

Crucified Mercy

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The biblical writers when you harmonize the gospels, we see that they recorded seven sayings of Christ on the cross that are recorded for us. Taking them in the commonly accepted sequence by those who have studied such things, Christ looked on those who were crucifying him and said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." As we read in the passage just a moment ago, he looked at the thief beside him and said, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." In the gospel of John 19, he looked on his mother and provided for her care after his departure when he said, "Woman, behold, your son," pointing to the disciple John, and he looked at John and he said, "Behold, your mother." In the hour of separation he cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" A short time thereafter he said, "I am thirsty." When he came time to breathe his last, he said, "It is finished," in other words, the work of redemption was done. And at the end he said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."

Tonight we're only going to look at the first three of those for our meditation but I wanted to set the fullness of it into your minds and set the context for us. It's so very important for us to remember either as believers or as those of you who are not yet in Christ, that God is a God of mercy and he always has been. There's not a God of wrath in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New Testament. That's a false dichotomy that has taken place. There is wrath in the New Testament and there is much much mercy in the Old Testament as well. But when we specifically contemplate Christ on the cross and when we specifically contemplate our salvation, and even more so when we come as we are about to do to the Communion Table, we must remember that God provided salvation from sin for us in his mercy. In his great great mercy upon us, upon his people, upon very undeserving sinners, Christ was on that cross as an act of undeserved mercy for his sinful people, and his words on the cross that we're going to consider this evening give us insight into that mercy.

Now let me first ask a question and answer it. What is mercy? What does that term mean? In the degraded society in which we live, it's a word that is, I fear, gradually slipping out of the public understanding and certainly out of public discourse. There is no mercy to be found in this wicked world, and if you're a sinner in this wicked world, it's easy to despair. If you're conscious of being a sinner and you only look at the world around you, all you see is condemnation upon condemnation and that's why the word of God and Christ himself is so important to us.

What is mercy? Well, the Greek word is *eleos*. It's defined this way: mercy is kindness expressed for one in need. It is kindness that is shown to someone in need. The verb for mercy in the Greek, *eleo*, means this, it means to show concern for one who is in a bad situation or condition. Those are simple definitions but you have the idea of kindness and concern on behalf of the one showing mercy, and you have the object of that kindness and concern, someone who is in a bad situation or a bad condition.

And so mercy speaks to us about the kindness of our Lord and his concern for sinners, and in those first three words on the cross, those seven sayings on the cross and the first three that we're going to look at, we see this about our Lord Jesus Christ. Mercy, true mercy, Christ's mercy sympathizes with those who suffer but it goes further. Genuine biblical mercy is far more than a sympathetic emotion, it's more than just a passing feeling of some sort. Genuine biblical mercy does something about the need. It does what is in its power to relieve the suffering, to make the suffering go away, and that's what our Lord Jesus did on the cross even as he looked upon those who were with him and around him, even, as we will see, even for his enemies. And so this mercy which we rely upon for our eternal salvation, this mercy which alone can take away our guilt and sin before a holy God, this mercy is the concern and care of Christ for us and we see it exemplified perfectly at the cross of Calvary when he suffered, bled and died on our behalf, and what I want to just highlight for you is as we consider his suffering on the cross and we remember it here this evening, that in the midst of his own agony both physical and spiritual anguish that he was suffering as the wrath of God was poured upon him as he bore our sins on his back and suffered in our place so that we would not have to undergo such torment, righteous torment for our wicked deeds, even as he was suffering, in the midst of his own suffering he was showing this marvelous mercy to those that were around him and we get an insight, the blinds are drawn back, the curtain is drawn back a bit for us to see insight into just how deep and profound the mercy of God is that Christ was showing mercy even in the midst of the suffering that he was undergoing.

First of all, we see his mercy for his enemies. His mercy for his enemies. That's number 1 here this evening. We see the mercy of Christ on his enemies. You should be in Luke 23 where we just had our Scripture reading. Our Lord Jesus showed mercy to the very ones who were mocking and crucifying him. Those that had nailed him to the cross, his enemies who were mocking him, were on the receiving end of his mercy rather than a call for judgment upon their heads.

Look at Luke 23:33 again. "When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'" Here they were and then you see it in verse 35 just to remind you, "the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.' The soldiers also mocked Him." In the hour of his extremity, they are showing forth the evil of their heart and really giving us insight into the wickedness that is in the heart of every man. With their hatred of God, absolute perfect holiness was there in front of them and they despised it, and yet they were despising Christ in some measure of ignorance. Christ says, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing." And

so he intervenes in prayer before his Father for the very ones whose hands and mouths were the source of his suffering, in a human sense. He intervened for them. This is immeasurable mercy, immeasurable concern, immeasurable kindness even for the ones who were most hostile to him in the hour of his suffering.

Is there anyone like that else in the universe? Is there anyone else like that who would find it in his divine heart to shower mercy on the one showing such hostility toward him? They were lost. They were ignorant. They were hateful. They despised him and despised the Father. Do you know what? You and I were in precisely that same position. We are conceived in iniquity. We're born into iniquity. Our lives, we don't need anyone to teach us as children how to lie and get angry and to be spiteful and selfish because it all comes naturally out of our hearts. That's why it's so imperative for each one of you to be born again. You must be born again because unless you are born into new life in Christ, you are still in the sin in which you were born into. We were all like that. We were all lost. And speaking to gathered believers here today, in one way or another we were ignorant of our need of Christ. If you think back to your time before you were a Christian, before God saved you, you had no idea of how desperate your spiritual condition was, no idea how desperate the danger of eternal hell was for your sins, and you were lost, you could not find your way to God, you had no power to save yourself. For some of us, we literally lifted our fists against heaven and despite, in spite, in anger against the God we thought we knew, and yet Christ intervened for us at the cross.

Christ wasn't simply intervening for those that were physically present with him simultaneous at the time of his death, he was dying for his people of all time, and the book of Romans 5:10 says, "If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more having been reconciled we shall be saved by His life." My brothers and sisters in Christ, don't ever forget, don't ever forget that your salvation is an expression of undeserved mercy given to you by the hand of a merciful Christ and in some manner that I don't profess at all to be fully able to explain, because Christ died for his people individually by name and as an exact substitute for us, in some manner, in one way or another, he thought of you on the cross. Somehow as he died for your particular sins, not a general atonement just making some kind of general sacrifice for general sinners in a general way, no, Christ was dying for us. The Apostle Paul said, "He gave Himself for me," first person singular. And that somehow we were on his mind and he suffered for us there at the cross while we were enemies. While we were enemies. Beloved, is that not mercy and kindness beyond compare?

To use a different passage from Ephesians 2, we were dead in trespasses and sins. Dead to the Spirit of God. Dead to spiritual things. Dead to our danger. Dead to the word of God. Just dead, dead, dead. No life whatsoever. No ability to respond in repentance or faith. None whatsoever. There is no life in a corpse. There is no spiritual life in an unredeemed sinner which we all were. And what does Scripture say in that context in Ephesians 2? In verses 4 and 5 it says this, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." Mercy. Mercy. Mercy on the ones who mocked him at the cross. Mercy on the ones who would come generations

later drawn by the Spirit of God alone to faith in Christ. Here we are today, those of us that are truly in Christ, we are on the receiving end of incalculable mercy, and you get an idea of what that mercy is like and how free and generous and gratuitous it is when you realize that while he was nailed to the cross and physically unable to move, he looked down on the ones who were crucifying him and he interceded for them with his Father and said, "Father, forgive them." And in the book of Acts, we see that the Father answered that prayer as thousands of Jews came to Christ at the preaching of Peter. And so when we consider Christ, then, when we consider him on the cross, we realize that we are seeing with our mental understanding, we are seeing crucified mercy. Mercy incarnate and it was crucified and yet it didn't stop being merciful at the time, such mercy even for his enemies.

Let's look at a second saying, the second saying on the cross when we see his mercy for the repentant. His mercy for the repentant. And just a final word before we completely turn our attention away. Christ showed mercy to those enemies while they were enemies. The mercy was at his initiative. They didn't ask him for that mercy. They were hating him, they were mocking him, they were crucifying him and while they were hostile like that, Christ showed mercy. That's an example of what he does for every sinner. The initiative for salvation always comes from God, not from the sinner. Always. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love, because He first loved us." Our love for Christ is in response to a prior act, a prior love, a prior movement of the Spirit of God on our hearts to open our eyes to sin and open our eyes to Christ, and I love that about biblical salvation because it means that God gets all of the glory for it. Understanding of biblical salvation magnifies the glory and mercy of God because it's mercy on those while they were hateful toward him. That's real love. That's real mercy. That's real kindness.

Now moving ahead here. Point 2: mercy for the repentant. Mercy for the repentant. Christ showed mercy to a repentant sinner at verse 39 of Luke 23, and as you compare Scripture with Scripture, as you read all the gospel accounts, you realize that a short time earlier even this repentant thief had been mocking Christ as well and hurling abuse at him, but there was a work in his heart. As he read the inscription that was above the head of Jesus, "This is Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews," he read about this King, he saw the way that the King was showing mercy, and the Spirit of God worked in his heart as well and let's look at this. Verse 39, "One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!' But the other answered, and rebuking him said, 'Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our sins; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!'"

Has there ever been a more obviously helpless man calling out to Christ than the thief on the cross? Death was a short time away from him. He was, by his own testimony, a man guilty and worthy of death. He had nothing to offer to Christ whatsoever. He simply understood his sin and called out to Christ and how did Christ respond to him? What was the thief doing here? Beloved, do you see it? In a positive sense, in a confessional sense, he says, "We are receiving what we deserve for our deeds." He is acknowledging his

guilt. He says, "I am on this cross and deservedly so. I deserve condemnation." And so he has nothing of merit to bring to Christ whatsoever. He's not in any position to perform any religious rituals, he's not in any position to do any deeds of mercy or to give any money to the local synagogue. It's over for him as far as what he can do in life, and all he has, he hangs there stripped of his clothing as a guilty condemned sinner and he knows it, and he knew his need, and so in utter humility, he asks this merciful Christ for something that he knows he does not deserve. He says, "Jesus," verse 42, look at it again with me, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" Do you see the first person singular again? Do you see how personal and individual it is? As he's drawing some of his dying breaths, he cries out, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And what did Christ do? He responded in mercy. He looked on this one in unspeakable need, unspeakable helplessness, and with great concern, with great kindness, he makes a promise to him. He says to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." And the torture of a guilty conscience, the torture of a body wracked in pain is suddenly replaced with the shining, bright, flaming hope of Paradise just on the other side of his suffering, speaking of the thief on the cross. And on that day, Jesus, as it were, carried that thief into Paradise with him. That's mercy. That's just unfathomable mercy.

Now I'm always mindful that I'm talking to a mixed audience in the sense that many, I trust, are in Christ but there are several, if not many, who are not, and so it's very important to me as a preacher, however awkward it may make my transitions, it's always important for me to make a distinction and to trust the Spirit of God to speak to hearts and apply the word as it needs to be applied. There were two thieves with Jesus being crucified. Only one of them went to Paradise. The other was left in his sins. And it is imperative for you who are not in Christ not to presume on this mercy, not to presume on it by saying, "I'll get it eventually," or to assume that everybody is going to heaven. That's not true. Not everyone is going to heaven, in fact, Jesus said there are few who find the path that leads to life. And so while we are all encouraged by the example of the repentant thief, that Christ will receive even the worst of sinners, even in their hour of desperation he will show mercy to the one who calls upon him, there is a warning to the one who doesn't. There is hope of mercy for the repentant but there is a warning to the unrepentant that not all are going to be saved, and so I encourage you, my friends, I ask by the mercy of God that your eyes would be opened and to realize that you need to come as the repentant thief and not presume that you will not be like the thief that was left in his sins. And the hope for us, the promise of it all in Scripture is that every sinner who genuinely comes to Christ asking for mercy will receive mercy from his hand.

In the gospel of John 1, it says, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe on His name." The promise is for those who are near and for those who are far away. The promise is for those who have carried their guilt for a long time, and the promise is equally available to the one who is just feeling the first pangs of guilt, only now being opened. You don't need to wait to come until you feel worse about your sins. You certainly shouldn't wait to come to Christ while you try to clean up your life. You can't do that. There's nothing that you can do to make yourself more acceptable to a holy God. You just come to Christ in mercy and remember that the thief cried out, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your

kingdom!" And the response of Christ was immediate, "You will be with Me in Paradise."

What can we say about this except that this is one wonderfully merciful Savior, and that that mercy, that fountain of mercy is flowing just as clear and full and bright today as it was back 2,000 years ago. By nature, he is merciful. Mercy is one of the immutable attributes of God. It does not change and so when any sinner comes to Christ asking in repentant faith for mercy, he will find it. It's a promise from God. It is a promise of blessing. I like to say that, I like to remind people of that. As we preach the gospel and as we warn sinners of their guilt and of coming judgment, it's not simply a warning, a cold, austere warning that we give. There is alongside that this wonderful promise of mercy to those who will come, a promise to be believed, a promise to be trusted, a promise to be received that Christ shows mercy to every repentant sinner that comes to him. Without exception. There's none that he turns away. There is nothing that you have done in your life that hinders you from receiving Christ and his salvation. His blood covers the foulest, his blood makes the foulest clean. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to cleanse us from our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness because he's merciful.

Thirdly, we see his mercy for his mother. His mercy for his mother and for this we turn over to the gospel of John 19 in verse 25. While he was on the cross, our Lord showed mercy to his widowed mother as she was watching him die. Look at verse 25 with me. You know, the fifth commandment tells God's moral laws that children are to honor their parents. "Honor your father and mother for this is right," as it says in Ephesian 6 as a comment on it, and here we see Christ honoring his own mother in his dying hour and caring for her, fulfilling the law of God in the time of his deepest anguish. So in verse 25, John 19, we see this, "But standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus then saw His mother," remember, he's nailed to a cross, the arms which no doubt at times held his mother in a loving embrace, as a young child putting his arms around her neck, as an adult perhaps also putting his arms around his mother to show love to her, now his arms are nailed, his hands are nailed, I should say, and they cannot reach out to her physically but his mercy extends to her in her need. So in verse 26, "When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' 27 Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!'" Now what was going on there? Well, Scripture tells us, "From that hour the disciple took her into his own household." She was going to be left without means to provide for herself. Jesus assigns the disciple to care for his mother after he is gone.

We can hardly imagine what was going through Mary's heart as she watched her son dying in agony. She had an agony of her own. It was not a redemptive agony, contrary to what some might say. Her agony paid for not a single sin, only Christ can forgive sin. Mary can't do any of that. She was a sinner herself, how could her agony save anyone when she herself, she said, you know, "I rejoice in my Savior." She needed a Savior herself as the testimony of her own lips testified in the gospel of Luke. But still she was a godly mother and we can only imagine the agony in her heart as she looked on this son that had been such a blessing to her.

A. W. Pink puts it this way, he said, "Try and read the thoughts and emotions of that mother's heart. O what a sword it was that pierced her soul then. Never such bliss at a human birth, never such sorrow at a human death." And in the depth of the humiliation of our Lord, we see again, my friends, the height of his mercy as he was crucified. Pink goes on to say this, speaking of Christ, he says, "He thought of her who loved Him and whom He loved. He thought of her present necessity and provided for her future need by committing her to the care of that disciple who most deeply understood His love. He thought for Mary at that time and the honor He gave her was one of the manifestations of His victory over pain." Then he goes on to say later, Pink does, "Engaged as Christ was in a divine transaction, making atonement for all the sins of all His people, grappling with the powers of darkness, yet amid it all, He has still the same human tenderness which shows the perfection of the man Jesus Christ."

Do you see it? He's suffering physically. He's suffering spiritually. He's not simply resisting the taunts of his enemies, there's a whole demonic realm being unleashed against him as he suffers on the cross and yet he looks beyond his need and sees the need of his mother and cares for her. Her need, legitimate. His concern, his kindness providing for her in that hour of extremity. And do you know what? There's a lot of reasons for us to love the Lord Jesus, here's another one, is that his mercies for his people haven't changed and we can rest in him. The one who showed such mercy to his enemies, mercies to the repentant thief, mercies to his mother, is the same one dispensing mercy to us in our hour of need as well. Whether it's physical or spiritual needs, whether it's cleansing from a guilty conscience or the balm needed for a suffering soul in the midst of human conflict and rejection, we can go to our Lord Jesus and know that we will find mercy. We know that we can go to him and that he will care for us, that he cares for us. Isn't that what Scripture says ever so plainly? For example, in 1 Peter 5, you don't need to turn there, casting all your anxiety upon him. Why? Because he cares for you. He's concerned for you.

And I know, as you know by direct personal experience, that those times of human suffering at times can make it seem like God is far away, but that's not true, that's not the reality. We base it not on what we feel or judge it by circumstances that are adverse, no, we base it on his holy word which tells us he cares for us, and he cares for us and we see his mercy and care manifested by the way that he cared for his mother on the cross. And so we can rest in him and when we go in sorrow and difficulty, hardly able to sometimes to form a coherent thought to express our prayers, sometimes just the tears running down our cheek, giving eloquent testimony to what our tongue cannot express that's in our heart, the Lord understands and the Lord cares. He knows what's on our tongue before we speak it, and so we can rest in him.

Jeremiah said this in the book of Lamentations, he said, "This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." In the New Testament, it speaks about his sympathetic concern for the needs of his people. I quote it often because I need it and I presume you need it too from Hebrews 4,

"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

And so through these three sayings on the cross, we see the great mercy of Christ illustrated for us, and as we come to the Table with these elements that remind us of his body and his blood, we have another reminder of the great mercy that he has shown for us. Oh, my friends, don't you understand? Do you see that we should never speak lightly of Christ, never speak lightly of his mercy, and that there is never legitimate reason to doubt it? So we are privileged as believers to remember him at the Table tonight, to remember the mercy that he showed on the cross and the mercy that he has shown to us, and if we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death or walking through particularly difficult times, we look at God's word, we remember the cross, and we remember that his mercy is there even if we do not feel it at the moment, and we trust in what he has revealed rather than in what we feel.

And so the bread reminds us of his body, the cup reminds us of his shed blood, and before the men come, let me just say this, two things that will almost sound in opposition to each other. This Table is by reservation only. What I mean by that is that it is limited to those who know the Lord Jesus Christ, who freely and openly confess their utter helplessness and sinfulness, who freely and openly acknowledge that their hope is in Christ alone, and through that confession express a measure of repentance that says, "I have turned from sin. I am trusting in Christ alone for my salvation." So when I say reservation only, this Table is only for people like that, but at the same time it's for every true Christian who does make that confession. If you're a Christian tonight, even if you are not a member of this church, we invite you to share in this Table with us. It's the Lord's Table, not Truth Community Church's Table. We simply ask you to come in a repentant spirit confessing any known sin in your life to God before you partake of the elements. Don't take it in an unworthy way. As you think about his mercy, we should reflect on the fact of how wrong it would be, having seen such a great view of his mercy from his word, to take elements that further speak of his mercy while we are tight-fisted in our rebellion against him. Sometimes it's good for people to stay away from the Communion Table when they love their sin more than they want repentance. Better to be away from the Table than to be there taking it and mocking the blood of Christ by their rebellion. And yet for those of us that are repentant and take it in that repentant spirit, what a moment of joy to remember the mercy that's been shown to us in Christ. If you're not a Christian, we just ask you to let these elements pass. Don't partake in that which symbolizes something that you have rejected the reality of.

I invite you to bow in meditation as our musicians come.

Our heavenly Father, we thank You for the mercy of Christ. We gladly honor and remember Him in this hour. We adore You and we adore Your Son and we remember Him with gladness as we come to the Table. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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