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Erie, PA
Good Friday April 2, 2010

“The Ironies of the Cross” Luke 23:33-49

Introduction

The dictionary defines irony as “the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning.” Another definition in literature is “an outcome of events contrary to what was, or might have been, expected.” Sometimes irony is intentional; at other times one has no clue that his words are ironic.

For example, the name of this meeting is called a Good Friday Service. Good Friday is somewhat of an ironic term in one sense. For it is the day that we remember the death of a very important man—one no less than Jesus who is the Son of God. We usually don't think in terms of “good” when it comes to injustice, death, suffering and loss. We don't think in terms of 9/11 in terms of good usually in our country—over 3000 people died. December 7, 1941 was not a good day for our country but President Harry Truman called it a day that would live in infamy—shame. We remember the day thousands lost their life savings, banks closed, and the stock market crash as Black Friday. A poisonous type of spider from whom its victims die is called a black widow.

Yet this is “Good Friday”. That is ironic, isn't it. For the greatest of all injustices occurred on that day when they crucified Jesus, and yet it is good—specifically it is good for us who look to Christ, believe, and are forgiven because of what happened on that day.

Irony can be vicious. Irony can be funny. But irony in a story can bring into very sharp focus some glorious truths as well. And for a few brief moments I would invite you to think of many of the ironies that are highlighted as Jesus is crucified on the cross. I wrote down eight earlier this week and there are probably more. I will just be able to mention some in our limited time together but I would urge you think on these eight ironies throughout the next few moments and days as we commemorate Christ's death and His resurrection. I acknowledge Don Carson's book *Scandalous* and especially his first chapter for some of the seed thoughts for this message. He has helped me to see the ironies of the cross much better and I trust this message will help you to see them a little more clearly from the passage read earlier—Luke 23:33-49.

1. The Man who is sinned against most forgives the most (33-34)

Luke tells us that “when they came to the place called The Skull (the English translation of what is called in the Greek *kranion*, in Aramaic *Golgotha*, in Latin *Calvarie*—a place so named because there were no doubts skulls scattered about it—“there they crucified him.” What profound words! What economy of words! What brevity! Words of marvelous restraint yet cosmic significance. Similar to the words in Genesis 1:16, “And God made the stars” [of which we know there are billions and billions.”

“There they crucified him!” Crucifixion involved a “thousand deaths” but Luke, a doctor, who could have given a very detailed account of Jesus' physical suffering leaves it at this simple sentence. “There they crucified him.” No melodrama, no overly dramatic description. “There they crucified him!” Oh, it was an excruciating death in physical terms. Hundreds, maybe thousands, have been crucified as well. Millions more have suffered horrendous physical pain in their deaths. But when Luke says “there they crucified him” I believe he wants us not to focus so much on Christ's physical agonies, but upon His spiritual suffering. Here we see the great gulf that love spanned for us. The Son of God descends from the regions of infinite delight to the abysmal depths of hell's fury as punishment for sin.

Furthermore he was crucified with “criminals, one on his right and one on his left.” He indeed was counted among the transgressors. He who knew no sin was surrounded by sinners, was being sinned against, but here is the first irony—the Man who is sinned against the most forgives the most. For at this moment, sometime between 9 AM and 12 noon, we hear his first cry from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (v. 34).

In the last few hours Jesus had been sinned against by Judas who betrayed him, the disciples who deserted him, the Jewish religious leaders who falsely accused him and had plotted his death for weeks and months, who resented his popularity, feared his power and were suspicious of his motives. He had been sinned against by Pilate and Herod who believed him innocent, yet condemned him to die. He had been sinned against by the Roman soldiers who went beyond fulfilling their official responsibilities and engaged in locker-room type harassment and abuse of Jesus Christ in mocking and beating him, stripping him of his clothes, putting on a purple garment, placing a thorny crown on his head, and beating him horrendously, and falling on their knees in mock worship.

Yet, He who is sinned against most forgives most as He cries, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!” Think of it, Jesus is still the most sinned against person. Have you been sinned against in your life. Sure you have. Hundreds, maybe thousands of times. Have you sinned against others? There's no doubt about that. But think of it. Every time you sin against someone else or someone else sins against you, that sin is also a sin against God. So, for sake of

illustration, let's say that a husband sins against his wife by being impatient, a wife sins against a husband by responding in anger, a friend sins against a friend by being dishonest and a child sins against a teacher by cheating. Four sins against four different people but all those sins are against God.

So it is that Jesus was the most sinned against individual who ever lived not in terms of sins committed but also in terms of depth of sin. He is the majestic Son of God who upholds the universe by the word of His power. He is very God of very God and yet they are crucifying Him, and of course, we would have been doing the same thing had we been there. Sin against a person of rank or position is a more grievous sin than sin against a person of similar rank. For example, to find someone guilty of stealing who didn't steal is one thing—wrong, serious, and it shouldn't happen. Yet, our sense of justice tells us that to find the Son of God guilty of sins worthy of capital punishment is far worse.

Yet, here is the irony of it all. He who was the most sinned against forgives the most. These words from the cross remind us that Jesus went beyond the call for justice to pour out his grace on those who executed him. This cry shows that God can forgive the most heinous of sins and crimes. This statement shows that God can forgive any sin no matter what one has done—no matter what your past or present looks like—it is possible for God to forgive your sin. Why? Because of what happened on Good Friday. When He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2. The Man who can't save Himself saves others (35)

Here's a second irony: the Man who can't save Himself saves others. Verse 35 tells us “the people stood by, watching (they are no longer actively calling for his crucifixion) but the rulers [in contrast] scoffed at him saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” This is the first of three taunts directed toward Christ. The soldiers and one of the criminals also call on Jesus to save Himself! (vv. 37, 39)

Now, what do they mean, “Let him save himself?” “Save” means different things in different contexts. Ask a financial advisor what it means to “save” and he thinks in terms of your retirement or rainy day fund. Ask a sports fan and he thinks “save” in terms of a goalie stopping the ball from getting into the net or a pitcher who preserved a ballgame in the final innings. Ask a computer techie and he would think you are talking about backing up data frequently so that if your computer crashes you don't lose anything.

Of course, that is not what these critics of Jesus had in mind—they meant saving his life. Indeed, Jesus had already saved others such as forgiving the sins of a sinful woman, freeing a man from demon-possession, healing a woman with a bloody discharge which lasted 12 years, restoring life to Jairus' daughter and

healing ten lepers. Jesus had come to seek and to save the lost, Luke records (Luke 7:50; 8:36, 48, 50; 17:19; 18:42; 19:10). But now they were mocking him because He could not save himself. And if he couldn't save himself, what kind of a Savior was he, after all?

But as Dr. Robert Stein points out, “Luke’s readers would have realized the irony in this taunt, for Jesus in coming to save others could only do so by not saving himself. It is precisely because Jesus is the Savior of Israel (Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23) that he must suffer and fulfill what the Scriptures said.” How ironic then that four times in five verses Jesus' saving ministry is highlighted. Although it comes in the form of mockery from his opponents, we learn that Jesus of Nazareth, even in his death, yes especially in his death, was the promised Christ, the King of the Jews, and Savior of the world.

There is irony here for in one sense if Jesus is to save others, he can't save himself. But it wasn't that he couldn't save himself because of some physical impossibility but rather because of a moral imperative. Just like at times of crisis such as in war or in a human disaster one person might give up his life to save his buddy or a child or even someone virtually unknown to them because they were following a moral imperative, so Christ refused to save Himself because He came to save others! His moral imperative was to do the will of His Father who sent Him. He had prayed just a few hours before this, “Not my will, but Your will, Father, be done!” The nails didn't prevent Jesus from leaping off the cross. His obedience to the Father and His love for those for whom He died kept him there.

If Jesus had jumped off the cross, he would not have ultimately caused these religious leaders and soldiers to believe in Him, for they would not have then been able to be saved from their sin. One can only be saved from the wrath of God in the truest sense and believe in Jesus if Jesus is the one who bore our sins in His own body on the tree—if Jesus is the One whose life and death and resurrection, offered up in our place, has reconciled us to God.

So here is another irony: What the rulers said was ironic yet it was true. The man who couldn't save Himself saves others. He who didn't save Himself desires that you trust Him alone and be saved by God's judgment of hell for your sin.

3. The Man who is mocked as king is King (36-38)

Thirdly, the Man who is mocked as king is King! “*The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”*” (Luke 23:36–38, ESV).

How ironic is it that Jesus mockers' unwittingly witness to the reality of who Jesus truly is. We read in Matthew's gospel that the soldiers, who beat Jesus after Pilate sentenced him to die, kneeled down and mocked Jesus saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" meaning of course, "This is no king!" Now, here they mock saying, "If you are king of the Jews" (implying he is not), save yourself!" And then there is the irony of the superscription ordered by Pilate placed above Jesus on the cross which read literally, "The King of the Jews, this one!" The soldiers believe their delicious irony is so humorous: a pathetic criminal who claims to be king. Look at him now. But there is this truth in their mockery. For Jesus is truly King of the Jews!

But what kind of King is He? Not a king in the sense of we think of the king or queen of England who is nothing more than a constitutional monarch or political figurehead who yields no true power or authority other than influence. No, Jesus is a real King with real authority and a real kingdom. His kingdom is not of this world—it is not a political kingdom, but nonetheless it is a genuine kingdom!

So what kind of King is Jesus? Is He a failed King? No! For when he rose from the dead, he declared "All authority is given unto Me! He wears a vestment in heaven and those there already declare that "He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords." So what was He doing on this Good Friday dying on a cross. Unlike the majority of human kings, He was on that day exercising His authority for the good of his subjects. His mission as king would lead through a cross—not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for the many! And we who are in His kingdom must serve in the same way.

So we see this third irony: that He who is mocked as King is truly King! And not just King over the ethnic Jewish race, but He is King of the world! He invites you into His kingdom right now through faith in His finished work on the cross. Just like the thief on the cross, if you recognize that Jesus is truly the Son of God and repent of your sin and by grace alone receive Him as your King, you will enter into a life full of joy—even though your struggles and trials may still continue. If you reject His kingship, you will nevertheless one day acknowledge Him as Lord to the glory of God the Father and be punished with everlasting judgment for your rebellion.

There are many more ironies in this text which time does not permit us to explore. I just list them for you:

4. The Man who is declared guilty is truly innocent (39-41)

Jesus died because he was found guilty of political treason by one man and charged as guilty of blasphemy by the religious leaders of His day. Nevertheless, there was six-fold witness in this chapter to Jesus innocence. Pilate declares him innocent three times Pilate (23:4, 14, 22), and he is joined by Herod (23:15), the

thief on the cross (23:41) and the centurion (23:47) who had seen it all: the Jews mocking, the soldiers gambling and teasing, the thieves arguing, and Jesus forgiving and offering eternal life.

5. The Man Who is suffering hell offers paradise (42-43)

Jesus suffers the essence of hell—separation from the presence of God for sins—as He hung on the cross as a man. Yet as very God of God, He is able to offer Paradise to the dying thief!

6. The man who was last is first while those first are last (v. 43)

Of all the men who should have suffered God's punishment for His own sin, who had no pretense of righteousness or religion or good works, the thief on the cross would die that day and awake in Paradise—heaven—right with God. How ironic then that the men who should have made it to heaven easily—who spent their lives in religion—the leaders of Judaism—actually were last—and could not enter the kingdom of heaven—their good works and their pride kept them from coming to Christ and seeking true salvation.

Rober Stein again points out,

Those who were first are again shown to be last, i.e., excluded from the kingdom and subject to the divine judgment. The last, who are helpless and without hope, however, can turn to Jesus and find life everlasting. The last thus become first. The supreme irony is that the criminal rightfully being executed for his crime(s) was infinitely better off than Israel's high priest, who by his rejection of God's Son was eternally damned. What a reversal indeed.

7. The Man Who is engulfed in darkness is Light (44-45)

For three hours from noon to 3 PM, Jesus was suspended between heaven and earth shrouded in darkness. This is He—*“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”* (John 1:9–10, ESV).

Darkness is often a sign of God's judgment. And what was true then is true today: A world that kills Jesus lives in darkness. How ironic that the Man engulfed in darkness for three hours is the true Light of the world. In Him is life and the life was the light of all men. On that day darkness, yet Jesus is life. In that day Jesus died so that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

8. The Man Who is forsaken by God trusts God (44-49)

9. The Man Who dies lives, rules and is our only hope of peace with God (Luke 24)

Oh, how this story is full of irony. The one who cries out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” did so that for all eternity you and I don't have to—if we

come to Christ. **He was forsaken by God so that Dwight Wagner would never be. How about you?**

But **praise God, God forsaken by God is not the end of the story!** For after His death, Jesus was buried but on Sunday, he was raised by the Father, which was the plan all along. The resurrection of Christ was **the “Amen”**, the **approval**, the **acceptance**, the **authentication** of the Father, to the **great cross work of the Son!** It was God saying, “This is My Beloved Son! Trust Him! Believe Him! Flee from your sin and its sure judgment and be saved from my everlasting wrath!”

Have you done that, friend? Will you do that? Will you seek God's grace today? We would **love to talk with you** more about your eternal soul and true salvation found in Christ alone!

Today, is **Friday!** But it won't be too much longer! **Sunday's coming!** And I want to invite you to our Resurrection Sunday services at 10:30 AM!

But the irony of Friday is that the man who dies, lives, rules and is our only hope of peace with God. Luke 23 is not the end of the story! Luke 24 is the rest of the story! And so we close our service this day remembering that **yes “Good Friday” contains a lot of irony!** But after Friday, Sunday's coming!