

*This, in the Tenebrae service that accompanied it, came out to almost exactly one hour. That could change depending on songs.*

Jesus often talked about forgiveness. He said that if you were in church worshiping God, and your conscience told you that there was not peace between you and your neighbor, you were to make it right with that person. Maybe even walk out of the service so that you could make it right.

Jesus often talked about forgiveness. There is that famous math problem. “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

That’s all well and good in the classroom. But that’s not real life. It’s easy to *talk* about forgiveness. But when our reputation is on the line, we stop worrying about forgiveness and we get defensive. When the opportunity presents itself to teach someone not to do that again, we usually take Satan’s bait and we go for the jugular.

It was easy for Jesus the teacher, surrounded by students in his open-air classroom to talk about forgiveness. But what about when it came down to business, to real life where most people live?

Luke 23:32-37.

**I.** <sup>Lk 23:32</sup> Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with [Jesus] to be executed. <sup>33</sup>When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. <sup>34</sup>Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” ~~And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.~~ <sup>35</sup>~~The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”~~ <sup>36</sup>~~The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar~~ <sup>37</sup> and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

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Without hope. There are few things worse in life than life without hope. I suppose that chronic pain is right up there. But, over time, life without hope is hopeless.

If anyone hopeless ever lived, it was the man on the cross next to Jesus. He had zero hope. He knew he was dying. But perhaps even worse, he could not deny that he deserved it. He admitted it, “We are getting what our deeds deserve.”

But as God would have it, in one of the greatest ironies of the history of the world, crucified next to him was the sinless Son of God. What are the chances? Zero, nothing. Things like that don’t happen by chance.

If you ever get into a conversation with a hopeless person, talk to them about Jesus. Or maybe better than talking to them, escort them. Escort them to the three crucified men of Luke chapter 23 and let them listen:

**II.** <sup>Lk 23:39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at [Jesus]: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

<sup>40</sup>But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup>We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

<sup>42</sup>Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

<sup>43</sup>Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

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So which is more important, a person's spiritual or physical well-being? If you said, "Their spiritual well-being," you are correct. The reason that the Son of God took human form, was for our spiritual well-being. He came to be our Savior, not from hunger, poverty or violence, but from the afflictions of the soul: sin, guilt and God's condemnation. If Jesus had filled our tummies, calmed our worries, granted us homeland security but not resolved our spiritual dilemma, he would have not significantly helped us. It would have simply been, as they say, rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he immediately replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." For all our confusion over the issue, the most important thing in life is our spiritual relationship with God.

And yet... while Jesus was *not* asked about the second most important commandment, without request or hesitation he added, "...And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" You cannot be a truly spiritual and godly person without a profound concern for other people's earthly well-being. Jesus kept that balance perfectly:

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**III.** <sup>Jn 19:25</sup> Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, ~~his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.~~ <sup>26</sup>When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," <sup>27</sup>and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

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If you have been a church-goer for many years, you know about Jesus' parables. Most of them are thought provoking, and kind of fun. But three or four of them are unhappy parables. And this is how they end...

"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

"The bridegroom arrived. The virgins (i.e. the bridesmaids) who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'"

"Take that talent from him... And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

And finally, not a parable, but Jesus' own description of the final judgment is this, "Then [the King] will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed.'"

Jesus consistently pictures hell's punishment as separation from God, without hope of restoration, ever.

Christ came to suffer that punishment of hopeless separation for us. Hear the words of Matthew 27:45-46.

**IV.** <sup>Mt 27:45</sup> From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. <sup>46</sup>About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

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A year ago a veteran pastor and I were talking about Jesus' seven words from the cross. His opinion was that in his forty years he had always found this next word the most difficult to preach. It is the least spiritual of the seven. The other six have obvious religious meanings and implications, but what of this word, "I thirst." After 40 years, it still tripped him up.

Indeed!

Perhaps, however, this is where Jesus looks most human. He is not talking of eternity or of forgiveness. He does not even have that concern for his mother in the midst of suffering. He is thirsty. He is like us. This is the only word that Jesus speaks which directly refers to his physical suffering. It assures us that in Jesus "we have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."

He offers his own body as a true substitute for us – not a different kind like a sheep for a person – but one like us. One man for us all.

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**V.** <sup>Jn 19:28</sup> Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." <sup>29</sup> A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

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A newer word that has been around a couple years is, "Fail!" It's a one-word interjection to mock someone's lack of success. Like when the basketball player steals the ball, takes a fast break down the court, he is all alone, defenders trailing, he jumps, he's over the rim, he slam dunks the ball and it hits the back of the rim bouncing clear back to half-court. "Fail!" the laughing crowd shouts in mockery.

Is that what happened with Jesus on the cross? That Friday afternoon when Jesus said, "It is finished," did he fail? A lot of people thought so. His disciples thought so. His mother thought so. The execution squad thought so. His enemies thought so. And that is what it looks like when a bloodied, naked, crucified person says, "It is finished." What else can it mean except failure?

That is not at all what Jesus meant.

This Greek work behind our English word "finished" means "completed." Like when you make the last mortgage payment, "It is finished." You are done, the debt paid.

But what Jesus here completes is the greatest work ever undertaken. He had lived thirty-three years to keep God's law for us. And here in the last three hours, he had suffered God's abandonment to make payment for our sins. Now Jesus tells us that payment has been made in full. We are redeemed.

John 19:30.

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**VI.** <sup>30</sup> When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." ~~With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.~~

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This final reading is Jesus' last sentence. What do you want your last words to be?

Throughout his life, Jesus had not only been concerned about other people. He had also been very concerned about his own spiritual health. He had spent entire nights in the forests and on the mountaintops of Palestine, praying. It was his custom to visit the synagogues every Saturday, and listen. In Jesus' last words, the truth shines forth that Jesus took care of his own spiritual health. He quoted the Scriptures with the last breath to leave his lungs. He quoted Psalm 31.

His last words were not words of worry or doubt – as many are on their deathbed. He spoke words of faith, of certainty that God would care for him even after the grave. Through faith in Jesus, we can share that certainty on our deathbed.

Will you be quoting the Bible on your deathbed? Not to say you have to. If you are thinking of your loved ones, sharing memories with them, assuring and affirming them—those would be fitting ways to pass from this world.

But let me ask again, *Could* you quote the Bible on your deathbed? About to enter eternity, will you only reflect on the world and not God? For all Jesus' care and concern for enemies, friends and family; for all his work and suffering for the people of the world; in his last moment, in his last words, he looked up. Hear Luke 23:44-46:

**VII.** ~~Lk 23:44 It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour,<sup>45</sup> for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. <sup>46</sup>Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.~~

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