

## Seven Words of Love

When I was in the army, two friends of mine got engaged. They almost messed it up however, when the time came for Jim to ask Irene to marry him. You see, Jim was being coy. He was kind of hinting around at what he wanted to ask and he said something like, “It all comes down a six-word question.” Suddenly, Irene wasn’t sure they were talking about the same thing, because she couldn’t think what six words he meant. She was thinking of a four-word question, “Will you marry me?” But for whatever reason, in his mind, Jim had framed the question as “Do you want to marry me?” That misunderstanding could easily have turned into a big fight and who knows what would’ve happened then? But they loved each other and they kept talking until they figured out that they both did want to get married. A four-word question verses a six-word question. Sometimes, people talk about “three little words” by which they mean “I love you.”

Today, we are commemorating the greatest act of love in human history: Jesus sacrificed himself to take away our sins. On Sunday we’ll be focused on the victory and the blessing that sacrifice brings. But Good Friday is good because today is all about the love that drove Jesus to suffer for us. But sometimes to understand acts of love, we need to hear words of love. And since ancient times, Christians have noted that during his crucifixion, Jesus spoke seven times. We even call those seven statements “the Seven Words from the Cross.” We just heard them all and we could spend a sermon on each one. But there is a theme that runs through all of them: love. Jesus reveals his heart with these **seven words of love**.

### I.

You can divide these seven words of love into three groups – and in the order that we read them. The first three words are direct expressions of love. Crucifixion, by design, was a horrible, painful event. Usually, the Romans tied a person to a cross and let them hang there and slowly die of suffocation. Their lungs would start to fill up with fluid and each breath brought in less oxygen. It usually took days to die and it was pure agony. But when they wanted to actually make it worse, they would drive nails through the victim’s hands and feet. The nails didn’t hold them up. They just added more pain. The Romans did that when they truly hated their victims. The Romans had come to hate the Jews, so when they executed Jesus, the King of the Jews, they drove nails through his hands and feet.

And for those men who hated him that much, Jesus prayed, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**” Of course, they knew exactly what they were doing. They were torturing a helpless man. But they didn’t know he was the Son of God. They didn’t know he was dying to pay for their sins. They didn’t know the depths of their crime or the mysteries of God’s plan. And in love, Jesus asked his Father in heaven to forgive them.

But he wasn’t done showing love that day. Two men were crucified with him. At first, they both mocked Jesus, but then one repented and rebuked the other. Then he made the only request that could matter at that moment in his life: “**Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.**” He admitted that he was being punished for crimes he had committed, and all that was left of his time on this earth was that horrible death that the Romans were inflicting on him, and then hell itself. So, he turned to the only person who could help him. And Jesus answered, “**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.**” What greater comfort could anyone give at that moment? What stronger promise to carry that man through that final agony? Jesus would be with him in heaven that very day. And the power of God is built into the gospel so we can be sure that Jesus sustained him in his faith and carried him home.

But Jesus wasn’t only concerned about spiritual matters that day. He came, certainly, to win eternal life for us. But that means that he came to defeat sin and all that it does to us here. So, he cares for us while we stumble through life in a sinful world. Jesus looked down from the cross and saw his mother there. Now, the Bible records that Jesus had brothers – presumably sons of Mary and Joseph. But it also records that they didn’t believe in him, at least not yet. So, Jesus asked his disciple John, his closest friend in this life, to care for Mary. He said to her, “**Dear woman, here is your son,**” And to John, “**Here is your mother.**”

Could there be greater love than this? As Jesus was experiencing pain that I can’t even imagine, he thought about others: his enemies, a dying criminal and his mother. He put them all ahead of himself. Sometimes, when people are dying, they are more concerned about the people they love than even about their

own pain. But this is more. And it's more than just an example for us of what love is. This is the Son of God made flesh and loving perfectly in our place. This is Jesus being all that God commands us to be. And that perfect love of Jesus counts for us. In heaven, God looks at us as if we had always prayed for our enemies, as if we had provided faith and hope to the dying, as if we had cared for the physical needs of the people God has entrusted to us perfectly and without fail. And he calls us holy because Jesus was.

## II.

That leads us to the next two words of love. In these next two words Jesus speaks of himself and his sufferings. But they still are words of love because he is suffering in our place. The gospels record that the sun stopped shining for three hours as Jesus hung on the cross. And at the moment when Jesus' suffering was most intense, he cried out in Aramaic. The words he cried actually come from Psalm 22. Jesus said, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" This wasn't a request for information. It was a cry of agony. At this moment, Jesus was suffering hell itself. When we get to heaven, there will be many blessings. When we rise from the dead, there will be even more. But the chief blessing of eternal life is that we will be with Jesus. We will be the children of God at home with our heavenly Father. But those who are in hell will be locked out of his love forever. Their greatest torment won't be the flames or the darkness – it will be the loss of all love and blessing by God. That is the cost of sin. Jesus endured it. He endured an eternity of hell. He endured all the hell that all the billions of humans who will ever live deserve. He did it all in three hours on the cross. That concentrated hell is what was happening when Jesus said this word of love.

Then he said, "**I thirst.**" Again, the Old Testament foretold that he would say this. And it's not at all surprising. Jesus had been beaten and whipped and mistreated by this time for something like twelve or fifteen solid hours and he had lost a lot of blood. That makes you thirsty – ask any nurse who's ever brought ice chips to someone after surgery. And the fact that Jesus' human body reacted exactly as our bodies would, reminds us that it wasn't just the Son of God who was suffering all this. Jesus was a true human being. He took on flesh and lived in our place. He endured all that sin does to us – body, soul and spirit. And because he was also true God when it did, it counts for every single one of us. "I thirst" shows us the love that took our place in life and death and hell.

## III.

And the last two words show that he did all we needed. They show that Jesus knew he was about to die – in fact, he was about to "**give up his spirit**" as John put it. Jesus' life wasn't actually taken from him. He simply willed it to end and it did. Now, when he spoke the next to the last of these words, Jesus was thinking both of the hell and the physical torment he had already gone through and the death he was about to die. And he said, "**It is finished.**" There was nothing left to do. Jesus had paid for all the sins of all the world – or he was about to as soon as he "**breathed his last.**"

And he added, "**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.**" What do those words mean? Jesus knew he was going home to heaven. Many times, I've had the privilege of ministering to Christians as their lives were drawing to a close. It's happened twice just in the last few weeks. And many times, I've prayed with them and their families and asked God to ease their passing into the next life, even to speed that passing and put an end to their suffering. Many times, those Christians have told me that they were ready to go home. Jesus was ready. His faith was perfect. So, his spirit did not go to hell when he died. All the suffering was finished. So, Jesus did what we do when we die: his soul went home to heaven. He blazed the trail that we will follow when our time comes.

When I was vicar, a lady who had come to faith as an adult asked me, "Why do we call Good Friday 'good'?" All she could see was horror there. I told her that in some countries it's called "Black Friday" because of that horror. But we call this day "Good Friday" because of what Jesus won through that horror. We do that because his love for us was so great that the Son of God took on human flesh and died in our place. He suffered hell itself so that we don't have to. He won heaven and a final resurrection for us. He solved our greatest problem and fulfilled our greatest need. And did it all for no other reason than that he loved us. We certainly haven't earned it or deserved it. You would think that that was more than enough to occupy his mind. But while he did all that, Jesus' love for us was so great that he spoke seven times so that we can see what he was doing, so that we can have that life he won. These seven words are Jesus' love letters to you. They tell you what you mean to him and what he has done to be with you for all eternity. Treasure these words. Amen.