

# **“Father, forgive them”**

Brenda Colijn

Smoky Row – February 18, 2024

## **Introduction**

I saw a story online about two brothers—let’s call them Bobby and James—who got into a fight over their toys. Bobby hit James, and James called for their mother. Their mother sorted out the fight and made Bobby apologize, but James was still mad.

At bedtime, their mother said to James, “You need to forgive Bobby tonight. What if one of you dies during the night and you never get the chance to forgive him?” (Free parenting tip: don’t do this to your kids!)

James thought a minute and then said, “Okay, I’ll forgive him tonight. But if we’re both still alive in the morning, he’d better watch out!”

As we all know, forgiveness is hard!

But both Jesus and Paul tell us to forgive others as God forgives us. Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Luke 11:4)—at least that’s how we say it here. Paul says, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col 3:13).

That means there’s a parallel between the way God forgives us and the way God wants us to forgive other people. Let’s keep that in mind as we look at our passage for today. Forgiveness is so important to Jesus that it’s one of the last things he talks about on the cross.

This week we’re looking at the second of Jesus’ seven last sayings:

<sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

<sup>35</sup> 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.”

<sup>36</sup> The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar <sup>37</sup> and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” <sup>38</sup> There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. (Luke 23:33-38)

Someone who was near death might be expected to pray for forgiveness for his own sins, but Jesus prays for those who are crucifying him. He says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Of course, we know that Jesus doesn’t have to pray for his own sins, since he doesn’t have any. Instead, in an amazing act, he’s praying for his murderers.

What is he saying, and why is it good news for us? We’ll look at Jesus’ saying in three parts, in reverse order. In Part One, we’ll look at Jesus’ statement “They do not know what they are doing.” In Part Two, we’ll look at “forgive them.” In Part Three, we’ll look at “Father.”

## **Part One: “They do not know what they are doing.”**

What does Jesus mean when he says that they don’t know what they’re doing? The chief priests and scribes clearly intend to kill Jesus. Both Herod and Pilate know Jesus is innocent. Pilate even tells the crowds that Jesus is innocent (Lk 23:13-16), but he chooses to condemn him to death anyway. Everything done to Jesus is done on purpose. So when Jesus says they don’t know what they’re doing, if he’s not talking about their intention, what is he talking about?

The idea of sins of ignorance is a big deal in the Mosaic Law. The Law distinguishes between ordinary sins—those committed in ignorance or error or weakness—and sins committed “with a high hand”—that is, in deliberate defiance of the will of God. I think of someone waving his fist in God’s face, so to speak. Some translations call these intentional sins vs. unintentional sins, but that’s not quite what the Law is talking about.

In the Law there are various kinds of sacrifices for ordinary sins. There are even sacrifices for sins like theft, lying, and fraud. We would call these intentional sins, because people do them on purpose, but they aren’t necessarily committed in outright defiance of God. Leviticus 6:1-7 says that when thieves, liars, and fraudsters recognize their guilt, they can make sacrifices and be forgiven.

But there are no sacrifices and there is no forgiveness for deliberate defiance of God. People who do this know they’re guilty and they don’t care. People who sin in this way are to be cut off from the people of God.

For example, here’s what Numbers 15:29-31 says: “The priest is to make atonement before the LORD for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally, and when atonement has been made, that person will be forgiven. One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether a native-born Israelite or a foreigner residing among you.

“But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the LORD and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the LORD’s word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them.”

So the problem isn’t so much their intention as their attitude. Sins committed “with a high hand” can’t be forgiven because the person who commits them is openly defying God. They aren’t interested in repentance and forgiveness. They have essentially already excluded themselves from God’s covenant people. Unless and until they get to the point of repentance, there can be no forgiveness.

In Jesus’ case, the chief priests, the scribes, and the Romans don’t realize the significance of what they’re doing. The chief priests and scribes think they’re killing a blasphemer and political agitator, not the Messiah, the Son of God. Pilate thinks he’s pacifying the crowds by giving them what they want. The soldiers think they’re crucifying a pretender, not the actual king of Israel.

The people responsible for Jesus’ death are sinning, but they aren’t deliberately defying God’s will. So Jesus asks God to forgive them for the sin they’re committing in ignorance.

When Paul talks about his sin of persecuting the church, he says that he was forgiven for persecuting the church because he “had acted in ignorance and unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13). So that’s why Jesus says that they don’t know what they’re doing.

## **Part Two: “Forgive them”**

What does Jesus mean when he asks his Father to forgive the people who have caused his death? What does it mean to forgive? The Greek word translated “forgive” here can have several different senses: send away, let go, set aside, cancel, pardon, or release from obligation. In Luke’s Gospel, forgiveness of sins is compared to writing off a debt.

For example, in Luke 11:4 (Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer), in the NRSV translation, it says, “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” The NIV says, “everyone who sins against us,” but it has a marginal note saying that the original Greek has “indebted to us.” In both translations, Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer says, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12).

It would be worth thinking about how this part of the Lord’s Prayer should influence our financial lives, but that’s beyond the discussion of our passage today. My point is that in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus makes a comparison between forgiveness and writing off a debt. God forgives sins in the same way as someone who writes off a debt or cancels an IOU. Paul says that this kind of forgiveness is what happened at the cross: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:13-14).

Some people think forgiveness is the same as rationalizing or excusing what happened. But that isn’t what forgiveness is. Jesus isn’t asking the Father to pretend that his murder isn’t really so bad. He’s asking the Father to forgive the inexcusable. Nothing can excuse the murder of the Son of God, but Jesus asks the Father not to hold it against them anyway.

Forgiveness releases someone from their guilt or obligation. Someone who has had their debt forgiven no longer has to repay that money. So by praying for his murderers, Jesus is asking the Father to release them from the guilt they would otherwise have. The forgiveness we have because of Christ is even better than what the Israelites had under the Law, because it sets us free from every kind of sin. In Acts 13:39, Paul says, “Through [Jesus] everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.”

When Jesus prays for his enemies, he’s doing exactly what he taught his disciples to do: “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28). When we love our enemies, Jesus says, we’re acting like God, who is “kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful,” he says, “just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36).

This is what God does when he saves us: he shows mercy to people who are his enemies. Jesus commands us to show the same love to our enemies as God has shown to his. We were all his enemies when Jesus died for us (Rom 5:8-10).

In fact, Jesus says that God will show us the same mercy (or lack of mercy) that we show others. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). So when Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them,” he’s showing us what love for enemies looks like, and his example calls us to do the same.

### **Part Three: “Father”**

Why does Jesus say, “*Father*, forgive them”? Jesus claimed early in his ministry that he had the authority to forgive sins. In Luke 5, when people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus, Jesus tells the man that his sins are forgiven. When the Pharisees object that only God can forgive sins, Jesus heals the man’s paralysis to show that “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Luke 5:24). So if Jesus can forgive sins, why doesn’t he just forgive the people who are killing him? Instead, he asks the Father to forgive them.

The Father is certainly a forgiving God. Luke’s gospel gives the best illustration of the Father’s attitude in the parables of the lost in chapter 15: the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. The Father seeks out those who are lost so that he can restore them. We see the Father’s forgiveness especially in the parable of the prodigal son. The father longs for his son’s restoration and runs to meet him, celebrating because of his return. So God the Father is forgiving—but so is Jesus.

Why, then, does Jesus ask the Father to forgive them rather than doing it himself? None of the commentaries I looked at answered this question. I believe that Jesus couldn’t forgive them at that point because they hadn’t repented yet or shown any faith in him. He can’t forgive them because in rejecting him, they’re rejecting the means of forgiveness. The Father, however, could forgive them later if they ever came to repentance and faith.

Repentance is important in Luke. In Luke 17, Jesus tells his disciples, “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them” Luke (17:3-4). Matthew’s version of this teaching doesn’t mention repentance, but Luke’s version emphasizes it.

God’s forgiveness is not a blank check. God takes sin seriously, and he requires repentance. Repentance means turning away from sin. We may think repentance means being sorry for our sins, and that’s partly true. But repentance is being sorry enough to quit! With God’s help, we stop doing the wrong we’ve done, or we start doing the good we were failing to do. When we need to repent for something we’ve done, we can rely on the Holy Spirit’s help. That’s true whether we’ve sinned against God or against someone else.

When we're on the other side and someone has wronged us, we shouldn't write them a blank check either. Forgiveness doesn't mean letting everyone do anything they want to us. God cares about justice as well as forgiveness. When we've been wronged, true reconciliation can't take place unless the other person repents.

But what if the other person can't or won't repent? Maybe they don't accept that they've done something wrong. Or maybe they've died without acknowledging the wrong they've done. What do we do then?

We can do what Jesus did and love our enemy. That doesn't mean we have warm fuzzy feelings for them. Jesus surely didn't have warm feelings for the people who were killing him. But we can pray for our enemies as Jesus did, and act for their well-being—whether that means writing off the wrong they've done to us or deciding that it would be better for them to experience the appropriate consequences. We can see Stephen following Jesus' example in Acts 7:60. As he is being stoned to death, he prays for God to forgive those who are killing him.

## How to Forgive

Ken Sande has an excellent book on forgiveness called *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. He says that complete forgiveness includes making four promises:

- “I will not think about this incident.”
- “I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.”
- “I will not talk to others about this incident.”
- “I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.”

These four promises clear the way for us to be reconciled to the other person.

In the case of someone who doesn't repent, we can do what he calls “positional forgiveness.” We promise God and ourselves not to dwell on the incident or seek revenge. That is the first promise of forgiveness. We can maintain a merciful attitude toward the other person and remain open to possible future repentance and reconciliation. We can't promise not to bring up the incident or talk to others about it, because we may need other people's help to deal with it. And we certainly can't reconcile while the other person is refusing to address what they've done. But making the first promise can keep us from becoming bitter and resentful. So that's positional forgiveness.

According to Sande, transactional forgiveness can take place when the other person repents. When that happens, the other person is ready to receive the forgiveness that we are ready to give them. We then resolve the incident in whatever way is best. Once the incident is resolved, we can promise not to bring up the incident or talk to others about it. Whether or not we can make the fourth promise and move toward full reconciliation depends on how serious the offense was and how thoroughly it was dealt with. In some cases, such as abuse, reconciliation might not be wise or safe.

Forgiving someone—writing off their personal debt to us—doesn't necessarily mean protecting them from all the consequences of their actions. For example, it may be appropriate to make restitution in some way. Serious offenses may have legal consequences.

In Jesus' case, there were consequences for Israel's rejection of him, even if God didn't hold them guilty for his death. Jesus had prophesied that judgment was coming upon Israel (Luke 21:20-24). He said that Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies, and the Temple would be destroyed. This prophecy was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in response to the Jewish revolt. If all Israel had recognized Jesus as the Messiah and followed Jesus' way of peace instead of revolution, that fate might have been avoided. But in praying for God to forgive his enemies, Jesus continued to hope for their eventual restoration. We can do that too.

## **Good News**

So how is Jesus' prayer good news for us? First, it's good news because we're included in his prayer. We were once his enemies, too. But now we're members of his family because he made our salvation possible. The Father has answered Jesus' prayer for us, and we are forgiven.

Second, Jesus' prayer is good news because he's still praying for us. According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus can give people ongoing salvation "because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb 7:25). If we're ever tempted to worry about what God thinks of us, we can remember that Jesus, better than any insurance policy, has us covered.

Finally, Jesus' prayer is good news because it shows us how not to be destroyed by people who hurt us. We can't stop hurts from coming, but we can choose how we respond to them. Regardless of what others do, God still loves us. He can comfort and strengthen us by his Spirit. We can turn away from the anger and revenge that come naturally and act supernaturally to love our enemies and act for their good.

When we are willing to release others from their sins toward us, we also release ourselves from bitterness and misery. It's not an easy road to walk, but Jesus has gone ahead of us, and the Holy Spirit is alongside to help. Jesus' words from the cross show us that he understands our pain, but he also shows us the way to heal.

Many of us have heard the story of the martyrdom of Jim Elliot and four other missionaries by the Waorani tribe in Ecuador in 1956. It's a remarkable story of forgiveness. Two years after the murder of her husband, Elisabeth Elliot went back to live among the Waorani, along with Rachel Saint, whose brother Nate had been killed along with Jim Elliot.

Their witness to the Waorani led to the conversion of the tribe, a previously unreached group. Steve Saint, the son of Nate Saint, spoke at Brethren General Conference one year, along with Mincaye Enquedi, one of the men who had killed his father. They had become close friends.

One part of the story I didn't know, I learned from *Christianity Today* last year: one of the reasons Elisabeth Elliot eventually quit working with the Waorani was that she and Rachel Saint developed irreconcilable differences. It's ironic—but maybe not surprising—that the women were able to take such a huge step of forgiveness toward the Waorani but couldn't resolve the more ordinary tensions between the two of them. For most of us, it's the everyday hurts that build up to ruin relationships.

As we celebrate bread-and-cup communion together this morning, let's take a few moments to reflect on whether we have any unresolved conflicts with anyone—whether we're on the offending side or the offended side. Let's resolve to work on those issues in the coming days so that we can celebrate Easter in love and peace. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to help free us from the things that hold us back. We can't guarantee that everything will work out, but we can take care of our own side of things, with God's help. After all, Jesus is praying for us!