

# Words of forgiveness

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading this morning is from Luke chapter 23, verses 32 to 43. Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals. One on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, He saved others, let him save himself, if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One.

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. There was a notice written above him which read, This is the king of the Jews.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us. But the other criminal rebuked him.

[ 1 : 07 ] Don't you fear God, he said, 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 he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus answered him, Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. We are going to think this morning about the passage that Johnny read a little while ago.

It is in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 23. A word spoken by Jesus from the cross. When I was a student and a young minister, I had a friend who was an old Christian gentleman.

He really was a gentleman. He had fought in World War II with the British Eighth Army right across North Africa and then in the invasion of Italy and fought his way up the Italian mainland.

And one of the things he often used to love to say was that there are no atheists in a foxhole. And that might not necessarily be true. But at the same time, he was alluding to the fact that facing death, facing hardship, really does focus the mind and cause us to show who we really are and what we really trust in.

[ 2 : 26 ] And I'm going to spend a few weeks with you now looking at the death of Jesus and looking at what Jesus says as he dies on the cross.

Here is the Son of God in extremis. In the worst of all situations. And as we listen to what he says from the cross, we are given such an amazing insight into his heart of love and the wisdom with which he lived before God and others.

And that's how I'm going to kind of approach it with you over the next few weeks. It's just to think about the wisdom that Jesus brings to us as he speaks from the darkness of his own suffering.

So today we have these words about the wisdom of forgiveness in Luke chapter 23 verse 34.

As Jesus is killed, as his life is consumed by darkness, as his life is swallowed up by violence, from this pit of suffering, we see words of such wisdom and love and goodness.

[ 3 : 41 ] And Martin Luther King Jr. Who has a sermon on these words. He says, this is love at its best.

It gives us an insight into Jesus that explains why so many people love Jesus and decide to trust their lives to him. Because of the goodness that flows from him, even in death.

We have our Thursday thought. What's the focus here? What is it I want you to remember as you go through the week and get up on Thursday morning? It's this. That today, as I get dressed, I'm going to put off anger and put on forgiveness.

Jesus here is reminding us so much about the power and the importance of forgiveness for our lives. So when we get up on Thursday, we want to put on forgiveness.

And wisdom, Jesus shows us here, wisdom prays for forgiveness. These are the first words that Jesus utters from the cross.

[ 4 : 47 ] We have seven different sayings that Jesus utters from the cross. And this is the first of them. Father, forgive them. He starts with a prayer for forgiveness.

Last weekend, I watched a film called *It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood*. There's a little clip with Tom Hanks and the other actors.

And *It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood* is a song about forgiveness or a film about forgiveness. It's about a journalist called Lloyd Vogel.

And he's a very successful man professionally in his journalistic career. But he's being eaten away by a really corrosive anger against his father.

We see him attacking his father at a family wedding. And this stems from childhood suffering. Lloyd Vogel's mother was dying.

[ 5 : 45 ] And as his mother died, his father walked away and abandoned them. And many of us are like Lloyd Vogel. We carry deep-seated anger with us through life.

The film shows us Lloyd Vogel being sent to interview somebody called Mr. Rogers, who is an American children's TV host. And we see what happens with Mr. Rogers, that Mr. Rogers shows so much concern, so much care and compassion to Lloyd Vogel over his anger and his suffering.

That eventually Lloyd is transformed. And he moves towards reconciliation with his father. It's an amazing portrayal of joy and peace being put on in place of anger.

So replacing anger with forgiveness is a transformative and powerful and beautiful thing. Now, you and I know, we know we live in an angry world, don't we?

We see racial hatred, anger against feminists, anger about gender and sex and identity. We see a lot of anger in the culture around us.

[ 7 : 03 ] Anger about the lockdown, anger about face masks. But although we see an awful lot of anger, we're not seeing an awful lot of forgiveness. People are mocked, shamed, cancelled, silenced, hounded.

It's a hard, hard world out there, it seems sometimes. And anger isn't just something that's out there, is it? Anger can be right in here, in the depth of my own heart.

Or in my home, in my family relationships. Or in the office, or factory, or school, or university with my colleagues. In our words, in our actions, we show the judgments that we're making against each other.

And in the face of that, the Gospel of Luke here in chapter 23, it shows us Jesus. And how Jesus responds to the anger and the hatred of his enemies, as they treat him so cruelly and so harshly. Jesus blew his disciples' minds with his teaching. He taught about forgiveness in such a radical way that Peter, the disciple, was like, Lord, how many times am I supposed to forgive somebody?

[ 8 : 16 ] And Jesus says, 70 times 7. And what Jesus was saying is this, that forgiveness is not just something that we do, it's what we are.

We become forgiving people. It's a habit that shapes our hearts and lives. We are forgiving people. That's my battery running down already, so this could be a quick run through Luke 23.

Jesus challenged the assumptions of his own day, traditional ideas of vengeance and moral justice. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life. In place of that, Jesus said, love your enemies and bless those who persecute you.

So that's what he taught. But now, when he's been crucified, what will he do? Verse 23 begins with this idea, then. Then Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them.

What does that then refer to? Well, it's then, when they twisted his limbs and nailed them to the wood. Then, when they raised the cross into the air and set it in a hole in the ground and suspend Jesus from the nails.

[ 9 : 26 ] Then, when they leave him hanging, stripped and shamed to die in agony. Then he doesn't cry out, Lord, destroy them. Father, burn your wrath on my enemies.

No, he cries out. Then he cries out, Father, forgive them. They do not know what they do. So often pain and suffering makes us self-absorbed and bitter.

But Jesus does not lose his sense of compassion or his other-centeredness. He's so sensitive to the people around him, to what they're doing, to the way that evil is manifesting itself in their lives. He's so concerned and compassionate for them that he prays for his killers. Many people admire Jesus, maybe even you, if you're not a Christian, admire Jesus for his fine words, for his great

philosophy.

But here at the cross, as he's put to the sword, we see who Jesus really is. That Jesus is not just a fine teacher. That he's a son of God, full of the most incredible moral courage.

[10:36] He practices what he preaches. Theory and reality meet in Jesus Christ. He does what he proclaims. What ought to happen is what does happen.

The wisdom of his words is matched by the power of his love. Now often, I know the right thing to do or to say. I know I should forgive. I know I should let go of anger or bitterness.

But somehow I lack the capacity for it. The ideals that I hold to and the reality of who I am in the day to day, there's a massive gap.

And that gap is closed by the presence and power of Jesus Christ. It's in Jesus that what we ought to be and what we are begin to merge.

So we need the presence and the power and the love of Jesus with us so that we can live with the wisdom of Jesus in a very difficult world. So we want to show to the world the power of his love and forgiveness in our own lives.

[11:46] We need the wisdom of Jesus to show love and forgiveness to those who harm us. Who do you need to forgive? Who's the person that you resent?

Who's the one that you complain about? Who do you carry a grudge against? Maybe over many years, a long-term simmering resentment over somebody who doesn't treat you the way you think you deserve to be treated or who did something that you felt was a gross betrayal.

Who do you need to pray for today? Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing. So we need to pray for forgiveness.

If your heart is hard and you can't forgive, pray, Lord, help me. Give me that power of love to forgive others. Second thing I want to talk about, though, is that we need to choose wisdom over ignorance.

Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them. And then he said this, he said, they don't know what they're doing. So the darkness that we find here, the evil that's being manifested as Jesus was put to death, so much of it is rooted in ignorance.

[13:03] They do not know what they're doing. They're naive about the moral ugliness of their actions. They have no clear idea of the monstrous nature of what they're up to.

For many in Jerusalem, as Jesus is put to death, what's going on seems like a righteous act because he seems like a dangerous person. That's what they're being told and that's what they choose to believe.

They don't know what they're doing. They can't see the magnitude of putting the Son of God to death. But in fact, what they're doing is an act of unspeakable evil.

And Jesus prays, Father, they don't know what they do. Forgive them. Ignorance doesn't make us guiltless. But sometimes it offers mitigation. But Jesus is also showing us that ignorance leads to evil.

A refusal to think and gain wisdom is morally dangerous. So I was reading this book. Somebody asked me this morning, what book are you going to promo this week? So here's an old book by Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love.

[14:13] It's a book of his sermons. He's got a sermon on this passage. It's excellent. And in his sermon, he talks about this ignorance. And he talks about soft-minded Christians who just drift along unthinkingly with whatever the culture says.

And don't use their minds to scrutinize it. He says about ideas of racial superiority. He talks about how in 20th century philosophy and science, ideas of racial superiority were being espoused.

And that many white Christians just uncritically accepted these ideas from the wider culture. Took them on board because it was easy and it pitted with their prejudices.

So Martin Luther King says, you're to love God with your heart and your soul and your strength and your mind. You're to engage your mind in loving God.

And if we're going to engage our mind in loving God, then we need to engage with ideas. We need to engage with what the culture is saying and the way it thinks. So I've got a quote from Martin Luther King which says this.

[15:23] If we call ourselves Christians, we had better avoid intellectual and moral blindness. He goes on to say in the same sermon, he says, and this is over 50 years ago, 60 years ago.

Modern man is currently having a rendezvous with chaos, not merely because of human badness, but because of human stupidity. So we have to refuse to be soft-minded.

We don't just agree with whatever the culture says is right. We take what the culture is saying, what society is saying, and we look at it in the light of scripture and we think critically.

We use our mind to its fullest capacity. We look for wisdom from above. So to you and to myself, I would say, hear what God has to say about an issue before you swallow what the culture says.

And there's so many resources out there to help, you know, aren't there? Podcasts, blogs, books, sermons. So be someone who thinks about your faith and how it relates to the world around you.

[16:30] Where does what we believe agree with the culture? Where does it challenge the culture? What are biblical ideas of race, gender, sexuality, creation and environment?

What does the Bible teach us about marriage, about honoring people, about respecting people, about so many big issues, about power and the use of power?

Could you explain what the Bible says about gender, sexuality? If not, are we just being lazy, refusing to think and choosing ignorance?

Ignorance? Compassion flow out of this children's TV host, Mr. Rogers.

And he really cares for broken, hurting people. He takes time with them. He pursues them. He calls them up. He goes to see them. He likes them.

[17:54] He loves them. And at one point in the movie, sorry for all the spoilers, Mrs. Rogers, his wife, is asked, how can he be like this? Is this real? Because people are quite cynical about him, you know, like, is this just some kind of act?

And it's not. This is what he's really like. And she says this. When people say, how can he be like this? She says, he reads scripture a lot. He prays for people by name.

And he swims. So how could he be such a loving, forgiving, compassionate person? Because he turned first to the Father. Jesus turns first to the Father.

Father, forgive them. The power of forgiveness lies in the relationship that we have with our Father in heaven. We go to the Father in heaven first to find grace to forgive.

To find an attitude of forgiveness. To say before the face of God, I will forgive this person. I'm not going to hold on to my anger or to my grudges.

[18:55] And it's after turning to the Father that we can then turn to others to offer forgiveness to them. And there will be people that you need to offer forgiveness to. To let go of resentment and bitterness.

Things might not always be the same between you then again. Maybe trust has been broken. But don't carry bitterness and anger with you through life. Often families have really disrupted relationships.

Long-seated misunderstandings and griefs. Betrayals. Sadnesses. Between siblings. Between parents and their children.

Maybe even with your colleagues. With your friends who've forgotten you and left you in their wake. So many different relationships. Broken. By hurt.

And so we need to forgive. Let's not cry out in anger. But let's pursue people in compassion. Let's be thankful for each person.

[20:03] And for who God has made them to be. Let's offer them grace and forgiveness. In our interactions at work or on social media. Don't just spew out your bitterness.

Turn first to the Father. And then offer forgiveness. And turn to the Father for yourself. Seek forgiveness first of all for you.

Because this prayer of Jesus. Father forgive them. They do not know what they do. That's a prayer that Jesus prayed. Not just for the people in Jerusalem that day.

But for all of us. Who reject him. And so this prayer of Jesus. Father forgive them. He is praying for you. That's good news isn't it?

I know I need forgiveness. So this is good news for me. That Jesus cries out for my forgiveness. I'm a sinner. I'm a bigger, nastier, dirtier sinner than any of you.

[21:09] I know I need a God who loves his enemies. I know I need a God who forgives those who have nailed him to the cross. Who've disowned him.

Or trampled in his goodness. And condemned him. The good news is that God has an infinite love and compassion. And a great willingness to forgive us.

We all have bitter regrets over things we've done. Over sins of the past. Or sins of the present. But God brings forgiveness.

So I want to say receive it. Nothing you've done is too big or too evil. Too bad. No one person is too insignificant. So please let God forgive you today for every wrong you've ever done.

Let it all be washed away. It will be forgotten. It will never be used against you. If you ask for forgiveness, God will never cast up the sins of your past to you and say, look at what you did.

[ 22 : 11 ] God will never shame you. He will wash you. He will cleanse you. Forgive you. And cover you in his love. So we pray for forgiveness in our own lives towards others.

We look for wisdom in our lives. So that we won't walk in darkness. And we look to God first for forgiveness for ourselves and a forgiving heart towards others.

Let me pray really briefly. Lord Jesus, please help us to be forgiving people. We just rejoice and thank you so much that this is good news. Hallelujah. You are ready to forgive us.

Help us to ask you now, Lord, for the forgiveness that we need today. Take our sins away, we ask you. Wash us. Free us from the guilt and the power of all sin.

To live forever in your presence. Amen.