Seven Last Words of Christ

Good Friday 2019 (Notes under Come to the Cross)

# Scripture: Luke 23:20-49; John 19:25b-30; Matt. 27:45-49

# Key Thought: The seven last sayings of Jesus inspire our devotion.

# “*Father forgive them*” – an example for us!

As Jesus was dying on the cross, looking down he would see the Roman soldiers, the ones who had mocked him, beat him and nailed him to the cross. Likely he could also see representatives of the Jewish leaders who had rejected him, misunderstood him, and persuaded Pilate to have been crucified.

If it were us, I’m sure our hearts would’ve been filled with bitterness and hatred and fantasies of revenge. We would have raged against the injustices that had been done.

But Jesus is entirely different. There is no crying out or cursing against those who have wronged him. Instead, we hear words of grace and mercy; words which show an amazing ability, even in these circumstances, to look into the minds and hearts of others. Jesus knew that the soldiers who put them there had neither the background, the knowledge nor the exposure to his teaching to have the foggiest idea as to what was actually going on. To them this was hardly more than just another day’s work in the gritty business of being a Roman soldier.

In the Lord’s prayer which we learn and which we repeat each week, Jesus taught us, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Now, in his last moments, on the cross, Jesus gives us a supreme example. He looks down in compassion on those who deserve no compassion, whose hearts show no compassion, and says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” It is the ultimate example for us.

If, from the cross, Jesus can forgive his enemies; if he can forgive those who have nailed him to that instrument of torture, what reason can we find adequate to refuse forgiveness to others. If by God’s grace Jesus could forgive, then he can give us the strength, the compassion, the mercy to also forgive others.

# “Today you will be with me in paradise.” – Heaven is for real and how you can get there

As Jesus was being crucified between two thieves, he endured mocking. The Bible tells us that the chief priests mocked him saying, “He saved others, but he can’t save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:31). Luke says the people standing around mocked him and the soldiers also. Worst of all, one of the thieves also joined in the mocking, apparently taking out his own anger on Jesus. “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39), he railed. But the second thief spoke up. “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then turning to Jesus, he said “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:40, 41).

At this moment we again see the wonderful heart of Jesus. He was ever open to hearts who showed the smallest seeds of faith. This man believed that Jesus was a king and would come into his kingdom despite the events of the day, an amazing thought considering that even Jesus’ disciples had a hard time grasping that his kingdom was not of this world. Jesus looked at the thief who had reached out to him and uttered those beautiful words, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” They were words of acceptance and inclusion in God’s family for a thief who had gone astray and was now looking to Jesus for hope.

For us today, these words remind us that heaven is real. Paradise was, for the Jews, the name for the place of the righteous dead. It was the place where spirits of righteous ones who had passed go after they die. Jesus expected to be there very soon, and he pronounced that this thief, his misdeeds hidden in God’s mercy, would join him there. How had this thief made this transition? He had simply turned to Jesus, acknowledging his own sins, believing in who Jesus was, and reaching out to him for mercy and hope. There is a very short sermon in these words of Jesus. Heaven is real! And here’s a roadmap for getting there. One, admit your own sins to God. Two, believe in Jesus Christ, the one whom God has sent. Three, reach out to him for mercy and hope and become his follower. Then it will be said of you as Jesus promised, “He who believes has everlasting life” (John 6:47).

# “*Woman, here is your son*,” and to the disciple, “*Here is your mother*” – Care for those you love

Mary, Jesus mother, is mentioned very few times in Scripture during the years of his public ministry. She is there at the beginning of his ministry at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. That is where Jesus turned the water into wine. Now at the very end of Jesus ministry, she is present at the cross grieving along with the other women.

The Apostle John records a tender and very human moment from Jesus’ time on the cross. He writes that Jesus looked down and saw his mother there and also noticed that she was with John. We need to remember that Jesus was the oldest son in the family; and it would’ve been his responsibility to care for his mother. He sees her grief, and his responsibility to care for her is upon his heart even in these moments of his own torture. Because of his impending death, Jesus fulfills his responsibility by using these last words to assign the care of his mother to his disciple, John. And there is a note in John’s Gospel that says, “From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (John 19:27).

This is a message and an example to us as well. We are to care for those who are near and dear to us.

Paul wrote, “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim 5:8 NIV).

Jesus certainly gave us an example of this tender commandment even his last moments.

# “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – Be real and have hope too!

This fourth one of Jesus words from the cross is noted in both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Both of those Gospels note that it happened at the ninth hour, after there had been three hours of darkness. So, this word is spoken very near the end of Jesus life. In our English texts it is related to us in the original language in order to help us understand the bystanders’ response. The first two words, in the original language sound similar to the name Elijah. That is a reason why the bystanders respond by suggesting that Jesus is calling Elijah. It was not true. What Jesus was, in fact, doing was quoting from Psalm 22 verse one. There is certainly an anguished tone in this cry which is captured in the second part of Psalm 22 verse one, “Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?”

The question immediately arises, “Why is Jesus quoting this Psalm?” There are three definite answers.

* First, Jesus is quoting the first verse because it is appropriate to the way he feels. Physically, he has endured nearly all that a body can endure. His life is expiring. He is emotionally and physically exhausted. Spiritually, we will never understand all that he has endured. What could it possibly mean for he “who had no sin to be sin” for us? (2 Cor. 5:21)? Henry Blackaby writes,

Jesus was entering fully that blackest midnight of the soul when he cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). That's the death he died for [everyone], the horror of an indescribable abandonment, and agonizing, consuming loneliness." Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross p. 47

Jesus cried out with the words of this Psalm because that is how he felt as he bore the penalty for our sins. Sin separates from God and Jesus was bearing that for us. This verse expressed the anguish Jesus felt in those moments.

* Second, Jesus undoubtedly thought of this Psalm to express his thoughts because he knew Scripture and he knew that the verses in the middle of the Psalm described in detail what was happening to him. He was encircled by enemies which are described poetically in verses 12 and 13 of the Psalm. He was thirsty which is described in verse 15 of the Psalm. People were mocking him and verse 17 specifically mentions how people stare and gloat over the victim. Most specific of all, verse 18 of the Psalm predicted that the victim’s clothes would be divided by lots (rolling dice). Jesus had seen the soldiers cast lots for his seamless undergarment. Jesus began to speak this Psalm; undoubtedly he had not breath for the whole thing. Perhaps as a rabbi it was enough to point his students to the Psalm. It was the right Psalm for the moment. Scripture was being fulfilled in these moments.
* But there is third an even greater reason why Jesus quoted the Psalm. The Psalm begins with great realism about the suffering of the one who is quoting it. These words of Jesus remind us that we never need to be afraid to be real with God. God knows how we feel anyway. But the words of this Psalm that Jesus chose are also the words of a prayer of hope. Consider verses 19,20 of the Psalm.

But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.
Ps 22:19-20 NIV

Undoubtedly that prayer is also in Jesus heart even in these moments of terror and loneliness. But the psalmist does not end there. He gives assurance of the answer to prayer.

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.
Ps 22:23-24 NIV

Jesus remembered these words too!

Jesus prayed with faith that God would indeed hear his prayer of desperation and answer. And the answer would be glorious, just as the Psalm predicted.

The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him—may your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.
All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it! Ps 22:26-31 NIV

Jesus had predicted his resurrection to his disciples. Even his enemies knew of his prediction. That is why they had his tomb guarded. Jesus’ use of this Psalm tells us that in his most desperate moments, he is still looking forward to what God will do.

Jesus’ quoting of this Psalm is an example to us, an example first to be real in our prayers. Then, it is an example to pray with hope. We must pray in faith, looking for what God will yet do even in our most difficult moments. We serve the God who is able to do immeasurably more that all we ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20)!

# “*I thirst*!” – Jesus truly suffered for us.

The fifth word of Jesus from the cross is a very physical indication of his human suffering. There was a tendency, especially in the centuries immediately following to try to separate the divine and the human in thinking about Jesus. One result of this was to deny the real suffering of Jesus. But this was heresy. This word from the cross reminds us that Jesus’ humanity was real and his suffering was real. Jesus simply says, “I am thirsty” (John 19:28 NRSV). Psalm 22, the Psalm which Jesus had just referred to, expressed this suffering explicitly;

My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth
Ps 22:15 NIV

It is tempting for us too, as we focus upon the divinity of Christ most of the time, to forget the reality of his suffering. But these words from the cross, these very human words, bring us back to the harsh realities of what Jesus went through for us. Think about the night’s activities. After the supper with the disciples, Jesus had been arrested in the late evening. He had been on trial multiple times throughout the entire night and was taken to be crucified in the morning. The Bible tells us that darkness fell over the land from noon until 3 o’clock. (I was reading recently that this darkness is attested in secular Greek historical sources.) During that time Jesus had been beaten and bloodied more than once. Who knows if Jesus had been given any water to drink at all from the time he was arrested. He had been stripped of his usual outer garments that provided shade from the Palestinian sun. No wonder he was crying out in thirst. His suffering was real.

He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed. Isa 53:5 NIV

# “*It is finished*!” – The price is paid; God’s gift is available.

In the Gospel of John, it becomes clear that Jesus is very conscious that he is on a mission assigned by his heavenly Father. His words and his actions are all part of a plan to accomplish God’s work in this world.

His teachings came from his Father in heaven. Jesus said,

I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So, whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” John 12:49-50 NIV

His death also was a specific part of the plan he had received from his Father, as Jesus had previously pointed out to his disciples.

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”
John 10:17-18 NIV

The Father’s plan includes granting incredible authority to Jesus. This authority was both for his ministry on earth and for all eternity to follow.

Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.
John 5:19-23 NIV

But in order for this plan to come to fruition, Jesus had a great price to pay. He variously called it the “baptism” he had to undergo or the “cup” he had to drink. On one occasion he said;

But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Luke 12:50 NIV

In the Garden as the arrest sequence begin,

Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” John 18:11 NIV

Now in these moments on the cross, as his physical life is about to expire, Jesus is aware that the great task that he had been sent to accomplish by his Father was completed. The journey that began with the incarnation, with his birth as a baby in the manger in Bethlehem was now complete. Jesus had entered into human experience to the fullest, submitting even to death, the death of a common criminal on a cross.

But there is even more! In the chronology of the Gospel of John, Jesus is dying at the same time as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed for the Passover that year. It is an amazing symbolism of the spiritual transaction that was also completed with the death of Jesus. When Jesus ministry began, he was announced by his forerunner, John the Baptist, as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The Jews annually commemorated the Passover by remembering that as they left Egypt, the blood of the Passover lambs had been smeared over the doors. Wherever there was blood over the door, the death Angel passed over that house. The Jewish people were rescued from the plague of death by the Passover lambs. Now, the Bible is clear.

Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 1 Cor 5:7 NIV

Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, because our Passover Lamb has died for us, we, who cling to Christ as our Savior, are rescued from the plague of spiritual death which hangs over the entire race. For our “iniquities have separated” us from our God (Isaiah 59). And, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

But this word from Jesus from the cross is good news for us! In Greek, the word is [Tetelestai]. It means, “It is completed; it is finished.” It is not a word of resignation, but a shout of triumph. It is the pronouncement of a person who has finished a huge task successfully. It is of special significance for us that this was the word which was used to stamp debt papers when the debt had been paid. As Jesus finished his task on the cross, our debt was paid. Whenever the enemy of your souls reminds you of the penalties due for your wrongdoings, mentally stamp this pronouncement of Jesus on them; “[Tetelestai]; It is finished; it is paid!” Hallelujah! Jesus’ work is done. Our debt is paid. In Jesus, we cross over from death to life! Now because Jesus’ work is done, all the benefits of his competed mission are available to you and to me.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness.
(2 Peter 1:3 NIV 1984)

Jesus has made abundant life possible for all who believe and follow him.

#  “Into your hands I commit my Spirit” – Faith for grieving

In his very last words, Jesus commits his spirit to his heavenly Father. This is another indication of Jesus faith in what is to come. He knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that this is not the end. His heavenly Father has greater plans. His human body and his spirit will separate as happens to all of us when this “earthly tent we live in is destroyed” (2 Cor. 5:2). But God will raise him up.

What an example Jesus is giving to us. When we face death, either our own, or that of someone we love, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Christians do grieve, for they miss those they love. But they look forward to that day when God will fulfill his promises to those who follow Jesus. So, they commit their own spirits and their lost loved ones to God even as Jesus committed his Spirit to God. The hope that Jesus expresses is not only for him, but also for us.

As Jesus said in his high priestly prayer for his disciples and those who would believe because of their words,

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory John 17:24 NIV

Jesus had earlier promised his disciples,

My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. John 14:2, 3

Now on the cross he was preparing for that journey. And we can be assured that because of what Jesus has done, we too can commit ourselves and those we love to God in faith that

Just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man. 1 Cor 15:49 NIV

We can rejoice with Paul when he wrote:

For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

…Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Cor 15:53-57 NIV