

Father Forgive Them
Luke 23:33-36
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11/3/13

I invite you to remain standing, as you are able, and turn with me in your Bibles, either the Bible you brought with you, or the one in the pew rack in front of you, to the end of Luke's gospel, Luke chapter 23 beginning at verse 33. And as a sign of honor and respect for God's Word, stand with me as we read the Word of the Lord this morning.

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord will last forever, Amen. And you can be seated.

In the spring of 1865, with the final gasps of the Civil War at hand, President Abraham Lincoln stood in the mud and the rain of Washington DC to deliver his Second Inaugural Address. Apprehension mingled with hope as the President prepared. At this critical moment in our history, he looked to the pages of Scripture and the words of Jesus, words of healing and hope, of forgiveness and not enmity, overcoming division with a call for reconciliation.

The nation was deeply divided, and so instead of seeking recrimination and judgment, he spoke these words: "With malice toward none, and charity toward all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work that we are in." And in not more than a few weeks time, the war would be over, the Union victorious in the cause of freedom, and the Confederacy defeated and demoralized. How would the President unite a nation divided by such a destructive period?

Instead of heaping judgment upon the South for their role in the war that cost more than 600,000 American lives, Lincoln prayed—and encouraged a nation to pray. Not for our individual vindication, but for regrouping. "The men comprising the Confederate armies" he said, "go back to your homes, work on your farms and in your shops." His prayers were for reconstruction not retribution. And on April 11th, 1865, as the people of Washington DC celebrated the end to the war, Lincoln asked that the Union band play "Dixie," a song he said now belonged to the whole country.

In the midst of all this, you can almost hear the words Jesus spoke from the cross: "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do." It was a result of the prayers of

our nation's president and those who joined him, prayers not for vindication, but for brotherhood and the mercy of God to prevail that led our nation out of this terrible time.

This morning, in these final weeks of our series on prayer, we're turning to the prayers God's people offer not for themselves, but for others. Our prayers matter for a world that is in need.

Have you ever been asked by someone, "Would you pray for me? I'm going through this thing..." Perhaps it is an illness or the loss of a job, or perhaps it is a family member who is struggling in some way. There are times when we are called upon to pray for others whose lives we may not be able to fully comprehend, but whose need is no less urgent than our own. And let me ask you this, has there ever been a time when you said you would pray, but you didn't? I ask this not to place guilt, but as a starting point in saying that our prayers for one another matter.

A man named Howard Hendricks tells this story:

By the fifth grade, I was bearing all the fruit of a kid who felt insecure, unloved, and pretty angry at life. However, my teacher thought I was blind to this fact and regularly reminded what a problem child I was—as if I didn't know it already. Needless to say fifth grade was the worst of my life.

So heading into the sixth grade, I expected no better. That is until I met Mrs. Noe, who as she went down the roll call and finding my name called out Howard Hendricks, then for a moment just looked at me. "I've heard about you." Then she smiled and added, "but I don't believe a word of it." After class she pulled me aside and said, "I wanted you to know that I prayed for you all summer, and I believe this is going to be the best year of your life." And from that point on, I had a hard time ever letting Mrs. Noe down.

Our prayers matter for a world that is in need. I mentioned a few weeks ago that there are times in the Scriptures when God's people go to God – like Moses in the Desert, Hannah in her childlessness, Elijah and the drought – where God allows the prayers of God's people to influence the course of history. You and I, we are players on the world stage with God. And forgiveness, love, kindness, and generosity matter to God and can impact our world.

Second Corinthians 3 says that "you yourselves," and Paul is talking about the church in Corinth, believers in the Gospel of reconciliation, "you yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets, but on the human heart." Your prayers, your intercessions, your compassion for the lost is Christ's presence to those in need.

In the Old Testament, it was the Priest who brought before God the requests and the offerings of the people. Priests didn't just represent God to the people, but Priests

represented the people back to God. And so we are invited to bring others before God in prayer. To enter into a relationship with others through prayer, and in so doing, stand in the gap for them.

We see this in the story of the men who brought their paralytic friend to Jesus for him to heal the man. These friends were priests, intercessors. They believed so strongly that if they could get this man to Jesus, that Jesus could help him. So they stop at nothing. They even climb up onto the roof in order to lower him down, because they believed that Jesus could help this man. And this guy wasn't healed because he had great faith, but because his friends did. Because these friends brought this man before the Lord, Jesus healed him.

And in this same way, we are invited to bring others before the Lord in prayer, because our prayers can have an impact on other's lives.

You never know what God has in store for the people we pray for, but I'll tell you what we know a little of: we know what is possible. You never know how your prayers are going to impact the course of history on someone else's behalf.

One of the best examples of the power of one person's prayer changing the course of history is found in the seventh chapter of the book of Acts, from the mouth of a man named Stephen. Stephen, one of Jesus' disciples, was called before the Sanhedrin (which is the Jewish high court in Jerusalem) and the Chief Priests. Stephen went on to preach one of the most important and historic sermons ever recorded. There he laid out God's story to the people and the court as a result was incensed, ordering Stephen to be stoned to death.

But in the midst of the crowds, all of whom wanted Stephen's head on a platter, Stephen looked up to the heavens and simply prayed, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." Stephen believed that the God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead was still at work, even in the crazed mob. And in a wonderful twist of irony, the Bible places one singular sentence immediately after Stephen's death that will forever remind us that prayers for others never go unheard.

Sandwiched between Stephen's speech and chapter 8 are these words: "And Saul approved of his execution." Who is this man Saul? This authority who has the power to approve such a heinous act? It's none other than Saul of Tarsus, a man who would come to be known as Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, the man who planted churches all over the Mediterranean, and whom we know as the writer of much of the New Testament. Saul, this man who stood by and approvingly allowed this disciple of Jesus to be stoned to death, was the very one whom Stephen prayed for, and look at what happened as a result.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has a wonderful quote. He says: "Those who've been forgiven always see others as those to whom Christ comes. The Christian is the one who sees the fellow man as one under the cross." Because Stephen recognized his own forgiveness in light of the Cross of Christ, he was able to recognize God's ongoing work even in the life

of the great persecutor of Christians Saul of Tarsus, and it was possibly in large measure because of Stephen that the Christian Church has Paul. St Augustine is quoted as saying that without the prayer of Stephen, we might not have Paul.

We pray for the world, for our enemies, for those who are ignorant, for those who want nothing to do with the church or with Jesus or with any of it, because we can never know what God has in store for his people. Who knows, maybe that person for whom you are praying might be the person who will do great economic justice work, or will find the next therapy or even a cure for cancer, or will be the next great voice for the church. Stephen could never have known what his prayers would mean for Saul, and in the same way, we pray this way as well, because we don't know what great thing God will do in someone because people like us pray.

And now, as people who not only bring others before Jesus in prayer, but as people who have been brought, blind, lame, infirmed, and diseased before Jesus and healed by his blood, we come humbly before the Lord offering our prayers for those whose lives can be redeemed and renewed by the grace of a Savior.

Let us pray now for our world and for God's people.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you did not ignore us, paralytics and persecutors to a person, but because of the prayers of those who loved us and those who've gone before us, you healed us and set us on a new course. Help us, O God, to courageously and boldly bring the needs of our world before you, and in so doing teach us faith, stir in us a passion to see your redemption continue to take hold of your world.

God, this morning we bring before you our friends, family, community, and world. And may the crises they face and the obstacles that stand in the way—whether a lack of wholeness or humanity, recovery or life, may your all surpassing grace intervene now and in days to come to bring change.

We lift to you the lives of those who struggle to find peace. Allow them to see that in joining with you, that peace is possible even in the midst of turmoil. You, Lord, are the calm that stands as the eye of the storm. Enable us to stand with others and call upon your grace.

We lift to you our friends and family who are ill and in need of respite from the pains of these temporal bodies. Be a soothing balm to those who hurt.

We lift to you our nation and those around the world. For those who hold power, and for those who wield it unjustly, intervene with the message of justice and peace. Lord, there was none who held greater power against your people than Saul. We pray that you would change minds and hearts and that oppression would turn to compassion, injustice to equity.

And for our relationships, where there is division, draw us together in common identity as children of the most high God. Let this meal you've set before us remind us of the heavenly banquet you are preparing, to which all are invited and at which all who humble themselves at the feet of Jesus have a place. We pray this feast would draw us together in prayer, believing that you still do incomparable things through the ordinary prayers of your people.

And as we share together these gifts, unite us, strengthen us, and fill us with your grace as we are lifted to your heavenly courts and joined by the people who for all time have prayed these words that you taught us saying...