2-23-20

Luke 23:34a

Good Friday and Easter are still two months away, but it is not too soon to start thinking about these events. Jesus’ ministry was very important; everything He had to say carries eternal weight. But when Jesus hung on the cross, the Gospel accounts record the seven last things Jesus said before He died. These final words must have great meaning and it will do us good to consider them carefully.

As we are told in John 1:10-11, “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.” Even when His mother was about to give birth to Him, there was no decent place for Him to be born. Before He was two years old, the local king gave the order for His murder. In Jesus’ beginning as a human-being, we see where things are heading for Him; mocked, humiliated, beaten, scourged, and nailed to a cross and left to die.

And still He prayed: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

The first thing to notice is that He prayed. These were Jesus’ first words after He had been crucified and left to die in the hot Judean sun. We can see here and in everything else He said, that Jesus’ mind was clear; He was strong and in control of Himself. He showed us exactly what any of us should do in even a hopeless situation; pray. This is what a Christian needs to do in any situation; seek God in prayer.

He prayed out loud so that we would be taught; even on the cross, Jesus was continuing to teach us. Prayer is so very important. The Bible tells us that Jesus was in prayer often. If Jesus needed prayer, we need prayer. I know how valuable our time is and how much of it gets taken up with unavoidable things. We often think, “I don’t have time to pray.” I invite you to change the way you think about this; instead think, “I don’t have time not to pray.”

In the here and now, God will help in things you ask Him for. He is a very present help in time of trouble. With His guidance, you will find things working out many times. But more importantly, our time on this earth is short. We must build a relationship with the One we hope to spend eternity with. If we can’t take time to do that, it calls into question our desire to be in fellowship with Him. Also, as we talked about last week, the writing is on the wall, Jesus is coming back and we are called to be ready. Prayer is an important part of being ready.

It is amazing that Jesus didn’t pray for Himself. There is nothing wrong with praying for yourself; we ought to do so. Jesus had already prayed for Himself. John 17 records Jesus’ high priestly prayer in which He asks to be brought back into glory with His Father; the glory that He had before He became a man. We also know of His prayer in Gethsemane, where He asked that the cup He was now drinking be taken from Him.

On the cross, Jesus sees that God’s will is for Him to drink the cup, so He submits to the will of the Father and prays for something else. He offers up intercessory prayer for others; for those who crucified Him. He doesn’t limit His prayer either; it is for the romans, the people who cried for His blood, and for the religious leaders who brought all this about. Jesus prays for them all.

It is important to have an understanding of what Jesus is praying for here. He is not asking God the Father to simply turn away from this sin; He is not asking for His Father to ignore what these people are doing. To do so would be against God’s will and against His character. God is completely holy; He is completely just; He will not allow sin to go unpunished. It would go against His very being to “let sin go”. God would not be true to Himself if He let sin go unpunished.

These people had just rejected the Saviour that God had sent to them; they were murdering the person of God the Son. Yes, this was all part of God’s plan, but they were still completely responsible for their part. If anyone deserved immediate wrath and judgement, these people did. But Jesus asked for time for them to repent. Jesus was dying for sin; He was taking the punishment for sin; even the sin of rejecting and murdering Him. In asking for their forgiveness, Jesus was asking for judgement to be withheld for a while, to give them time to understand what they had done, repent, turn to Jesus as Saviour, and be forgiven.

Of course, this prayer was in accordance with the Father’s will. He desires that none should perish. And this prayer of Jesus’ was answered. In Acts chapter 2, we read of the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the 120 Christians gathered together in prayer. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter stood up and preached to those in Jerusalem. His preaching, by the power of the Holy Spirit, pierced the hearts of many who listened. They repented of their actions, became followers of Christ, and received forgiveness. From that one sermon, about 3000 people obtained eternal life.

The Bible tells us that as time went on, thousands more received forgiveness. God the Father answered the prayer of His Son. But that extra time came to an end. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus telling His disciples to be watching for certain signs; when they saw them, it was time to leave Jerusalem and Judea. History tells us that forty years later, Judah and Jerusalem were attacked by the Romans. There was a mass exodus of Christians from the area when the signs were seen. Then, judgement fell on those who still denied the Messiah and Israel ceased to be a nation for almost 19 centuries.

See how powerful intercessory prayer is. See that it will work for even those who crucified the Lord of glory. We all have people in our lives who seem to be beyond the reach of anything. Loved ones who simply don’t believe that they need a Saviour, to those who utterly reject Him and hate Him. Don’t give up on them; don’t stop praying for them. Intercede on their behalf. Ask for the Holy Spirit to work in their lives to prepare them for the Gospel. This is definitely prayer that is according to God’s will. God sent His Son for just this reason: to save souls. He wants to see our loved ones in hell even less than we do; but God has ordained that He moves by our prayer.

How appropriate that Jesus prayed for forgiveness. That is exactly why He came. Mankind would have no alternative but to receive the infinite punishment for our own sins, unless God Himself made some other way; and that is what He did with Jesus. We now have a choice: we can pay the price for our own sins for eternity in hell, or we can accept the priceless gift of Jesus paying the price for us.

Yes, God is just and that justice seems harsh, but it is ultimately fair and right. But God is also merciful and He loves us more than we can possibly know. His love caused Him to send His only begotten Son to take the punishment in our place so that we can have eternal life. Because Jesus took our punishment, God’s justice is intact; and He can offer us mercy. Jesus went to the cross in obedience to His Father; but we can see in this simple prayer, that He loves us as much as the Father does.

We should also note that in this prayer, Jesus fulfilled prophecy. Isaiah chapter 53 is known as referring to the Suffering Servant. As we read that chapter, we can see Jesus throughout. It talks about how He was despised and stricken; that He was oppressed but did not open His mouth, that He was assigned a place with wicked men, yet was somehow with a rich man in His death. It also says he was righteous and that He would justify many. The last two lines of the chapter say:

Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,

And interceded for the transgressors.

It was prophesied that He would intercede for those who were crucifying Him, for the transgressors, and he did. And we know that this was the whole purpose of what He was going through. That He would bear the sins of many; of all those who would come to Him in repentance and accept Him as Saviour.

Jesus said that the people didn’t know what they were doing. This truly shows the depth of the spiritual blindness of the people. There was no excuse for them to not know who He was. He fulfilled much prophecy; He fulfilled all the prophecy of the first advent. All of the law of Moses pointed to the coming Christ; if in nothing else than it showed that the Israelites were incapable of keeping the law and needed a Saviour Messiah. The histories foreshadowed Him; the Psalms told of Him.

Those who studied the law knew what to look for; those who went to synagogue every Sabbath had heard the Old Testament and also should have known. These were stiff-necked people and they let themselves be blinded to the Saviour. Even in this self-inflicted blindness, Jesus prayed for their sight, so that they might be forgiven.

We are also without excuse; we have the whole Bible; we who are Christians have the indwelling Holy Spirit. There should be no room in our hearts and lives for willfulness against Christ. In light of what He has done for us, our only reasonable response is to offer our lives as living sacrifices to Him. Don’t be like the Israelites were then; don’t resist the Holy Spirit. Follow His leading; read the Bible and let it live in your heart.

Finally, we see this great Teacher living what He taught. In Luke 6:27-28 Jesus tells us, “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 mistreat you.” On the cross, Jesus prayed for those who mistreated Him; they cursed Him yet He blessed them by asking for their forgiveness; they hated Him, but He did good for them by praying on their behalf; they were nothing less than His mortal enemies, yet we see the unsurpassed love that Jesus had for them.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to this same degree of self-sacrifice. When we see that Jesus was willing to forgive in His torturers; when we come to understand our own sinfulness and that we were each equally enemies of God before our conversion; we can realize that we have no right to hold anyone else in unforgiveness.

Forgiveness is difficult for us; our feelings demand justice or vengeance. And forgiveness doesn’t mean we let someone off the hook for something illegal. Civil justice is important. The line we must walk in that case is seeking justice without malice; without doing it out of spite or revenge.

We are to forgive others no matter what; to be forgiven by God requires a person accepting Jesus as Saviour. Why the difference? God is entirely holy and perfect; He is completely above and beyond us in righteousness. Because of who He is, sin must be atoned for. Because God is without sin, any sin committed against Him must be punished. We, on the other hand, are all sinners. We people are all in the same boat. We cannot hold guilt over someone else, because we are guilty too. We do not have the perfect moral ground to stand on when accusing another. So, God will forgive only after a person has accepted His Son, because His Son paid the price for the sins. We must forgive others because of our own guilt and in obedience to Jesus.

By the way, ultimately justice and vengeance will be carried out by God for any wrong done against us if that person hasn’t accepted Christ. Vengeance is God’s and He will repay. Just make sure you have accepted Christ so that you don’t come under God’s vengeance.

We also have to understand how to forgive. We often make the mistake of depending on our feelings. We may spend much time in prayer asking God to help us forgive someone, only to continue to feel the hurt and anger. To forgive requires a decision. With our minds, we choose to forgive someone for whatever they have done. Our prayer to God then becomes, “Lord, I forgive this person for what they did. I have chosen to forgive them and do not hold this thing against them.”

That is forgiving someone. We probably won’t feel any different but our feelings will catch up eventually. Additionally, satan will sometimes come against you. He will remind you of what that person did, maybe years later, and you will start to get angry again and he will tell you that you didn’t really forgive. Yes you did; you made that decision. Rebuke the devil and reaffirm your choice.

How amazing is our Lord, how wondrous His love for us. While suffering on the cross, He prayed for sinners. The whole point of the cross was to bring us forgiveness of sins and put us in right standing with God. Let us joyously serve Him; let Him have our lives to use for the Father’s glory; As we look forward to worshiping Him for eternity.

Prayer

Lord Jesus our Saviour, we cannot begin to imagine what You endured for our sins; what You endured as people You loved did this to You; what You endure now when we Your people still turn away from You in rebellion. You are worthy, Lord, of the glory You share with Your Father.

May Your Holy Spirit guide us now, so that we are useful servants to You. We are fallen but it is our desire to bring You glory and build Your Kingdom. Make us more and more like our Saviour.

You know that we are but dust and that we are weak; but we also understand how important it is for us to forgive others. Build up the love of Christ in our hearts, so we can make that decision to forgive. Lord God, help us to be obedient to You as Your Son Jesus is.

We pray these things in the holy and beautiful name of Jesus

Amen