

THE LORD'S LAST WORDS
Luke 23:33-46

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According to the categorical trivial collection, *Our Lifetime in Numbers*, the average life expectancy is 78.5 years. We take an average of 7,163 baths during our lifetime. We consume 845 cans of baked beans, use 276 tubes of toothpaste, and – the best part of all – consume 10,354 chocolate bars. I think I've done more than my fair share on the beans and chocolate bars.

But the number I want to focus on today is the words spoken during a lifetime – 123,205,750 words.

Of your approximately 123 million words spoken during your lifetime, some, surely, are more important than others. A lot of emphasis is placed on that first word that you speak. Parents persuade and push, trying to influence babies to speak the first word that the parent really wants to hear. I wanted all three of my girls to speak their very first word as “DaDa.” No, it was not to be. Every one of them said “MaMa” first. Surely it had nothing to do with the fact that Lisa sat with them at home all day and said, “Mama. Mama. Mama” about 500 times a day, brainwashing our babies. I don't think I had a fair shot. But first words are really important.

And there are other words that are really important, like “I do,” “I love you,” or “Jesus is Lord.”

But if first words are important, surely last words are important as well. Today we look at the seven last words – as they are called – of Jesus.

What is it that Jesus actually said while He was dying?

In *Speaking of Dying*, the authors suggest that the words of Jesus can be outlined around seven different emphases. We have looked at examples of Jesus speaking about His death, while the dense disciples denied his impending suffering and argued over who was the greatest. Perhaps in Jesus' last words we see more of His own human response to His dying. Thank goodness scripture preserves the last words of our Lord, for they are appropriate words for every end-of-life discussion.

I. His first word comes in Matthew 27:46. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Words of lament.

If you're a student of scripture, you realize pretty quickly that He is quoting Psalm 22. It's an individual lament. These words are often referred to as Jesus' cry of dereliction. They communicate a sense of utter and absolute abandonment. It's a feeling of hopelessness – having

ever been in the presence of the Father and now to have the Father turn His back while He dies on the cross. God turned His back away from the Christ because He bore our sins, and God can have no fellowship with sins.

Psalms 22 isn't the only lament psalm. Psalms 6, 38, 39, 41, 88, and 102 – they are all laments or prayers for healing from sickness.

The psalmist in Psalm 6, for example, says, “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am pining away; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are dismayed. My soul is greatly dismayed; but thou, O Lord – how long? Return O Lord, rescue my soul; save me because of Your lovingkindness.... I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears.” The psalmist is suffering – perhaps a physical and/or psychological malady – and he feels the absence of God. He wants to know “How long, O God, until you step in and do something about it?”

When Jesus laments upon feeling the absence of God, He does so because he believes that God ought to be there, and God is going against His nature by His absence. He ought to be present, hearing and responding to the cries of His children.

Sometimes, in the fearful darkness of the soul, it feels as if God is not there, as if He is absent. In fact, one of my good friends at Baylor University, Dr. Drew Shofner, wrote his dissertation on the absence of God in the psalms. He wrote his dissertation about all the times when the psalmist is searching for God but cannot find Him. God is absent. He doesn't show up. “My God, My God,” Jesus says, “why aren't You here?”

Of course, there is nothing wrong with being honest with God. One of the lessons we learn from our Lord in regard to our dying words is we can be honest with God. We can speak when we feel His absence. We can cry out when we feel abandoned. We can make it known when He seems so far away. For truly, if He is God, doesn't He already know your heart and your thoughts even before you utter them?

II. A second word from the cross – a good word for all dying men – is what Jesus says in Luke 23:34. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” The second word is a word of forgiveness.

Even while the murderous mob puts Him to death, Jesus says to His very executioners, “Father, forgive them.” Forgiving words, healing words, are always good words to be spoken among the last words – leaving no relationship broken, leaving no business unfinished.

I stand many times each month – sometimes many times each week – at the head of a casket. And I have learned from conducting over a thousand funerals that those who linger the longest and cry the loudest around the casket have unfinished business. I've seen sons stand at the casket of their fathers long after everyone else is already in the limousine, thinking that somehow, in some way, a final goodbye can make right all that was wrong in the relationship.

But Jesus, in praying for his persecutors, models exactly what He taught His disciples to do – to love their enemies and pray for those who abuse them (6:27-28).

It was customary for the one being executed to cry out for vengeance and threaten the executioners. Psalm 69 gives us something of an example of a prayer of vengeance. “May their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see, and make their loins shake continually. Pour out Your indignation on them, and may Your burning anger overtake them. May their camp be desolate; may none dwell in their tents” (Psalm 69:23-25).

Those are words of lament of a man in pain, calling down the righteous indignation of God Almighty on his enemies. That was a normal fare for the dying.

I am reminded of how well some disciples learn. I think about Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles – even as he is being stoned for speaking the truth about the crucifixion of the Christ. As Paul is holding the coats of those who were casting the stones, Stephen cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and falling on his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And having said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60).

“Father, forgive them.” Words of pardon are good words in the process of dying. Going to the grave with a grudge is the worst of all possible plans.

Of course, it’s best to live life in such a way that you repair relationships as you journey along the path.

She was close to death after a long life, and she was on a mission. With one foot in heaven, the elderly Josephine’s determination kept her alive until there was forgiveness in her family. On the day of her death, she was removed from life support – her own wishes – and not expected to live more than a few minutes. But hours passed. Doctors were baffled how this tiny white-haired woman, battered by severe respiratory problems, managed to breathe on her own – not for minutes, but for hours.

But I know why. She was on a mission – a mission of forgiveness.

She was born in Venezuela in 1920. Two of her daughters, Jo and Debbie, had experienced a terrible rift in their relationship. It was the type of rift that so many families know too well. Disagreements grew until an abyss formed. It was dark and cold, that awful abyss between sisters. Occasionally a fire would flare up inside of it, a bitter heat that only sealed the doorway that had shut tight between them.

You see, Josephine, who had requested that no extraordinary means be used to keep her alive, was herself doing something extraordinary.

The family gathered together, Jo, one of the sisters in the rift, recalled. “We sang hymns in English and Spanish. We laughed. We cried. We told funny stories about our mother, our grandma. But when life support was withdrawn, we all agreed we did not want her to be alone, so we stayed there. Minutes turned into hours, and the morning turned into the afternoon. She remained alive, breathing on her own, despite so much medication. Everybody else in the family left, convinced that she was ‘gone.’ ‘Just call us when it’s all over,’ they said.”

Several months prior, she had said to Jo, “I want you and Debbie to make up.”

“Mom knew that Debbie and I had not even been friends, much less sisters. I just ignored her,” Jo said. “I had made up my mind it was never going to happen. I changed the topic and asked her what she had had for lunch. But now that we were around her deathbed, her request came back to me – a request I had cast aside.”

Jo’s friend, Marlene, told her she needed to do it. “What do you have to lose? What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid of rejection,” Jo said. “I’m afraid my sister Debbie will reject me.”

But Jo approached Debbie in the hallway, not knowing if she’d tell her to take a hike, to get lost, no way. But Jo remembers she told her sister why she believed their mother was holding on. “She’s waiting for us to finally make up.”

Debbie’s response was instantaneous. “Jo, I want my sister back.” The darkness was gone. The doors had blown open. The relationship was restored. And as they were in the hallway mending fences, they heard Marlene sobbing inside the room by their mother. “We feared that mother had passed, but then we realized that Marlene was telling mom, in her native language, that her daughters were doing as she asked – that we were making up. Marlene said that as she was telling our mom these words, a tear came streaming down our mom’s face. It was the last sign we had that she was still alive.

“I put my hand on my mother’s hand, and Debbie put her hand on mine, and we told her that we were sisters again.” Upon that utterance, their mom took her last breath – surviving on her own for five hours, trying to fix a relationship that had been strained for thirteen years. (Cathleen Hulbert, “So Powerful on her Death Bed: A Story of Forgiveness,” www.likethedew.com)

“Father, forgive them.” Words of forgiveness. Good words at the last.

III. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The third word is a word of hope. Offer hope.

You remember these words, uttered by our Lord to the kind thief on the cross. “One of the thieves was hurling abuse at Jesus, saying ‘If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!’ But the other answered, rebuking him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’” And he, the kind thief of the cross, looked at Jesus and said, “Jesus, Remember me when You come into your kingdom!” And Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:39-43).

I’d never noticed this before, but Luke 23:42 is one of the very few times where Jesus is addressed by His name. Usually He’s “Lord,” or “Sir,” or “Teacher.” But the thief calls Jesus by His name: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power.”

Interestingly enough, unlike the criminal's colleague, the one hurling abuse, he does not ask for earthly deliverance but salvation in the world to come. This man was not at the Last Supper when Jesus announced that the Father had bestowed on Him a kingdom and promised His loyal disciples that they would eat and drink at His table in the kingdom and sit on thrones (22:29). What would have led him to believe that this man being crucified next to him would ever exercise sovereign power. Surely the Father has revealed the lordship of Jesus to this criminal, even as He revealed it to Simon Peter. This thief addresses Jesus as if, indeed, He were God, one who could remember people in His covenant mercy.

In verse 43, the response from Jesus is the sixth time in the gospel of Luke that Jesus uses the phrase, "Truly, I say to you" (4:24; 12:37; 18:17, 29: 21:32). In each case, the saying is related in the context of the reign of God and/or the final judgment. Salvation is not reserved for a distant future, but it's already present in Jesus. "Today." The word of hope. If the man is expecting some favorable regard in the future, he's wrong. Jesus corrects him: "Today. Today is the day you will be with Me in Paradise."

Whatever the thief might have hoped for when he made this request, the response of Jesus is all out of proportion. "Not only will you be in Paradise, you'll be with Me, and it will happen today."

Jesus is, indeed, one who offers hope – even to sinners. Good words for us to follow in our own dying. Offer words of hope.

IV. The fourth word of our Lord from the cross is an expression of His physical needs.

"I am thirsty" (John 19:28).

Jesus, as a suffering man, had physical needs and did not hesitate to express them. Often those who are dying utter words asking for comfort in the midst of pain, for soothing in the midst of suffering. "I'm thirsty," the Lord said – parched tongue, dry mouth.

Word 3 reminds us Jesus is God. Word 4 reminds us Jesus is human.

V. This fifth word addresses the needs of others.

In John 19:26-27, even as Jesus is dying on the cross, He looks to His mother Mary and says, "Here is your son," looking at the Apostle John. He looks at the Apostle John and looks to Mary and says, "Here is your mother."

Part of dying is taking the opportunity to make sure that those left behind are cared for. We can't be sure, but it's highly likely that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a widow. She needed the care of a male relative in that cultural time and place. We know He had brothers, but for some reason Jesus assigns the task of caring for Mary to the beloved disciple, to John. Even as Jesus is dying – don't miss this – He never stopped thinking of others.

I can't tell you how many times I've been at the bedside of someone who is dying, someone in the last days of life – asking how they are, wondering how I can help – and have them look up and ask about my family, my children. “How are things with you, pastor?”

Words of the dying – always thinking of others, even as the ultimate moment approaches.

VI. There is a sixth word from our Lord from the cross. It's the word that commits oneself to God.

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

When Brent Clark's father, David Clark, was in hospice, I stood by his bedside as Brent was sharing about a conversation he had had with his father about the Christ of the cross – about how our sins are forgiven and how we, when we die, go to live eternally in God's kingdom. We said a prayer, and as we spoke about going to be with Jesus, he said, “Yes, I'm His if He'll have me.”

Isn't that the position we're all in? “Father, into your hands we commit our spirits.” But in Christ, God will “have us.”

The sixth word of Jesus is not like the first ones. There is no “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” Instead, these are words of reconciliation. At the end of the day, He entrusts Himself to God. And whatever awaits Him after death, He puts that in God's hands.

VII. The seventh and final word from our Lord is a word of acceptance.

“It is finished” (John 19:30).

Paul put it this way when his own death was impending. “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Done what God has asked.

I visited a man who was suddenly taken to the cardiac care unit. He was my friend, but not a member of First Baptist Church. He was completely alert, and all of his cognitive skills were in place. When I asked him how he was doing, he said – without blinking an eye or having a quiver in his voice – “They called in hospice. The end is here.” It was more uncomfortable for me than it was for him, this conversation of acceptance. But that's where he had arrived. God had given him a full, rich life, even numbering his days beyond expectation. And now he'd accepted the fact that he was going to die.

As we mature as followers of Jesus, we know that we're on a journey and that journey has a transition. Not an end, but a transition. We interpret our suffering. We seek forgiveness for our sins. We forgive others around us. And when death comes to our door, we don't panic but we speak words like our Christ's conversation from the cross, words that ultimately show that our

hope is in God – the One who created us, loved us enough to send Jesus to die for us, and numbered our days.

Father, into your hands we all commit our spirits. For you alone are trustworthy.

Last words:

Hope

Forgiveness

Confidence

Care