

Do you find it easy to forgive someone? I'd suppose you'd say it depends on what they did to you and your history with that person. If a stranger bumps into you in a crowded hallway and says "I'm sorry" you wouldn't give it a second thought to let it go and not hold it against them. If a stranger viciously insulted you to your face while you were pulling over to get them out of a ditch it might be a different story. If someone really hurts you, you might forgive them, but it would be hard to forget about it. In today's reading we see how Jesus was insulted by the very people he was dying for. We may not have stood in front of the cross and hurled insults at Jesus, yet with our apathy, doubting God's word, and misusing God's name we too mock our Savior. However, just like the thief who mocked his savior and then sought forgiveness, we too have our sins forgiven and forgotten because Christ died so that we will be with him forever in paradise.

It may be difficult for us to put ourselves in the thief's shoes. We aren't on death row. We haven't experienced or even witnessed a real crucifixion. I'm guessing many of us haven't even been convicted of stealing. But what about the crowd watching the execution? These were everyday people who must have had some idea of what was going on and who Jesus was. Some may have shouted "Crucify!," others may have been Jesus followers; those who had, less than a week before, shouted "Hosanna!" How can we tell the difference now? We can't--the crowd did nothing. They were apathetically interested as they watched their leaders and the soldiers mock Christ. Not a one spoke up in Jesus defense. No one objected to an innocent man's suffering. No one tried to stop the abuse of God's name.

Can we place ourselves in the crowd's shoes? Is it hard for others to tell if we are Christians or not? We may find ourselves singing Hosanna in church, but standing silently next to friends who shout crucify with words and actions. When others are in need, do we stand out in the crowd by being more willing to help? When other Christians are under attack for believing in Christ do we step in and speak up in their defense, or do we remain silent, thankful that we aren't a target ourselves? Do we warn others of misusing God's name, or do we laugh along and even speak in the same ways?

Likewise, when we hear about Christians being persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in other lands, do we remember them in our prayers or petition our government to come to their aid? When we see students at our schools or coworkers ridiculed for calling themselves Christians do we step in and speak up? When we hear the world accuse Christians of being sexist and homophobic, what do we say?

We can mock our Savior in silence, but we can also mock God more verbally, as the religious leaders did at the foot of the cross. The religious rulers and leaders in Jerusalem challenged Jesus to save himself to come down from the cross, if he really were the Son of God. They questioned his identity. They demanded proof. Even if he did come down, would they really believe him? Jesus words and ministry had been accompanied by so many miracles up to this point. He had healed the sick, driven out demons, and even raised others to life. Would these leaders really believe if Jesus came down? No they wouldn't. They wouldn't believe because they had always rejected God's Word, they rejected the words of Jesus.

We are just like these "leaders" whenever we doubt and reject God's word and his promises. Whenever we question whether or not God loves us; when we ask whether or not God cares about us as bad things and troubling situations enter our lives. When our faith is weak we sometimes wish that God would give us a miraculous sign so we know that he's real. Then we are like these rulers who mocked Jesus. We reject what God has given us, and ask for something else. If Jesus had done what the unbelieving rulers had challenged him to do, Jesus wouldn't have paid for our sins on the cross, he would have disobeyed his father's will. He would have failed to be perfect. He wouldn't have been raised from the dead and our faith would no longer have any point to it and we would be dead in our sins forever with no hope in sight.

Thankfully Jesus didn't let the mockers get to him. He didn't stop his suffering, which was paying for the very people insulting him to his face. Because of his great love for us, Jesus stayed on the cross to redeem us from sin and win eternal life for us. He showed the whole world why he was enduring suffering when he gave the thief the gift of paradise.

We know that there were two thieves on crosses on both sides of Jesus and that both had mocked him. At first the one joined with the other. It must have been fun to join in with the crowd, the soldiers, and the authorities in ridiculing one pathetic target. For a while the thief forgot why he was dying and stopped thinking about what would happen. Something changed. This thief realized that in a very short time, he would have to face his maker. It just didn't seem right to him anymore to ridicule an innocent man. The thief knew who this was, he knew he was Jesus, the one called the Messiah. By God's grace the thief believed that this man was the Christ, the Savior of the world. Suddenly he knew what was happening, perhaps he was the only human in the world who knew that day that Jesus was dying to pay for.....sins,..... he was dying for his own sins, right in front of him.....

In his new faith the thief acted immediately. He rebuked the other thief. He told him to stop mocking an innocent man. How hypocritical! They were the ones who deserved to die, they were guilty but Jesus was not. Knowing what Jesus was doing, the thief turned to Jesus and asked him to remember, to care for him as soon as he entered his kingdom. Jesus could see into this man's heart and he saw his faith. He promised the repentant thief paradise!

Jesus could say this because he was paying for everyone's sins, including the thief's. Jesus knew his Father's will. He knew that he was to die to redeem everyone, to atone for the sins of the world. Jesus prayed for forgiveness for all his enemies that day. This thief's request for mercy must have been the best thing Jesus heard that day. Jesus had wanted everyone to have the precious gift that cost him his life! With great joy he gives forgiveness to all who ask.

Jesus paid for all our sins too. He paid for sins of apathy, mockery, and blasphemy. Jesus had just been insulted to his face by this thief, yet he forgave him instantly. God wasn't going to keep record of that sin. Likewise we too are forgiven instantly. We don't have to worry about our past sins being brought up on Judgement Day. Through Jesus our sins are forgiven and forgotten forever.

The thief was clearly saved through faith. He certainly didn't earn his forgiveness; he was being executed for a crime he had just pleaded guilty to! He had just blasphemed God to his face! His forgiveness was a gift of mercy. He didn't have to wait for his reward either. Jesus said "today you will be with me in paradise." We also can rest assured. Our death means our entry into paradise, our entry into heaven.

When we pray that God "deliver us from evil," doesn't he do that whenever we die? Our death means an end to the pain, suffering, and doubt of this world. At our death God takes us to heaven. There our paradise is something that we can't experience here on earth. It's much better than a fancy resort. Jesus told the thief "Today you will be with me in Paradise". Heaven is so wonderful, it is such a great paradise because we will be with our Savior.

At times we can identify ourselves with the different people at the cross. Sometimes we are apathetic like the crowd. We don't stand up for the innocent, we don't speak up for our faith and for our Savior's name. Other times we are like the leaders who questioned God's word, doubted his promises, and tested God. We are most like the thief. Caught up in our sin and blind of our need for salvation, then realizing our need and turn to Jesus in faith. Like the thief our sins are forgiven and forgotten forever, and we have Jesus personal assurance: "Today you will be with me in paradise." Amen

1. How do we mock our Savior?
2. What does Jesus promise us?
3. What did (or didn't) the crowd do at Jesus' death?
4. In what ways can we be like the crowd?
5. What did the leaders do at Jesus' death?
6. When do we doubt God's word?

7. What made one thief change his attitude about Jesus?
  8. What did the repentant thief see that no one else did?
  9. What did Jesus promise the thief?
  10. How do we get to see Jesus in paradise?
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1. What things do you find easy to forgive? What are some hard things?
  2. Agree/Disagree: We Christians are most likely going to find ourselves acting like the crowd instead of the leaders or the thief.
  3. A/D If Jesus got down from the cross, he still could have payed for our sins in some other way.
  4. Describe how you view your own death.

Almighty God, You have invited us to pray and promised to hear the prayers of Your people. We come before You this day in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, to offer You petitions and supplications on behalf of ourselves and all people who have need.

*Brief silence*

We give You thanks that You have granted us Your only Son and for His deliverance from the domain of sin and its darkness of death and for raising us up to be people of light. Give to us the courage we need to meet the troubled days ahead, and guard us against despair. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In Christ, You have revealed the fullness of Your saving will and purpose. As He has forgiven us, teach us to forgive one another, that no one may be hindered in faith by a guilty conscience, no conflict or division distract us from the work He has given us to do, and we may live at peace by the blood of His cross. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Give to the nations and all who govern a sense of right and wrong and the courage to act decisively for good. Help us to honor the sacredness of life and to care for those least able to care for themselves, especially the unborn. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Preserve among us the fruits of Your creation for the well-being of all people, and teach us to care responsibly for all that You have made. Guide us to honor the vocations You have given us, that we may serve You faithfully in home and at work, in neighborhood and nation, in labor and in leisure. Accept from our hands the offerings we bring as tokens of our gratitude and signs of our trust in Your mercy. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

When Your Son was revealed as the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world, He did not shrink from the suffering that bore the fruit of our salvation. Keep us from the fear of our enemies, that we may not deny our Lord in the hour of trial but with good courage proclaim Jesus Christ to the end when we and all who live in Christ shall receive the great reward You have prepared for all who have loved His appearing. We pray You, O Lord, to grant us all things needful and to keep from us all things harmful, even as we pray in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**