



Invitation to forgiveness

'Father, forgive them...'

Week 1

Introduction

'I forgive you,' she told him. 'You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you.'

These are the words spoken by Nadine Collier, two days after Dylann Roof walked into her church in Charleston and gunned down her mother and eight of her friends during a Bible study. The world witnessed this costly offer of forgiveness as they were spoken during a victim impact statement and broadcast on national and international television. The raw emotional impact of grace being offered to someone so undeserving rocked all who saw it. Nadine's words remind me of another time the world witnessed forgiveness being offered, but this time we were the perpetrators of the crime and Jesus was the one offering the forgiveness.

'Father, forgive' Jesus uses some of his last breaths from the cross to plead for God to show mercy to all who have conspired to kill him: strangers and enemies, soldiers hammering nails through his wrists and onlookers mocking and insulting him. Jesus prays that his Father God would still welcome in hospitality even those who are murdering him.

Prayer

Father God, as we think upon this most sacred moment in human history where Jesus laid down his life for the world, please help us to hear his voice. Open our hearts to receive your forgiveness and teach us how to pass that forgiveness on to others. Challenge us, equip us, stir us and release us to walk the way of the cross today. Amen.

Setting the scene

As Jesus was crucified, there were words of hatred all around him. In the midst of severe physical pain and unimaginable spiritual distress, he was also tortured with mockery and verbal abuse from all sides.

Perhaps you know the difficulty of standing up for good when surrounded by evil and the instinctive reaction to retaliate. But Jesus, surrounded by opposition, degradation and humiliation, responds by praying – and not for himself, but for his enemies. Not retrospectively, but as he is being murdered.

Luke 23.32–38

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.’ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, ‘If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.’ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Focus

Surrounded by all hate on all sides, Jesus’ response is astonishing. For whom is Jesus wanting forgiveness? For his executioners, who were soldiers just doing their jobs? For the crowds, for misunderstanding Jesus’ talk about the Kingdom and rejecting the Messiah? Or for the whole of humankind and our rejection of God? It is perhaps deliberately vague. There does not seem to be a limit on Jesus’ request to his Father for forgiveness. It appears to be aimed at all those who are mocking, wounding, insulting, murdering, rejecting, betraying and opposing him.

There is a stark contrast here. On one hand, there are those who see Jesus, broken and bruised, distressed and dying and choose to add insult to injury. On the other hand, we see Jesus, looking down from the cross at his enemies gloating and taunting him, and choosing to speak grace and compassion.

I find Jesus’ actions and words deeply challenging to me in how I treat the people in my life. Jesus invites us – whoever we are and whatever we have done – to both receive forgiveness from him, and to offer forgiveness to others. He offers us a worked example of what it means today to fight brutality with forgiveness, division with unity, hatred with love, showing incredible grace under fire; mercy in the face of evil.

Personal reflection questions

1. When you think about the scene of Jesus’ death, what strikes you about the crowd’s response and Jesus’ response?
2. As Jesus hangs on the cross he is still the all-powerful God, the commander of legions of angels – yet when he is insulted, he doesn’t use his power to avenge himself. What does this show about Jesus’ character?
3. Reflecting on the death of Jesus, the apostle Paul wrote ‘In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.’ Why do you think that Jesus had to die in order to offer the forgiveness of sins?
4. What are some of the barriers that stop us from being able to forgive others?
5. How do the circumstances of Jesus’ offer of forgiveness challenge us in our response to other people?
6. When was the last time you had to ask for forgiveness from someone? How did it feel to ask? Was forgiveness given to you? How did you feel after?

Final thoughts

I wonder if we live with the guilt and shame of mistakes we have made. Sometimes they make us want to shut ourselves away. What would it mean for us to experience Jesus' liberating forgiveness?

Forgiveness is powerful, but it is incredibly costly. I should not expect it to be simple for me to forgive others. When I think about Jesus literally dying to forgive others, it gives me fresh resolve. Forgiveness is costly, but it is also incredibly powerful. When I look at some of the hurts I still carry from the past, or reflect on those I have wounded, I would love to apply the transforming grace of forgiveness to these broken relationships. Jesus' prayer is a powerful example for us: 'Father, forgive them.'

We will have touched on some personal and challenging issues this week. Let us remember in prayer those in situations where it is hard to offer or receive forgiveness.

Closing prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one.

For Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

now and forever.

Amen.