

A Word from the Cross – by Rev. Tom Aicken

In Luke 23:34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Many sermons have been preached from this first of the seven last sayings of our Lord from the cross, sermons which are very comforting and full of gospel light, yet even many of those, I submit, have missed the point of what this text is really about.

Let’s begin with the two Greek words for “to forgive.” The first word is *charizomai*, and that does mean to forgive or to grant a full pardon. Jesus might have used that word here, but he did not; instead, He used the word *aphiemi*, which simply means to send away. *Aphiemi* can mean to forgive, and if so the context should make that clear, but in every case the focus is on sending away.

In 1 Cor. 7:11, for instance, we read that the husband is not (under the case specified) to divorce, or send away, his wife. Now it’s this word *aphiemi* that is used there, and, very clearly, divorce is not to be equated with forgiveness. So, we need to be careful with this word *aphiemi*; it always means to send away, often a temporary action, but it can be used to mean other things related to that.

I don’t know if you have ever come across the classic 3-volume work known as The Schilder Trilogy, in which Klaas Schilder writes extensively on the suffering, trial and crucifixion of Christ. Let me say in passing, if you’ve never read it, I recommend it very highly. Every few years I try to read something I’ve never read before on the humiliation of Christ, particularly His suffering and death, because there is nothing else I know which serves as such a key, giving me entrance into the very mind and heart of God, as faithful works on the sufferings of our Lord. I’ve read several fine books on the subject, but none I would recommend more than The Schilder Trilogy.

Schilder makes the argument, and I believe very effectively, that Jesus is not calling for a full pardon on His enemies in Luke 23:34, but is instead calling for a temporary stay of judgment. There is a difference, isn’t there? The temporary stay of judgment might ultimately be to forgive them (for those whom He will yet bring to repentance), or it may be to condemn them (for those who are not so brought to repentance). Yet, either way, there is a delay, a postponement, that is sought in the judgment to be reached.

We may well ask, 'Why the cry for such a delay?' Well, consider the circumstances of this passage. At no time has God the Father loved His Son more than on the cross. At no time has He hated sin more, or been more incensed by it, than in witnessing the death of His Son. Would they dare to crucify the Lord of glory?!

Notice, the first thing out of Jesus' mouth from the very pit of hell is an earnest plea, not a plea for Himself, but for His enemies. When the Father might so easily in a moment of His wrath consume His enemies, putting them all to death and utter destruction, the Son of God cries out, "Father, send away your wrath! Send it away, hold back Your judgment, this is not the time. There will come a time when these very people who are so against Me will come under apostolic teaching, they will hear the sound of the gospel as never before, and every prophecy will be explained. Only then, after they've heard such things and had opportunity to repent, proceed to judgment!"

Later, we know, many of these very priests – not all, perhaps, but many, we're told – did repent. Beloved, we will see them in glory. I look forward to meeting them, and to hearing from them songs of praise as they lift up our Saviour and celebrate what He has done for them. When we sit down and talk with them, I wonder if we'll see anything of what they did to be any worse, any more worthy of God's righteous indignation, than what we ourselves have done! Yet, there we'll be, singing with them, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!"

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Ignorance could never be a reason to overlook sin and excuse anybody, but it could be a valid reason to show this kind of mercy, to delay the judgment in order to give time and opportunity for repentance.

Here, again, I want to reassert the point, Jesus is not seeking the forgiveness of people who have never repented. That is contrary to everything the Bible teaches. In His love and compassion, He's seeking a temporary stay of judgment only, a greater window of opportunity, so that, under the ministry of gospel preaching, many brands might yet be plucked from the fire – that many souls might be saved, even among the vilest of men, before that fire is even set ablaze!