



**THE FIRST WORD - IS FORGIVENESS!**  
**Luke 23:33-34, Acts 2:22-23**

Today, I want to share some thoughts from what historically has been designated as the **FIRST WORD** - from the **SEVEN LAST WORDS OF JESUS CHRIST**.

It should not come as a surprise to anyone that the first word from the cross deals with the same issue of **FORGIVENESS** and really what is being implied is forgiveness of our sins. This was the reason for his coming to earth as one of us.

During my freshman year at Huron College, we had a traveling religious drama group come to campus for a presentation. They performed one short play that I have never forgotten. I am especially reminded of it at this sacred time of the year.

The play begins with a wife and husband together while the children play off in the background. The man is a carpenter by trade. The wife shares with the husband that they could really use some extra spending money to make ends meet. The wife shares that when she had gone to the marketplace she had heard the Roman officials were looking for carpenters to make some crosses for a series of executions scheduled in the next few days. She hints that he should take the job - the pay was good and they really needed the money. The husband shares he really did not like to build crosses, because he knew what they were used for. He liked building chairs, tables, cabinets and yokes, but not crosses.

However, he saw the weariness in his wife's eyes about how badly they needed the money. The light fades, the curtain comes down.

The second act opens in the same house. A small lad runs into the house crying and hollering, "Mommy, Daddy, Mommy, Daddy." They finally calm him down. The mother wraps her arms around him and said, "Son, what is wrong? Why are you crying?"

The small lad shares, "Mom and Dad, I was in town today and coming down the street I saw a big crowd. I saw Jesus, beaten and whipped and carrying one of OUR CROSSES." The father shares that it probably was not our cross that Jesus was carrying, but carrying a cross made by someone else.

The son protested and said, "Dad, it was our cross. When you were negotiating the price of the cross with the Roman official, I placed our family trademark on the top of the cross. When Jesus fell down climbing the hill, I saw for a moment that it was OUR

CROSS!"

The small lad was quite correct; it was our cross and it had our trademark on it. The story is told of the time the late great Methodist preacher, Dr. Charlie Allen, took a group from his church on a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel. As they came close to the place called Golgotha or Calvary – he went on ahead of them. They found Dr. Allen on his knees weeping. The guide asked Pastor Allen if he had been here before. Dr. Allen said, "Yes." He had been here 2000 years ago in the heart and mind of his Lord and Savior Jesus. As the old spiritual proclaims, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

The gospel of Saint Matthew announces his entrance into human history with the words found in Chapter 1:21 - **"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."**

The gospel of Saint Mark declares, **"For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."**

The gospel of Saint Luke declares in the famous passage we read at Christmas, **"For to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."** As we ponder the meaning of the cross, we can see why we are tempted to keep the baby in the manger and not allow Him to climb out onto the cross. It is a painful thing to watch our Saviour - die on a cross - for sins He never committed!

The Book of Revelation takes us even further back in history than the birth of Jesus, **"to declare that Jesus Christ was the Lamb slain before the creation of the world for our salvation."** Can you imagine the incredible sense of time that God has?

We believe that Jesus spoke this first word perhaps as the nails were being driven in. To think that Jesus actually prayed for those who were performing this task is beyond my comprehension. Most biblical scholars like Dr. Barclay share with us that the word 'said' is in the perfect tense in the Greek, which means Jesus kept on saying, "Father, forgive them."

Please notice that Jesus does not say, "Father, forgive **me**," but, **"Father, forgive them!"**

Charles Wesley knew we were never to separate the cross from the cradle when he wrote these words:

**"Hark the herald angels sing,  
Glory to the newborn king,  
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinner reconciled."**

The paradox is how can a God who declares that he is going to punish **sin - then forgive?** How can God be reconciled to sinners? How can God remain holy, righteous, and just - and yet forgive **sin and sinners?**

How can mankind be forgiven from sin? **It would have to be God's idea.** Martin Luther said, "**Christ became what he was not - 'Sin' - in order that we might become what we were not - 'The Righteousness of God.'**"

Charles Haddon Spurgeon writing on this verse from Luke 23:34 states: "Christ prays for you when you do not pray for yourselves." "Father, forgive them" was a prayer offered by Jesus for those who had never sought forgiveness for themselves. Oh, what encouragement this ought to give everyone. Yes, the prayer that Jesus offered some 2,000 years ago is still the same prayer that Christ would offer at this very moment for us today in this place.

Please remember, Christ did not die on the cross for the **perfect**.

Christ did not die for the **Godly**.

Christ did not die for the **Good**.

If Christ would have died for the perfect, the Godly, and the good, there would be no hope for our souls today. However, since he died for the un-Godly, there is hope for me and hope for you.

I realize that sometimes we feel that the most important barometer of a church being successful is that of **budgets, buildings, and baptisms**. However, the cross instructs us that forgiving and being forgiven - is the most important dimension of the church's life.

I believe that the greatest danger to the Christian church is that we become an institution without the incarnational love of God expressed in Jesus Christ. It is so easy to become cool, cold, calculating that the image of our Lord is also one that is very cool and cold.

The greatest message that the church has to offer is that God has provided a way out of sin and guilt with the gift of forgiveness.

The story is told of the time when a much younger Dr. Billy Graham accepted an invitation to hold a crusade in a large Southern city. Dr. Graham wrote to the mayor of the city asking him to share names of some of the people of that city who had deep spiritual problems and were in need of forgiveness. Dr. Graham was going to pray for them in the time leading up to the crusade. Dr. Graham was surprised when the mayor of the city mailed him a large telephone directory. The mayor was theologically correct. Our greatest need – our first spiritual need – is for forgiveness.

Max Lucado tells of the first time he was privileged to see with his own eyes the famous **CHRIST THE REDEEMER STATUE** that overlooks the city of Rio de Janeiro in

Brazil. No magazine picture he had ever viewed in his childhood came close to capturing this impressive work of art. However, the closer he came to the statue; there were two other details to the statue he discovered. First, Christ had no eyes. He thought, **"What kind of Christ was this that refused to see the masses of people below it? Then it struck him. The statue also had a stone heart. What kind of redeemer is this that has a heart made of stone? The statue was held together by concrete and mortar but with no love or passion."** Then Max Lucado said, **"This is exactly the kind of redeemer most people want and have."** (1)

I agree with Max Lucado that stone statues are fine for art work and artistic expression but not for a church to represent - to people who are hurting and suffering and are caught in a vicious cycle of despair and disappointment.

However, there is something so powerful about the Lenten season that even stone churches and its people are moved to tears. Even the church can stop from pushing papers to share the passion that our Lord had for people. His passion was so strong that even a stone tomb could not contain His love.

In a lonely cemetery in New York City, there is told of a grave marked by a headstone which contains just one word - **FORGIVEN**. The source for that word begins with our Savior's cry from the cross today. It is the cry from the cross - not the comfortable Hilton Hotel in Jerusalem. I am thankful that the savior who loves us enough to go to the cross does not give us a cold glance and shoulder from the cross but cries out with great feeling a prayer of petition addressed to His heavenly father.

The artist, William Holman Hunt, once painted what I believe to be one of the most insightful pictures into the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. The work depicts a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Jesus is standing by a wooden trestle on which he has just placed his saw. Lifting his eyes towards heaven - **Jesus stretches** - and raises both arms above his head. The sunlight racing through the open door cast a dark shadow in the form of a cross on the wall behind him, making his tool rack appear as a horizontal bar on which his hands have been fastened. The tools look like the nails and pallet used to nail him to the **CROSS**. Make no mistake about it - from the cradle, the cross cast its shadow over him.

Someone picked up on that symbolism and wrote: **"Whenever you have the choice of two roads, take the road on which the shadow of the cross falls."**

Charles Wesley was one who must have traveled the road on which the shadow of the Cross fell.

No one can write hymns with power and depth of meaning unless they do so. He captures with great contrast the drama and meaning of what is happening from this cry of Jesus which makes up the first word of the cross in his hymn, "Arise, My Soul, Arise:"

Arise, my soul, arise; Shake off thy guilty fears;  
The bleeding sacrifice In my behalf appears;  
Before the throne my surety stands,  
Before the throne my surety stands,  
My name is written on his hands.

He ever lives above, For me to intercede;  
His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead:  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now The Throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds he bears, received on Calvary,  
They pour effectual prayers; The strongly plead for me;  
“Forgive him O forgive,” they cry,  
“Forgive him O forgive,” they cry,  
“Nor let that ransomed sinner die!”

The Father hears him pray, His dear anointed One;  
He cannot turn away, the presence of His Son:  
His spirit answers to the blood,  
His spirit answers to the blood  
And tells me I am born of God.

My God is reconciled; His pardoning voice I hear;  
He owns me for his child; I can no longer fear,  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And, “Father, Abba, Father,” cry. Amen. (2)

Sh! Listen closely! Get real quiet. The most important words in history will be uttered again. Are you listening? **“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM.”**

**Amen and amen.**

**Reverend Eric S. Ritz**

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**Endnotes: The following resource was used in the crafting of this sermon.**

**1. Max Lucado, "Six Hours One Friday," Multnomah Press, 1989, Pages**

**87-89.**

**2. “The Methodist Hymnal,” The Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN, 1964, Hymn No. 122.**

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Portions of this sermon were previously published in Pastor Eric’s book entitled, “PREACHING THROUGH THE CHURCH YEAR: Proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel,” Seven Worlds Corporation, 1992.