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OUR GREAT NEED, GOD'S GREATER GRACE

Luke 23:34

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Luke Lesson 109

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Several years ago when our family vacationed in the Canadian Rockies, we drove up to the Athabasca Glacier. There are signs warning you not to walk out on the glacier. A ranger told us that one year before to the day, a German man had ignored the signs and walked out there. A snow bridge over a hidden crevasse had collapsed and he fell in. Before they could get him out, he had frozen to death. Yet in spite of the warning signs and the extreme danger, there were dozens of tourists, including families with children, walking out on the glacier as if they were strolling in a park!

There are times that you are in great danger, but you don't even know it. Since the greatest danger of all is the danger of dying and facing God's eternal punishment, there are none in greater danger than those who are oblivious to that threat. These people stroll through life a heartbeat away from hell, yet they never even think about God's wrath. It never occurs to them that they will face His judgment on their sins. Such people need to be awakened to their great need so that they will flee to the only remedy, God's abundant grace in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Those standing around watching the crucifixion were in grave spiritual danger, but most of them were oblivious to it. The Roman soldiers saw it as just another day's work. It was a nasty job at times, but someone had to do it and it did pay the bills. Some in the crowd saw it as a gruesome, but interesting spectacle. Many were saddened, thinking that a good man was being treated cruelly and unjustly, but they made no connection between their sin and His death. They saw it as a political vendetta that the Jewish leaders had against Jesus, a prophet who had overstepped the line by confronting their sins. The Jewish leaders were mostly relieved, glad to get rid of this troublesome prophet who was hindering their temple business. So the people were in varying degrees of spiritual danger, but they were oblivious to it.

Into this scene comes a cry from Jesus on the cross that reveals both the sinners' great need and God's greater grace, "Father

forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” It was the first of seven final sentences recorded for us in all the gospels that Jesus spoke from the cross. Luke only records three of them; we will look at the other two in future messages.

Jesus’ prayer reveals our great need and God’s greater grace.

Before we look at some of the spiritual lessons of this prayer, we need to deal with the fact that it is missing from some early significant manuscripts of the New Testament. We do not possess any original New Testament manuscripts, so when there are variations, we have to compare all of the readings that we have and try to determine which is most likely the original.

Two types of evidence must be weighed. The external evidence evaluates the manuscripts themselves, as to which reading has the earliest and most trustworthy support. In this case, the manuscript evidence seems to lean toward the omission of the verse from Luke’s original gospel (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1868; Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, second ed., [United Bible Societies], p. 154).

However, we must also consider the internal evidence. This examines different reasons that a variant may have occurred. In the case of this verse, it is probably easier to explain the prayer’s omission than its insertion. In light of the severe judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70, a later scribe may have thought that Jesus’ prayer was unanswered and hence left it out. There are some other reasons to argue for its being original to Luke, or at the very least, a genuine cry of Jesus from the cross that was later inserted here (see Bock). It breathes the same spirit of forgiveness toward one’s enemies that Jesus taught in Luke 6:27-36.

But even if we assume that it is original to Luke, we need to think carefully about the verse, since many have concluded things from it that contradict other Scriptures. Note briefly four things that this prayer was *not*:

- This was not a prayer for pardon apart from repentance, since such a thing is foreign to Scripture.

In other words, Jesus was not conferring God’s pardon on those who crucified Him no matter how they continued living.

God never forgives sin apart from the genuine repentance and faith of the sinner. Jesus' prayer that God would forgive was a prayer that His persecutors would repent and believe.

- This was not a prayer to cancel God's temporal judgment on Israel.

In the verses just preceding, Jesus told the women of Jerusalem to weep for themselves and for their children, because God would bring such terrible judgment on the nation that they would wish that they had never had children. He is not negating that here.

- This was not a prayer for every person in the crowd that day, but only for some.

If it pertained to everyone, then everyone (including Caiaphas and the other wicked leaders who instigated the crucifixion) would have been saved, but we know that that did not happen. We know that this prayer was answered, because Jesus never prayed an unanswered prayer. While it is true that God spared Jerusalem from judgment for another 40 years, allowing many to come to faith, Jesus' prayer was not just for sparing the city, but for forgiveness, which means God's salvation. It is not enough to say that Jesus provided the possibility of salvation for all, since He prays for actual forgiveness for those who were ignorantly killing Him.

So we must understand Jesus' prayer as applying to those in the crowd whom the Father had chosen to give to the Son, but who had not yet come to faith in Him. In John 6:37-39, Jesus taught that the Father had already given to the Son a particular number of souls, and that Jesus would not lose any of them. Further, in John 17, on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus again mentions in His prayer that the Father has given some to the Son so that the Son may give them eternal life (17:2). He specifically prays for them, not for the whole world (17:9). While God's forgiveness is available to all who will come to Jesus (John 6:37b), the Bible is clear that the only ones who will come are those whom God draws (John 6:44, 65). Thus we would be mistaken to say that Jesus is here asking God to forgive everyone. Christ laid down His life for His sheep (John 10:14-15, 26). They are the only ones who experience God's forgiveness.

- This was not a prayer granting forgiveness to all who are spiritually ignorant.

Jesus' reason, "for they do not know what they are doing," did not apply equally to all in the crowd that day. The Roman soldiers were the most spiritually ignorant, in that they did not know the Hebrew Scriptures that prophesied of Jesus. They had not heard His teaching or seen His miracles. For them, executing this man was just another day's work. They were the most spiritually ignorant of any in the crowd that day. But, their spiritual ignorance did not absolve them of responsibility and guilt before God. Even though they were carrying out God's predestined purpose (Acts 4:27-28), they were liable before God for a terrible crime.

Moving up on the guilt scale, the Jewish crowd knew more about Jesus than the Roman soldiers did. They knew that He was a great prophet at the very least. They knew that He lived a blameless life and that He faithfully taught God's Word. Many of them had seen the evidence of God's hand on Jesus through His miracles. But, they were somewhat powerless to stop their religious leaders from their evil ways. Like us when our political leaders are wicked, they shook their heads in disgust, but there wasn't much that they could do. So their guilt was greater than that of the Roman soldiers, in that they knew more about what was happening. But even though they may have been ignorant with regard to Jesus' true identity and unable to stop the crucifixion, they were nonetheless guilty before God.

The most guilty in the crowd were the religious leaders, since they were rejecting the greatest light. They knew the Scriptures better than the average citizen. They knew that Jesus fulfilled the many Scriptural prophecies about Messiah. They, too, had seen His mighty works, including the recent raising of Lazarus from the dead. They knew that Jesus' teaching confronted their pride, greed, and lust for power. In John 15:22-25, Jesus said,

"If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well.

But they have done this in order that the word may be fulfilled that is written in their Law, 'They hated Me without a cause.'

Thus the guilt of the Jewish leaders was the greatest because they sinned against the greatest light.

But, why then does Jesus seem to use spiritual ignorance as an excuse when He prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"? Peter picks up this theme in his sermon in Acts 3:17, where he tells his audience, "I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also." Paul echoes a similar theme in Acts 13:27, where he says that both the residents and rulers in Jerusalem, "recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him." In 1 Corinthians 2:8, he states that if the rulers of this world had understood God's wisdom, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Regarding his personal testimony, Paul states that even though he was formerly a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent aggressor, he was shown mercy, because he "acted ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13).

In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul explains that in the case of those who are perishing, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." In that sense, every unconverted person is spiritually ignorant. And yet, clearly, God holds every person accountable for his sin and He will judge every person who does not repent and believe in Jesus. No one will be able to stand before God and plead ignorance to escape hell.

In light of these verses, I understand Jesus' prayer (and Peter's and Paul's words) to be reflecting the Hebrew concept of unintentional sins of ignorance as opposed to sins of willful defiance (Num. 15:22-31; Lev. 4:2; 5:18; 22:14). For sins of ignorance, an offering was available to remove guilt (Heb. 9:7). But for willful, brazen defiance, the person was without hope. The author of Hebrews picks up on this when he writes, "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment" (Heb. 10:26-27a). I understand this to be tantamount to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, for which there is no forgiveness (Matt. 12:30-32).

Thus I argue that there were some in the crowd who were beyond the scope of Jesus' prayer. Some of the Jewish leaders had committed the unpardonable sin, attributing Jesus' works to Satan. They were not ignorant and they could not be forgiven. Other Jewish leaders (and only God knew their hearts), like Paul, were zealous for their Jewish system, but they were ignorant of Jesus' identity. Many of them, like Paul, found mercy. Others, like the Jewish crowd, were even more ignorant, and many of them came to experience God's forgiveness. Probably many of the Roman soldiers also found hope in Christ through the witness of the early church. But, while the level of spiritual ignorance may lessen the level of guilt, ignorance is no excuse when it comes to the final judgment. All stand guilty and condemned before God, as Paul argues so forcefully in Romans 1-3.

Now let's focus on four spiritual applications that we can draw from Jesus' prayer:

1. The sin of wicked men is much greater than we ever imagined.

While ignorance lessens guilt, it never removes it. If it did, we should leave the heathen to go on in their spiritual darkness without the gospel. But, as Paul argues in Romans 1:18-20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

A. W. Pink (The Seven Sayings of the Savior on the Cross [Baker], p. 14) states,

Sin is always sin in the sight of God whether we are conscious of it or not. Sins of ignorance need atonement just as truly as do conscious sins. God is Holy, and He will not lower His standard of righteousness to the level of our ignorance. Ignorance is not innocence.

One mark of genuine conversion is that God is revealing to you more and more the depths of your own sinfulness. At the point of conversion, your eyes are opened and you see how evil you have been, living for yourself, ignoring the cross of Christ and the holiness of God's law. As you begin to read God's Word, your eyes are opened more and more, so that you see with greater clarity how holy God is and how corrupt your heart is. You realize how much you have offended God, even as a believer. This increasing knowledge of your own sinfulness drives you to cling more tightly to the cross of Christ where His mercy is revealed.

John Newton reflects this tension beautifully (cited without reference by F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* [Eerdmans], p. 91):

Alas! I knew not what I did,
But now my tears are vain;
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
For I my Lord have slain.

A second look He gave, which said:
"I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom shed;
I die, that thou mayest live."

Thus, while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue;
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon too.

With pleasing grief and mournful joy
My spirit now is filled,
That I should such a life destroy,
Yet live through Him I killed.

Newton's words lead to the second lesson of Jesus' prayer:

2. The mercy of the holy God is much greater than we ever imagined.

Jesus' prayer fulfilled the words of Isaiah 53:12, "He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors." J. C. Ryle remarks, "As soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede"

(*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], Luke 11-24, p. 467). Thankfully, His mercy is not based on our merit or degree of sinlessness, or none could qualify. It is based simply on His sovereign grace, given freely to those who deserve His wrath.

Jesus' prayer for those who crucified Him should teach us never to put a limit on God's saving grace. We often do that, don't we? We see someone who is so evil that we mistakenly think that he is beyond God's saving grace. It is not so! God delights to save the chief of sinners as a trophy of His abundant mercy (1 Tim. 1:15-16). Terrible sins in your past should never hinder you from coming to the cross of Christ for mercy. In fact, the greater danger is that those of us raised in Christian homes will not lay hold of God's grace because we mistakenly think that we're good enough not to need it. We all need it! Thank God, none can exhaust it!

3. Our need to forgive and pray for those who have wronged us is much greater than we ever imagined.

Jesus is our great example. He was free from all bitterness toward those who did this evil deed toward Him. Most people in Jesus' situation would have uttered curses and threats toward their enemies, but would have had no power to carry them out. Jesus had the power to obliterate His enemies, but He uttered no threats. Peter calls us to follow Jesus' example, who "while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23).

The fact is, God will be glorified both in His gracious salvation of His elect and in His just judgment on the reprobate. The salvation of His elect glorifies His love, mercy, and grace. The condemnation of the wicked glorifies His justice and righteousness. But, I think that I can defend the view that God is *more glorified in His mercy than in His judgment*. When He revealed Himself to Moses, He goes on and on emphasizing that He is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin." Only then does He mention, with less emphasis, that "He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Exod. 34:6-7).

This means that as God's people, we must go overboard on showing mercy to those who have wronged us. We can leave the matter of judgment to God. If sinners do not repent, then one day we will rejoice and wash our feet in the blood of the wicked (Ps. 58:10) when God judges them in righteousness. But we must follow the clear command and example of our Savior, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). We have been forgiven a debt of sin that we could never repay. We must show forgiveness to those who have wronged us (Matt. 18:21-35).

4. Our need to trust God in a time of trial is much greater than we ever imagined.

When your friends have wronged you and forsaken you, when those who hate God have persecuted you even to the point of imprisonment and impending death, you will be tempted to think that God has forsaken you, too. But here, at the time above all other times in history when it would seem that God was not at the helm of the universe, when evil seemed to be winning, Jesus addresses God in the most intimate way, "Father." He always addressed God in that way, except in the one instance of His cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" In that moment, He was bearing our sin so that we would never have to be forsaken by God. Thus when we face extreme trials, we need to draw near to our Heavenly Father, not drift away from Him.

But, to know and trust God as your loving Father in a time of trial, you must know Him as such before the trial hits. If you are not walking in intimacy with God before the trial hits, it is not likely that you will know how to flee to Him when it hits. Jesus knew God intimately as His loving and sovereign Father. He knew that nothing happens apart from His purpose of good for His children. Thus Jesus, for the joy set before Him, could endure the cross, despising the shame.

John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was in Bedford jail, imprisoned for preaching the gospel. He wrote (cited by F. B. Meyer, *Tried By Fire* [CLC], p. 113)

This prison very sweet to me
Hath been since I came here;

And so would also hanging be,
If Thou didst then appear.

Conclusion

Have you ever applied Jesus' prayer to your life? Do you know God's forgiveness because you have put your trust in Jesus Christ? Has He rescued you from the imminent danger of God's judgment on your sin? Perhaps someone here is harboring bitterness toward those who have wronged you. If you don't root it out, it will short circuit God's grace in your life and defile many others (Heb. 12:15). You must entreat God for the grace to forgive, so that His mercy might flow through you to others. Even if it seems that He has abandoned you, you must draw near to Him as your faithful Father, pouring out your needs to Him in prayer. Then, even if the world hangs you on a cross, as it did His Son, it will be sweet to you because you will know His presence.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is ignorance no excuse for sin? How can God rightly judge those who are totally ignorant of Christ?
2. John Newton talks about a "pleasing grief" and "mournful joy" as he thinks about what his sin did to Christ. What does he mean? How is the glib spirituality of modern evangelicalism at odds with this?
3. Does forgiving others mean that we should extend forgiveness to them whether they repent or not? What does it mean?
4. Why is it especially important to trust God in a time of trial? How is this at odds with the current psychobabble of expressing your rage toward God or forgiving God?

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