

October Cell Group Teaching  
Reflections on the Last Seven Words of Christ  
First Word: Forgiveness  
*“Forgive them Father for they know not what they do” (Luke 23: 34).*

Lectio Divino: Luke 23: 26-37.

For the next few months I will be reflecting on the Last Seven Words of Christ. At the beginning I should clarify that the last seven words are not words at all but rather the last sentences or phrases that Christ said from the Cross before he died. Traditionally, the Last Seven Words form the basis of a homily on Good Friday. I would like to reflect on them now, however, because I think they contain the entire mystery of our Catholic faith which is worth praying about, meditating on, and discussing with others at all times. This also ties into last months cell teaching which encouraged us to adapt the posture of the Holy Family and grow in holiness in our homes. I would thus invite and challenge all of you to discuss the points raised with your families, loved ones, and friends. As Fulton Sheen wrote “[t]here was never a preacher like the dying Christ; there was never a congregation like that which gathered about the pulpit of the Cross; there was never a sermon like the Seven Last Words.” In the coming months let us soak in the and reflect upon what Jesus teaches us from the Cross.

In all the scriptures only three other people’s dying words are recorded besides those of Christ: Israel, Moses, and Stephen. This is fitting because each of the three have special significance: Israel was the first of the Israelites, Moses gave us the law, and Stephen was the first Christian martyr. From the Cross, Christ gave us a map for our salvation because the Cross was the climax of His earthly ministry. The fact that Christ would even speak at all should not have come as a surprise to those who crucified him. Two Roman writers, Seneca and Cicero wrote about what those who were dying would shout from the Cross. Seneca wrote that those who were crucified would curse the day of their birth, their executioners, and would spit on those that passed by. Cicero noted that sometimes it was necessary to cut the tongues of those crucified to stop their “terrible blasphemies.” It was only fitting, then, that Jesus’ executioners expected a word from Christ, but I bet they weren’t expecting what they heard. Those Scribes and Pharisees knew that Jesus preached the Gospel of loving your enemies and doing good for those who persecute you. Perhaps they thought, and even expected, that in His hours of agony and torture Christ would somehow change his tune and curse those who unjustly condemned Him. How wrong they were! Rather than curse those who crucified Him, Jesus prayed from Cross. Not only did He pray, but He prayed *for* those who were killing Him. By this prayer Christ was teaching us the importance of forgiveness. How can we not forgive those who harm us, when Christ asked for forgiveness to those who crucified Him?

If ever anyone had reason not to forgive it was the Son of God who was truly innocent of any wrongdoing. Yet forgive He did and not only did He personally forgive, Christ also played that God the Father forgive them, because they didn’t know what they were doing. Bishop J.C. Ryle wrote that Christ probably said these words while He was “being nailed to the Cross, or as soon as soon as the Cross was reared up on end. It is worthy of remark that as soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede.” Despite the example given to us by Christ, we find it hard to forgive those who harm us in our own lives. Sometimes we may find it so hard that we either refuse to forgive altogether or go about our own lives thinking that is just impossible to forgive someone for their actions. What makes

forgiveness even harder to accept are examples of extraordinary (or what we might call supernatural acts of forgiveness). Take the following example: on October 2, 2006, a group of Amish school girls were taken hostage in their one-room school house in Nickel Mines Pennsylvania. Eight out of ten girls was shot, before the gunman took his own life. To many peoples surprise the Amish community forgave the gunman. This tragic event was the basis of a book and movie called *Amish Grace*. In one powerful scene in the movie, the mother of the gunman meets with the families of those he killed. One of the family members says “[We forgive] because it’s the right thing to do, God commands it. We must trust God’s wisdom. If we forgive, God promises that peace will follow.” These are powerful words because they are true, but why are they so hard to live by? As Sister Helen Prejean wrote about inmates on death row “people are more than the worst thing they’ve done in their lives.” What makes forgiveness so difficult sometimes is when the person who hurts us doesn’t seem to care. This is when we need to take special note of what exactly Jesus says. Jesus not only prays that they be forgiven, He also notes why. They are to be forgiven because they know not what they do. Jesus did not reduce those He saw before Him to one act of injustice, Jesus saw the entirety of their character. We too are called to see people as more than just their actions.

We may have the desire to forgive but find it hard to go that extra step and follow the example of Christ. Well, that desire is a good place to start. If you’re like me you may struggle with conflicting impulses. On the one hand you may want to forgive but feel incapable of doing so. Or perhaps you want to let go of any resentment in your life but you feel you don’t have the power to do so. Acknowledging these impulses and wanting to change is the first step. Take the example of the Amish community in Nickel Mines. How can we ever approach that level of forgiveness? Where did that community’s strength come from? The simple answer is from God. Forgiveness is a gift from God. We may say to ourselves we can’t forgive and we are right, we can’t alone. But God can. In this year of mercy, let out prayer be for an increase in the desire to forgive those who wrong us. I leave you with one final thought. In my room at the seminary I have a painting by James Tissot. Tissot was a French artist who by the end of his life devoted his time to painting scenes from the Bible. One of my favorite paintings, and the one I have in my room, is called “What Jesus saw from the Cross.” The painting is done from the perspective of Jesus on the Cross and what He would have seen as He was dying on the Cross. I include a copy of it and I would encourage you to pray with the painting and meditate on a few questions: Who does Jesus see? What are they doing? Do you see yourself in the painting? If so, who? If not, why not? This is a good painting to pray with because it invites us to reflect on what Jesus sees even now. He continues to pray for our forgiveness. Jesus prays for us even when we know full well what have done. Isn’t it only fair that we extend that same grace to others? Isn’t it only fitting that we pray for that grace ourselves?

#### Discussion Questions

- 1) Why do we find it so hard to forgive?
- 2) Discuss examples of your own struggles with forgiveness.
- 3) Discuss any examples of how you have forgiven someone.
- 4) For private meditation: Imagine you are hanging on the Cross. Who do you see?