

# Seven Words From the Cross - Forgiveness

by Warren Wiersbe

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*Jesus' statement 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' reveals the wonder of His address, appeal, and argument on behalf of those who persecuted Him.*

**Duration:** 33:47

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Luke 23:33-36, Luke 23:38

**Topics:** "The Cross", "Forgiveness"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the statement made by Jesus on the cross, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' He highlights the four wonders of this statement. The first wonder is the address, as Jesus addresses God as Father. The second wonder is the appeal, as Jesus asks for forgiveness for those who crucified him. The third wonder is the argument, as Jesus acknowledges the ignorance of sin in those who crucified him. The fourth wonder is the answer, as God answers this prayer by sending the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sins. The speaker emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in the Christian life and encourages listeners to forgive others as God has forgiven them.

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## Transcript

We read the word of God from Luke chapter 23, verses 33 to 38, as we begin today a study of our Lord's seven last statements from the cross. Luke chapter 23, verse 33, And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And they parted his raiment and cast lots, and the people stood beholding. And the rulers also derided him, saying, He saved others, let him save himself, if he be the Christ, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him and offering him vinegar and saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.

And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek and Latin and Hebrew, This is the king of the Jews. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. On the day that Karl Marx died, while he was on his deathbed, his housekeeper came to him and she said to him, Mr. Marx, give me your last words and I'll write them down.

After all, all famous people want to be remembered for their last words. And Karl Marx said this to his housekeeper, Go on, get out. Last words are for fools who haven't said enough.

I don't quite agree with that, I think that sometimes last words can reveal a great deal about a person. The next time you go to the circus, remember that P.T. Barnum's last words were, What were today's receipts? When Napoleon lay dying, he said, Army, head of the army. Florence Ziegfeld, the great showman, said, Curtain, fast music, lights, ready for the finale.

The show looks good, the show looks good. And he died. Quite a difference from Charles Spurgeon, who when he died said, Jesus died for me.

And that great man, John Wesley, when he died said, The best of all is, God is with us. When our Lord Jesus Christ died at Calvary, he made seven statements. We call them the seven last words from the cross.

And these statements are like windows into eternity that show us the heart and the mind of God. Our Lord Jesus did not make these statements because he was a fool. They thought he was a fool.

He saved others, let him save himself. He made these statements because he is the very essence and the sum total of the wisdom of God. He didn't make these statements because he hadn't already said enough.

He had given to us the marvelous revelation of God. He made these statements because we need them. And the first of these statements is found in Luke chapter 23 in verse 34.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. If we understand this verse correctly, our Lord was making this statement while they were crucifying him. And the tense of the verb indicates he said it repeatedly.

They took him to Calvary and they stripped him and he said, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. They put him down against the ground and his back and his arms against a wooden cross. And he said, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.

Roman soldiers got Roman hammers and Roman nails and nailed his hands to the cross. And he prayed, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. They nailed his feet to the cross and again he prayed.

And they lifted the cross and his body fell forward in excruciating pain. As they placed the cross in a hole in the ground, Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. I want you to consider with me the four wonders of this statement.

Now, every statement our Lord makes is wonderful. But just for this morning, let's focus on this statement and notice the four wonders of it. And I would trust that the Holy Spirit of God would speak to us in spiritual language today, saying far more than I can say.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Consider first of all the wonder of the address. He addressed God as Father.

Now, this doesn't surprise us because this is what Jesus called God, Father. He taught us to pray, Our Father, but he never prayed, Our Father. He said, My Father, Your Father, My God, Your God.

His relationship to the Father comes out here. Three times at Calvary, Jesus talked to God. The first statement, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

The Son was entering into his suffering. The middle statement, the fourth statement, it wasn't Father, it was God. Out of the darkness, Jesus cried, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? And at that point, he was enduring his suffering, being made sin for us.

His first statement, Father. His middle statement, My God. His last statement, Father.

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. The suffering was over, the victory was won, Father. Now, if you meditate upon this little address, Father, you learn a wonderful truth.

Nothing that Jesus was enduring was changing his relationship to his Father. Would you have been able to say, Father, if they had taken from you all of your rights? If they had arrested you illegally, tried you illegally. If they had taken from you not only your legal rights and your civil rights, but your human rights.

If they had spat upon you. If they had scourged you. If they had plucked out your beard.

If they had mocked you. If they had used you for jesting and for joking. Would you be able to say, Father? You see, our Lord Jesus Christ was so close to the Father, that physical suffering and inhumanity and the wickedness of man did not cloud the face of the Father.

I have visited people in hospitals who have said to me, God has forsaken me. I don't have a Father. Are you praying? I can't pray.

If God is my Father, why am I going through this? If God is my Father, why did this happen? But Jesus didn't talk like that. As our Lord Jesus entered into these six terrible hours of suffering, the first word that He spoke was, Father. It is that that enabled Him at the end of those six hours to be able to say, Father.

He could have said, there is no Father. Look at the way the people are acting. He could have said, there is no Father.

Look at what my disciples have done. Is your faith shaken by the wickedness of sinners or the weakness of saints? His wasn't. I have met Christians who say, I can't believe anymore.

This man or that woman was such a great Christian. Look what happened to them. Jesus didn't say, I can't believe anymore.

Peter has denied me. I can't believe anymore. Judas has betrayed me.

It's a marvelous thing when you get your eyes off of the saints and get your eyes off of the sinners and get your eyes on your Father. That's the way to take the sufferings of life. That's the way the Gospel of Luke begins.

Here is our Lord Jesus, the 12-year-old lad. And he says to his earthly parents, didn't you know I must be about my Father's business? From the very beginning it was the Father, not myself. I do those things that please Him.

The Father's business. And this was the grand climax of the Father's business. One day our Lord looked up to heaven and said, Lord, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto babes.

Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight. And my friend, if in the sunshine of life we can look up and say, even so, Father, it seemed good in Thy sight, why can't we say it in the darkness of life? He prayed in the garden. And again, it was Father.

Father, if it be Thy will, let this cup pass from me, but not my will, Thy will be done. I'll tell you, my friend, if in the prayer closet you can say, Father, Thy will be done, you'll have no problem on the cross saying, Father, forgive them. The wonder of the address.

Father, isn't it time that some of us stood a little taller, climbed a little higher? Isn't it time that some of us got away from our petty, picky, yoonish, infantile, midget complaints? Isn't it time that some of us stopped looking up to heaven and saying, You've forsaken me. You don't love me. Isn't it time we did what Jesus did while men were doing their worst? Look up and say, Father.

I heard about an atheist who did a very mean thing. He went into a school where a class of deaf people was studying. And he wrote on the blackboard, If God loves you, why were you born deaf? There was a silence in the classroom, and then one child got up and picked up the chalk and wrote on the same blackboard, Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight.

The wonder of the address. But a second wonder comes to us from this statement, and that's the wonder of the appeal. Father, forgive them.

One of the most difficult things in the Christian life is to forgive. Now, you'd think it would be one of the easiest things. You would think that inasmuch as God has forgiven us, we would be able to throw our arms around those who have hurt us and forgive them.

But there are Christians in every church who carry unforgiving spirits within. Peter writes and says, Laying aside all malice and all guile and all evil speaking, Paul writes and says, Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. And yet there are people listening to me right now who can't forgive.

There are people who say, As long as I live, I'll never forgive him for what he did. I'll never forgive her for what she did. Has anyone ever treated you the way Jesus was treated? Have you been crucified? Oh, you've hurt.

You've had a broken heart. You've wept. People have done things that have crushed you and broken you.

But my Lord was able at the time of His greatest suffering to make a wonderful appeal. Forgive them. When Samson died, he asked for revenge upon his enemies.

The Romans worshiped the God of revenge. Some Christians worship the God of revenge. Forgive them.

Now, in praying this prayer, the Lord Jesus was fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah 53 certainly is a picture of our suffering Savior. Who hath believed our report? To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? He is led as a lamb, as a sheep, before her shearers is dumb, so He opens not His mouth.

He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. When you get to the end of Isaiah 53, verse 12, it makes this marvelous statement, and He made intercession for the transgressors.

Peter tried to defend Him in the garden, and Jesus said, Put up your sword, the cup that the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it? Think you not that I could call legions of angels, and they would deliver Me?

Back in the Old Testament, one angel killed 185,000 soldiers. If legions of angels had come, they could have wiped out the earth. But He didn't pray for revenge.

He didn't pray for judgment. He prayed, Father, forgive them. He was practicing what He preached.

You have heard that it has been said unto you by them of old, Love your neighbor and hate your enemies. But I say unto you, love your enemies. Do good to them that despitefully use you, and pray for them.

That's what He did. He said, What do ye more than others? Even the publicans can salute the publicans. Even the sinners can salute the sinners.

You see, each of us in this congregation today is living on one of three levels. Either the level of the demonic. Satan always returns evil for good.

Or the level of the human. Men return good for good and evil for evil. Or the level of the divine where we return good for evil.

And as they nailed His hands, He prayed for forgiveness for them. And as they lifted Him up and dropped that cross in that hole on Calvary, as He hung there between heaven and earth being reviled, being laughed at, being mocked, He prayed for them. This word forgive simply means to send away.

Father, here is their sin. Send it away. Don't let their sin remain on them as a burden.

It's the picture of the Old Testament day of atonement when the priest would take the two goats and one goat was killed and the blood was taken into the tabernacle and sprinkled in the Holy of Holies on the mercy seat. And then the priest would put his hands upon the head of the living goat and confess the sins of the people of Israel. And then that goat would be led out into the wilderness, taken away.

As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. He has buried them in the depths of the sea. He has blotted them out like a thick cloud.

And this word means to take away. Father, forgive. There is forgiveness because He died.

Our God is not a God of vengeance. He is a God of forgiveness. Now, there is coming a day of vengeance.

Our God is a consuming fire. There's coming a day of judgment and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But today is not a day of war.

Today is a day of reconciliation. God has not declared war. He has declared peace.

The wonder of the appeal. Forgive them. My friend, forgiveness is the greatest experience in life.

To come as a guilty sinner before a thrice holy God, to believe on Jesus Christ as your Savior and have that God say to you, forgiven, is a great experience. This is what Jesus did when He was here on earth and they didn't like it. They brought a man to Him who was sick and Jesus said to this man, My son, your sins be forgiven you.

And the doctors of the law who were sitting there said, Who is this man who forgives sins? And Jesus said that you may know that the Son of Man has power, has authority on earth to forgive sins. I say to you, rise, take up your bed and walk. And the man was not only healed physically, but healed spiritually.

A woman came in one day. Not an ordinary woman. A woman of the streets.

A woman of reputation. And she dared to bring ointment and anoint the feet of Jesus. She dared to let down her hair and wipe His feet with her hair.

And the people were scandalized. And the host said to himself, this man, if he really were a prophet, he would know what kind of a woman she is. And Jesus said to the woman, Go in peace.

I forgive you. And again, they said, Who is this that forgives sins? The last thing Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke is go on out into all the world and preach the remission of sins, the forgiveness of sins. Let people know that sin doesn't have to bind them.

Sin can be sent away. Sin can be forgiven. Sin can be broken.

The wonder of the appeal. Forgive them. Now, He's not praying for a lost world today.

Our Lord said in John 17, I pray not for the world, but for them whom Thou hast given Me out of the world. But on the cross, He prayed for lost sinners. And if you've never been forgiven, my friend, it's not His fault.

There's the wonder of the argument. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Here is the victim arguing on behalf of those who are persecuting Him.

Here is the sinless Son of God presenting to the Father an argument why judgment should not fall. And judgment did not fall. Back in the Old Testament when David was carrying the ark up to Jerusalem, the ark began to waver on the cart, and a man reached out and touched the ark, and he died.

He didn't burn the ark. He didn't pound nails in the ark. He didn't spit on the ark.

He just touched the ark, and he died. And yet here were men cruelly crucifying the very Son of God, and they didn't die. Here is a nation that said, we have no king but Caesar.

Crucify Him! And they didn't die. In fact, for some 40 more years, the Lord patiently waited, and then judgment came. Now please don't misunderstand this statement, for they know not what they do.

Our Lord is not saying that a person is saved because he's ignorant. Nor is He saying everybody is forgiven. In some states, they have signs that they put up along the road when a new traffic sign is erected.

You've been driving down that little road for several years, and you don't just go straight through. It's an intersection. No stop sign.

But one day they decided to put a stop sign up. And so they warn you several miles in advance, stop sign ahead. Now if you're ignorant of what's going on, I dare you to tell it to the cop.

You go zooming through the stop sign, and you look into your mirror, and there are those flashing blue lights, and you know it's not a flying saucer. And you pull over, and the policeman comes over and says, didn't you see that stop sign? And jokingly you say, hey officer, when you've seen one, you've seen them all. I didn't know it was there.

And he says to you, did you know that ignorance is no excuse in the sight of the law? Our Lord is not saying that because people are ignorant, they're saved. What He is saying is that a gracious God stoops

to the weakness of man, but when men do find out the truth, they are responsible to do something about it. No one in this congregation can plead ignorance.

You've heard the Word of God. You've been a part of a Christian worship service. I doubt that anyone here today can say, well, God's not going to judge me because I'm so ignorant.

No. That's not what this phrase means at all. You see, they were ignorant of His person.

They didn't realize who He was. They mocked His being a prophet. They blindfolded Him and slapped Him and said, Prophet, tell us who did it.

They mocked His kingship by putting a robe and a scepter and a crown of thorns on His head. They didn't believe He was the Christ. They called it blasphemy.

But most of all, they were ignorant of their own actions. You see, sin always makes a person ignorant. The prodigal son, with his eyes wide open, said, Father, give me.

With his eyes wide open, he went out into the far country and wasted it in riotous living. He ends up living with the pigs. And the Scripture says, when he came to himself, the ignorance of sin.

When he came to himself, he said, what a dope I have been! What a fool I have been! They didn't realize the enormity of their sin. They didn't understand their own actions. They parted His garments.

They were fulfilling Scripture. They gave Him vinegar. They were fulfilling Scripture.

They mocked Him. They were fulfilling Scripture. They didn't realize it.

You see, what our Lord is saying here is something very wonderful. In the Old Testament Scriptures, God gave to the Jews five very special sacrifices. One of them was the sin offering.

Leviticus 4 tells you about the sin offering. You ought to read it. It starts off like this.

If anyone shall commit a sin of ignorance, not a high-handed, willful, belligerent, proud, arrogant sin. If anyone shall commit a sin of ignorance, or it was sin and they're guilty, but it was a sin of ignorance, then let him bring the sacrifice. And the rest of that chapter says if the priest sins, he does this.

If the common people sin, they do this. If a ruler sins, they do this. That's what you have at Calvary.

The priest did sin a sin of ignorance. They didn't realize who he was. The common people, a sin of ignorance, they didn't realize it.

They should have. They could have, but they didn't. And so God in His grace listens to the intercession of His Son and He holds back judgment because Jesus Christ is the sin offering.

Now, He knew what He was doing. You see, they didn't know what they were doing and they didn't know what He was doing, but He knew what they were doing and He knew what He was doing. When you read the Upper Room Discourse, John 13-17, several times you find that word, Jesus knowing that all things came from the Father, Jesus knowing that the hour was come, Jesus knowing that the Scriptures should be fulfilled, Jesus knowing.

Jesus knew what He was doing. They didn't know what they were doing. They thought He didn't know what He was doing and they knew what they were doing.

It was just the opposite. Just like sinners today. The awful ignorance of sin.

His argument, they know not what they do. But once they discovered what they had done, they had to do something about it. Which leads us to the fourth wonder of this statement.

We've had the wonder of His address, Father. And the wonder of His appeal, forgive them. And the wonder of His argument, they know not what they do.

Look with me at the wonder of the answer. Did God answer this prayer? Yes. What did He do? He sent the Holy Spirit.

What's the work of the Holy Spirit? To let people know what they're doing. And at Pentecost, Peter got up and said, You crucified the Lord of glory. You denied the Holy One and the Just One.

And conviction came upon them and they knew what they had done. And having known what they had done, they were responsible to do something. And they cried out and said, Men and brethren, what shall we do? And Peter gave them the answer.

Repent. Believe on the Lord Jesus. Give evidence of your faith by being baptized.

And He'll forgive you. Have you ever noticed in Acts chapter 3 that Peter sort of echoes what Jesus said of the cross? Peter preaches this second message in Acts chapter 3 and he says this, You delivered Him up and you denied Him. And you killed the Prince of life whom God has raised from the dead.

And His name through faith in His name has made this man strong, the man that they had healed. And now, brethren, I know that through ignorance you did it, as did also your rulers. But now you're no longer ignorant.

Father, forgive them. They know not what they do. I know that through ignorance you've done it.

But now that you know who He is and what you've done and what He's done, what will you do about it? And 2,000 more people got saved. You see, God answered the prayer. 3,000 saved at Pentecost.

2,000 more a few days later. Then all through the book of Acts, a great multitude, until one day we get to the book of Revelation when there's a great multitude that no man can number, people who deserve to go to hell. People whose minds were blinded by Satan.

People whose wills were enslaved by sin in the world. People who deserve judgment, but because Jesus died and because Jesus said, Father, forgive them, they were given the opportunity for salvation. And that opportunity is still open today.

You say, well, I don't know all about the Bible. I don't either. Mark Twain used to say, it's not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me, it's what I do understand.

Do you know today that you are a sinner who needs forgiveness? Do you know today that Jesus is the only Savior who can give forgiveness? Do you know today that through faith in Jesus Christ, your sins can be forgiven and you enter into the family of God and a new life of blessing and victory? Do you know this?

Then you are responsible. And if you do nothing about it, there remains no more sacrifice for sin. For if we sin willfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin.

No one can plead ignorance before the throne of God. The Bible is in this world. Conscience is in man's heart.

Creation speaks of the glory of God. The Holy Spirit of God is speaking to hearts. And Jesus died that he might have his own prayer answered.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Wesley put it so beautifully. Five bleeding wounds he bears, received on Calvary.

They pour effectual prayers. They strongly plead for me. Forgive him, O forgive, they cry, nor let that ransomed sinner die.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. What will you do? Heavenly Father, we marvel that our Lord spoke at all at Calvary, and yet in grace he spoke from the tree and turned that tree into a throne and gave to us these marvelous words of grace. I pray that someone having heard this message now will believe and be saved and be a part of the answer to that prayer.

For Jesus' sake I pray, and in his name, Amen.

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