

Matthew 23-03-19b

We return now to what I consider to be a very interesting come to pass here, related to the words of the crowd when they say in Matthew, unquestionably, no text problem here, “His blood be on us and on our children.” So the people say, “We’re happy to be guilty of the blood of Christ.” Jesus says, according to Luke 23:34, “Father, forgive them.”

“They do not know what they do.” So they say, “We’re happy to assume responsibility.” Jesus says to the Father, “Don’t hold them responsible.”

And this brings us to the question of the nature of forgiveness, the nature of whether a sin is conscious or unconscious. Is it a sin of ignorance if you do something in good faith, but it is actually sin? Or if you’re doing it out of the reprobation and corruption and fallenness of human nature? There are things we do that might be a sin, but we didn’t know they were a sin.

We didn’t think they were a sin. And yet it turns out to be sin. And what is the nature of responsibility and what is the nature of forgiveness? We have the parallel from this same author in Luke chapter—Luke’s second book, Acts chapter 7.

So if you keep your place here in Luke 23 and go to Luke’s other gospel, Acts, Luke’s other book, chapter 7, you’ll remember that this is the testimony of Stephen as he is in the process of being held accountable and ultimately stoned. So, beginning in verse 54, after they hear his sermon, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed at him with their teeth. He, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said—this is 7:56 now—“Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord. And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Unquestioned words of Luke here, recording Stephen: “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. You can see the nature of the parallel here.

What do you notice that is similar and different in this regard? In both cases, there is a prayer. Interestingly, Stephen can apparently see the throne room at this point. He sees the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Have to be able to ascertain the location of God to know that Jesus is standing at His right hand. So there is a representation to Stephen of God and the Lord Jesus standing at His right hand. This, of course, opens the fresh question.

What does it mean when it says no man can see God and live? And yet we have several instances where, whether it is an Old Testament prophet or a New Testament saint, there are people who do see the throne room and see the presence of God—Moses and the elders seeing the throne of God across the glassy sea and eating in His presence. But that is not our topic here. He prays two things.

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” Compare and contrast this with the 23:34 in Luke that has Jesus saying, “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.” In legal terms, you have two different stages of the process to answer that question. In the case of what Jesus says, if it is legitimate, the sin has been charged and is on the books.

They are guilty of a sin. But to forgive a sin, forgiveness is one of several stages. If you want a detailed study on this, we did one in the past under short specials under the concept of the barrier.

What is it that separates man from God? And there is more than one aspect to sin. Simply forgiving a sin doesn’t end its grip, its power, its effect. The issue that is created between God and man with sin is not solved by forgiveness alone.

If you're forgiven, that's not all you need. Forgiveness is one of several aspects of sin and effects of sin that has to be accomplished. So simply being forgiven is not enough.

Lack of forgiveness can be a deal-breaker. Any one of the blocks in the barrier remaining prevents fellowship and relationship with God. All of them have to be removed.

Any combination of them is enough to disqualify us from presence and relationship with God on an ongoing basis. So that having been said, the words of Jesus, if they are authentic, are after the conviction of sin, after the acknowledgment that this is in fact a sin. There's no question about it, and there is going to be a consequence and a penalty for that sin. "Father, forgive."

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us." And the forgiveness, the removal—aphiemi is the word there for forgive—and forgive means to separate. You are no longer accountable in the sense of the penalty.

Forgiveness removes the penalty, the consequence of that sin. And consequences of sin are directional, just like love is directional and conversation and communication is directional. Forgiveness is directional.

So to forgive a sin in terms of God's accomplishing that, in God's eyes, that sin is removed. Now, someone can commit a sin, and I'm thinking here about the model prayer that the Lord Jesus gave to His disciples when they said, "Teach us to pray." And you remember the pertinent part of that prayer is to the Father, "Forgive us, Father in heaven, forgive us our trespasses."

You, in Your sight, remove responsibility and consequence from us for our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgive us our trespasses as we do, to the extent that we, in like manner as we forgive others. And someone can commit a sin against us.

They can go to the Father and confess that sin, and God forgives them. Separate and distinct from that is whether or not the victim of that sin chooses to forgive. And that's a separate question.

Forgiveness is directional. So this is our first point of observation, which will lead to application as we review the authenticity of Luke 23:34 and the responsibility that the Jews claim for themselves. "Let His blood be on us and on our children."

Responsibility for the crime of executing an innocent man. Let that be on us, they say, at the instigation of the leadership. So first of all, if there is going to be forgiveness, who is doing the forgiveness? What is the direction of the crime? This is a crime perpetrated against Jesus Himself.

Is He going to forgive them and not charge it to their account? Is the Father going to hold them responsible and accountable? In the case of Stephen in Acts chapter 7, it is a different thing. He says, "Don't even bring this to trial. Do not charge this sin to their account."

"Do not charge them with this sin." This is similar to being assaulted or mugged and they grab the perpetrator and someone says, "I do not want to press charges. I do not want to bring this to court."

I don't want this to come before a judge or a jury. No charges filed. I refuse to have this person held accountable by the legal system.

Let them go." Do you see the difference? By saying, "Do not charge them with this sin. Do not charge this sin to their account," Stephen is praying, "Don't let this be an issue for judgment, conviction, and sentencing." If it isn't brought to trial, then they will not be convicted or sentenced. The legal mechanism does not address this.

So I think very consciously and amazingly, given the circumstances, Stephen understands that he can't ask God to forgive a sin that has been charged and convicted and carries with it an automatic sentence. So he prays, "Do not charge them with this sin." They are in the process of committing it and he says, "Don't write this one in the books."

That would be the difference between Stephen's words and Jesus' words. I bring this up for two reasons. First of all, to point out the difference.

And secondly, to bring up a point in connection with the legitimacy of Luke 23:34. Could there be a motivation to add these words to Jesus in the early years of the church because of Stephen? Is Stephen going to be more forgiving than Jesus? Stephen says, "Don't charge this sin to their account," yet here's Jesus and He doesn't say that. And you could imagine a situation where someone says, "Well, Stephen can't be more forgiving than the Lord that he is standing in front of."

So we'll quietly add Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do," so that he's outshining Stephen.

So there is an argument to be made for early copyists adding something similar but different to what Stephen says. It is also a point to be addressed that if you look at Moses on the occasion where he intercedes for the people after the incident of the golden calf, and you can turn back to Exodus chapter 32 and verse 32, Exodus 32:32. And you remember that Moses returns to the Lord in verse 31 and says, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed."

The sin is on the books. It is charged. It is visible.

"They have made gods of gold for themselves." This is in direct violation of a couple of Ten Commandment tablet lines: "Have no other gods before me," "not make unto thee any graven image." They have made gods of gold for themselves.

Yet now, verse 32, "If you would only forgive their sin—if not, please blot me out of the book that You have written." And you can also see a parallel that an early copyist might adduce from this passage. Moses puts himself on the line and says, "If You would only forgive their sin—if not, please blot me out of the book that You have written."

It is an interesting, similar situation. There is corporate guilt. There is someone who is interceding to the Father on their behalf, but keep reading in Exodus 32.

As you continue into verse 33, the Lord replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot out of My book. Go lead this people to the place I described.

My angel will go before you. But on the day that I settle accounts, I will punish them for their sin." So Moses intercedes and says, "Forgive them this sin." God says, "No, those who sin are held accountable."

This is the justice of God. And you have a bit of a symmetry here between the early days of the nation of Israel, the inception under Moses, and the last days of the nation of Israel at the crucifixion. In both cases, you possibly have someone interceding on behalf of them.

God gives a very clear answer in Exodus chapter 32. There is no voice from heaven in the Luke passage. And you think, well, maybe Jesus has more clout than Moses.

Jesus being the second person of the Trinity, can He suspend the function of the justice of God in some way? Here's my conclusion from looking at Acts chapter 7, from looking at Exodus chapter 32, with regard to accountability for sin. Whether it is a sin of ignorance, whether it is a sin of— It is clear in both the Exodus and Acts 7 situations, there's no suggestion that they don't know what they are doing. They very clearly knew what they were doing when they had Aaron make the golden calf and they sat down to eat and rose up to play.

The Jews who are incensed at the implications of the sermon that Stephen has given, stop their ears and cry out and react in a mob violence fashion to murder Stephen without any justification. He gave a sermon. You disagree with the sermon, just say, "You're a nutcase.

Leave us. We don't want to listen to you anymore." They can't even charge Stephen with blasphemy.

He hasn't claimed to be God, or he claims to see God, but so—that's not a capital offense. There's no indication of ignorance. So, the argument you could make for Luke 23:34 is, "Father, forgive them, for"—gar.

I had a really interesting discussion with a fellow piano client the day before yesterday, who is working on his doctoral dissertation, and the subject of that dissertation is the use of conjunctions, specifically in the book of

Hebrews, in terms of preaching value, homiletics, these connective words that connect phrases and modify the core idea. What is the value, what is the significance of that in homiletics, in preaching? And really fascinating. Barely got the piano done.

It was a good thing I was putting the piano together and tuning it because he and I were talking constantly the whole time. But you have a connective word here. You have a conjunction, *gar*, “for.”

“Father, forgive them,” and here’s the basis, here is my contention, here is the ground or argument for forgiving them: “They do not know what they are doing.” Do they know what they are doing or not? They are calling for the execution of a man on the basis of no capital crime evidence at all.

Do they not know? You say, “Well, but they don’t know He’s the Lord of Glory. They don’t realize that He’s the Son of God and the Messiah.” Does that matter that they are murdering a man on the basis of no evidence outside any of the procedures that were laid down for them in the covenant law of Moses? He could be Barabbas, and if they call for His execution on the basis of no legitimate evidence, no legitimate testimony, it’s a railroad job.

Should they be forgiven when they know that that’s what they are doing? Everybody knows this is a put-up job. Everybody knows that no one can cite any evidence. So is this, in fact, a sin of ignorance? I will give you another example, also from the book of Acts, in the sermon of Peter, which would also militate against this, and also in 1 Corinthians.

I only have time to give you one of these. Let’s go to 1 Corinthians chapter 2. You can review Peter’s speech in Acts. This is 1 Corinthians 2, verse 8: “We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory.”

Remember wisdom in Proverbs that we’ve been looking at, claiming to have been present with God at the creation of the world. Paul affirms that here. “The hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew.

If they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. As it is written, eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” And we often cite this verse and say, “You can’t imagine the great things that God has in store in heaven, in the resurrection, in the kingdom of the Father.

Eye has not seen, ear has not heard the things that God has prepared.” But it’s important to keep going. Look at verse 10.

“But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.” The things that the eye hasn’t seen, and the ear hasn’t heard, and haven’t entered into the heart of man, have been revealed by the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.”

So, in context, what is Paul talking about? There are things that people were ignorant of. If they had known them, they wouldn’t have crucified the Lord of glory. But they are revealed by the Spirit.

What is he saying? The rulers of this age who crucified the Lord of glory, these rulers, these elders and priests who incite the mob and get Jesus crucified, these things have been revealed by the Spirit. If these individuals had known those things that are revealed by the Spirit, they would not have crucified the Lord. Why are they accountable for the crucifixion? They are not unaccountable because they did not know.

What are they accountable for? They should have known. Jesus indicts them. “You search the Scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life.

It is these Scriptures that speak of me. If you knew my Father, you would know me. If you listened to the Father, you would listen to me.

My sheep hear my voice, and they follow.” Why? Because they hear the voice of the Father, and they follow Him. This ignorance is willful.

It is willful ignorance. It is a consequence of disregard of the existing revelation of God. The fact that they are ignorant of what they are doing does not excuse them because that ignorance is something for which they are accountable.

You can't say, "You know what? If I never study the Bible, I won't know what God considers a sin, and I can do what I want. I won't have to be forgiven for anything because I don't know what a sin is." Does that argument hold any water? Is that going to persuade at the judgment? "Well, Lord, this is like the argument people have had. You know, I should kill my children before they reach the age of accountability.

That way they will automatically go to heaven because they won't be accountable for rejecting the Lord Jesus." And there's a few crazy people that have actually carried that out. "Well, I didn't want them to grow up and possibly—you know, why gamble a few years of life when I can ensure that they'll be eternally with the Lord? Because all babies go to heaven, they're not accountable.

So I'll kill them now, and I'll obviate any possibility that they might reject Jesus and go to the lake of fire and burn for all eternity." It's a crazy argument. And it's crazy to say, "If I remain skillfully ignorant, willfully ignorant, I won't be accountable for any sins that I might commit."

Ignorance does not provide an excuse. Ignorance, when you find it in Scripture, is held accountable as a sin in itself. If you are covenant people of God, you should know.

And you're on the hook if you're ignorant for that ignorance. The ignorance itself is the sin. Jesus holds that generation accountable.

They know Him as God, but they do not glorify Him as God, neither are they thankful. They empty their imagination and their foolish heart is darkened, and God gives them over because of that willful ignorance. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

They remain ignorant of it. They say, "I see everything I need to see," and Jesus told them, "Because you say we see," in John 9, "your sin remains." Your sin remains because you maintain willful ignorance.

This is the theological basis on which I believe Luke 23:34 is not something Jesus said or prayed. I think there are other reasons why someone would decide to attribute these words to the Lord, and they are attributed very early. There is a paper, if you want to read detailed arguments pro and con, and a conclusion that is different than my own because it is based primarily on textual evidence.

There is a paper that I commend your attention. It is very balanced. It is very erudite.

It is very well researched. It is a paper by Ryan W. Weber, 1B, Ryan W. Weber, W-E-B-E-R. It is a thesis.

It's a master's thesis that was submitted to Wake Forest University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in May of 2012. Just Google Ryan Weber, and the name of the paper is "Unforgiven: The Textual Problem and Interpretation of Luke 23:34a." You can probably get it with Ryan Weber, Unforgiven textual problem.

Just put those in. It will come up. It's a PDF.

It's very slow to load. It's about 50 pages long, but if you want to really delve into the background of this, that's a great place to go. It's an excellent paper.

I just want to read you his conclusion after having adduced many arguments pro and con. His conclusion is as follows on page 60. "This paper has sifted through the variety of views on the textual problem of Luke 23:34, rendered a judgment on its originality, and posited an explanation for the variant's introduction.

We saw the Westcott-Hort originally sparked discussion by judging the variant unoriginal. Many have since agreed with this judgment on the basis of external evidence. Most recently, they specifically classified the prayer as an exclusively Western reading prior to the fourth century.

We have successfully challenged that decision, demonstrated the evidence for the long reading is equal to that of the short reading, both in geographical diversity and antiquity. For these reasons, this paper finds that the

manuscript evidence favors neither the short nor the long reading, but rather necessitates a close look at internal and transcriptional evidence. Internal evidence heavily favors the long reading,” and he goes on from there.

So he ends up deciding in favor of the prayer being original. And basically they say he concludes that it was deleted because of antisemitism in the early days of the church. Christians were mad at the Jews because the Jews persecuted them.

The Jews were held accountable for crucifying the Lord. And that is the basis. And there was a near universal understanding in the early church fathers that the subject of this prayer are the Jews who are in the midst of crucifying the Lord of glory.

And so on the basis of this internal evidence, those who say, “Well, you could go either way on the text evidence, but internally speaking and based on early church history, we think it was original and it got deleted.” In my last few minutes here, I want to address that conclusion. We’re back now in Luke 23:34.

What is our primary rule of interpretation? How is it that we understand Scripture? What are my three rules of Scripture interpretation? They all start with C. Number one, context.

Number two, context. Number three, context.

So let’s take a fresh look at the context of this verse. Jesus has been carrying the cross in verse 27. A great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who mourned and lamented Him.

Jesus, turning to them, said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.” Why would they need to weep for themselves and for their children? What was shouted below the balcony as Pilate said, “Behold, the man,” in Greek and Latin? What did the crowd shout unquestionably in Matthew chapter 27? “His blood be on us and on our children.”

What does Jesus tell the daughters of Jerusalem? “You need to weep for yourselves and for your children.” Why the children? Because they’re going to get their wish. Jesus doesn’t say, “Oh, don’t worry, daughters of Jerusalem, I’m going to pray to the Father and forgiveness is on the way.”

He says, “Don’t weep for me, weep for yourselves and weep for your children.” Interestingly, when Peter is about to commit the sin of denying the Lord multiple times, if you look at all of the denials, remember we counted them, there’s at least nine times that Peter denies the Lord Jesus on that single night. Jesus kneels down to wash his feet and he says, “Lord, You’re not going to wash my feet.”

Jesus basically has kneeled down and, in His body language, says, “I’m going to wash your feet.” And Peter says, “No, You’re not.” And Jesus says, “If I don’t, you have no part with me.”

Jesus tells him he’s going to deny Him multiple times on that evening. And every time Peter says, “You’re wrong, Lord, I’m not going to deny You.” That’s a denial of the Lord.

But in the face of those, Jesus says to the disciples and to Peter, “Satan has asked for you that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed to the Father to forgive your sin.” Is that Jesus’ response? “I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail.

And afterward, after you have sinned, that you can return and restore your brethren.” There is no prayer. Jesus knows Peter is going to sin.

He has heard him sin all night. He does not pray for Peter’s forgiveness, who is the leader of the disciples. Why would he pray for the forgiveness of the crowd? But continue to look at the context here.

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed, the days are coming in which they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren wombs that never bore and the breasts which never nursed.’

And they will begin to say to the mountain, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?” If they can reject and they can call for crucifixion when there is life and power and opportunity, what will they do in the days when there is no life and no power and no

opportunity? If they reject in the face of the presence and the preaching of the Lord Jesus, what will they do in His absence when it is no longer available? Green wood and dry.

Now notice, that is argument number one from context. Here is number two argument from context. There were two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death.

When they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. In verse 33, circle the word “they.” Verse 33, circle the word “they.” Draw a line out to your margin.

Who is they in the immediately preceding verse? Who is it that crucified not just Jesus, but the two criminals? This is not the crowd. This is not the Jews.

These are the Roman soldiers. Yes, they, the Roman soldiers, crucified Him and the criminals, one on each side. In context, the most recent use of the word “they” refers specifically, unequivocally, undoubtedly, and exclusively to a group of Roman soldiers performing the actual work of pounding the nails and erecting the cross.

No question, no doubt, the immediately preceding use of the word “they.” In verse 34, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do.” Circle “them” and “they.” Draw a line out to your word “Roman soldiers” in the margin.

In 34b, “and they divided His garments and cast lots.” Circle “they,” draw a line out to your margin, “Roman soldiers.” Now, ask yourself the question: is there any contextual reason why, all of a sudden, with no reference to the crowd, no reference to mocking, no reference to any others present, this scene is located exclusively and specifically at the foot of the cross? Who is they? Even if this were a legitimate prayer, for whom is Jesus interceding? Who is legitimately on this occasion ignorant of what they are doing? I would argue, strongly, that the only really ignorant people here who have a legitimate excuse because they truly do not know what they are doing—they do not know the history of this alleged crime and the mock sham trials, they do not know the false witnesses, they do not know why these people are clamoring—what are they doing? They are doing their job. They are soldiers, as the Roman centurion said, “I have soldiers under me, I give them orders and they obey.”

These individuals, and I think there are five of them, perform the three crucifixions, and if this is in fact—even if it were, I am not sure, based on textual evidence that you could make a case—but I think on theological evidence, if this is a legitimate prayer, it cannot be for the Jews, because they cannot be forgiven. They are willfully ignorant. This is the fruit of their disregard for the Word of God, the ministry of John the Baptist, the testimony of Jesus.

They should have believed the signs. He said, “If you do not believe my words, believe my works.” They believed neither, and this is the outcome and the fruit.

There is no basis for a prayer of forgiveness for the Jews, or the leadership of the Jews, or for the crowd. Based on context, if this is a legitimate statement, they are the Roman soldiers who are just doing what they are told, and Jesus says, “Father, do not hold these Roman soldiers to account. They do not know, they cannot know.

They did not grow up as Jews. They have not been to synagogue. They do not have the testimony of the law and the prophets.” Either way you construe the textual evidence and the legitimacy of this word of Jesus that is attributed to Him on the cross, there is no grounds for claiming that sins of ignorance can be forgiven, that forgiveness can be obtained by a third-party prayer.

At most, Jesus could have said for the crowd and for the leadership, “I forgive you.” On the basis of the Lord’s prayer, Stephen asks that the sin never be charged, because if it is charged, they are going to be found guilty and there will be a penalty, and he does not want that to take place. Moses says, “If You will forgive their sin,” and God flat out says, “I am not going to forgive their sin.”

And these are slaves recently released from Egypt, having only recently been given the Word of God, but now they have the Word of God, and they have no excuse. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” They violate the first two lines of the freshly given law.

There is no excuse, and God says, "I will charge them, and I will hold them guilty," and the prayer of Moses is denied. All He does is suspend the sentence for several hundreds of years, until they are finally driven out of the land of promise. So that is my analysis, and we will move forward from this.

"Let His blood be on us and on our children." Jesus tells the daughters of Jerusalem, they are going to get their wish. Just as in Romans 1, those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, don't want to glorify God, don't want to be related to Him, they are going to get their wish.

God honors the sentient free will and free choice that He built into each human being, and when we freely choose against God, the consequences are irretrievably and inevitably negative. Nobody else can pray me out of my sin. Nobody else can release me from my accountability or my responsibility.

It is only in the blood of Jesus Christ that we find forgiveness and atonement. Next week we are going to address this idea of atonement. What is the positive side of the blood of Christ? And those who may say, "Penal substitutionary atonement," are going to have to contend with what Scripture says on that subject, and we will address and solve that next time.

But we will close here in a word of prayer. Father, we are so grateful for the mercy, the grace, and the love that You expressed toward us, toward the world, in sending Your Son, the Lord Jesus, so that whosoever believes in Him does not perish, but has eternal life. And recognizing that condition for forgiveness, that condition for cleansing, that condition for renewal, for the grant of life and opportunity, is so critical in our day, when truth is subverted, perverted, distorted, obscured, and set aside, as it was in the days when the Lord Jesus was on this earth.

And the response in that day seems so similar to the response in our day. We pray that we can be lights, shining in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation, that our light will shine before men, that they will see our goodness, the righteousness that You create in us and through us, and will be drawn to Your presence, and be drawn to Your throne, be drawn to the foot of the cross, and to relationship with You through the Lord Jesus. We pray it in His name, amen.