

It was November 19, 1863. Thousands were gathered for the dedication of the battlefield and cemetery of Gettysburg. The date of the dedication had been delayed for several months to allow the greatest orator of the age to finish writing his speech. Now at last a hush fell over the crowd as he stepped before the crowd and began to speak, ***“Standing beneath this serene sky...it is with hesitation that I raise my poor weak voice to break the eloquent silence of God and nature...”*** And then he went on...and on...and on...for two hours, breaking that same silence with his own relentless voice. He then concluded, ***“That whosoever throughout the civilized world the accounts of this great warfare are read, and down to the latest period of recorded time, in the glorious annals of our common country there will be no page brighter than that which relates THE BATTLES OF GETTYSBURG.”***

What, never heard that one before? Probably not. Honestly, neither had I. No, most of us remember another speech given that same day, ***“Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”*** Abraham Lincoln. 10 Sentences. 278 words. Only a few minutes to deliver. Yet President Lincoln’s few words audibly reverberate through time and our nation’s consciousness.

In the nearly two thousand years since they were first spoken, Jesus words from the cross have been the focus of an incalculable number of words from sermon to song. Yet the 7 simple statements, the 7 “words”, Jesus spoke from the cross speak louder than them all. And so we turn our attention once again this Good Friday to these words of Jesus as we seek to renew our souls and prepare our hearts for lives of love to God’s glory, giving special attention to a word of forgiveness, ***“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*** And as we consider...

During the season of Lent, as we looked to the cross and our Savior’s passion, we sought to spend the days in repentance and renewal. They are days of sober introspection and muted joy. We look to take inventory of who we are and where God wants us to be, all the while taking comfort in God’s grace and forgiveness. During this journey we tend to concentrate on God forgiving us. But today, as we meditate on Jesus’ words from the cross, God’s Holy Spirit takes us in another direction. The Spirit asks, “What about considering how we forgive others?”

How often haven’t we prayed, ***“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”***? We certainly have no problem with the first half. After all, God has taken care of that – forgiven OUR trespasses. But think about the second half of that statement – ***“...as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*** Some have done this before, but for those who haven’t, let me break down the equation for you. – in effect we’re praying, “God, forgive me in the same way I forgive others. But is that really what you want?”

Dutifully Sarah recited the words assigned to her as homework in confirmation class. “Take his words and actions in the kindest possible way.” That, in part, is how Dr. Martin Luther explained God’s Eighth Commandment: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” But later that same morning, during recess time, little Johnnie accidentally bumped into Sarah and knocked her down on the playground. She scraped her knee and needed medical attention. When the teacher asks Sarah what happened, the girl blurts out through her tears, “Johnnie pushed me down on purpose! He’s always so mean to me!”

Yeah, you know how it goes, don’t you? Someone accidentally bumps into you, so you shove them back. Someone whips around you on the express way to get ahead of you and you speed up so that they can’t do it. Someone innocently passed along some misinformation about you and you publicly ridicule them in front some friends. So-and-so at work repeatedly blames you for

problems with his work, so you try and make him look bad in return. Your spouse said something hurtful to you so you withhold your affection. A friend betrayed your trust and your attitude is, “She knew exactly what she was doing. She doesn’t deserve my forgiveness. Well, maybe if she comes groveling on her knees I might consider it.” When we look at ourselves, we have wonder, “What ever happened to taking our neighbors words and actions in the kindest possible way”?

Consider for a moment what was happening to Jesus as he spoke words of forgiveness. People were laughing at him. So-called church leaders were sneering at him. Soldiers had nailed spikes through his hands and feet. His clothes were being gambled away right in front of him. The weight of his body was already causing him to suffocate at the same time that the weight of our sinful, unforgiving attitudes were suffocating him with hell itself. And Jesus said, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” Talk about taking words and actions in the kindest possible way! That statement from Jesus’ cracked and bleeding lips is a Word of forgiveness to be sure, but it is a word of forgiveness that also condemns my unforgiving heart.

During his public ministry, Jesus taught, “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**” “**Love your enemy.**” “**Forgive seventy-seven times.**” On the cross, the first words from my Savior’s mouth were “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” Your Savior and mine practiced what he preached. Perfectly. Selflessly. His word of forgiveness condemns my unforgiving heart, because I know I can’t love and forgive the way he wants. All too often—and it hurts to admit this—I don’t even want to. I don’t even try.

But Jesus knew that, didn’t he? He had to! After all, the Jesus who hung on Golgotha’s cross is the Christ, the Son of God. He is holy. He is all-knowing. Even before you and I had ever been born, before we held our first grudge, before we refused to “let it go”, before we let our stubborn pride lock us away from the freedom of

forgiveness, Jesus knew us. He knew just how we would be. He knew our unforgiving hearts. And as he hung dying for these very sin-filled hearts he said, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**”

A Word of forgiveness. But not just a *Word* of Forgiveness. No, Jesus backed it up with the *act* forgiveness by first living the life we would fail to live – perfectly forgiving his enemies, praying for those who persecuted him, speaking the truth in love to restore relationships. And then, because he demanded it, restoring our very relationship with God by giving his own life on that cross for you and for me.

How can we possibly say thanks for that?!? In concept, it is very simple: follow Jesus’ example. Forgive in your heart those who hurt you. Take the opportunity to assure them of your forgiveness and love. Recognize your own failures. Together, look to the Lord, banking on Jesus’ work and word of forgiveness, “**Father, forgive them.**”

Oh, I know, the concept may be simple and putting it into practice is sometimes downright seemingly impossible. But remember, we have been forgiven even though we didn’t deserve it. After all, God has forgiven *me*, and has forgiven you. Plugged into God’s promise of this forgiveness, now go and do likewise. Because Jesus spoke these words of forgiveness for you, now, from a comforted and grateful heart, forgive as you have been forgiven. Amen.