

“The Last Words of Jesus: #1 - Forgiveness”

Πάτερ ἄφες αὐτοῖς οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν (Luke 23:34).

“Jesus said, “Father, forgive these people, because they don’t know what they are doing.”
Luke 23:26-34; Psalm 51 ¹

Perhaps you saw Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, a powerful and controversial film that depicts the last few hours of Jesus’ life. Under fire from critics of many sorts from the first moment that he began to work on the project, Mr. Gibson risked \$25 million of his own money in making it because no studio was interested in being a part of the effort.²



So why did Gibson risk so much money and his superstar reputation to produce *The Passion of Christ*? When he was asked that question, Gibson replied, “I made this movie because I had to do it. I just had to do it. It wasn’t something that I had a choice about. . . . You come to a point in your life when you’ve made millions, you have a wife and family . . . and a drinking problem and you come to an edge of a window and you want to jump—you don’t, of course, but you want to—but something holds you back. And what held me back was this story—the story of Christ. . . . I used His wounds to heal mine.”³

Isaiah saw it coming 2,700 years before Mel Gibson did: “⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by Him, and afflicted. ⁵ But **he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed!**” (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Just for a moment, try to remember the most awful, the most painful, the most terrible thing that has ever happened to you (pause). We work hard to seal such things away, out of our conscious awareness, but can you remember just a bit of that pain? You and I have all been hurt . . . some of us, terribly. But *nothing* you and I have known compares with what Jesus experienced as the flesh of His back was viciously ripped away by the Roman scourge. Our pain has been small compared to the spikes that were driven through His wrists and feet. And you and I have never known anything remotely like the spiritual agony Jesus knew as all the Sin of all the ages—every sin that I have done; every sin that you have done; every sin that anyone anywhere has ever done or will ever do—was compressed into those six awful hours on the cross.

In our digitized and sterilized society, you and I generally work pretty hard to insulate ourselves from death. Though every one of us has an unavoidable appointment with death, relatively few of us these days have actually been present as another person died. And even when we may have witnessed someone’s death, what physical pain there may have been has usually been mercifully relieved by the medical arts.

I suspect that our insulation from death and our distance from the Cross may cause us to misunderstand and to greatly underestimate the gravity of our Sin. For most of us, *The Passion of the Christ* gives us a closer look at the impact of our Sin than we care to have. I’ve watched the film several times, but I’ve never enjoyed it.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 26, 2012.

² Gibson’s risk was repaid handsomely, with the movie grossing \$612 million worldwide.

³ Mel Gibson, in an interview with Julie Reid, *WorshipLeader* movie guide to *The Passion of the Christ* (www.worshipleader.com), pp. 4-5.

If you're reading through the Bible on a schedule similar to what I'm following, we've recently finished reading through the book of Leviticus. It seems to me that the ancient Israelites may have understood the reality of Sin better than we do. If we had lived in those days, how could we have missed the point as we brought a huge bull without any blemish—a perfect animal—to the altar of sacrifice, placed our hands on the bull's head to symbolize that his suffering was for our Sin, and then watched his blood gush against the altar, heard his agonizing bellows, and watched his gradual death . . . in our place?

Yes, that's gruesome, and no, I don't like it. But it's in the Book, from one end to the other. And though I do not pretend either to understand it or to like it, the Bible says that "*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*" (Hebrews 9:22). Our Sin is far more serious than we know, and our release from its penalty comes only at the price of death. As Jesus told his disciples, "*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28).

Later that night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword away. Don't you know that I could ask my Father, and He would instantly give me ten thousand angels? This isn't about power, Peter. This is about Love. No one takes my life from me. I am giving it . . . for you" (Matthew 26:52-53; John 10:17-18).



And so it is that we come this morning to the first Sunday of Lent, that season in which we prepare ourselves to walk with Jesus toward the Cross. Over the next seven Sundays, culminating on Resurrection Sunday, we're going to reflect on what are usually called "The Seven Last Words of Jesus." The First Word from the Cross appears in our text this morning. This Word is found in Luke 23:34 and only Luke recorded it: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*"

Jesus actually spoke this First Word of Forgiveness long before Calvary. The Bible tells us that Jesus is "*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8). The Bible tells us that long, long ago, even before the Word of Creation was spoken, God knew what our redemption would cost, and willingly agreed to that price. The shadow of the Cross fell upon Bethlehem's stable, and it followed Jesus all the days of His life.

Think again about that most terrible time of your own pain. If that pain was caused by another person or other people, can you imagine offering forgiveness while that pain was still being inflicted? Even at this distance, forgiveness may still seem impossible. Yet Jesus' love for us is so great that He said these words even as His mutilated back was impaled with new splinters with every breath.

But, horrible as Jesus' death was, the Bible says that it was "*for the joy set before him [that] he endured the cross, scorning its shame*" (Hebrews 12:2). Have you ever wondered what joy could possibly have taken Jesus to the Cross and then kept Him there? The idea seems like a perverse contradiction. As the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, even to this very moment, what would Jesus have missed if He had chosen to avoid the Cross? Do you know? Well, I'll tell you.

The joy that Jesus gained by the Cross, that He would not have had without it, is the opportunity to spend eternity with you. Let me say that again. ***The joy that Jesus gained by the Cross is the opportunity to spend eternity with you.*** The Bible says that "God so

loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). And that, my friend, is about you.

Why is there no forgiveness without the shedding of blood? I confess to you that I don’t know. God alone really understands our situation, and that’s why Jesus said, “*Forgive them, Father, for they don’t know what they’re doing.*”

Contrary to what much of the world thinks, God doesn’t hate Sin because God wants us to live dull, boring, depressing lives. No, God hates Sin because Sin destroys us. Sin always destroys us. Sin masquerades as that which it is not, and promises that which it cannot deliver.

You and I don’t *begin* to understand what we’re doing. From the very beginning, Adam and Eve were deceived, thinking that by disobeying God’s instructions and going their own way they would gain a more rewarding life. But what they discovered, and what we discover after them, is that our Sin brings only guilt, separation from God, anxiety, despair, and death.

One of the clearest examples of this in the Bible was King David’s adultery with Bathsheba. Because he was the king, David thought he could do anything he wanted to do and get away with it. He thought he could have sex without consequences. Much of our contemporary culture would have us believe this, too. But look at what actually happened. Turn with me, please, to Psalm 51. I want to quickly show you seven things that sin does.

1. Look at verses one and two: “*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*” The first thing that sin does is that it makes us dirty . . . soiled . . . guilty. From the Garden of Eden to Columbia, Maryland, sin’s effect is always the same. What did Adam and Eve know on this side of their disobedience that they didn’t know on the other side? **Guilt. Sin soils the soul.**
2. Look at verse three: “*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.*” Lady Macbeth was not alone in her futile attempts to wash her hands of her guilt. Though she washed them night and day, she was still haunted by the memory of her husband’s murder. The second thing that Sin does is that **Sin saturates the mind.** Sin creates anxiety from which there is no release.
3. Look at verse four: “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*” David knew that his sin had hurt other people—Bathsheba shared his guilt; David had murdered Uriah, her husband; and the child born of their sin died as well—but David also knew that at its root, Sin is rebellion against God, and judgment is sure. **Sin stings the conscience.**
4. Look at verse eight: “*Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*” “*The bones you have crushed*” may refer to physical illness, and much—though certainly not all—of our physical illness finds its root in Sin. We eat too much, and we eat things we know are not good for us. We don’t exercise. We ingest chemicals of all sorts, whether tobacco or alcohol or pollution from our industries. We experience physical and emotional illness of many kinds, much of which finds its root in Sin. **Sin sickens the body.**
5. Look at verse 10: “*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*” The fifth thing that Sin does is that **Sin sours the spirit.** Whether it

takes the form of anger, envy, lust, or sloth, greed, gluttony, pride, or any number of other things, Sin always sours our spirits.

6. Look at verse 12: “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*” David’s plea for a restoration of joy reminds us that **Sin saddens the heart** and steals away the joy our hearts long for, the joy that God intends for us to experience. Jesus told us that “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*”—that is, that life may be joyful, overflowing, abundant, and free (John 10:10).
7. Finally, look at verses 14-15: “*Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.*” The last thing we see in Psalm 51 is that **Sin seals the lips** and destroys our ability to give effective testimony to our faith.

I’m afraid that one of the reasons you and I are not more joyful and effective witnesses to God’s glad mercies is that we are allowing things to remain in our lives that we know are contrary to God’s purposes. That’s why the first verses we’re pondering in our Lenten Journey are these: *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting* (Psalm 139:23-24).

So what does Sin do? *Sin soils our souls, saturates our minds, stings our consciences, sickens our bodies, sours our spirits, saddens our hearts, and seals our lips. That’s why God hates sin.*

Where is sin soiling your soul this morning? Are you involved in a wrong relationship? Are you captured by chemical dependence? Do you struggle with Internet pornography? Do you have a critical spirit? Are you a complainer? Are you selfish, or unkind, or unforgiving? Do you damage others with your tongue? The list is nearly endless.

Mel Gibson actually appears in *The Passion of the Christ*, though we never see his face. The hands that nail Jesus to the Cross in the film are Mel Gibson’s hands.⁴ They are also your hands. And they are also mine.

“*Father, forgive them,*” Jesus said, “*for they don’t know what they are doing.*” As we begin our journey toward the Cross this Lenten season, wouldn’t you like for your soul to be clean, for your mind to be unfettered, for your conscience to be clear, for your body to be strengthened, for your spirit to be sweetened, for your heart to be gladdened, and for your lips to be set free? Is there a sin that God brings to your mind just now that stands between you and such joy?

The Bible says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). “*No matter how deep the stain of your sins,*” says the Lord, “*I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool*” (Isaiah 1:18).

That’s a promise. That’s a guarantee. That outcome was purchased on Calvary’s Tree. While there are many ways to make confession to God that leads to forgiveness, I invite you to consider a very powerful way this morning.

⁴ http://urbanlegends.about.com/cs/celebrities/a/gibson_cameo.htm

You've probably been wondering what that *Post-It Note* is doing in your worship order. I invite you to take that out and turn it over so that the sticky side faces you. Now I invite you to write a word, a phrase, or a sentence on that note that represents your confession of that sin that God brought to your mind almost immediately when I asked you where your soul is soiled this morning. Don't put your name on it. Then I invite you to quietly walk to the altar and affix your sin to the Cross. No one will read these notes. After the service, I will burn them as a sacrifice to God.

Gibson said, "My hope is that this movie will affect people on a very profound level and reach them with a message of faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. . . . We have gotten too comfortable with pretty crosses on the wall. We forget what really happened. We know that Jesus suffered and died, but we don't really think about what it all means. When you see and understand what He went through, it makes you feel not only compassion, but also a debt. You want to repay Him for the enormity of His sacrifice. You want to love Him in return."⁵

I said earlier that the joy that Jesus gained by the Cross is the opportunity to spend eternity with you. Jesus purchased the *opportunity*, but He left the final choice with you. Jesus said, "*There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to me*" (Luke 24:47, NLT).

Will you receive His forgiveness this morning? Will you come to Him?

⁵ Mel Gibson, *WorshipLeader* pastor's guide to *The Passion of the Christ* (www.worshipleader.com).