Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The King Crucified: The Contrast at Calvary
Scripture: Luke 23:32-39
Code: 42-286

The King Crucified: The Contrast at Calvary

Well now we have a great privilege to open the Word of God, the greatest of privileges to hear the voice of God as He has spoken on the pages of holy Scripture. The text this morning is Luke 23...Luke chapter 23. And we are, of course, at the cross of Christ. In going through this gospel of Luke, we have journeyed with the historian Luke from the first introduction of Zecharias and Elizabeth and promised birth of the forerunner to the Messiah, John the Baptist, through the birth of the Lord Jesus Himself. We have sung with Mary the praise that a Redeemer has been born. We have seen Him grow and minister and gone with Him through all His trials and all His triumphs. And we now find ourselves with Him standing, as it were, at the foot of Calvary and taking in the stunning reality of the crucifixion of Christ.

Let me read for you, beginning in verse 32 down through verse 39, which is a passage that I referred to in our last message and we'll look at more deeply this morning. "And two others also who were criminals were being led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, 'He saved others, let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His chosen One.' And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him offering Him sour wine and saying, 'If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.' Now there was also an inscription above Him, 'This is the King of the Jews.' And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us.'"

In our last look at this passage, I used the title, "The Comedy at Calvary." I understand that's a stunning notion that this is a comedy, but it is precisely that which was intended by the crucifiers. To them Jesus was an object of absolute ridicule. As a king, He was laughable. This whole thing was intended to be a mockery of the fact that He was a king. He had no army. He had no sovereignty over anything or any place. He had meager and minimal followers. It conquered no one and nothing, delivered no one. There was nothing about Him that looked as if He was amassing power but rather He was increasingly weaker and weaker and weaker. And so the whole thing was so comedic, they

turned it into a kind of burlesque.

Here those that are gathered around the cross are mocking, sneering and hurling abuse at Jesus with sarcasm. They're endeavoring to treat the Son of God with as much dishonor as they can muster, with as much disrespect and disdain and shame as they can possibly generate. After all, this is in fact God the Son and therefore this is in fact blasphemy of monumental proportions. Here is sin at its apex. Here is sin at its ultimate. Here is blasphemy at its pinnacle. Mocking deity, sneering at the incarnate God and with glib satisfaction piling sarcastic scorn on the Creator and the Redeemer, the true King, the true Messiah.

Sinners cannot do worse than this. Nothing that sinners could do could more offend God than this. Blasphemy can't be worse than this. And we might ask that in light of the heinousness of this, maybe this is time for God to act. We should be expecting a holy righteous God to react to this kind of ultimate blasphemy by pouring out wrath and vengeance and fury on those who are perpetrating this on Him.

Even in the world of false gods invented by men and demons no false god would tolerate anything close to this. Should not the true and holy God maintain His dignity to some degree? Maintain His honor to some degree? Should not the true and holy God who has revealed Himself as such in most convincing proofs of his deity and now being blasphemed in such a way react in holy anger and bring about a swift and instant death and judgment?

Judgment will come forty years after this in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. Many if not most of these people gathered together who are still alive forty years later will perish in that judgment. Many will die before that ever comes. But doesn't this seem like an undue patience? Just how tolerance is holiness? Just how patient is righteousness? Just how enduring is divine mercy and grace? If ever there seem to be a time when God's wrath would be justified, if it came swiftly, this would be it. Well, in a strange irony, His judgment did come swiftly at the cross, but it didn't come on the crowd, it came on Jesus on behalf of those who blasphemed Him.

The Old Testament is pretty clear about blasphemy, it says this in Leviticus 24:16, "Anybody who blasphemes My name shall die." It is a capital crime to blaspheme the name of God. They are blasphemers. They know that. They're content to blaspheme Him, to pronounce curses on Him, to heap abuse on Him. That is exactly what they are doing. In a perverted twist, however, they accuse Him of being the blasphemer. When earlier in His ministry Jesus demonstrated the power to forgive sin, Matthew 9, they said, "This man blasphemes." As you come to the end of Matthew, or toward the end of Matthew in chapter 26, Jesus says, "You have said it yourself, nevertheless I tell you, you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. And the high priest tore his robe saying, 'He has blasphemed. What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have heard the blasphemy. He is deserving of death.' And they spit in His face and beat

Him with their fists and slapped Him."They are the blasphemers but in a perverted twist, they make Him into the blasphemer. And they are the ones who think they're upholding righteousness.

In John's gospel and chapter 10, there are a couple of verses there, verse 33, "The Jews answered Him, 'For a good work we do not stone You. But for blasphemy and because You being a man make Yourself out to be God.'" And then in verse 36, Jesus speaks, "Do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said I am the Son of God?"

The whole thing is twisted. Justice should fall on them, it falls on Christ. Judgment should crush them, it crushes Christ. They accuse Him of blasphemy. They are the blasphemers. Certainly our Lord had every right to judge them, every right to destroy them on the spot and catapult them forever into hell.

There's precedent on the part of the Old Testament prophets. I think about Habakkuk, that prophet who couldn't understand why God didn't bring judgment on apostate Israel, and in chapter 1 of his prophecy in verse 2 he says, "How long, O Lord? How long? How long are you going to tolerate sinful apostate Israel?" And I think about Revelation 6:10 where the martyrs in a future time, the time of coming Tribulation in the world, those who have suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Antichrist's power are also found under the altar, raising prayers to God saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on the those who dwell on the earth?"

Even the saints in the past and in the future, and certainly in the present, sometimes wonder at the patience of God. How strange it is that there at the event of Calvary when God's fury should have come down on the crowd, it instead came down on Christ for the crowd on their behalf.

But, you know, this is not inconsistent with the character of God. I'll give you an illustration of it from the Old Testament. Go back to Isaiah, back to Isaiah. If you're not familiar with the prophecy of Isaiah, I would encourage you to get familiar with it. You can do that by reading it. Yeah, it's a good thing to read and to read and reread and reread and reread because it is indicting, is full of pronounced judgment and it is full of promises of salvation. And you see the heart of God here, a true assessment of the condition of the sinners, a true proclamation of coming judgment, but at the same time, mercy and grace inevitably extended to them. For example, you see a sort of microcosm with that in the first chapter of Isaiah. God says in verse 2, "You've revolted against Me," rebelled against Me. In verse 3, "An ox knows his owner, a donkey knows its master's manger. Israel does not know, My people do not understand. Alas, sinful nation. People weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly, they've abandoned the Lord, they have despised or blasphemed the Holy One of Israel. They have turned away from Him." How tragic.

How bad is it? Verse 5, second half of the verse, "The whole head is sick. The whole heart is fate." How bad is it? Verse 6, "From the sole of the foot to the head there's nothing sound in it, only bruises,

welts and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged or softened with oil, like a body that is bruised and beaten and hammered and sick and meek." That is Israel. God brings pronunciation of judgment. "Your land is desolate. Your cities are burned with fire," verse 7, "your fields, strangers are devouring them in your presence. It is desolation as overthrown by strangers." This is the pattern in Isaiah, sin and judgment.

But come down to verse 16. Well perhaps verse 13 is a good place to start. "I hate your new moon festivals. I hate your appointed feasts, they are a burden to Me. I'm weary of hearing them, or bearing them. So when you spread your hands out in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you even though you multiply your prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood." They're in serious condition and then comes this, "Wash yourself, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, reprove the ruthless. Defend the orphan, plead for the widow." And then this invitation, "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord, "though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool." That magnificent verse is God offering grace and mercy to a sinful people upon whom He has pronounced judgment that will fall unless they repent.

This pattern, by the way, is sustained all the way through Isaiah in most magnificent ways. And we have time to just look at a couple of them. Chapter 40...chapter 40, after all kinds of promises of judgment to come, chapter 40 begins, "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God, "this speak kindly to Jerusalem and call out to her that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. There's salvation waiting for her." Amazing expression of mercy.

"There's coming a clearing of the way for the Lord in the wilderness, a smooth highway in the desert for our God. Every valley is going to be lifted up. Every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground become plain, a rugged terrain, a broad valley. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it." There's coming a great and glorious salvation.

The same language comes in chapter 42 verse 6, "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness. I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you. I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison. I am the Lord, that is My name, I will not give my glory to another." This is a reference to the Messiah who is the servant mentioned at the beginning of chapter 42. So He appoints for this disobedient and sinful and wicked and sentenced, we might say, nation a coming a salvation, a coming kingdom and a coming Messiah.

You find the same thing at the beginning of chapter 43. You find it in chapter 52. You find it in chapter

53. But go to chapter 55 and this is such a magnificent section of Scripture. After further pronunciations of judgment and indictments of sin, “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters. You who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money, without cost.” Salvation is always free. It is always by grace. “Why do you spend money for what is not bread? And your wages for what doesn’t satisfy? Listen carefully to Me and eat what is good and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen that you may live and I’ll make an everlasting covenant with you according to the faithful mercies shown to David.”

And then He gets personal in verse 6. “Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake His way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. And let him return to the Lord and He’ll have compassion on him and to our God for He will abundantly pardon.”

You might say, “I don’t understand God. I don’t understand how God can look at people who have apostatized, people who have defected from Him, people who have shown Him nothing but rebellion and revolt and He has pronounced judgment on them. How can God then extend Himself to them in this way. Is God’s patience this great?” And the answer comes in verse 8, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so our My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

When you would run out of patience, God does not. When you look at something and think that the patience of God must be exhausted because my patience would have been long ago exhausted, God’s is not.

And the answer is, God is far beyond us, infinitely beyond us in how He thinks and how He acts. The uniqueness of God is this, that when He is massively offended and when He is relentlessly offended, He still comes to the offenders and warning them of the judgment to come offers them forgiveness and mercy and grace and compassion and makes them His children and takes them to His holy heaven forever. It is that God who is hanging on the cross. That God whose patience is far beyond ours because His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts.

The stunning contrast at Calvary is the contrast between the merciless insults of the crowd and the merciful intercession of the Christ. And those are the two points I want you to look at. The merciless insults of the crowd verse 35, we’re going to look at the merciless insults of the crowd.

The crowd is made up of four groups. There’s the people, the leaders, the soldiers and the thieves. And they all have the same response to Jesus. They are literally without sympathy. They are heartless, cruel, brutal.

Verse 35, “And the people stood by looking on.” Now Luke has given us the best possible spin on that crowd. It just appears from Luke that there has been some kind of stupor, like watching some kind of

blood sport. Just looking on, watching the comedy play out. Now remember, the whole thing has been staged by the Jews and the Romans to be comedic. Jesus claims to be a king and that is laughable. So that becomes the trigger point for the whole joke. All the sneering, all the mocking, all the abusive sarcasm is built around this idea that Jesus claimed to be a king.

Remember, it started before this as we'll see with the soldiers earlier when they put a robe on Him and put a reed in His hand and jammed a crown of thorns on His head. And it continued when they got Him to the cross because He was crucified there with two thieves, but they made sure to crucify one thief on one side of Him, and one thief on the other side of Him so that it would mirror in a mocking way a king with his two most important courtiers, one on His right and one on His left.

And then they ridiculed Him with sarcastic language that if He was a king, maybe He should exercise some of His great power. They taunted Him. It is without sympathy. You cannot find sympathy in this crowd at all. Nobody shows Him sympathy. It is the most brutally cruel scene imaginable.

And we might expect cruelty out of Roman soldiers because they did this all the time. They were executioners by trade who put Him on the cross. And we might even expect cruelty out of the leaders, the religious leaders because they had demonstrated how cruel they were by piling heavy burdens on people which they never did anything to help them carry. They were brutally unkind to sinners and tax collectors and the kinds of people that Jesus received. We might expect unsympathetic brutality from the criminals because they were criminals by profession and long ago sympathy and compassion had probably departed out of their hearts. So we're not surprised at those people.

But wouldn't we have expected maybe the crowd would be a little more sympathetic? I mean, these are the people probably who had been healed by Jesus of certain diseases. These might be people who had had experiences of other miracles that Jesus had performed in the area of Judea and Jerusalem. And there were lots of them from, of all places, Galilee in the north. There may have been and surly were people in the crowd who were fed among the five thousand when Jesus made the food. There were certainly people who knew well those who had been healed, maybe been given their hearing or their sight or raised up to walk from a state of paralysis. I mean, wouldn't we expect to find something sympathetic out of them? And didn't they hear Jesus teaching? And didn't they experience the meekness and gentleness of Christ and the love of Christ that was so manifest in the beauty and the magnificence of what He taught?

But even the crowd is merciless. You say, "Well wait a minute, all it says in that verse is that the people stood by looking on." Well that's not all that can be said about the merciless crowd, I'm sorry to say. This is a large crowd. They've come from everywhere. It's Passover, the city has swelled by hundreds of thousands of people. And the crowd moving toward Calvary from the public trial early in the morning is growing and growing and growing because Jesus is the most popular person in the

country by far. And He's drawing a massive crowd that are now collected around the cross. These are people who were there to hail Him as the potential king. On Monday when He came into the city they were the same people who were there to scream, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him," earlier in the day. And now they've sort of appear to be exhausted, I guess, sort of blank stares from what Luke tells us.

But Matthew and Mark tell us more. Matthew and Mark tell us what we need to know. Matthew 27:39, "And those passing by, the milling crowd...the milling crowd, were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, a gesture of taunting and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself if You are the Son of God, come down from the cross. In the same way, the chief priests...etc."

So, it's the crowd and the leaders. Mark 15 verse 29, "And those passing by, the milling crowd, were hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Ha,' wagging their heads, 'You who were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself and come down from the cross.'" And again, "In the same way," which sorts out the rulers from the passing milling crowd. The crowd were in it. They had been orchestrated by the leaders. They're easily seduced by their evil hearts of unbelief, easily seduced by the manipulation of their leaders. They pick up the comedic game and they pour out the venomous sarcasm on Jesus.

They never do the right thing, this crowd. They haven't done the right thing all week. Here they're just vicious, merciless to the merciful Son of God. It's amazing. It's amazing. This is the worst possible conduct by the people of Israel.

So the merciless crowd, then the merciless rulers, back to Luke 23:35. "And even the rulers were sneering at Him," of course they orchestrated all of it, "saying, 'He saved others, let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One," and they use two Messianic terms, "The Christ of God, the Anointed, the word Messiah and His Chosen One," a Messianic title taken from Daniel chapter 9. The Old Testament expressions related to the Messiah are in reference...in general reference when they use the term The Christ of God, the specific words, His Chosen One comes from Daniel 9 and definitely is a messianic title.

And so they mock Him for His claim to be the Messiah. They mock Him for His claim to be the one chosen by God. They are sneering at Him, very strong word, used only here and one other time in the gospel of Luke and nowhere else in the New Testament.It is a compound word. The word in the Greek for nose is mukter...mukter. This word is ekmukterizo, it means to push up your nose at Him. It is a compound word, you do so in an extreme way, intense derision and scorn. They blaspheme Him.

And by the way, would you please notice? They don't speak to Jesus. They never speak to Him. There's no record around the cross that they ever spoke to Him. They speak to the crowd about Him.

“He saved others, let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.” They never speak to Christ. Their intention is to stir up the crowd. So they never address Jesus.

He saved Himself, He saved others, let Him save Himself. What do they mean by that? Sheer sarcasm. It’s ridicule. He saved no one. Who did He ever save from what? He delivered noone. And, of course, their view would be political military deliverance.

So, since He’s done such a great job of saving everybody else and delivering all of Israel, let Him deliver Himself. Just total scorn. They are very proud, by the way, to be the vanquishers of this phony king, very proud. And they welcome the responsibility and say, “His blood be on us and our children.” According to Matthew’s account, Matthew 27:42, “He saved others, He can’t save Himself. He’s the King of Israel. Let Him now come down from the cross and we’ll all believe Him. He trusts in God, let Him deliver Him now if He is taking pleasure in Him. For He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

You know, they say these things and they just have no idea what they’re saying. Listen to this, Psalm 22 looks at the cross of Christ, prophecy. It starts out this way, here’s the beginning of Psalm 22, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Does that sound familiar? The very words of Jesus on the cross.

But go down to verse 7, Psalm 22:7, “A reproach of men despised by the people, all who see Me sneer at Me. They separate with the lip. They wag the head.” Exactly what they did. “Say, ‘Commit yourself to the Lord, let Him deliver Him, let Him rescue Him because He delights in Him.’” All that sarcasm was predicted in the Psalm. They fulfilled it to the letter.

And by the way, you can go back to the ninth chapter of Luke and in verses 20 and 35 you will see that Jesus did take the title “The Christ of God,” and He did take the title, “His Chosen One.” They knew He claimed it. To them it was just ridiculous. And so they turned it into a joke. Remember Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 that a crucified Messiah is to the Jew a stumbling block. And, of course, to the Gentile, foolishness.

They thought of someone hanging on a tree, according to Deuteronomy 21:23, as cursed by God. And Jesus was cursed by God. And so they heap on Him all the scorn of this notion that He is the true Messiah and King that they’ve been waiting for. How could that possibly be true? It is absurd. The leaders orchestrate this and egg on the mindless crowd. Little did they know, as I said, that He was being cursed by God, that was true. Further, Isaiah 53:4 says He was smitten by God and afflicted. And verse 10 says, “The Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to death.” Paul looks back on that and says, “He was made a curse for us.” But it was all nonsense to the people.

There's a third group, there are the merciless people in the crowd, there are the merciless leaders, and thirdly, the merciless soldiers. Verse 36, "And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him and offering Him sour wine and saying, 'If You're the King of the Jews, save Yourself.

They don't know anything about Jewish theology. They just join the game. They just follow the same line. They mocked Him, these merciless soldiers. They taunt...the actual Greek word empaizo is to taunt, inflicting even more pain on Him to His face, as He hangs in agony. And in a mock act of obeisance and service to Him as if He were a King, they offer Him sour wine.

Now there are a couple of occasions that are clearly identified when Christ was crucified in which He was offered something to drink. The first one was when they got Him to the place to be crucified, you remember, they offered Him a drink that had a sedative in it that would probably be used to sedate the person a little bit so that it would be easier to nail Him to the cross and He wouldn't fight. And Jesus refused that, remember? And then when He comes to the very end of His dying, six hours later, at the very end at three o'clock in the afternoon when He's about to die, He says, "I'm thirsty." And they lift up to Him a drink on a sponge on the end of a stick. This seems to me to be something different from both of those. This seems to me to be part of the game they were playing. This is certainly not their giving Him the wine in response to His asking. This does not appear to be the sedative because He's already there and the mockery is already full scale. It seems to me that they are offering Him sour wine and saying at the same time, "If You're the King of the Jews, save Yourself." It's a pretend act of obeisance as if they were bringing royal wine to the King. The mockery just reaches ultimate proportions. The Roman soldiers drank a cheap form of wine they offered it to Him. Mimicking the rulers and mimicking the people, spewing out the same taunts.

Verse 38 is a very important note in the text. There was also an inscription above Him, "This is the King of the Jews," and, of course, that's the theme that sets the state for the whole comedy. It all played around that idea.

Where did that sign come from? Well John 19 tells us, we know historically that when people were crucified, their crime was posted. And since Jesus committed no crime, there could be no crime posted over Him. So Pilate decided what was going to go on the sign. Pilate, John 19:19, Pilate wrote an inscription, put it on the cross. This was Pilate's thing, and tis is what it said. "Jesus the Nazarene, or Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." If you combine Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it actually says, "This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." It was all placarded there.

Well therefore this inscription, many of the Jews read for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city. Again reason for a huge crowd. It was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. Pilate wanted everybody to know it. And so the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write the King of the Jews, but that He said I am King of the Jews." Pilate answered, "What I have written I

have written." Pilate wouldn't change it because this was Pilate's way to mock them. They had mocked him. They had backed him into the proverbial corner and blackmailed him into executing a man he knew was innocent. Even his wife said, "Wash your hands of this innocent man." Pilate said multiple times, "I find not fault in Him." Herod found no crime. And Pilate had been made to look like a fool and he wasn't going to leave it at that and so he wanted to turn the tables and make them look like fools. It was Pilate's little joke, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." And they said, "Take that down and put up He said He's the King of the Jews." And he said, "What I have written I have written."

So you have the people mocking Jesus and Pilate mocking the people. By the way, the inscription like that on the top indicates that the cross was a traditional cross with part of the long beam extending above the cross beam where the sign would be placed, rather than a T-shaped cross, since this was placarded above His head.

Something else about the soldiers; back in verse 34, end of the verse, "And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves." They cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. That's standard procedure, by the way. The executioners were given the right to keep the possessions, the final possessions, the clothing and things of the people who were executed. That was sort of a small job benefit, I guess, perk.

Now there's a little more detail on this back in John because John gives us some insight into exactly what the soldiers did. In John 19 verse 23, "The solders therefore when they had crucified Jesus took His outer garments and made four parts." There would be four parts. There would be four garments that a man would wear in that day. There would be an outer cloak that you kept warm with, like a jacket and you slept on and used as a blanket. There would be shoes or sandals. There would be a head piece. There would be a sash or a belt. Four pieces.

We know that there were four Roman soldiers assigned to a crucifixion. If you look in Acts 12:4 you read about a squad of Romans, it's a quiturnian(?) made up of four. In fact, a full one was four units of four. So it's very likely that there were four soldiers in a death squad and that's why the four garments could be divided one to each of the four. But there was also a tunic which would have been His regular garment and the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece so they said, "Let's not tear it, let's cast lots for it to decide whose it shall be. That the Scripture might be fulfilled, they divided My outer garments among them and for My clothing they cast lots." That too in Psalm 22.

So that's what they did. They cast lots, dividing up His garments among them, each taking one piece and then somebody winning the tunic. As you think about that, you now realize that Jesus has been stripped of everything. He's been stripped of all His clothing and He's naked except for a loin cloth. And they're doing everything they can to strip Him of all His dignity if there's anything left of His

dignity, they want to make Him such a mockery that there will be none of that left. And He's hanging there naked.

Can't help but think about that without remembering that when Adam and Eve fell into sin, they were immediately made conscious that they were...what?...naked. Nakedness has been associated with and symbolic of moral guilt, symbolic of shame before God. And they tried to make coverings for themselves unsuccessfully and God moves in in Genesis chapter 3 and kills an animal to make coverings for them for that shame and nakedness, that symbol of moral guilt God Himself made a covering. Here at Calvary, Jesus is made naked in our place. Jesus is in the position of manifesting the symbol of moral guilt and moral shame before God. Only He's not covered. He's judged. He's cursed by God in that nakedness which was not His own but ours. Jesus naked in our place. Jesus naked, the symbol of our moral guilt and moral shame is not covered by God, He is judged by God and God pours out the full fury of His wrath on that nakedness. And Jesus, the One made naked for us becomes our covering. He becomes our covering, our Lamb who covers us. This in a divine irony.

Finally, the merciless thieves, verse 39. "One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us.'" It's the same thing. They're all playing the same game. One of the thieves, only one is quoted by Luke. But Matthew and Mark tell us the rest of the story. Here's what Matthew says, Matthew 27:44, "The robbers were also insulting Him with the same words." Both of them, plural. Mark 15:32, "Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him." They both joined in. The whole crowd, all the rulers, all the soldiers, both thieves. All Luke does is record for us what one of the two said. But they were both involved.

"Are you not the Christ," again with scorn and sarcasm. "Save yourself and us." It's just all merciless.

So against this attitude of this merciless insult, we look at the merciful intercession of the Christ. It's really stunningly starkly opposite. Verse 34, "But Jesus was saying, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing.'" This is just shocking...just shocking. Without argument, what is being spewed out of these evil hearts and evil mouths right at the Son of God is the supreme blasphemy, the ultimate desecration of holiness, the lowest sin ever committed, wickedness at its lowest. And it is deserving of divine cursing, divine threatening, divine vengeance, divine judgment, divine damnation. This is injustice without parallel, transgression without equal. This is heresy above heresy, irreverence above irreverence, profanity above profanity, sacrilege beyond comprehension. We would expect Jesus to pour out furious denunciations on all of them, to judge them, to make them pay for their outrageous iniquity immediately on the spot. But He doesn't. Contrary to that He says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they're doing." He asks God to provide forgiveness for them.

Now Jesus spoke seven things from the cross. He spoke to one of the thieves and said, "Today you'll be with Me in Paradise." Then He spoke to His mother and John and said, "Behold your mother,

behold your son," and gave the care of His mother to the Apostle John who were standing far, far away. And then for three hours the whole earth was dark and He spoke not at all. And after the darkness He spoke to God and He said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And then He spoke to the soldiers and said, "I'm thirsty," and they gave Him a sponge. And then He spoke to Himself and said, "It is finished." And then He spoke to God and said, "Into Thy hands I commit My Spirit."

But the first thing He said before any of those was, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." His first words were words seeking divine forgiveness for the world's most wretched sinners. Certainly this is Jesus the Father running to embrace the stinking prodigal, isn't it? This is not surprising. Jesus even said that the more someone is forgiven, the more they love. So He set Himself up to forgive great sinners so that He might experience from them great love. Peter says that when He was reviled, He reviled not again. And that when He was being abused, He did not cry out for vengeance, 1 Peter 2:23 and 24. Stephen picked up on this and when Stephen's life was being crushed out by the bloody stones, Stephen following His Lord said "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

This is a general prayer. To understand what He meant by this, it is a general prayer for all the world to know that there's no sin against the Son of God that is so severe it cannot be forgiven if one will repent. That's the message. If there is forgiveness for these people, there is forgiveness for anyone. You can't get beyond this. But it's more than just a general prayer, it's a specific prayer. When He said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing," He knew who the them were because on the Day of Pentecost, three thousand Jews in Jerusalem were converted to Christ and baptized and the church was begun. Within a few weeks, another five thousand men and more and more, and it moves into tens of thousands of people in Jerusalem who embraced the faith of Jesus Christ. And there must have been many of those who came to Christ in those weeks after the resurrection who were there in that crowd so that it is a general prayer, telling the whole world that the sinner who repents and comes to Christ can be forgiven of the worst crime ever committed. But it is also a specific prayer and that God knows in His mind before the foundation of the world who in that crowd He will truly forgive. And the church was born out of these people who stood at the foot of Calvary and mocked the Son of God. They became the first church.

Not only that, there was a soldier. Among the soldiers, one of them came to salvation. Verse 47 of Luke 23, "When the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'" And Matthew says he said something besides that, he said, "This was the Son of God." And by the way, don't think it was just that centurion, listen to Matthew 27:54, "Now the centurion and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus said, 'Truly this was the Son of God.'" The prayer was answered on the spot. Some in the crowd formed the first church. Some among the soldiers affirmed the deity of Jesus Christ and a Roman centurion praising the true God of

Israel and affirming the reality of His Son and others with Him? And by the way, some of the leaders also were saved. In the sixth chapter of Acts verse 7, “The Word of God kept on spreading, the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem,” listen to this, “and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

And by the way. There was one of the two thieves who said, “Remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.” And to him Jesus said, “Today I’ll meet you in Paradise.” In one sense it’s a general prayer, throws open the forgiveness of God for all who have rejected Christ no matter how great the crime is committed against Him, but on another level, this is a very specific prayer that was immediately answered among the crowd, among the soldiers, among the thieves and even among the priests. The great irony of Calvary is that while all of this scorn was being heaped on Christ, He was bearing the curse of God far worse than anything they could put on Him. You think it’s bad to be cursed by men, He was being cursed by God. But in taking both the curses from men and the curse from God, He provided the very atonement which makes the forgiveness He prayed for possible.

Lord, we thank You again for the scene, the vividness of it, the richness of it, the wonder of it that fills our souls with joy and thanksgiving. It is the prayer of my heart that all who are here would have a true relationship with Christ, that we would trust in Him as our Redeemer and Savior alone, that we would receive the forgiveness that He offers, even those who have blasphemed His holy name. We thank You for the greatness of grace. We thank You that You were willing to take all the curses of men and even more, the curse of God to provide forgiveness for undeserving sinners such as we are. We praise You, we bless You. Little wonder that we can’t find strength enough to sing loud enough and long enough our praises.

Now, Lord, do Your work in every heart and we rejoice in that work. We thank You that we were there in a very real sense in Your Son’s mind when He said, “Father, forgive them,” we’re a part of that them. We have been forgiven. We are the ones for whom He prayed and for whom He responded. We thank You for the greatness of our salvation. May You use us to proclaim this salvation to the ends of the earth, we pray in our Savior’s name. Amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).