

THE SEVEN LAST STATEMENTS OF JESUS CHRIST

“Father, forgive them ...”

Luke 23:34

Written By

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Final words. They have a way of sticking with you for a lifetime.

The year was 1981. The month was a cold, foggy January day in Stockton. I was a twenty-two-year-old newlywed working for a landscape company as I awaited acceptance at Dallas Theological Seminary.

The call from my father in San Diego caught me off guard. “Your grandmother wants to see you one more time before she dies.” As one of ten sisters, my father was the last male with the family name. That made him special to the family. Since I was his only son, this made me the next *last male* to bear the name *Baker*. As you might guess, this status made me special to my frail eighty-something-year-old grandmother.

How could I refuse her last request? I boarded a plane shortly thereafter and flew across country to her small little town in South Carolina. It’s called Kershaw. Let me say, the few days I spent back there were amazing. I hadn’t been back there as a man before. Everything about the old house seemed so much smaller, and for the first time in my life I recognized that my grandmother was poor by earthly standards. Linoleum floors were worn through here and there to the floorboards. Furniture looked it was from the fifties (and it probably was). Her old rocker was just that. Old.

But none of that mattered, really. For a few short days, I hugged her, sat with her on the couch with my arm around her, listened to her stories, and saw her reading her Bible in her rocking chair early in the morning light. Let me say, what she lacked in earthly wealth, she made up in personal, heavenly wealth.

The last day with my Grandma Lilly finally came. Waking up about three in the morning to catch my plane back home, I distinctly remember a sense of dark dread. How was I going to tell *her* good-bye? How was I going to hug her tender neck one last time? How was I going to ever get myself to pull away from her and walk out the door? Of all the things I’ve ever done in my life, this was one of the hardest.

As she sat up in her bed in the dim light from a small lamp, first my dad told his mother good-bye, then it was my turn. I looked her in the face and told her I loved her, then I hugged her, and she told me she loved me. At that point I think my body was shaking so hard I'm sure she sensed it, although I was trying to be strong for her.

Time eventually forced me to pull back one last time and move toward the door and out to the waiting car. All the way to the airport, I sat in the darkness of the backseat remembering the moment and her final words to me, "Marty, I love you."

Yes. Final words have a way of grabbing your attention and motivating you for a lifetime.

On another day, in another age, it was a son hanging on a cruel cross. He was arrested on trumped-up charges, beaten beyond recognition, and at 9:00 a.m. on a brisk morning just north of Jerusalem, on a hill which resembled a skull, he was crucified between two thieves. From 9:00 a.m. until noon, despite excruciating pain and suffering, he made three of seven final statements. At noon, deep darkness descended upon the world, and no one heard a word from the son. Then, at 3:00 p.m. the eerie darkness broke, and in the dim light the son spoke four more times, and then he died ... and the world has never been the same since.

The son's name? Jesus Christ.

The son's identify? The Son of God.

Because of who He was and is, because of what He accomplished on that skull-strewn, rocky hill, His final words are some of the most important words ever spoken. Books like Robert Thomas' and Stanley Gundry's *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels* helpfully show us, by aligning all the gospel accounts in a sequential fashion, the order in which Jesus made his final statements while He hung on the cross. We, therefore, don't have them in the gospels so we can read over them quickly. No. We have them so they can impact us, change us, and mold us for a lifetime. We have them, like I have my grandmother's words, indelibly imprinted on our souls so we will never forget the love of the Son for us, but also so we will always remember that His love teaches us how to really live.

So, stand close to the cross of Christ. Listen closely and you'll hear Him whisper some last words you'll never forget. But I get ahead of myself.

The gospel writers set the sad, horrific scene for us.

- Jesus was crucified in a public place outside the city walls. While Gordon's Calvary, which resembles a skull, looks like the place, there is better evidence it was really located just outside the Western Gate where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is now. Either way, the public nature of the capital punishment was seen and known to all, and served as a deterrent to future criminals. The only problem we see here is Jesus was *innocent* of the trumped up charges. How ironic. The innocent One died for the guilty ones to give them the hope of access to God by means of their faith in Him (John 3:16; Rom. 5:1-11).
- Jesus was nailed to the rugged tree for his grueling and gruesome crucifixion at 9 a.m. on a Friday Passover morning according to Mark, who was following Jewish time reckoning (they figured time from sunup to sunset; hence the third hour was 9 a.m., Mark 15:25). How ironic. The Messiah physically died *outside* the camp, as was customary for the sin offering (Exodus 29:14ff; Heb. 13:11-2), in order to provide the potential for spiritual life the Jews *inside* the camp.

- Pilate placed a *Titulus*, or an inscription/label on the top of Christ's cross. Since it appeared in Latin, Hebrew/Aramaic, and Greek, each gospel writer records various facets of Christ's title. Putting all the accounts together, we know the sign read: *This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews* (Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). The Jewish leaders didn't like the sign and asked Pilate to remove it. But he, in typical harsh Roman fashion definitively declined. Why three names? From Pilate's perspective to warn everyone of what happens to those who claim to be kings under Roman rule. From God's perspective, to show that Jesus would die a sacrificial death for all men: The Jew, who represented religion; the Greeks, who represented science, culture, and philosophy; and the Latin's who represented law.¹ Man's sin in Babel (Gen. 11) brought God's curse of language to the world, but with Christ's death the curse would be directly addressed by the One who could deal with all sinners, no matter what language they spoke. How ironic.
- On Christ's left and right were crucified two known criminals, men who were potentially associated with the insurrectionist Barabbas, whom Pilate freed in order to fulfill the Jewish desire to have Christ crucified, and, therefore, silenced (Luke 23:33; John 19:18). How ironic. The innocent One died between two guilty ones.
- Shortly after the crucifixion detail, which was composed of four Roman soldiers, dropped Christ's cross into the pre-prepared hole, they divvied up his garments, which was a customary benefit for units like this.

Just after the Roman crucifixion detail dropped His rough-cut cross into the ground, and while they gambled for His thread-bare garments, Jesus made His first of seven final statements for all to hear. John gives us the fullest account of what they said,

- ²³ Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. ²⁴ They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be," that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: "They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." Therefore, the soldiers did these things (John 19).

The four outer garments, like his belt, sandals, head covering, and outer tunic quickly went to the respective soldiers of the crucifixion detail by means of rolling some dice, as it were. Instead of cutting up the expensive seamless inner tunic into four pieces, the money hungry warriors rolled the dice again to see who would get it. Sad, isn't it? The clothes Jesus possibly wore to give sight to the blind, hope to the adulterous, knew legs to the lame, food for thousands out of a young man's sack lunch, and life to His formerly dead best friend were now gambled away by mindless, unthinking, careless, selfish soldiers. Imagine what this did to Mary's heart as she looked on in total disbelief. Surely, she must have taught, "Get your hands off my Son's clothes in His hour of trial. Couldn't I as His mother, at least, have His inner tunic since you already took the other pieces of His clothing?"

¹ Arthur Pink, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1975), 1045.

As best we can tell, it was right after this gambling debacle Jesus, writhing in pain, looked down on the bizarre event and prayed a loving, selfless prayer for the men:

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves” (Luke 23:34).

Would these have been your last words? To those who had beat you unmercifully and mocked you in the process, to those who had spit repeatedly on you like you were a piece of trash, to those who seemed to sadistically enjoy watching you grimace in pain as they drove a crown of thorns in your head, the natural person wouldn’t be asking their father to forgive His persecutors. No, in our humanness we expect words like, “Father, judge them, vaporize them, and torment them for me!”

Yet this is not what we hear because the man on the cross was/is the God-man. He’s not like you and I. He’s not overcome by feelings of revenge. He’s not overcome by the darkness of our sin and need of a Savior. He’s not consumed by getting back at those who’ve tormented Him. Quite the contrary. He’s consumed with a commodity which is still in short supply in our cruel, ruthless world. It’s called forgiveness.

Ο δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔλεγεν, Πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς· οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν.

“Father, forgive them ...”

Haunting words. Moving words. Instructional words.

What does forgiveness mean? Literally the Greek word means to leave something and simply walk away from it, or to let something go. Jesus uses the word this way in Matthew 5:40 when He teaches us how to respond to our enemies:

“If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also” (Matt. 5:40).

The phrase “let him have” is the same word Jesus uses in Luke 23:34 of forgiveness. It means to just let it go, never to want it again. Used in a theological/religious fashion the word points to walking away from something you had a right to. Jesus had a right to hold these particular sinners accountable for their actions against Him, but He chose, out of love for them, to ask His Father to let them walk. Put in our vernacular, it’s as if Jesus said,

“Father, despite the heinous nature of their actions against me, your only Son, and how you feel prompted to respond, I ask you to overlook what they’ve done and leave them alone.”

Incredible. We’d be gritting our teeth and screaming for justice, for vengeance, but Jesus lovingly and quietly calls for forgiveness.

Forgive who? Contextually, the Roman crucifixion detail. Forgive them for nailing Him to the cross. Forgive them for stooping so low as to gamble for His clothes at the foot of His cross while He writhed in pain.

The Jewish onlookers, however, didn't hear words of forgiveness it appears. They, of all people, should have known who Jesus was because He fulfilled everything the prophets said about the coming Messiah.

But they chose to reject Him anyway. Why? Because an ancient prophecy in Isaiah 6:9-10, which is repeated in Matthew 13:14-15, tells us the Jews were divinely blinded by God because of rejecting the voice of the prophets for hundreds of years:

“⁹ He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.’ ¹⁰ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.”

Years of rejecting God's truth as delivered by the holy prophets moved God to judge them with difficulty in seeing messianic truth when it stood right in front of them. Perhaps this is why John said this of Christ in the opening chapter of his gospel:

“¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1).

One of the reasons why they didn't receive Him is because they were spiritually blind to Him.

Another reason is perhaps because of their collective, innate hatred of all things related to God and His holiness. Once more, John guides our thinking here:

“²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

Those who love darkness don't, by definition, love light ... ever. They run from it like a cockroach. They hide from it. They fight against it. And if they so happen to be purely religious people, who embrace a belief system of their own making, they are usually prone to thinking they are doing God a big favor when they oppose people, like Jesus, who'd dare expose the dark, wicked nature of their beliefs. You know, hatred will do that to you. It will blind you every time from the very thing, from the very one you should embrace.

So, there you have it. As He hung suspended from the cross by His hands and His feet, as He watched the soldiers gamble over His meager clothes, as He thought back over the entire “day,” Jesus made a prayer request to end all prayer requests. He prayed not for judgment upon those soldiers who had mistreated and abused Him, but for absolute forgiveness. Do you think that prayer was heard and fulfilled? I don't think anything Jesus ever prayed went unfulfilled, and this one is certainly no exception.

Read the rest of the story of what transpired after His crucifixion and resurrection in the book of Acts and you'll unearth the coveted answer. Thousands of Jews eventually came to know Jesus as the true Messiah. What grace.

- On the day of Pentecost three thousand people were saved (Acts 2:31, 42).
- Not long after Pentecost thousands more were saved (Acts 4:4).
- Luke also tells us that a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

Let no one doubt for one minute some of these people didn't play a part, in some fashion, in Christ's crucifixion. The point is, that within time, *forgiveness trumped their hatred and drew many of them to the very Messiah they had formerly spit on, mocked, and insulted*. You may need to read that sentence one more time to get your mind and heart around it. Such is the power of forgiveness! I like the way Mark Twain speaks of it:

"Forgiveness is the fragrance that the flower leaves on the heel of the one who crushed it" Mark Twain (Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992: Entries 4080-4083).

Fragrance. What a beautiful way to speak of Christ's forgiveness. It catches my attention and draws me to the One who can make me, the vile sinner, clean. Admit it. Had we been there 2,000 years ago, chances are we would have reacted the way these people did toward One who claimed divine status. Had we been there 2,000 years ago we would have snarled at and sought to cancel the One who dared oppose the unbiblical religious traditions handed down from our fathers. Had we been there 2,000 years ago, chances are good His forgiveness from the cross would have cut through our calloused hearts and drawn us to Him who died for us.

We needn't go back in time, however, because the import of these words are just as powerful today as they were then. We, too, oppose God. We, too, are hostile to all things holy. We, too, embrace darkness and shun the light. We, too, live lives which mock Jesus. And we, too, have a suffering, now glorified, Savior who stands ready to lovingly forgive us and welcome us into His kingdom.

So go ahead, put your name into Christ's first statement from the cross. Make it personal because it is meant to be: "Father, forgive _____." The moment you do that, you walk away from darkness and embrace light, you exchange hatred for eternal love, and you trade hell for heaven.

- Father, forgive me for running from you for so long.
- Father, forgive me for thinking my arguments against your existence were air tight.
- Father, forgive me for living for myself by leaving the wife of my youth and living in a sinful fashion.
- Father, forgive me for arrogantly picking apart your Word so I don't have to bow to you, the Lord of the Word.
- Father, forgive me for all the lame excuses and vacuous rationalizations I've cleverly manufactured over the years to keep me from seeking our forgiveness so I could worship you.
- Father, forgive me for doing everything within my limited power to keep me from ever kneeling before the cross of your dear Son in order to obtain true, lasting forgiveness for my utter wickedness.
- Father, forgive me for putting other gods, other idols at the forefront of my life, idols like wealth, power, prestige, position, academics, a godless/Christless religion, a false view of sexuality, or an in ordinate love of all things political.

- Father, forgive me for self-righteously judging everyone around me and failing miserably to judge my own life in light of what your living, eternal Word says about me.
- Father, forgive me for the secret, heinous sins I have committed in the past which have kept me from ever thinking you could, or would, actually forgive the likes of someone like me.

Ask Him to forgive you right now and He will, immediately. And at that point of forgiveness you pass from being outside His family to be inside His family for all eternity.

For those of you who already know Christ's rich forgiveness, the message from your Master can't be missed, can it? Even as He hung on the cross, He taught us how to live for Him. And just what is He looking for? He is looking for us to turn loose of hatred, to walk away from vengeance and to truly forgive those who have wronged us.

"But, Pastor, you just don't know what has been done to me?" you say.

"You don't know how deeply I've been wronged. You don't know how I've been hurt by people."

Maybe I don't, but I do know one thing. *There is no way on earth the wrongs committed against you or I collectively are greater than what was done to our Savior, Jesus Christ.* I'd submit to you these atrocities pale into absolute insignificance at the foot of the blood-stained cross.

We are left, then, with only one course of action when, not if, we bear the cross for Jesus Christ. Paul, one who fully understood the import of Christ's first words from the cross, put our responsibility this way:

³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4).

We are to forgive as Christ has forgiven us: *fully, freely ... and forever.*

- Imagine what your family will be like when you live like this.
- Imagine how your husband or wife will smile when you restore them from a past misdeed. Imagine how the pain in your friendships will be mended when you chose this holy life path.
- Imagine how your parents will shower their love on you when you admit you're sorry for what you drug them through.
- Just imagine what this city would be like ... or should I say, will be like ... when hatred is trumped by forgiveness. Just imagine how the lost will be touched in a spiritual way that will cause them to marvel at the power of the living God through His people.

Release forgiveness in your life and what its fragrance spread into countless lives, transforming and healing them.

Maybe it's time, then, for you to ask yourself a probing, personal question: What greater thing could possibly happen in your life this Passover/Easter season than for you to not only accept Christ's forgiveness for your sin, but to be empowered to go out and live a life of forgiveness? God awaits your decision. So does your family, your friends, your co-workers, and your acquaintances.

For those who need a gentle shove in the right direction, I share with you an analogy I found most helpful.

Those who trap monkeys set coconuts at the bases of trees where the monkeys live. But these aren't just any coconuts. Small holes are drilled in them just big enough to expose the white "meat," and to allow a hungry monkey to squeeze his hands inside to take hold of the coveted food.

Graphic pictures like this are most instructive, are they not? The only way the monkey can free himself is to release his grip. Most don't and they wind up "prisoners" because of their driving desire.

Are you holding onto the white meat of what was done to you ten years ago, a year ago, or this week by people who should have known better? Freedom through forgiveness awaits you but must first release your grip.