

THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34.

Had you been in Jerusalem on that fateful day that changed the world, you would doubtless have been brought under the spell of the excitement which was born of the fact that three prisoners were about to pay the death penalty. One of them was Jesus of Nazareth and the other two were robbers. With a natural fondness for the gruesome, the crowd was hideously eager for the show.

Man had done his worst. The Lord of Glory had tabernacled among men, but He was not wanted. The eyes which sin had blinded saw in Him no beauty that He should be desired. At His birth there was no room for Him in the inn, and that fact foreshadowed the treatment He was to receive at the hands of men. Again and again His enemies had attempted His destruction, and at last their vile desires were granted, for the Son of God yielded Himself into their hands. It was determined that His death should be one of intense suffering and shame.

We see Christ as they led Him away from Pilate's Judgment Hall and started to Calvary, bearing His own cross. He did not bear it very far until His strength failed. The sleepless nights, the severe scourgings, the painful crown of thorns, the agony of Gethsemane and the weight of the cross were too much for Him. He either fell beneath the load of the cross or showed signs of doing so. This moved the soldiers to further brutal treatment. There was nothing to do except to transfer the heavy cross to the shoulders of another. It seems that a man from North Africa was just then entering the city, and seeing this brutal treatment, protested, whereupon the soldiers promptly laid hold of him and made him carry the cross from the city gate to Golgotha, which was a skull-shaped hill a short distance outside the city wall.

Upon their arrival at Calvary, they stripped Christ, His garments falling to the executioners, and laid Him on His back on the cross, which was lying on the ground. They drove the cruel spikes through the palms of His hands, fastening them to the two ends of the cross-piece. While the blood was flowing, a hole was prepared in the ground, the cross was lifted on end and dropped with a thud, leaving Him to suffer a lingering and painful death as the blood dripped from His head, His hands and His feet. What suffering and torture the cruel spikes must have brought to His pierced hands and feet! No longer could His hands minister to the sick. No longer could His feet carry Him to aid others. No longer could He instruct His disciples. Finally, His pallid lips began to move.

The words of the dying are usually impressive. The last words of famous men are treasured for centuries. Nations can never forget the precious words uttered by their dying heroes. Every patriotic Hollander cherishes the statement of William the Silent when he was mortally wounded by the bullet of the assassin at Delft in 1584: "My God, My God, have mercy on me and on my poor people." We never forget the death-bed utterances of a parent, a close relative or a bosom friend. We never forget the precious words

which were spoken by our dear ones just before their departure, and especially if they were words of loving comfort or earnest admonition.

The words which Christ spoke from the Cross of Calvary are far more valuable than any statements that have been uttered by human lips. They are pearls of great price. Every one of them should be considered as a rich legacy of each Christian. These words are full of comfort, opening the heart of Christ to us in a wondrous way. They tell us of His unspeakable love for the dying sons and daughters of men.

Christ was suffering untold agony and dying a shameful death. It was not unusual for crucified persons to speak from their respective crosses, but their words usually consisted of wild expressions of pain or fruitless entreaties for release, curses against God or imprecations upon those who had inflicted their sufferings. When our Lord spoke from His cross, He neither cried out for pity nor plead for release.

The fact that the first utterance of Christ on the cross was a prayer does not surprise us. He had maintained the habit of prayer from His youth. For that reason, we would have expected Him to pray in His darkest hour. Naturally, we would have expected Him to pray for His mother, who was heart-broken. She could not understand why her pure and spotless Son should be crucified. Had He prayed for her comfort, sustenance and support, we certainly would not have been surprised. Also, we would have expected Him to pray for His disciples, and especially the weaker ones. We are impressed with the fact that our Lord's first prayer was not for Himself. He did not ask for His own deliverance. Neither did He pray for His loved ones nor for His friends. Rather, He prayed for His enemies. He prayed for the pardon of those enemies who had hounded Him to His death and nailed Him to the cross.

Of Christ it had been said, "Never man spake like this man," and here we have a prayer that does not have any parallel in the history of the world prior to His coming. "Father, forgive them," expresses a spirit that is unlike anything found in the Old Testament. It represents a new and unsurpassed "high" in religion. Revenge was not only practiced in the ancient world, but it was also considered right. To refuse to take vengeance upon one's enemies was regarded not only as cowardly but also as a moral weakness. The Mosaic Law sanctioned "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," but Christ prayed for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying Him. What an example He set in this matter!

It was a common thing for those who were being crucified to curse their executioners and revile them, but praying for them was such an advanced idea that the world has never ceased to wonder at it. Indeed, His prayer for His enemies was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "He was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

This was the most amazing prayer the world had ever heard. In all the annals of the human race there had never been recorded a prayer of such deep compassion and tenderness coming from one receiving such brutal torture. To pray for one's enemies who were inflicting such cruel punishment as was being administered to Christ was something that was unknown in the ancient world. The ancient teaching and practice had been, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy." But, in His matchless Sermon on the Mount Christ had remarked, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). What He preached on the sunny hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, Christ practiced beautifully and perfectly on the grim hill of Calvary. In asking forgiveness for His murderers our Lord was requesting the best thing possible for them.

Truly this is a rare example of magnanimity. Conscious of perfect innocence and the loftiest aims, Christ found Himself not only unappreciated and unrewarded, but misunderstood, ill-treated, condemned on a totally false charge and sentenced to the most cruel and shameful death a man could die. But, even under those conditions, the kindness of His nature had not turned to sourness of spirit. At the very moment when He was the object of the most heartless cruelty man could inflict, and when He was suffering pain of body and of mind that was literally agonizing, He forgot Himself and prayed for the forgiveness of those whose crime was the most horrid that ever was committed by men. He desired the very best of mercies for the worst of sinners.

This first saying from the cross was the keynote of Christ's spirit. This wonderful spirit resulted in the salvation of one of the robbers who was dying by His side. It was this, also, which melted the hard heart of the Japanese criminal, named by one who wrote of him, "A Gentleman in Prison."

A hardened and condemned criminal awaited execution in a Japanese prison. He was a man whose life had been one of abandoned wickedness, and whose hand had taken life after life. A copy of the New Testament had been given to him by a lady missionary. One day, bored with idleness, he took the New Testament and began to read it. But he was only mildly interested. He felt that Christ must be a good man, who sought to help others into the path of virtue. But one day, later on, he took the New Testament and read the story of the crucifixion. He knew much about that sort of thing for he was versed in brutality. In describing his experience later he said, "I went on and my attention was next taken by these words, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' I stopped. I was stabbed to the heart, as if pierced by a five-inch nail. What did that verse reveal to me? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that, with an unspeakably grateful heart, I believed. Through that simple sentence I was led into the whole heart of Christianity. That is how I thought it out. I suppose a man's greatest enemy is the one who seeks to take his life from him. Now at the very moment when Jesus' life was being taken from him, He prayed for His enemies to the God of Heaven, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' What else could I believe but that He was indeed the Son of God?"

It was not a prayer for enemies who had mistreated Him years before, but for those who were there and then murdering Him. As He prayed for His enemies then, He is praying for His enemies now; the past on the cross was an earnest of the present on the throne. He is now in a higher place and in a nobler condition, but His occupation is the same; He continues still before the eternal throne to present pleas on behalf of guilty men, crying, "Father, forgive them." His intercession was most gracious. Those for whom He prayed did not deserve His prayer. They were utterly undeserving of a single good wish from Him. They certainly never asked Him to pray for them, but even scoffed at His prayer when they heard it. Nevertheless, Christ asked for their full absolution: "Father, forgive them." "Do not punish them; forgive them. Do not remember their sin; forgive it, blot it out; throw it into the depths of the sea."

It is not always easy to think of God as our Father when some crushing blow falls upon us and our hopes that had blossomed like beautiful flowers are withered in the burning drought of adversity. At such times, because we cannot understand, it is hard to keep the bitterness out of our hearts and to conquer the feeling that we have been mistreated.

The worst Christ's enemies could do to Him, making His death most cruel and most shameful, was met by His appeal that God would grant the best to them, which was forgiveness for their deliberate, brutal and inexcusable wickedness in doing Him such a great wrong. In praying for His crucifiers not only did Christ set before us a perfect example of how we should treat those who injure and hate us, but He also taught us never to regard any as beyond the reach of prayer.

Forgiveness is the essence of all true blessing. He, who has forgiveness, also has peace with God, rest in Christ and comfort in the Holy Spirit. Forgiveness is the breath of life, the seal of love, the spring of devotion, the antidote of fear, the sunlight of the heart, the secret of service, the flower that wafts its fragrance along the valley of the shadow of death and the passport to the home of the many resting-places above.

Christ was not thinking of what they were doing to Him, but of what they were doing to themselves. That is what hurt Him most. He knew that in crucifying Him they were putting out the light in their own souls. They were destroying themselves. The worst reactions of evil, and its deepest consequences, are always within.

Then the Master gave a reason why the Father should grant His request. Although they knew they were doing wrong, they were ignorant of how great was their guilt. Note His infinite charity expressed in His words, "They know not what they do." Few of us are ready to think in this way of those who do us wrong. We do not imagine that they are ignorant or forgetful. We remember our friendship, the kindly favors we showed them and the things we did for them. We imagine that their acts are nothing less than base betrayal, and all of this heightens our indignation.

The crucifiers knew that they were crucifying a man, but they did not know that He was the Son of God and the Saviour of men. They did not sense the enormity of their crime. No sinner realizes the enormity of his sin. Their ignorance, however, did not excuse them; even ignorance needs to be forgiven. Sins of ignorance need atonement and forgiveness just as truly as do conscious sins. God is holy, so He will not lower His standard of righteousness to the level of our ignorance. Ignorance is not innocence. We have no excuse for our ignorance, because God has clearly and fully revealed His will. They did not know all that was involved in their murderous act, but that did not excuse them.

Unsaved friend, you little know what you are doing in rejecting God's great salvation. You little realize how awful is the sin of slighting the Christ of God and spurning the invitations of His mercy. You little know the deep guilt which is attached to your act of refusing to receive Christ, the only One Who can save you from your sins. You know not what you do. You are blind to your sin, but you are not excused. You may be saved now if you will "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." Knowing that you should do so, won't you do it now? Don't continue to oppose God's will, turn your back on the light of life, reject His love and destroy your soul.