

“FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING”

Luke 23:26-34 The Crucifixion of Jesus

²⁶ As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ ³⁰ Then “‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!”” ³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” ³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

MESSAGE:

“Ignorance is no excuse in the eyes of the law.” As far as I know, all societies regard this principle as vital to maintaining the social order. If ignorance were an excuse, how could anyone be proven guilty? If you break the law, you’re guilty, whether you were aware of the fact that you were breaking it or not. But does this principle apply to divine law as well? If men don’t know that there are commandments against lying, stealing, murdering and committing adultery, are they guilty of doing those things? Is ignorance an excuse in God’s eyes? Jesus’ words, “*Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,*” would seem to indicate that it is.

The problem is, there is no such thing as ignorance when it comes to God’s moral law. In his *Letter to the Romans* Paul writes: “*The requirements of the law are written on [human] hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.*” (Rom. 2:15) In other words, everyone is born with the knowledge that it is wrong to murder, to steal, to lie and to commit adultery because God has instilled that knowledge in their genes. It’s called a conscience and it tells them that those things are wrong. Moral knowledge is as natural to man as his heart or kidneys or lungs. That is why the moral codes

of all societies are virtually identical. There is no known society that approves of lying, stealing, murdering or committing adultery.

Our problem is not that we are ignorant of the law; our problem is that we don't like the law. We don't sin out of ignorance—we sin because we like to sin. We know the difference between right and wrong—we just prefer the wrong—it comes naturally. Our sin is not an indication that we don't admire virtue; our sin is an indication that we admire evil even more. We are born sinners: we should do good but we do bad.

Now at this point a disturbing question arises. If we are born with a compulsion to sin, how can God hold us responsible? How can He blame us for sinning if we have no choice but to sin? Not only blame us, but threaten us with eternal punishment for doing what we can't help but do? It seems like an impossible situation: God demands that we be morally perfect even though He knows that we are compelled to sin. He holds us responsible for meeting requirements we cannot possibly meet and then threatens us with damnation and hell for failing to meet them. It's unthinkable—but true.

In other words, we are doomed from the start. Born on death row, we are dead men walking with biological life in our bodies and death in our veins. Dust we are, and to dust we must return. The judge has set the date of our execution and there is no remaining court of appeals.

If all this alarms you—it should. Sin and death are two inescapable realities of our lives. Whatever the relativistic blather of our age may say to the contrary, sin is real, it is offense to God, and the penalty is death and hell. The Psalmist tells it like it is: *“You turn men back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust O sons of men’; you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.”* It's not a pretty picture, but it's an accurate one.

And then we hear Jesus' words from the cross: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* And how are we supposed to respond to that? What in the world did Jesus mean? Are we expected to believe that those who were driving nails through bone and flesh didn't know what they were doing? That those who were swinging the mallet and holding the spikes didn't know what they were doing? That the Jews who had brought the capital charges against Him and wrung the death penalty out of the reluctant governor didn't know what they were doing? That the onlookers who approved of it all didn't know what was going on?

The answer is: no they didn't. They really, really didn't. Oh, they knew that they were sinning, of course, just like we do. But they had no idea that by crucifying the Lord of life with their sins they were opening the door to eternal life for themselves. That by heaping their sins on the Carpenter from Nazareth, they were setting themselves free from sin itself. That by executing their plans for ridding themselves of this troublesome Rabbi they were fulfilling God's plan for their salvation. They didn't know that. They couldn't have known that.

And how about the mob that kept shouting, "Crucify Him!" and "His blood be on us and our children!"—did they know what they were asking for? Oh they thought that they were shouting that they were willing to accept the responsibility for what was about to be done—and even pass that responsibility along to their children—but did they even imagine that the blood for which they were howling would turn their sins from scarlet to as white as snow? They didn't know that. They couldn't have known that. They really didn't know what they were doing.

These words from the cross stand at the very epicenter of time and space. They are illogical, yet true. Incomprehensible, yet certain. They secure God's forgiveness for all of man's inhumanity to man and all of his contempt for God—and for no other reason than that the Son of God asked the Father that it be so. They are our only—yet sufficient—basis for hope in a world which would otherwise lead us to sink into despair. They are our only hope for light in the midst of darkness visible. They are our only hope for life in a world full of death and dying. Do men know that they sin? Yes. Do they know the consequences of their sins? Some do, some don't. Can all men know that they are forgiven? Yes they can, thanks be to God—but they won't know unless someone tells them.

Amen.