

### ***“Why These Words?”***

(The Seven Last Sayings of Jesus from the Cross)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Of all the things our Lord might have said while He was dying...why *these* words? Let us consider them in order:

First, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* In a very real sense, the first saying is the most important from the standpoint that it summarizes the saving faith. What is its message? What is its benefit? What encapsulates the reason for Christ’s coming to begin with? One word: ***forgiveness***. The word “forgiveness” means a cancellation of debt. Your account is now clean and clear. Romans 6:23a states, *“For the wages of sin is death...”* The wages of sin put you in the red, but Jesus Christ puts you in the black. Christ began His words from the cross in order to summarize the Gospel, the Good News that explains why He came: it was to cancel your debt. You are forgiven dear Christian; your debt is no more.

By the way, this truth of the Gospel gives us tremendous insight for our call to forgive and speaks to how we now live. This does not mean that the Lord is calling you to have pleasant feelings so as to forget the unpleasant ones. No, rather we keep forgiveness in its objective meaning that I’ve already stated: it means to cancel debt. Do not wait for repayment, but forgive; cancel the debt that your neighbor owes you. Hold nothing in your neighbor’s account. Let it go, wipe it clean.

But to withhold forgiveness; to insist on holding onto the debt is to lock it up in the safe deposit box of your heart and keep it there. You do not cancel the debt; you do not forgive when you live this way and this debt will simmer in your heart and turn bitter and like an acid it will start to eat away at you. But this is not how Christ has treated you.

Even though the soldiers and mockers evidently knew precisely what they were doing, Christ said that they did not, because sin is blinding. It is binding, but it is also *blinding*. It makes us do and say stupid and sometimes insane things, so Christ is nothing but merciful and gives you the benefit of the doubt that you must indeed be like Saint Paul who said of himself (but let’s make it more personal for you): ***“For the good that [you] wish, [you] do not do; but [you] practice the very evil that [you] do not wish.”*** (Romans 7) This Christ knew full well about you when He canceled your debt on the cross, taking God’s wrath for your sin and taking that wrath for you in order to cancel your debt. Your sin is no longer held against you.

Second, *“Truly I say to you, today you will shall be with Me in Paradise.”* This was said to the dying sinner who called on the Name of the Lord. He was in the throes of His worst suffering, dying a terrible death in pain and abandonment. But what does the Lord give when we are in our darkest hours? He gives us a promise: There is heaven for those who call on the Lord. There is paradise even for those who face nightmarish realities; there is hope again for those who feel as if they have no hope. What is more, He answers the prayers of even the worst of sinners, even the chief of

sinner. All that is needed is a faith the size of a mustard seed that prays. We look at our sinfulness and feel despair, "But I haven't even faith the size of a mustard seed," and this is where the second saying comes in: This thief on the cross could do nothing, but when He beheld Christ, His lips and vocal chords were loosed and though his hands and feet were nailed down, his spirit was released from bondage and in beholding Christ, he was given grace to have faith. And then he prayed and Jesus answered. In the same way, Christ answers you, even you, because He came for sinners like the thief on the cross.

Third, "*Woman, behold your son!*" Then He said to the disciple John pointing him to Mary, "*Behold, your mother!*" Through the passion and death of Christ we are joined to become His body, the Church. It is this simple: sin causes separation. It separates us from God and it separates us from each other, even within our own families. But on the cross, Jesus' blood was doing more than merely covering our sins, it was binding us together with God. Think of the cross itself, it is the intersection between the vertical and horizontal; it is the place where God is reunited with man and where man becomes reunited together in Christ. Through His cross, Jesus destroyed the separation. Now we have peace with God and through the Gospel, we now have peace with one another. Think about the Christians around you right now. In this congregation, we have mothers and brothers and sisters. Indeed, Christ had proclaimed: "*For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.*" (Matthew 12:50) In Christ, we are now the family of God...and we have mothers and fathers, brothers, and sisters, and sons and daughters throughout this congregation. The cross of Christ has accomplished this unity.

Fourth, "*My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?*" The devil, however, does not stand still as you receive the wondrous Gospel. It is too good for him to stand still. It makes him rage. He therefore strives to distract you: "This Gospel is not for *you*...true, Christ did all of these great things for the world, but not for *you*...*you are forsaken by God!*" Our Lord knew what the devil would say and how he would tempt you dear Christian, so hear this: Jesus also endured your abandonment and your exclusion. Did you hear me? You can't be excluded; you can't be forsaken, because Christ already went through that for you! His being sin and a curse for you was not hypothetical. No, He actually took your place. He was your real substitute and experienced the desertion due you for your sin. The Son looked out and the Father was gone. He poured out the judgment for your sin and condemned His Son a sinner and declared Him a curse.

Then the devil comes and says to you, "But Jesus did not do this for *you*." The Gospel, however, thunders down on his false accusations and lies. In the light of the Gospel of Christ in your stead, Jesus took your worst nightmare away. What you fear most, He took for you. It cannot happen again, God will never abandon you. The abandonment is gone; the desertion is completed, because the payment for sin was made. The evil one defeated by this Gospel throws a slew of false accusations your way, but then he hears these words that you hear again, "*My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?*" These words rob the devil of his power. Whatever curse he tries to put on you has been taken by Jesus.

Fifth, *"I am thirsty."* But how can we be certain that this gospel is true for me? Could it be that all my sin was truly cast on Him? We are tempted to doubt, but just when we would, we hear this most simple saying, *"I am thirsty."* It is so simple in fact, that we think it unimpressive and innocuous compared to the other words. We are wrong to ever think this way. This saying -- more than any other -- proves Christ's true humanity; that the flesh He bore was ours and that the blood that came from His body was just like ours. He was qualified to stand for you, because He knew thirst just as you do. There is now no doubt. He was the perfect sacrifice, because He was the perfect substitute! What more basically reveals our weakness than thirst? For without quenching it, we die in but only a few days. Jesus knew it, He joined you in your humanity and His thirst proved it.

Sixth, *"It is finished."* The work of salvation is done. Nothing can be added to it. All that needed to happen to save you happened. It was done that day 2000 years ago on the hill of the Skull and it was guaranteed to be applicable to you on the day you were baptized. *"It is finished"* means just that: your rescue from sin, death, and the grave has been accomplished. ***"So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."*** (Romans 6:11) Why so? Because quite simply, *"It is finished!" even as the ministry of Word and Sacrament keeps you in this saving, finished reality!*

Seventh, *"Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit."* There is so much that could be said here, but I will just say this: Because Jesus was put into the hands of the Father that is where you now also reside dear Christian. So hear these wonderful words: *"Do not fear,*

*for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."* (Isaiah 41:10)

Because Jesus went to the cross, these are the things that have been given you dear Christian. May these seven words be kept in your heart, so that whenever you think of death you will think of the death that has saved you. For the Christian, death is now sweet, death now leads to life, death can no longer hold us in fear, because the painful death, the sorrowful death, the agonizing death, the wrathful death was put on Christ. It was and is indeed *Good Friday*. He died so that now you live. This is most assuredly *very good!*