

“Forgiveness! What’s up with That?”—Luke 23:34

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Forgiveness! What’s up with That?”, is Luke 23:34 → *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Have you ever wondered at the ability of some people to forgive? There are many testimonies of people who have been victimized, abused and hurt by what we may consider the most atrocious sins and still have been able to forgive. It may cause us to exclaim in confusion: “Forgiveness! What’s up with that?” It makes one wonder what motivates such forgiveness.

Such forgiveness baffles the mind and goes against the desire to display vengeance. In the midst of such victimization it seems rather natural and justified to hold grudges and take up the cause to make this person suffer as much as I have, if not more. It causes a person to rejoice when his victimizer fails or experiences abuse, feeding the attitude that “pay-backs are sweet.”

The testimony of Jesus’ forgiveness, expressed while He was hanging on the cross, also baffles the mind. When Christ uttered the words from the cross, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they*

do, it was a very unique prayer for sinners. In light of the circumstances He expressed an **unconditional** love for them.

Such a forgiveness goes directly against the world's concept of forgiveness. From a worldly perspective, "forgiveness" happens in such a manner that it really isn't forgiveness. Usually it involves a person approaching someone else to apologize, which initiates a discussion based on questions which demand answers. Such questions as, "How could you have done such a thing to me?" or "What were you thinking?" all demand the person to explain his sinful actions **in an effort to justify them.**

Following much discussion and interaction of rational for the person's sinful behavior usually the victim will find in the midst of all the conversation some bits and pieces of reasons to explain why this person hurt them so badly. It is actually a process of rationalizing the person's sin so that you can have some kind of understanding of why he did what he did in order to "forgive" him. It is usually followed by some reassurance such as: "That's OK. You didn't really mean it." or "That's alright. I can see where you had a really bad day."

Unfortunately, no actual forgiveness has taken place through such a process. What really happened is that sin was simply explained away and justified as not really being sin. It actually minimized sin by trying to find some good in the person's sinful behavior in order to accept the

victimization. When sin is minimized, with the affects of its display not taken seriously, forgiveness cannot happen.

Sin is never “OK.” Picture doing the same thing with God. Aside from His refusing to accept our justifications for our sin, He’d never look down from heaven and say, “That’s OK” or “That’s alright.” God would never say sin is “OK.” In fact, He takes sin so seriously that He staked His life upon it.

Jesus did not look for something good in people upon which to base His forgiveness. Where would He find such goodness? The people involved in His crucifixion certainly lacked good behavior, even according to human standards. Out of fear (cf. John 11:48) the religious leaders sought false testimony against Him with the desire to condemn Him to death (cf. Matthew 27:59-60). The soldiers tortured Him (cf. Matthew 27:27-30; Mark 15:16-19; Luke 22:63-65; John 19:1-3) and, along with those at the foot of the cross, mocked Him (cf. Matthew 26:66-67; 27:39-43) as they nailed Him to that tree.

The reality exists that there is nothing good in us upon which Christ can base His forgiveness. God describes the deplorable condition of all people in Romans 3:10-18 → *None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps*

is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

This description is certainly very applicable to those involved with Christ's crucifixion. Since **everything** we do in this life is tainted by our sinfulness, where was Jesus going to find this goodness upon which to based a **deserved** forgiveness of sin?

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Christ's forgiveness is not based on our goodness but on God's **grace**—His undeserved favor—His unconditional steadfast love. It is based on **God's goodness** as Titus 3:4-5 says: *But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy.* He did not minimize our sin and guilt by justifying it with human reasoning. Instead, He dealt with it once and for all in judgment for our sins which Jesus experienced on the cross. You are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. These words of Jesus mention that these people who crucified Him did not know what they were doing. Perhaps this could be used as justification for forgiving them, such as the world does so often. Since they didn't know what they were doing certainly they must not be accountable for their actions,

right? How many times have you claimed ignorance in the midst of a sinful act as proper justification for release from accountability?

What did Jesus mean by such a statement? He was not minimizing their sin and accountability for it. Actually it is a statement which revealed a deeper meaning behind their sin for which they were accountable to God. It was ignorance in the sense that they *gathered together against . . . Jesus . . . to do whatever God's hand and His plan had predestined to take place* (cf. Acts 4:27-28). They were ignorant of God fulfilling His plan of salvation through their sinful actions, **even for themselves.**

The unconditional forgiveness of God in Christ extends to all people. It is this forgiveness for us undeserving, unlovable sinners which moves us to take on the greatest relationship challenge in our lives—forgiving other sinners with no strings attached. Ephesians 4:32 sums it up: *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, **as God in Christ forgave you.*** Such forgiveness is not based upon conditions such as an apology, family connections, the evidence of justice, sincerity or any other such stipulations. We forgive simply because we have been forgiven in Christ. Such motivation does not need to seek explanation or rationalization for sin because there is none. There simply is no excuse for sin.

Because the forgiveness is **in Christ**, such forgiveness also

recognizes the severity of the sin, as well as the only way to deal with that sin properly when the Holy Spirit brings the conviction of guilt and repentance. Rather than interrogation, faith in Christ produces pronouncement of absolution. You speak the words, “I forgive you.” Such absolution also allows you to deal with the consequences of the sin from the starting point of peace in forgiveness. Forgiveness is based on the goodness of Christ, not us.

Forgiveness . . . what’s up with that? No, you need to get even, give it to ‘em big time, make ‘em suffer and squirm, take every advantage of your “right” to personal vengeance. In the midst of such temptation to let sin breed sin in unforgiveness, faith in Jesus causes His words to ring in our ears: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.* The Holy Spirit moves us to view the greatest display of God’s love for all us unlovable sinners because *God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (cf. Romans 5:8). Amen.

Let’s open our hymnals to page 324 and read together the 5th petition of the Lord’s Prayer and its meaning (it’s in the middle of the second column on the page):

“And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

What does this mean?

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayers because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.” (Luther, Martin. Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation. © 2017 Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO, p. 21.)

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