *"sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow"* ([Isaiah 1:18](#)). Blameless in the presence of God's glory. Faultless and with great joy. Any sinner who turns to Jesus Christ and says have mercy on



me will find that God the Father is still in the wonderful business of answering His Son's prayer from the cross. He is a forgiving God.

[Spurgeon](#) said, "I love this prayer, also, because of the indistinctness of it. It is '*Father, forgive them.*' He does not say, 'Father, forgive the soldiers who have nailed me here.' He includes them." He didn't just say, "Father, forgive these people who are standing around the cross, jeering at me, mocking me." They were included, too. No, He kept it very generic, very broad: "*Father, forgive them.*" And [Spurgeon](#) said, "Now into that pronoun 'them' I feel that I can crawl. Can you get in there? Oh, by a humble faith, appropriate the cross of Christ by trusting in it; and get into that big little word 'them'..."! I can become one of those who receive the mercy of God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

What if Christ had not prayed like this? What if He had not taken the initiative and pleaded with those who were not even asking for forgiveness? Would the soldiers have been struck dead on the spot as they crucified the Lord of Glory? Would the thousands who came to faith in Christ in Jerusalem in the six months that followed have been converted without that prayer of Jesus from the cross?

And one more application: If there is pardon like this for us when we are God's enemies, how much more should we be assured that He will forgive His blood-bought children? Though we still don't know what we are doing, we, by the mercy of God, are grieved when we sin. I firmly believe that for a child of God there is nothing that causes us greater grief and pain than the knowledge that through our weakness and folly, we have been ensnared by the tempter; we have fallen into sin. We have offended our Heavenly Father, He who loves us "*with an everlasting love*" ([Jeremiah 31:3](#)). And when the awareness of our guilt and shame penetrates our conscience, we are wounded in our spirits; we are grieved to the core of our being.



And sometimes in the agony of the awareness of our sin and shame, we wonder pensively, “Would God forgive me again? Would He have mercy on me?”

One of the Puritans, [John Flavel](#), beautifully said, “Doubt it not but that he who receives enemies into his bosom will much more receive and embrace children, even though offending ones. Pensive soul, if you did but know the largeness, tenderness, freeness of that grace which yearns over enemies, and has given forth thousands and ten thousands of pardons to the worst of sinners, you would not sink so quickly into despair.”

Praise God for the initiative of our Saviour, pleading for our forgiveness before we were asking for it ourselves.

3. I will never need to forgive more than I'm forgiven

And finally, lesson number three – and this relates directly to what we are praying for this month: relational renewal and reconciliation. As we [“survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died”](#), we realize this lesson: I will never, never need to forgive more than I've been forgiven. Never! Christ is our substitute and when we read this story of His crucifixion, that's what we need to embrace first of all. He died for me. None but Jesus can do helpless sinners good, but He is able, He is willing and so I must flee to Him, I must embrace Him as my Saviour. He is my substitute. But after embracing Him as my substitute, I now need to follow Him as my example. And Stephen, the first Christian martyr, did this as they were stoning him. [Acts 7:60](#) says, “*And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*” He was modeling his Savior's example and I think that the conversion of the apostle Paul, just a couple chapters later, is an answer to Stephen's prayer. Saul's heart was transformed by God's grace.



But as we die daily as Christians, as we experience the heartache and grief of relational breakdown in this world which we surely will, we too are called to intercede for the transgressors. I've been struck in reading the Gospels this past week by verses like [Luke 6:27-28](#): *"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."* Isn't that the highest Gospel ethic? No religion can make you love an enemy like this -- only the Gospel that at its heart has a Saviour crucified for His enemies, praying for their forgiveness. Only that Gospel can, in due season, sweeten your head with grace so you're ready to do good to those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you.

Or listen to this: This is a really straight forward saying of Jesus - I'd like you to think on this one: [Mark 11:25](#): *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."*

I want to ask you believers a question: Has your Heavenly Father ever asked you to forgive more than He has forgiven you? Ever? I heard [Ray Pritchard](#), or read something he wrote a while back, he said, "One of the greatest barriers to forgiving others is that we cherish in our hearts this idea that people need to understand how much they've hurt us before we're willing to forgive them." That's just an impossible standard because the truth is they don't know how much they hurt you.

And the truth is that our Saviour prayed for our forgiveness when we did not know how much we hurt Him. I think we should be eternally grateful that God did not wait until we came to a full and complete comprehension of how great our sins have been against Him before He was willing to forgive us. Because if He waited until then, we would still not be forgiven today because we still do not know how greatly our sins have offended and even continue to offend a Holy God. He did not



wait until we embraced the pain that we cause Him before He pardoned us. Now I'm not saying that repentance is not necessary or not important for it clearly is in Scripture. But I am saying that none of us have repented as much as we've been forgiven. And so we must not make our pain the standard of whether or not we are going to forgive others. Instead, we need to make His pardon of us the standard of whether or not we are going to forgive others. Not, "Oh, you must know how much you've hurt me." But, "Oh, I must know how much He's pardoned me." How great His mercy is!

I praise God that when *"we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* ([1 John 1:9](#)) Because the truth is when the Spirit graciously convicts me of sin and I'm aware of particular sins that I need to confess to God, there are a whole lot of things the Spirit has not yet shown me that are still offensive to a Holy God and I'm not even aware of it. But when by grace I've confessed what He has shown me, He, in enormous mercy, cleanses me from everything else. I need forgiveness more than I'll ever know. Christ pleaded for and purchased my forgiveness before I even desired it. Now how can I, who have been forgiven more than I'll ever know, how can I refuse to forgive much less than I've been forgiven?

"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity..." ([Psalm 103:1-3](#))

Thank You, Lord. Thank You for Your mercies to us, new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness. You continue to lavish on Your people forgiveness, unearned, undeserved, sometimes not even asked for because we don't know we need it. But Your heart is continually disposed to be merciful toward our iniquities and to remember our sins no more. And it's all because of a Savior, Your Son, the



Lamb of God who was slain for our sins and for the sins of everyone in the world who had ever believed in Him. So we give You praise, we praise You, Father, for Your mercy. We praise You, Jesus, for Your obedience to the point of death, even death on the cross so that Your prayer for our forgiveness would be answered. We praise and thank You, Holy Spirit, for giving us an awareness of the guilt of our sin so that we can repent and run to Jesus. And we thank You, Father, that You've put this table before us. You've prepared a table for us in the presence of our enemies, You anoint our heads with oil and our cup overflows with blessings and we would now feast on the abundance of your household and drink from the river of Your delights with joy, with thanksgiving. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.