The Seven Last Words of Jesus - 1

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Every year, most Christian churches in the Philippines hold the “Siete Palabras,” or “Seven Sayings” services, stressing the last seven words of Jesus on the cross. I remember every Good Friday back in the 70s, Fellowship Baptist Church of Bacolod would hold a special Seven Sayings service at 2-4 PM, with a battery of seven speakers. It was the longest preaching service I can remember. With no aircon, the sanctuary was usually hot and humid. But 300 people would pack the pews every year.

The last words of a dying man are supposed to be the most moving. But we study Jesus’ last words, because they are uttered on the cross. The death of Christ is the heart of the gospel. It is the climax of the gospel story. The last words of Jesus on the cross are thus highly significant.

I wish that we could hold a seven sayings service in our church every year. Unfortunately, there is a conflict of schedule, for we hold DVBS outreach during Holy Week, which is the best time to do it in government Barangay buildings.

So for two Sundays, I will preach on the seven last words of Jesus on the cross—three this Sunday, and the remaining four, next Sunday, to wrap up Holy Week.

Most sermons on the seven sayings are detached from authorial intent. However, we will study the authorial intent of Luke, Matthew, and John, and the context of their words, to grasp what they are telling their readers.

A Word of Forgiveness (READ Lk. 23:34)

In the last minutes of Jesus’ life, Jesus prayed to the Father. In fact, in His last seven sayings, Jesus prayed three times. It is interesting that Jesus did not pray, “Forgive me,” for He knew no sin. Instead, He prayed, “Forgive them,” for they all needed the forgiveness of God.

We note three things about Jesus’ act of forgiveness on the cross. First, we see the position of forgiveness. It is a position of weakness, not strength. Jesus’ prayer for forgiveness reflects His teaching. He said, “Love your enemies; pray for those who abuse you” (Lk. 6:27-28, ESV). But to pray for those who abuse you is to pray from a position of weakness. They abuse you. You are the victim of their abuse. But you are to pray for those who abuse you.

Just as Jesus loved His enemies and prayed for them, He also forgave them. His forgiveness then was forgiveness out of a position of weakness. He forgave on the cross—a position of powerlessness, a place for victims. Thus, Jesus’ prayer is a call for us to forgive likewise—to forgive from a position of powerlessness. We are to forgive as victims of the sins of other people. That is the context of Jesus’ prayer for forgiveness. It is a context of weakness and powerlessness. It is in a position of weakness that we should ask God to forgive those who sinned against us.

Second, we see the recipients of forgiveness. Jesus prayed for those who harmed and hurt Him. Luke draws a contrast between the people who mourned for Jesus and the leaders who mocked Him. Read with me vv. 27, 35-37. (READ) There were the mourners and the mockers.

Who were the mockers of Jesus? The mockers were the Jewish religious rulers and priests. They were His guards (READ 22:63-65). They were Gentile soldiers who gambled over His clothes. They mocked Him and offered Him sour wine (wine vinegar) (Gingrich), the cheap wine drank by soldiers (v. 36).

The word, “mocked” (Gk. empaizo) in v. 36, means, to “ridicule, make fun of” (Gingrich). The rulers sneered at Him, but the soldiers made fun of Him.

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Even one of the criminals on the cross “railed” at Him (v. 39). The word, “railed” (Gk. blasphemeo) means, “slander, revile, defame someone’s reputation” (Friberg) This criminal, who has a bad reputation himself, maligned the reputation of Jesus.

But Jesus prayed for these mockers who plotted against Him, insulted Him, and violated His human rights. Some blame the Jews today for killing Jesus. But if Jesus forgave His Jewish tormentors, then nobody should say anything bad against the Jews today.

If Jesus loved the worst of enemies, then it is no more difficult for us to love our enemies today. If Jesus prayed for His enemies, we should also pray for people who hurt us.

Brethren, nobody, no matter how sinful, is beyond the reach of the grace of God! I’ve seen criminals in BBRC who came in as unbelievers, but came out as believers of Christ. Do you have rebellious children or hardhearted family members? Pray for him or her.

Third, we see the nature of forgiveness. These plotters and mockers did not deserve forgiveness. They did not know what they were doing. But Jesus asked for forgiveness for them. Forgiveness, therefore, is a form of grace. The Lukan emphasis is that forgiveness is the act of forgiving those who don’t deserve it—those who have sinned against you.

If you cannot forgive others, ask yourself, “Do I deserve the forgiveness of God?” The answer is—you don’t. Nobody deserves God’s forgiveness. But God forgives our sins by virtue of the cross of Christ. That’s what’s amazing about divine grace.

If you don’t deserve God’s forgiveness, but God still forgives you, you should also forgive those who don’t deserve it. Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us as we forgive those.” In the same way that God forgives us though we don’t deserve it, we should also forgive others though they don’t deserve it. The bigger the sin, the bigger the need is for God’s forgiveness. So Jesus prayed for God’s forgiveness for the worst sinners.

Now if our greatest problem is ignorance, we’d need education. If our greatest problem is money, we’d need livelihood. But our greatest problem is sin, and so we need God’s forgiveness. We all need the forgiveness of God. But God shall forgive you only through the death of Christ. For God to forgive you, you must come to the cross.

**A Word of Salvation (READ Lk. 23:43)**

The first saying is a prayer for sinners. The second saying is a promise for believers. This promise is NOT for the two criminals. It is only for the criminal who repented and trusted Christ. It is NOT for everyone then. It is only for everyone who repents and trusts Christ.

How did this criminal repent? In v. 40, we see that he feared God as Judge. He feared the judgment of God after he dies on the cross. In v. 41, we see that he admitted his wrongful deeds. He recognized that he deserved his punishment on the cross, compared to Jesus who did not deserve it.

Then in v. 42, we see that he believed that Jesus is King. He believed in the authority of Jesus to grant mercy as King. Thus, he called on Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. To remember him is to remember him with favor, so that Jesus will grant mercy on him and to save him (cf. Ps. 106:4).

He knows that he hangs there on the cross as a criminal. He now asks Jesus for a royal pardon for his crimes. In Lukan thought, to come into His kingdom is for Jesus to go from death, resurrection, and ascension at the right hand of God (cf. 9:51; 19:12; 24:26).

Jesus answered, “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43). In these words we note six amazing blessings to believers. First, this promise is for you if you repent and trust Christ. The criminal did not become religious to earn it. He did not give to the poor to receive it. He only repented his sin and trusted Christ as Savior. You do not work for your salvation, but you only repent and trust Christ to be saved.

Second, you don’t have to wait till you die before you receive divine mercy and grace. “Today,” Jesus said, before the criminal dies on the cross, he shall receive kingly pardon and forgiveness. Today, before Jesus goes into His kingdom, He is already giving kingly pardon to the criminal. Jesus saves you today.

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Third, no matter what you have done yesterday, you can be saved today. The criminal committed many serious sins in the past. But before Christ, what matters is his salvation today. Today is the day of your salvation.

Fourth, you will receive more than you will ask for. The criminal asked only for mercy. But he received both mercy and the presence of God. If you believe in Christ, you receive not only His mercy. You shall be with Jesus forever!

Fifth, the next place to live after planet earth is paradise. The word, “paradise,” (Gk. paradeisos) comes from an old Persian word for “garden” (Friberg) or “an enclosed park or pleasure ground.” (RWP) In the Septuagint, paradeisos is used for the garden of Eden, with all its trees and waters (Gen. 2:8; 13:10; Ezek. 3:8). In Rev. 2:7, Jesus promises victorious believers the right of eating the tree of life in the paradise of God. Paradise is the final place of believers after planet earth! It is not a halfway house, or a temporary stop, but a permanent place in heaven.

Sixth, you will receive Jesus’ forgiveness and live in paradise today, not as a reward, but as a gift of divine grace. The criminal did not deserve Jesus’ mercy. He did not deserve to go to paradise. But though he did not deserve it, Jesus granted it. Jesus gave it not as a reward for him, for he was no saint. Jesus gave it as a gift, for he is a sinner. Your salvation is not a reward for your goodness, but a gift of God, because of the grace of God.

A Word of Care for Parents (READ John 19:25-26)

Jesus is not giving a command or a suggestion here. It is what is called, a “testamentary disposition” or a “last will and testament,” as we call it today, in language suggesting adoption. In Roman times, a crucified man can make such testimonies even on the cross, as E. Stauffer explains. Jesus here follows a formal formula in Jewish family law, “Woman, behold your son! Son, behold your mother!” He places his mother under the care of John. 3

In Jewish cultural tradition, it is the duty of the eldest son to take care of his mother if his father is no longer around. 4 Jesus now places that responsibility to John. Jesus’ words do not appoint Mary to take care of John. It appoints John to take care of Mary. That John took Mary into his home afterwards (v. 27), shows that this is the emphasis of John’s words.

Jesus is showing us that we should take care of our parents in their old age. The fifth commandment says, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land” (Ex. 20:12, ESV). It is so important that Paul repeats it in Eph. 6:1-3: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land’” (ESV).

The word, “honor” (Heb. kăbed), means, “‘give weight to, glorify, esteem,’ in the sense of giving a place of precedence, of taking someone seriously.” Do you take your parents seriously? It does not mean merely to obey them or respect them. It means primarily to give priority and preference for them. Just as Israel honors Yahweh by prioritizing worship to Him alone, so she honors her parents by prioritizing them. 5

What happens when you obey your parents and honor them? Your life will go well and you will live long in the earth. Listen! Honoring your parents is the key to a long life!

There are many things I like about America. I like their beautiful country and economic prosperity. I like their educational system. I like the Christian values that founded that great country. But I don’t like how they treat their parents. They talk back to their parents. In their quest for more money and things, they can no longer give time for their parents. So they put their old parents in old people’s homes, and leave them there without visiting them often.

The Philippines is a poor country. But we know how to take care of our old parents. We take care of them in our own homes. That is one strength of our Filipino culture.

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5 John I. Durham, Exodus (WBC3; Dallas:Word, 2002), 291.
As Jesus has showed us, to honor your parents is to take care of them when they grow old. Jesus took care of his mother even when he couldn’t take care of her anymore. He entrusted her to somebody he trusted. This means that he ensured food and shelter for her.

We should also provide food and shelter for our parents, including their medical expenses. The older you get, the higher your medical costs. I would strongly suggest that you children should put aside a medical fund for your parents. I suggested that to Mylene's sister and brothers. They didn’t listen to me. When their father lost his kidneys and went on dialysis, spending P30,000 a month, they couldn’t afford it. I was proven right.

Let us ask ourselves: How am I treating my parents? Do I give them top priority and importance? Do I listen and obey them? How do I show my respect for them?

Prov. 23:22 says, “Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.” (ESV) No matter your complaints against your parents, no matter their failures and weaknesses, no matter if your parents will leave you nothing when they die, we owe our parents a debt that we cannot fully pay.\(^6\)