

**First Word: *FORGIVENESS***  
**Luke 23:32-34a**

This morning, we begin a seven-week journey through the Gospels as, once again, we make our way toward Easter Sunday. Our focus is on Jesus and His cross--specifically, the seven statements we have recorded that Jesus made while on the cross.

Jesus' first word from the cross is about forgiveness. By starting with forgiveness, Jesus points first of all to the problem of sin—and that's not a popular topic, is it?

We used to hear a lot more about sin than we do today. Some folks claim they want to go back to those days—back to the things that were emphasized...say...by the founding fathers of our nation.

Well, let's see. The first permanent settlement in America was in Jamestown, VA. As we've all heard, these early American settlers were very religious folks.

For example, they had a 2-hour church service...every day. The service was 5 hours long on Sundays, and get this: attendance was mandatory. Missing church was a sin, and sin was dealt with severely.

The penalty for missing just one service was the loss of food rations for a whole day. No church, no food! A second absence subjected the guilty party to a public whipping. Still sure you want to go back there?

Missing church 3 times resulted in being placed in wooden stocks every day for 6 months! Historians tell us there is no evidence that anyone in the Jamestown Colony ever missed church 3 times.

The rules about church attendance were bad enough; but if you got caught committing adultery, it got much worse. In almost every colony, an adulterer could be publicly disgraced and then branded—that's right, with a red-hot branding iron--on the forehead or cheek.

I don't know if anyone branded for adultery ever held public office, but I doubt it. So again, I'm not so sure many of those who claim to want to go back there...really do! Just saying...

1. Our Failure to Recognize Sin:

Things are certainly different today, aren't they? I know I wouldn't want to return to the system of punishment practiced by the Puritans, but I do think we still need to recognize the power that sin exercises over our lives...and the kinds of problems it creates for all of us.

Jesus was loving and gracious. He was kind and forgiving; but He also took sin seriously. We see this often in his ministry; but today, I want us to focus on Jesus' very first words from the cross. Let's take a look at our text, Luke 23:32-34a:

<sup>32</sup> Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup> Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

It may well be true that we tend to turn a blind eye toward sin today, but I also think it's true that we're not the first folks to be guilty of this. As Jesus prayed from the cross, asking that those who put Him there be forgiven, He also indicated that they didn't realize what they were doing. So often, that's the way sin is. It's subtle, not so obvious; and yet, it's real.

"Well, there was nothing subtle about the crucifixion of Jesus," you say. "Our Lord's crucifixion was a blatant and horrible example of sin. Anyone can see that!"

Well, no. Not really. Honestly, most of the folks who did this to Jesus didn't see it that way.

It's obvious to us now, but to those who took an active role in crucifying Jesus, this wasn't clear at all. Most of them probably thought, in fact, that what they were doing was right—which should serve as a sobering reminder for us!

In the account of Peter healing the crippled beggar which is found in Acts 3, we're told that a crowd gathered quickly. This was big! A man crippled from birth was now up and walking!

Peter seized the moment and began preaching to the crowd. He told them this man was healed not by his power, but by God's power. He told them it was the same God they worshipped who

had done this--the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--the same God who sent His servant Jesus into the world.

Peter reminded them how they had handed Jesus over to be killed. They convinced Pilate to release to them a murderer instead of Jesus. Then they had Jesus put to death on a cross.

He reminds them of all this, but then Peter says, "Now brothers, I know you acted 'in ignorance,' as did your leaders." Peter said in effect, "I know you didn't realize you were crucifying the Son of God. If you had known, you wouldn't have done it."

Now, Peter learned this from Jesus. From the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them. They do not know what they're doing."

The angry mob thought they were crucifying a traitor. The religious establishment believed they were eliminating a heretic, an enemy of the faith.

The soldiers were ignorant of the truth as well. They carried out their orders, believing they were simply doing what they should.

But isn't that the way it is for us so often—even in just our normal day-to-day living? We do something that brings hurt or injury to another, not because we're mean people, but because we just don't realize what we're doing.

How many times have we said an unkind word, or failed to lend a hand, or neglected to say "thank you," or taken someone for granted—and our action, or inaction, has led to a strained relationship or hurt feelings? It happens all too often, doesn't it?

And when it happens, we lament, "Oh, if I had just thought. I didn't realize it would come to this." We didn't mean any harm, but—listen--the hurt still happened, didn't it?

Now take all those little wrongs, multiply them a million times over, and you have the one enormous wrong that took place at Calvary—the crucifixion of Jesus--the most dreadful example ever of failing to recognize sin for what it is.

## 2. Our Need to Be Forgiven:

We all need to know when we're right, and when we're wrong. Our spiritual eyes need to be wide open so we can see the problem of sin in our lives. When we are guilty of wrongdoing, we need to know it. Only then will we do something about it.

Ignorance is no excuse for sin. Whether we're talking about those gathered at Jesus' cross back then, or any of us gathered here today, sin is sin...whether or not we realize we've sinned.

Our legal system acknowledges this. Ignorance of the law is no excuse, we're told. A person who robs a bank cannot use the defense that he didn't know it was against the law. Ignorance of the law does not let him off the hook.

I've gotten two speeding tickets in my life. When I was twenty-two years old, I got pulled over for speeding on my way to my very first day on the job at Milliken. I knew I was speeding. I wanted to get to work early—you know, make a good impression.

Well, I'm not sure what kind of impression I made, but I do know I got to work late on my very first day—not the best way to get started! Fortunately, my boss had gotten stopped a few days earlier at just about the same place on I-85, so it became sort of a bonding experience for us as we commiserated together.

My other speeding ticket was quite different from that first one, though. I was living in a new place, Roanoke, VA. I was on a city street that I'd never traveled before. I assumed the speed limit was 35 miles per hour; but a policeman pulled me over and told me the limit was 25 mph.

Now, I explained to him that I was new to the city and that in the future I would be sure to limit my speed on that stretch of road to 25. I guess he was concerned that I might not remember to do that, so he gave me a little something to remind me: a ticket!

The first ticket—I knew I was speeding. But on the second ticket, I didn't. I learned, though, that ignorance of the law is no excuse.

It's that way with God's law, too. Some may refuse to hear that God has endowed us with the ability to choose between right and

wrong, but when they choose wrong, they are no less guilty of sin.

Those who put Jesus to death didn't realize what they were doing, but they were still guilty. They still needed forgiveness. "Father, forgive them," Jesus prayed.

We need to be conscious of sin. Like the Prodigal, we need to "come to our senses" and realize the mess that sin makes of our lives and our world. Sin has left its mark on us all!

Now, think about this. I don't know of anything that makes us so aware of our sin as does the cross of Christ. We envision Jesus Christ hanging on the cross...and we are forced to consider what we, in our sin, are capable of doing.

People like us took the very incarnation of love and holiness and goodness and nailed Him to a cross. Along with Jesus, we hung our barbarity and cruelty, our prejudice and ignorance on that cross for all the world to see.

It is the cross that makes sin so plain and obvious. It forces us to know that we are sinners in need of a Savior. The cross doesn't leave us with any doubts about that!

But how much more powerful this realization becomes when we hear Jesus--in the midst of all the jeers, pain, and suffering He was experiencing—we hear Jesus, as He looked out over those who were taking his life, and prayed, "Father, forgive them."

If we have any spiritual sensitivity at all, we realize that we have a problem. Our life and our love just don't stack up against that kind of living and loving. There's a wide gap between Christ's life and ours; a great chasm between the quality of our love and His.

That separation is caused by sin. Sin is the reason we don't live more like Jesus and love one another as He loves us. It's the cross of Jesus that helps us to understand our need to be forgiven. The cross makes this obvious, enough for us to finally "get it!"

### 3. What We Should Do

Now I want you to consider this. Before we ever begin to understand this need we have, God reaches out to us with forgiveness. Jesus' plea from the cross was a sign of God's love offering forgiveness to his children, even before they made any effort to ask for it.

So what does this mean? It means that you and I need only to respond to that which is already offered. Again, that's the Gospel: not what we do, but what Christ has done for us!

Understanding that we are sinners, knowing how far we fall short of God's will for our lives, creates its own response. When we truly see that we have sinned against the God who loves us so much that He sent his only Son to die for us, response happens.

Jesus' cross causes us to see ourselves as we really are. His plea from the cross points to our deepest need. We are sinners who need to be forgiven, who need to be reconciled to God, who need to have our lives changed, cleansed, and re-directed.

I don't think we could admit this if it were not for the gracious love of God made known to us in Christ. Without the assurance of God's love and forgiveness, we wouldn't have the courage to hear the truth about ourselves.

But Jesus enables us to face the fact of sin, to confess it, and to receive God's forgiveness. The whole Gospel story is filled with people whose greatest need is forgiveness.

There's the woman taken in adultery and the paralytic on his couch. There's that little, dishonest tax collector named Zachaeus, the woman at the well, Peter who denied Jesus, and the thief on the cross.

They all had the same problem: sin. They all had the same need: forgiveness. And they all had their need met in the same way: through Christ Jesus: His grace, mercy, and love.

The great Apostle Paul acknowledged both his need and the answer to his need when he wrote: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Then he adds, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ."

If you recall, when we first encounter Paul in the Bible, he's the chief persecutor of the church. But when, on the Damascan road, Paul realized what he'd been doing, it changed his life.

When he realized that even in spite of all he'd done, Christ still loved him and held out to him grace, mercy, and forgiveness, it turned his life around. He became a new man in Christ—a new creation--and he spent the rest of his days telling the world about his new life.

Paul hadn't realized how wrong he'd been before. But when he came to grips with the ugliness of his own sin, and when he understood that God still loved him—once he knew, he responded! Paul gave his life to Christ. He accepted the grace and forgiveness the Lord offered him.

We need to do this too, friends. First, we accept that we've all sinned against the God who loves us and gives us life. We accept by faith that Jesus Christ died for our sins so we wouldn't have to, and that, in Him, we can find forgiveness and eternal life.

Place your faith in Christ Jesus and accept what he has done for you. He died on the cross to help us "own up" to our sin...and see our greatest need.

And then, while on that cross, he prayed, "Father, forgive them." Again, He understands just how much we need it—how much we all need forgiveness.

Do you know, friend, that you're forgiven today? Jesus' first word from the cross let all of us know we need this; and He also let us know where our need can be met.

It's in Him—only in Him is there forgiveness and eternal life. Will you trust in Jesus Christ today?