

Seven Good Words: The Work Jesus Did on the Cross

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. . . *they crucified him* . . .
— Luke 23:33 —

For six hours Jesus body hung on the cross. Nailed to the tree, another crucified enemy of the state, Jesus labored to breathe as pain racked his body and mockers filled the air with vitriol. Tempted by Satan one last time to save himself (see the words in Luke 23:35, 37, 39), Jesus remained, inching closer to death. Still, the end of Jesus' life was not a passive surrender to the inevitable. Just the opposite; it was the climax of his earthly labor.

Indeed, Luke only uses three words to speak of his crucifixion. He revels not in the physical agony Jesus experienced. Rather, the good doctor focuses on what the cross meant. His testimony is a work of theology, not autopsy. For him, the importance of Jesus's death was not found in the physical pain, but in the message it sent to the world. Like the other Evangelists, he tells us that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (19:10), and on the cross we find the climax of Jesus' work of salvation.

And thus, to understand the cross, we must ponder what his cross means and what the final work of Christ meant to accomplish. And to do that we can and must follow the lead of Luke and the other Gospels, who capture the final moments of Jesus' life with seven different sayings on the cross.

Behold the Man: Seeing the Work of Christ's Cross,

When we read the account of Jesus' crucifixion, it would be a mistake to think he passively endured the cross, as another helpless victim of injustice. As Jesus reveals in John 10:17–18, he had authority to lay down his life and authority to pick it back up again. Indeed, as the soldiers fell down at Jesus' feet when they came to arrest him (John 18:6), it is apparent Jesus' death was not out of his control. Rather, it went according to God's eternal plan (Acts 4:27–28) and the Father's sovereign will (Isaiah 53:10). Though Jesus died at the hands of evil men, it was his hands that were laboring to reconcile the world to God.

It is in this active sense we should consider what Jesus did on the cross. While theologically we can speak of his cross in one sense as his *passive* obedience, there is another sense in which his cross reflects Jesus's final work of his active obedience. For instance, in the Epistles we learn how Jesus's death *justified* the wicked (Romans 5:9–10), *transferred* righteousness to sinners (2 Corinthians 5:21), *removed* the curse from his people (Galatians 3:13), *disarmed* the devil (Colossians 2:13–15), and *inaugurated* a new covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25–16). From passages like these, we learn Jesus's death was hardly passive. Therefore, as we prepare to remember his death this Good Friday, we should remember the *work* he did on the cross.

And one of the best ways to understand that work is to listen to the words Jesus spoke on the cross. In fact, in his six hours on the cross, he spoke seven words—seven statements encapsulating much of what his cross accomplished. Sometimes these words are called Jesus *last* words. I prefer to call them *good* words because they display the essence of the good news and the goodness that resulted from Christ's death on Calvary.

In order of the Gospels, these seven statements can be found in Matthew/Mark (1), Luke (3), and John (3). But in order of timing, these seven statements typically appear as follows:

- Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are do. (Luke 23:34)
- Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43)
- My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)
- Woman, behold, your son . . . Behold, your mother! (John 19:26–27)
- I thirst. (John 19:28)
- It is finished. (John 19:30)
- Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit. (Luke 23:46)

Together, these seven words do not say everything about Christ's cross, but they come close. By looking at them we see Jesus' life was not stolen from him or cut short from its full potential. Rather, Jesus used every last breath of his God-ordained life to finish the work God gave him before the foundation of the world. And by looking at his words, we learn much about who Christ is and what his cross means for us.

Seven Good Words

Consider the seven good words Jesus spoke from the cross.

1. Jesus **interceded** for transgressors. At the same time, he **fulfilled the law** and his own word: "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27–28)
2. Jesus **gave comfort** to a dying man. But more, he also **saved** the thief who turned to him in his final minutes.
3. Jesus **interpreted** the Father's self-abandonment through the lens of **Psalm 22**. Moreover, he **suffered the wrath of God** on the cross so that others might find God's good favor.
4. Jesus **honored his mother** and **provided** for her well-being. Though losing his own life, he did not forget the woman who brought him into the world. Even more, **he created** in John and his mother **a new spiritual family** based not on the flesh but his death and resurrection.
5. Jesus again **interpreted Scripture** when he said "I thirst." In this quotation of Psalm 69:20, he confirmed his humanity and the spiritual warfare he engaged in on the cross.
6. Jesus **finished** his earthly labors. He obeyed his father to the end, and in his perfect obedience he secured salvation for people.
7. Jesus **gave up his life**. Again, Jesus did not have his life taken away from him; he gave it up when his life's work was finished. And thus even his last act of surrender was a triumphant act of obedience to the Father—as he was sent into the world, he returned to heaven with the express purpose of bringing his people back to the Father.

All in all, Christ's final words are not simply the last lamentations of a dying man; they are the confident words of God's Son who came to give his life as a ransom for many. In this way, his words speak hope to sinners. They explain that his death is not in vain; rather, it completes

his life's work—the salvation of the world. This is good news to those who hear his words and believe.

Amazingly, just as God long ago spoke the world into existence through his Word (John 1:1–5), so on the cross the Word become flesh speaks to the world words of forgiveness and new covenant salvation. Likewise, by means of citing Scripture and applying it to himself, Jesus interpreted how God's judgment and his personal suffering meant triumph over evil and the completion of his earthly labors.

Indeed, when we see these seven words together, we learn Jesus's death is not the passive surrender of a tragic martyr. Rather, it is the triumphant conquest of death by the sinless Son of God. In his death, we find life. And in his words, we find good news.

Therefore, this Good Friday, let us consider what these seven good words mean. And let Jesus' final words lead us to trust him as the only work that stands before our holy God. After all, this is why he came, so that we might find rest in his finished work.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds