

Good morning, Fellowship. It's good to be with you this morning.

As I prepared this week, obviously Christmas was on my mind this week. As a kid, my family didn't have much money so Christmas was usually pretty simple. My parents worked hard all year to save up enough money for just a few gifts for us. My mom recently told me a story from my childhood. One year, I went to a friend's house after Christmas and they had stacks of new toys and clothes. Santa had his elves working overtime for the house. When I got home that day, I cried to and asked my mom, "Why does Santa love them more than me?" Isn't that terrible?!?

So...in junior high...I knew I was risking disappointment when I asked my parents for a Michigan Starter jacket. Starter jackets were all the rage that year. They were big, puffy jackets with the name of the school across the front and with a big pouch you could put stuff in.

As Christmas approached, my parents warned me: "Richard, we know you really wanted that jacket, but they were just too expensive for us to buy." I was crushed. I understood. But I was crushed. On Christmas day, I opened up my gifts knowing the gift I wanted most wouldn't be there.

After opening what I thought was my last present, they handed me one last box. I ripped the paper open. I popped the tape off the top. I opened the flaps on the box and when I did, staring me in the face was one word, "Michigan." Tears immediately streamed down my face. My parents had come through with the best gift ever! Now, they also made themselves liars by telling me that they couldn't afford one but that's another sermon for another day.

When you think about Christmas – what's the best gift you've ever received? What gift did you ask for, didn't think you'd get, but got it anyway? Or the gift that was special because of the time and energy spent on it? The gift that showed you someone's love and devotion to you?

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. "Okay – here we go. Normal, cliché Christmas sermon about Jesus' birth being the 'best gift ever.' Queue up *Mary Did You Know*." If that's you – you're wrong! We've been looking at the book of Luke and today we're in Luke 23 so in an ironic twist we're talking about Jesus' death and the 3 gifts that come directly from the cross – 3 gifts directly from Jesus' lips.

Let's start in verse 33: <sup>33</sup> And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. <sup>34</sup> [But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."] And they cast lots, dividing His garments among themselves. <sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, watching. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also ridiculed Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" <sup>38</sup> Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS."

Ok, let's stop there so we can open up the first gift from Jesus. He's taken to a place called, "The Skull" which in Aramaic is "Golgotha" and in Latin, *calvaria* – which is where we get the word Calvary. Once there, it says they "crucified Him." Most of us know about crucifixion, but I want to reiterate it.

The Romans were experts at crucifixions – experts at torturing and killing people. They possessed various types of crosses: a traditionally shaped cross, a capital-T shaped cross, a single upright beam, and an x-shaped cross. We know they used a traditional cross for Jesus because they hung a sign above His head.

Unlike what is seen in many movies, historians believe Jesus only carried the crossbeam to His death. I say "only" but remember Jesus has already experienced, betrayal, various trials, He's been beaten, He's exhausted. So, even carrying the crossbeam would've been difficult if not impossible.

At Golgotha, the Roman soldiers stretched Jesus' arms out, and drove 7-inch nails through His wrists severing the median nerve which would intensify His pain and paralyze His hands. Once attached to the crossbeam, the soldiers used ropes and pulleys to draw Him up into the air – placing the crossbeam into a slot grooved out in the upright beam. Then they nailed His feet at a 45-degree angle to the upright pole. Then they waited for Him to suffocate when He could no longer use His legs to push Himself up for air.

Now, imagine this scene. Imagine the pain and suffering. Imagine how you'd respond. Look at how Jesus responds. **"Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** Father, they're foolish. Father, they don't realize the severity of their actions. Father, they are numb to their own sin. Father – don't look at them. Look at and listen to me: Forgive them!

### **The first gift from the Cross: Undeserved Forgiveness.**

While on the Cross – Jesus isn't thinking about revenge or regret. He's thinking about and praying for the souls of His enemies. He's living out the message He's preached to His followers. Remember? When it came to enemies, Jesus told His followers to do good, to bless, to pray for, and to love their enemies. On the Cross, Jesus does all of those things. Instead of retaliation, Jesus offers the gift of forgiveness.

And listen, He wasn't just praying that for the people then. He was praying that for us because without His forgiveness – we are still trapped in our sin – His enemies. If you haven't that gift already, I hope and pray you do so today.

A long time ago there was a man who owned a store in a small town. His regular customers were allowed to open accounts in which they could purchase items on credit and pay for them later. The man knew all of his customers and he operated this way as a courtesy to them. During the depression, when times were hard, people were having a difficult time paying their debts. The result was that many of them felt guilt and shame and stopped coming to the store.

This not only affected business, but people no longer hung around the store to catch up on the latest events in one another's lives. The store owner did something that changed the course of the community. He took out an ad in the paper which read simply, "All debts forgiven." People flooded back to his store immediately.

On the cross, Jesus shouts, "Father, all debts forgiven!" it's the gift that draws His people back into community with Him and with each other. And, it's the gift that makes the next two gifts possible.

**The first gift from Jesus: undeserved forgiveness. Now, let's look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> gift.**

<sup>39</sup>One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup>But the other responded, and rebuking him, said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" <sup>41</sup>And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our crimes; but this man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup>And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" <sup>43</sup>And He said to him, "**Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.**"

Jesus is situated between two criminals actually guilty of their crimes. One of them joins the soldiers and rulers in mocking Jesus. This first criminal is continuing down the same destructive path that brought him to his cross. He doesn't view Jesus as the Christ. He views Jesus as a criminal – unable to save himself from pending doom.

C.S. Lewis has famously said we must decide if Jesus is Lord, a lunatic, or the Devil of Hell. In other words, Jesus can't be just a good person. He is a liar, lunatic, or Lord. He is bad, mad, or God. This first criminal doesn't believe Jesus to be Lord hence his blasphemy and mockery.

Now – this 2<sup>nd</sup> criminal. Let's talk about him for a moment. In the books of Matthew and Mark, we find he also mocked Jesus. But at some point, his heart changed. Maybe it was in the way Jesus suffered. Maybe he started to see the weather changing – as we'll see in the next few verses. Or maybe, just maybe it was after He heard Jesus' prayer of forgiveness.

Maybe Jesus' prayer actually converted this guy. Whatever changed, He now saw Jesus as innocent and good – as the Christ – and begs Jesus to remember Him in His next Kingdom.

"When the two malefactors were hanged beside the Lord, the one was no better than the other. It is only the grace of God in the cross of Christ that can instantly transform a reviling sinner into an attitude of saving faith and confession. The repentant thief began to see the justice of his own punishment; the sinless character of Christ; the Deity of Christ; a living Christ beyond the grave; and a kingdom beyond the cross, with Jesus as its coming King. – Cyrus Scofield

**And that brings us to the second gift from the cross: A Perfect Heaven.** Jesus promises paradise to the guilty. He promises paradise to a sinner who recognized Him as the sinless Christ. The gift of forgiveness makes the gift of heaven possible.

Think about this man's day. He entered as a man condemned to death with no hope. Even though he was physically close to Jesus; spiritually he was far off. And in a moment – He's drawn near. In an instant, he's changed. He goes from condemned to forgiven. From anxious to hopeful. From enemy to friend. From hell bound to paradise bound – and he's still there today experiencing the joy of eternally worshipping His Savior.

**Jesus gives Him the gift of heaven.** Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Christ, we aren't just forgiven – but we are reconciled to Him in relationship and given the privilege to experience the redemption of a broken relationship that extends into eternity.

A couple of years ago a woman who had been attending our church for a couple of years called me and asked me to officiate her upcoming wedding. I didn't know her so I asked if she and her future husband could meet to talk about everything.

Both of them were divorced and had kids they wanted to involve in the ceremony so we discussed how we could involve them. They were all New England Patriots fans (which is such a tragedy) so I somehow made the Patriots an example of what healthy marriages look like – that they're all on the same team going forward. You should have seen the smiles on those boys faces when they thought about their mom being a New England Patriots player but also in them recognizing how amazing it would be to have a whole family again.

You see – I left one part of the story out. This couple – they hadn't been divorced from other people. They had been divorced from each other. And the two boys in the wedding – were their boys. They were being reconciled to one another to spend the rest of their lives together.

There's nothing more beautiful than a living testimony of God's people being reconciled to Himself – not just for now – but for eternity – in heaven.

**The first gift from the Cross: Undeserved Forgiveness. The second gift: A Perfect Heaven. Now let's take a look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> gift.**

<sup>44</sup> It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the entire land until the ninth hour, <sup>45</sup> because the sun stopped shining; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. <sup>46</sup> And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I ENTRUST MY SPIRIT." And having said this, He died.

Around noon the land begins to get dark and it stays dark for the next 3 hours. The veil in the temple is torn from top to bottom. We could go into detail here but let me summarize it

quickly. The temple veil separated the Holy of Holies – the earthly dwelling place of God’s presence – from the rest of the temple where sinful people were allowed. It was a symbol of sinful man’s separation from a holy God. So, it being torn in two at Jesus’ death was the opening of God’s presence to all people – including the man He just promised heaven.

Jesus gives us our last gift right before His death, **“Father, into your hands I entrust My Spirit.”**

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> gift from the cross: An example of Faith.**

He once again reminds us that His whole mission in reconciling His people to Himself was predicated on Him doing the will of the Father. Every word, every action, every deed was an attempt to please His Father because He knew His Father to be trustworthy. He knew His Father’s plan to be perfect. In His final words, He reminds us that we have a good, good Father who is worthy of our trust. We can trust the Father with our souls. We can trust Him with our lives. We can trust Him in the good times and in our suffering and pain or even when we’re near death. Jesus, on the cross, is experiencing a pain like most of us will never feel and in the midst of that – He continues to lean on and trust His Father. It’s an example to each of us – especially in a year such as this. No matter what you’re going through, you can trust Him.

These 3 gifts from the cross are the gospel. That Jesus has forgiven us, He’s secured a place for us in eternity, and that He is trustworthy – we can place our faith in Him because of His grace towards us.

How awesome would it be to end 2020 and enter into 2021 dwelling on these gifts – the gift of undeserved forgiveness, the gift of a perfect heaven, and the gift of faith? These gifts give us reason to celebrate. These gifts give us peace, hope, and joy. They change our outlook and perspective. Peace knowing that the Lord has made us right with Him. Hope that one day we will be free from all forms of oppression. Joy in our growing dependence upon the Lord.

Wouldn’t it be nice, this week, and beyond to experience the peace, hope, and joy found in these gifts? I know what some of you are thinking. But, Richard, you don’t understand. I don’t feel those things. I don’t feel peace, hope, and joy. I feel miserable. I feel numb. I feel anxious.

Can I tell you something this morning? I do understand.

For the last couple of months, I have been battling some depression. I probably don’t meet the criteria for clinical depression. But I have had a depressed mood. 2020 has sent me into a whirlwind and there are some things in my life I need to grieve and process. There are some things I need to let go of. It’s not been fun. Last weekend, Erin and I went on a date and I asked her, “I used to be happy, right?” Because to some extent – I have kind of forgotten what that feels like. And so, I am getting some help. I started seeing a counselor last week and will continue on with that so I can get back to a healthier place.

I can also tell you, though, that in spite of not feeling right – in spite of feeling kind of blah – I have sensed or felt peace. I have sensed or felt joy. I have sensed or felt hope – just this week. As I have kept the gifts Jesus gives me on the Cross – as I have drawn near to Him in the midst of a season where I don't really want to draw near to anything – I have sensed those feelings. This passage describes the worst scene in the Bible and Jesus shows us that in the midst of that He draws near to His Father. And I hope you will, too. God is near. Hope, peace, and joy are available. I hope this next week you will draw near to the Cross where the gifts of forgiveness, heaven, and faith await you.

There's no better way for us to close our time together than to take communion. Noah is going to lead us in a song and then we will take the elements together.

<sup>19</sup> And when He had taken *some* bread *and* given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body, which is being given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." <sup>20</sup> And in the same way *He took* the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant in My blood.