

Jesus has shown us what it means to pray for others, especially in times of temptation. And he has also shown us what it means to pray that God's will would be ours. But now we leave behind Gethsemane, and we go to Golgotha, where we see Jesus hanging on the cross. As he hangs there, he says a remarkable prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

And to realize just how remarkable that is, Christians, think about what Jesus has been through up to this point. One of his own disciples betrayed him in the garden. And after he was arrested, he was led from the illegal trial to illegal trial. And even though Pilate wanted to release him, the crowd cried for his blood. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" they said. Jesus was repeatedly beaten, punched, slapped, spit on, and much more. And the Romans whipped him with the scourge, a terrible whip, one that had little bits of stone and bone embedded into it. A terrible way to be beaten. And after that horrific beating, they forced him to carry part of his own cross as he walked uphill to Calvary. And there on top of Calvary, they crucified him, driving spikes through his hands and through his feet. Lifting him up on that cross so that he was just a little ways above the ground. And that cross was cruel, Christians. That cross was designed to make his suffering worse. It was designed to make it last as long as possible, to stretch it out as much as they could. Every time Jesus tried to breathe, he had to work. It caused him tremendous pain just to take a breath. Can we even begin to understand the suffering that he went through? Was there ever grief like his?

But it gets worse, because not only did he physically suffer, he suffered in so many other ways too. Jesus was treated like a criminal, a murderer, because the cross was the worst possible punishment under Roman law. So terrible, in fact, it was illegal to use on Roman citizens. It was a punishment reserved for the worst of the worst, the worst criminals in those days. But what had Jesus done? And they made him into a public show through it. Because they set that cross right next to the road, right next to the main road going into Jerusalem, so as people went in and out of the city they were walking right past him. And nobody felt sorry for Jesus. They thought it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun to mock and to spit on and to strike this man as he was crucified. It was entertainment to them, like going to the movies. They had nothing else to do that day, so they might as well go make fun of the guy who was crucified. And the soldiers too really enjoyed what they were doing. They took a sick pleasure in it. They made it into a game. How much can we make this man suffer? How much pain can we inflict on him? His physical suffering was almost nothing in comparison with the abuse that he went through at the hands of men. Can we even begin to understand what he went through? Was there ever grief like his?

But the very worst thing of all, Christians, was that he deserved none of it. He was crucified like a murderer, even though he had never committed a sin in his life. He was mocked and beaten, even though no evil had ever come out of his lips. Even Pilate knew that he was innocent, and yet he condemned him to be crucified anyway. The greatest injustice in the history of the world. Was there ever grief like his?

But what would you do, Christians, if you were on that cross instead of Jesus? What would you say? Would you curse the crowds that were abusing you? Would you pray that Pilate would suffer for what he did to you? Would you hope that the soldiers would perish? Would you wish for your enemies to die? What would you do if you were on that cross instead of Jesus?

But Jesus does none of those things. Even though he has suffered the very worst than anyone in the history of the world has ever suffered or ever will suffer, Jesus prays: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Do you see just how remarkable that prayer is, Christians? Jesus is saying: "Father, forgive that crowd which is mocking and spitting and striking me. Father, forgive those who called out, 'Crucify him.' Father, forgive the soldiers who are so cruel. Father, forgive Pilate for what he did. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We do want to be clear here. Jesus does not mean that they are somehow innocent. Saying that they know not what they do is not the same thing as saying that they did nothing wrong. It was a horrific sin, a terrible sin to treat the Lord of glory in this way. And it would've been worse still if they had known what they were doing. But it was evil to do what they did to Jesus. So Jesus is not saying, "Father, forgive them, because they're innocent." Not at all. But rather, Jesus is praying that they would come to realize the horror of what they have done and that they would turn from that sin and live. Jesus does not curse those who hurt him. He prays for them. Even as they are killing him, he prays for their salvation. That is what makes this prayer so remarkable.

And think about what Peter says to that same crowd a little bit later in the book of Acts. Acts chapter 3, he says: "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." It was ignorance, yes, but it was still sin. And so Peter says, "Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out." He is holding out mercy to them, mercy to the very people who killed Jesus, calling them to turn from their wicked ways and live. Because they were not beyond mercy. They too could be forgiven. Jesus prays the same thing. He prays that all who are making him suffer would find that mercy, that they would come to know him, that they would repent of this sin and have their sins blotted out. Jesus prays that they would turn and live.

Oh, but Christians, we are so often unwilling to do the same thing. We are so often unwilling to pray for the good of those who hurt us, even though we suffer far less than Jesus did. They hurt me, so why should I pray for them? They made me suffer, so why shouldn't I condemn them? I can't forget what they did to me, so why should I forgive? How often our suffering tempts us to not pray, especially for those who caused it.

But listen to what Jesus says, Matthew chapter 5: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Praying for our persecutors does not mean just be nice to them. It doesn't mean let them do whatever they want to you. Jesus chose to suffer, after all. There's nothing accidental about this. He's not passively letting this happen. He chose for this to happen. But rather, loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you means praying for their good, especially their eternal good. It means praying that they would come to know Jesus and be forgiven. It means praying that they would be shown the same mercy that God has shown to us. It means praying that they would be one with us, both here on earth and also in eternity. Because it is this amazing love, Christians, that Jesus showed to us on that cross, loving us while we were still his enemies. And he calls for us to love our enemies in the same way, so that, as he says again, Matthew chapter 5: "You may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

Therefore, Christians, pray for those who hurt you. Pray that they would know the love of Christ. Pray that they too would repent and turn away from their sins. Even if they've done terrible things to you, even if it seems like they're never going to repent, pray that they would become

one with you in faith. Forgive one another as Jesus first forgave you, because it is that same love that Jesus showed to you on the cross, praying that those who crucified him would turn from their wicked ways and live. Love one another as God loved you, because that is who Jesus has called us to be.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, teach us how to forgive as you forgave those who crucified you. Show us what it means to love our enemies and to pray for our persecutors, so that we will be like you and will glorify you in all that we say and do this day; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.