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Journey with Christ on the Cross (ESV® Edition)

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1. The Primacy of Forgiveness

And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34a)

Jesus has suffered on the cross for six hours. Beaten and weakened, there is not enough breath in His body for sermons or parables. His lungs can only squeeze out a few words at a time. Knowing this, let’s listen carefully and look for what Jesus wants us to hear. His first words were: *“Father, forgive them.”*

What is your most important need?

I love to sit and talk with folks of different religions and social classes as I travel around the world. I have engaged in conversations on street corners, hiking trails, in mosques, temples, taxi cabs, restaurants, and living rooms. I have discovered ordinary people will tell fascinating stories, if I take the time to sit and listen. The stories are as diverse as the people but have two common threads that can each be expressed in a question.

These two questions are sewn into the fabric of the human experience. The **first** question looks outward: “What is wrong with this world?” (The problems of corruption, violence, injustice, environmental pollution, and suffering threaten us all.) The **second** question looks inward: “What is wrong with me?” (We all suspect our personal failures are somehow linked to the bigger problem.) These two threads are stitched tightly to our souls.

Each of us observes sin generally in humanity and specifically in our own hearts. How does Jesus explain this in John 8:34?

Our sin owns us and oppresses us. Our ancestors lived in sin, we live in sin, and our descendants will live in sin. How does Paul

explain the source and symptoms of our sin in Romans 5:12?

The word translated *men* in this verse is ἄνθρωπους (anth'-ros). It refers to both men and women. Every descendant of Adam is spiritually dead—separated from God. *All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one* (Rom. 3:12). We are sinners by our collective ancestry and individual action.

This is a terrifying truth because God is perfectly just and righteous. Each one of us will be judged according to God's perfect standard. All who fall short of perfection will be cast for eternity into the lake of fire, the second death (Rev. 20:11-15). This reality is frightening for sinful people like you and me. Thankfully, God is not only just, but He is also merciful.

God declares in Exodus 34:6b: *"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . .* Write verse 7a-b below:

God perfectly demonstrates both His mercy and His justice in one event—the Crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah. On the Cross, we see God's perfect justice and abundant mercy at the same time and at the same place. In that event, God satisfied His justice with a merciful sacrifice. How does Paul summarize this in Romans 5:9?

God's greatest gift to us is forgiveness. All material blessings from God are temporary and will pass away. All physical healing is brief, and our bodies will again become ill and die. **Eternal forgiveness of sins by the blood of Jesus is the Christian's most precious blessing.** All other blessings pale in comparison.

But this is not the end of the story of forgiveness. Over and over, Jesus tells us we are to share this precious gift with other people. We are His messengers and are examples of forgiveness in this sinful world. There are **three** ways God wants us to demonstrate forgiveness. First, He wants us to . . .

1. **Forgive offenses of non-Christians.**

Someone must harm you **before** you can forgive them. If everyone is always friendly and good to you, you will never learn how to forgive. Since God wants to teach us how to forgive, He allows people to harm us. This is how we come to understand and appreciate God's forgiveness. The apostle Peter wrote we should not be surprised when we experience a *fiery trial* (1 Pet. 4:12). Then, what does he write in 1 Peter 4:19?

It is God's will for His children to suffer harm at the hands of unrighteous people. Jesus promises the world will hate us when we follow His ways and preach His Word. He commanded us to respond to offense with love and forgiveness, but then He demonstrated His command in extreme circumstances.



Under what circumstances does Jesus demonstrate love and forgiveness on the Cross? He has been corruptly convicted, betrayed by one of His close disciples, abandoned by many, insulted, beaten, mocked, spit upon, humiliated, stripped naked, robbed, and finally nailed to a cross to be publicly ridiculed. He suffers unjust harm at the hands of corrupt, careless people. Yet, there is no cry for justice from Jesus. Instead, we see a Model of what He had previously

taught in Matthew 5:44. Write that verse here:

In Luke 23:34, the Greek word for *forgive* is ἀφίημι (af-ee'-ay-mee), which means to “release” or “give up.” It is usually used in a legal sense when a person is forgiven of a crime or debt.

For example: Imagine you crash into the car in front of you while reading a text on your phone. The driver of the car suffers a broken arm, a bloody gash on the forehead, and a severely damaged vehicle. This broken, bloodied driver has the legal right to hold you fully accountable for the harm you caused.

Now, imagine the injured driver walks up to you and says, “I know I have the right to seek justice for your offense, but I give up that right. I won’t hold you accountable for the harm you have caused.” We would all be amazed at this kind of mercy and forgiveness. Yet, what Christ has done is so much more!

God offers each Christian a couple of resources to give us sufficient strength for forgiving. What is the first (Romans 12:19)?

Though people might escape justice in this world, they will not escape God’s eternal judgment. While Christians should work to promote justice and righteousness in this life, we must ultimately look to God. Knowing God will serve justice in the end empowers us to forgive in the present.

Secondly, we can forgive because we were first forgiven by our Heavenly Father. What does Jesus say in Matthew 18:33?

Forgiveness is difficult. However, we are empowered to forgive because: 1) we know God’s final justice will come, and 2) we have experienced God’s forgiveness for our own sin. This is true even when the offender is not sorry for the harm. Jesus forgave before there was an apology. He is our Model for dealing with lost people.

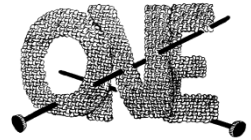
There is a second set of relationships in which God gives us opportunities for learning forgiveness. He wants us to also . . .

2. Forgive offenses of other Christians.

It is one thing to be offended by a stranger, and another to be betrayed by a close Christian friend or family member. The more intimate the relationship, the more painful the offense. The bitterest forms of hatred can grow from unforgiveness among close friends and family members. That is why we have what command to the church in Colossians 3:13a-b?

God uses the marriage covenant to describe His relationship to His people. Over and over, the nation of ancient Israel proves “unfaithful” to their loving God and chases after gods made of stone and wood. We read in Ezekiel 23:37: *For they have committed adultery . . . With their idols they have committed adultery . . .*

The most painful human betrayal is adultery. This is true because the marriage commitment connects a man and woman legally, emotionally, physically, and materially; plus it involves nurturing offspring. In Genesis 2:24b, God describes this unique human relationship like this: *they shall become one flesh*. Marriage is the most intimate human commitment. Therefore, adultery is the most painful offense.



In the book of Hosea, the Bible compares God’s forgiveness of our sin to a husband’s forgiving his wife’s repeated adultery. This story describes a living analogy—God is the faithful, forgiving

husband while we are the repeatedly unfaithful wife. If God can forgive this kind of repeated offense, how much more we should be ready to forgive our brothers and sisters for their offenses!

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus gives specific instructions about how we should respond to being hurt by a fellow believer. The first step is to talk with the person privately.

Later, Peter asks Jesus how many times a Christian should forgive an offense—“*seven times?*” (Mt 18:21). What was Jesus’ answer in Matthew 18:22?

Christian forgiveness requires me to **forgive offenses of non-Christians, forgive offenses of other Christians**, and to . . .

3. Forgive myself as God has forgiven me.

Having shame and guilt about past sins discourages many Christians from doing ministry or sharing the Gospel. Satan convinces them that they are unworthy to do God’s work because of past sin. Nothing could be further from the truth. What do we read in Psalm 103:12?

We have one thing in common with the great saints in the Bible—**they were all sinners**. God cannot use perfect people because there are none. Peter deserts Jesus and then curses and denies even knowing Him. Yet, God uses him to lead the first church in Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene is believed to be a former prostitute. Yet, she is the one God entrusts to be the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection. John Mark deserts Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. Yet, God later uses him to write down the earliest gospel. The greatest missionary in the Bible is the apostle Paul, who calls himself the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

For a forgiven sinner like you and me to be used of God, we must follow the model Paul gives us in Philippians 3:13b-14. Write down Paul's strategy for dealing with past sin:

You will never be able to forgive like Jesus if you have not embraced the forgiveness of Jesus for yourself. But, when you fully accept the Gospel truth that God has absolutely forgiven you, you will have the power to forgive the offenses of others. Christian forgiveness requires: **forgive offenses of non-Christians, forgive offenses of other Christians, and forgive myself as God has forgiven me.**



Forgiveness is our greatest need and the greatest need of everyone we know. So, we obey our Lord's command . . .

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)