

## **“Dying to Forgive”**

What are you dying to do? For example, are you dying to get something to eat? Or are you dying to see the Reds make it to the post season this year? Now, when we use the word “dying” here we don’t mean it literally but rather figuratively. However, let’s consider the time when someone was really, truly, and in the plain and literal sense of the word, dying to do something.

In the gospel according to Luke we read these words: *“And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’”* (23:34). This is the first of what is known as “The Last Seven Words of Christ on the Cross”, and it is a prayer. It is a prayer for those who are putting Jesus to death, slowly but surely. It is a prayer for both the religious leaders and the irreligious Roman soldiers. In this prayer Jesus is not thinking about or praying for himself; rather, he is thinking about and praying for others, in particular, his enemies. He is not thinking about revenge, but rather he is praying for mercy.

This is astonishing, but it should not be surprising. Why? Because in this prayer we see Jesus practicing what he has been preaching. Earlier, in a sermon recorded in Luke 6:27b-28, Jesus said to those who hear: *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”* In his last hours Jesus has loved and done much good: he washed the feet of his betrayer, and he healed the ear of one of his captors. Could there be a greater demonstration of enemies, hate, cursing, and abuse than the crucifixion? Could there be a greater expression of love, doing good, and blessing than what we see in this prayer from the cross? The prophet Isaiah was right when he spoke of the coming Messiah who *“bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors”* (53:12b).

Since *“forgive them”* is a prayer, the question has to be asked: Was it answered? If so, when? It began to be answered on the Day of Pentecost when three thousand of the *“transgressors”* came to faith in Jesus Christ. Since these words of Jesus are a prayer, another question has to be asked: How was it answered? How were sinners saved? They were and are saved through his death; through the shedding of the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. His death provided the very basis on which those who crucified him could be forgiven. A well-known hymn asks and answers a very important question, one that is a matter of life and death: *“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”* Indeed, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, *“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”* (9:22).

The first of these “Last Seven Words of Christ on the Cross” demands a response from all those who hear. When God shows you what you have done, when you have been brought out of your ignorance and recognize and acknowledge your sin, you are also enabled to hear the gospel call to repent (to turn from sin) and believe (to turn to Jesus Christ). And repentance and faith are the means by which the grace of God comes to us, and the leading edge of grace is the forgiveness of sin. As he prayed this prayer while hanging on the cross, Jesus was, in no uncertain terms, “dying to forgive.” He died to forgive all those who come to him in repentance and faith, back there and then as well as here and now. What’s Jesus doing on the cross? He’s “dying to forgive”, to which the great English hymn writer Isaac Watts in his 1707 hymn *Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed* responded with these words: *“Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!”*

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