

# The Crux of Forgiveness

sermon digest

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Luke 23:34-43; Acts 7:58-8:3

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The word has grown out of centuries of Christian history with crosses on steeples and altars of churches, carried in processions, and worn by the pious. We speak of the "crux"—the cross—of a matter without the slightest thought of the suffering and death of Jesus. If something is of critical importance in our lives, it is *crucial*, "cross-like." The terminology has blended into the secular landscape so that we no longer need to be the least bit religious or Christian to speak of the cross as a metaphor for the center. This use of the English language is a remnant of the old Christendom in which the Western dominance of the church put a Christian spin on the mundane.

Today, we need to get to the bottom of the question of forgiveness, for the *crux of the matter* is indeed cross-like. Moltmann's declaration, "All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ," (*The Crucified God*, p. 204) is pure audacity no longer given unquestioned acceptance.

**Can forgiveness be real?** The word of forgiveness spoken from the cross is usually numbered as the first of seven words/statements of Jesus: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." It is a priestly prayer offered as intercession for the guilty parties in perfect harmony with the teachings of Jesus throughout the Gospels, but the prayer for forgiveness is not without controversy. Some early manuscripts of Luke do not include it at all; others leave off the qualifying clause, "they do not know what they are doing." Carlyle Marney judged, "*The words were hot and the church dropped them for a season!*" He concluded that early Christians could not stand his forgiving Jews that way. (*He Became Like Us*, p. 17)

Marney may be right. A scandalous history of Jewish persecution has followed the Christian observance of Holy Week and focus on the cross. Barbara Brown Taylor collected a litany of historical violence against Jews: 1096, the first Crusade with a slaughter of Jews in Rhineland; 1190, Jews are massacred in England; 1233, the Inquisition offers Jews a choice of death or conversion; 1290, Jews are burned in Switzerland for causing the Plague; 1394, Jews are expelled from France, in 1492, from Spain; 1648, Venice establishes the Jewish ghetto; 1881, Russia launches pogroms against Jews; 1938 *Krystallnacht* initiates the Nazi Holocaust and the death of six million Jews in Europe. Taylor concluded that, if the Jews were in any way responsible for the death of Jesus, his death has been avenged a million times over; Christians have twisted the prayer of forgiveness and the command to love enemies into a two-thousand year nightmare of hatred and violence toward Jews. (Lenten sermon, April 21, 2000)

Some think that this is a Luke-thing. Luke's Gospel is loaded with compassion, especially on the margins of social acceptance—women, tax collectors, Samaritans, the poor. Luke continues the spirit of forgiveness in Acts with two prayers nearly identical to the prayers of Jesus from the cross on the lips of the first Christian martyr. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," as Jesus prayed, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Like Jesus, Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The controversial reference to ignorance of the persecutors is also carried forward into Acts. Peter speaks to his Jewish family in the Temple court (Acts 3:17): "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers."

*In addition to the textual issues, moral questions are raised by the prayer for forgiveness.* Harvey Cox (*Christian Century*, Nov 30, 04) put the prayer before his students at Harvard. They leaped on the contemporary moral problems raised at Nuremberg after WWII. Are soldiers to be held accountable for their behavior even if they are just following orders? It seems that the moral consensus today requires humane treatment of the enemy, regardless of the political or military authority. Forgiveness based on the ignorance or naivete of the offender is weak. The students became embroiled in the discussion. Cox had to leave for another commitment. He returned an hour later and found most of the students still engaged in discussion with no real consensus on the moral necessity of forgiveness. One student cited the play *Copenhagen* that recalled the moral dilemma of Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and Robert Oppenheimer in developing the atomic bomb. Even though they believed it to be a military necessity, Oppenheimer later opposed its use.

**The right to revenge is abandoned at the cross.** The *lex talionis*, "law of retaliation," was challenged by Jesus: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." (Mt 5:38-39). It was not only considered the law of the land, it was the Law of God. One had a right to extract justice when harm was done to one's person or family. The *lex talionis* allowed one eye for one eye, and no more; one tooth for one tooth, and no more. The balance of justice allowed inflicting pain for pain, repayment in kind for crimes, in order to maintain a balance of perfect justice. The real scandal of the cross is rooted in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus looked beyond the issue of immediate justice to ultimate reconciliation.

The truth is, no one ever gets even. The most perfect picture of the struggle for human justice in our world is found not in the U.N. or in the courtroom but in the nursery. Children required to share space and toys on the nursery floor are in a constant tug of war trying to establish an even playing field. Children manage to play together in peace only when they are willing to give to one another. There is a "give" in forgiveness.

Historians have observed that the punitive damages assessed to Germany after WWI helped to create the sense of persecution and injustice in the German mind that eventually brought Hitler to the fore. After WWII the Allied nations took a second look at the ineffective route of punitive justice. The successful rebuilding of Germany and Japan led to the formation of international friendship. Dr. Johnson's rigid opposition to the Friendship Bell in Oak Ridge based on his enmity with Japan was rooted in the *lex talionis*. It does not work.

Look at the effect of our prison system on national crime. When the point of prison is to inflict punishment rather than reformation of the criminal, the pain is passed on to other prisoners on the inside and to society on the outside. One observer noted that the most

common quality found among prisoners is poverty and previous abuse. The problem with restorative justice, *lex talionis*, is that it is a practical failure. Rather than a cockeyed optimist or a hopeless idealist, Jesus may have had the most practical sense of the human mind at work in all of history. The demand for revenge has to stop somewhere, and Jesus declared to his disciples that the buck stops here.

Moltmann reflected on Jesus' prayer for forgiveness and concluded that from the cross "the universal religion of revenge is overcome and the universal law of retaliation is annulled." (Volf, *Embrace*, p. 122) J. B. Phillips was a deacon in our first pastoral charge after seminary. He lived up to his famous name with numerous quips and bits of wisdom that have continued to stick in my head. J. B. was a conservative, against the ordination of women and constantly at war with the protest generation of the sixties. The cry for social justice coming both from the pulpit and the pew was often met with J. B.'s retreat to theology. He would say, "In light of my sin, I need mercy rather than justice." J. B. may well have been right on both counts.

First, the prayer of Jesus from the cross is more about theology than it is about historical fact. With all of the arguments favoring the prayer as an actual event based on the teachings of Jesus, I have to say that it does not matter. The early Christians viewed God in the face of Jesus and heard God from the voice of Jesus. They heard the grace of God from the cross that stood not only on the hill outside Jerusalem but in the depth of divine love.

Second, mercy is our plea to God. As we continue to struggle for human justice, we need the mind of Christ. Jesus never saw a person in perfect harmony with God, but he saw every person as a child of God. It is not original with Jesus, and certainly not with me; Psalm 103 declares: "As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust."