

# THE SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST



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## *Introduction*

### THE SACRED LEGACY OF LAST WORDS

There is a reverence attached to last words that makes them rise above everyday speech. When loved ones die, we read their “last will and testament” with elevated solemnity. After a tragic suicide, we look for a note as a clue to the person’s state of mind and heart. When a condemned criminal is executed, we pause to offer the opportunity for closure by asking, “Any last words?”

Tradition and experience suggest that last words come from the deepest part of the human spirit, our so called “heart of hearts.” To utter last words is to leave behind a testament to reassure loved ones and a legacy to inspire followers. Jesus comes to Calvary as an innocent man condemned to death for our sins. As the Word made flesh, Christ gives us seven last words as a final confirmation of his gospel and a call to embody the good news. As disciples, we listen with open hearts and grateful spirits.

*The words that I have spoken to you  
are spirit and life.—John 6:63*

*Father, forgive them, for they do not know  
what they are doing. —Luke 23:34*

The Lord's startling offer of forgiveness is a mark of integrity and a courageous fulfillment of the call to practice what one preaches. These words pay dying tribute to the gospel, a legacy consistent in its embrace of reconciliation and peace, even under the most daunting of circumstances: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Talk is cheap, but Jesus remains true to his word even when it costs him dearly.



Perhaps the Lord's conciliatory words were disturbing to the disciples who watched him die. One of his followers had already displayed an impulse for violence in the Garden of Olives when Jesus chided, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." Christianity is

not naive about the reality of evil, the potency of hatred, or the fragility of diplomacy, but the words of Christ call us to let the vengeful ways of “an eye for an eye” yield to the beatitudes of peace and justice.

The cross itself is a symbol of Christ’s role as divine/human mediator. Its horizontal and vertical beams intersect to reconcile heaven to earth. Mediators sometimes seem scarce in our culture of violence, polarized ideologies, and taking sides. The setting for Christ’s agony in the Garden of Olives is a fitting symbol of his role as reconciler and peacemaker. The olive branch is a universal symbol of peace. In a sense, the Lord holds himself out as a living olive branch to reconcile the world to God and enemies to one another. The words of Jesus are like verbal olive oil, a healing balm for human words of anger and hatred.



**Prayer:** *Lord, Jesus, your willingness to forgive astonishes and unsettles us as we face betrayals and crosses in life. May the oil of the olive branch, the salve of pardon, heal our relationships so that we may live in holy communion.*

*Jesus said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” —John 19:26-27*

The Lord who promised, “I will not leave you orphaned,” could not have departed this world in peace without knowing that his beloved mother and disciple would be cared for. With these dying words, the Jesus offers us a touching portrait of family as a mutual care society. This moment calls us to embrace the gift of our families even as modern hectic life pulls at the ties that bind. The love of Christ moves us to talk with our spouses, spend time with our children, tend to our sick, and care for our elderly.

Jesus is not merely referring to immediate family at this telling moment. These dying words hold too broad and rich a meaning to be minimized in such a fashion. Christ is also calling us to embrace God’s family, the larger community of faith. Jesus wants us all to feed



each other, visit each other, and clothe each other until his return: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.”

Baptism celebrates our graced spiritual relationship: “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Our mutual commitment to the gospel seals this universal kinship: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

A poetic line in Hebrews cuts to the heart of this Christian responsibility: “Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have unknowingly entertained angels.” As they stood weeping at the base of the cross, Mary and John certainly did not look like angels. In a culture that too often focuses its eye on the “beautiful people,” God calls us to see Christ, our brother, in the poor, the broken, and the ordinary people of the world.

*Prayer: Lord, Jesus, our mother in faith inspires by her grace and helps by her intercession. May such love move us to treasure our loved ones and care for our extended families in Christ.*

*I am thirsty. —John 19:28*

There is something starkly vulnerable and touchingly human in this simple admission of need on the part of Christ. In our darkest hours, the basic deprivations and simple indignities can make suffering unbearable. Similarly, in the depths of our pain, it is often the small kindnesses that save us—a thoughtful word, a hand on our shoulder, or a cool drink of water. As we bear the crosses of life, we imitate the Lord, not just by forbearance, but also by acknowledging our pain and voicing our need of mercy.



The thirst that Christ expresses in these words is more than physical. Whenever the Lord cured someone in the gospels, a spiritual healing is implicit

in the miracle. So it is that when we are physically scarred, spiritual wounds add to our torment. We all have hungers and thirsts that are not readily visible. In his agony, Jesus thirsts for more than liquid water. The incarnate Lord is thirsty for justice, compassion, understanding, and peace. In a way, Jesus is asking for the living water that he spoke about to the Samaritan woman, water that will never leave us thirsty.

Having been raised from the dead, Jesus is no longer subject to human pains: “Death no longer has power



over him.” Yet, Christ continues to hunger and thirst in the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the wounded.

The Lord calls us to emulate him in compassion for the human thirsts of the world: “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

*Prayer: Lord, Jesus, as you asked for comfort, today we humbly voice our need for love, mercy, and healing. Quench our thirst with the living water that will never leave us thirsty again.*



*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. —Luke 23:43*

We witness an unexpected, spontaneous conversion in the final hours of Christ's life. The example of the Lord's innocent suffering moves the good thief to displace selfishness with empathy. Perhaps this moment recalls death bed conversions we have heard or read about. There is something about the finality of death that calls us to repentance. In this case, these impulses elicit a redemptive change of heart and the surpassing gift of promised salvation.



The name “good thief” should actually be an oxymoron, but numerous churches are named after Saint Dismas. Only in God could this contradiction be reconciled. If Christ could wed heaven to earth, turn Peter the denier into a rock, and make the

seeing blind, surely he could transform a common thief into a saint. This paradox exists in each of us who are at once saint and sinner, bold and afraid, generous and self-serving. Dismas is the patron saint of all humans in their ongoing struggle for holiness.

This dialogue between Jesus and Dismas reminds us that the true impediment to salvation is not sin, but self-righteousness. The Lord's guarantee of redemption to a sinner stands in stark contrast to Christ's angry condemnations of the Pharisees. It is in our very denial of being "good thieves" that we imperil our salvation: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'we see,' your sin remains." It is in our humble repentance that we receive the gift divine mercy.



*Prayer: Lord, Jesus, we are a living contradiction as we seek to find your way. As we confess to being "good thieves," welcome us into your kingdom where sinners form a communion of saints.*

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*  
—Mark 15:34

These haunted words reflect a moment of stark desolation for the Messiah who once heard the Father speak from the heavens: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” There have been historical theologies that attempted to deny the humanity of Christ or subjugate it to his divinity. These heresies implied that the suffering Lord was merely putting on a good show for the inspiration of his followers. The incarnation, however, affirms that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. Thus, his prayer of abandonment is heartfelt and real.

We may not ever know the utter betrayal of being tortured or martyred for our beliefs, but we can certainly relate to the sense of abandonment Jesus felt at this moment. We



experience it when we are betrayed by a loved one, fired from a longstanding job, ostracized for

our convictions, or wrongly accused of sin. We feel it when our loving service is rejected or we are punished for our faith. This is the mystery of the suffering servant, the innocent Lamb of God thrown to the wolves and left to die.

By displaying his human doubt so openly, Jesus gives us tacit consent to be human and vulnerable in our relationship with God. These troubled words of Christ are tinged with anger and confrontation. Such honest expressions of doubt and challenge are common in the psalms: “Why, God, have you cast us off forever?” Yet, they are not the last word, but a springboard to a leap of faith: “Yet, you God are my king from of old, winning victories throughout the earth.” Before Christ dies, his anguished words will be resolved in hope and trust.



*Prayer: Lord, Jesus, we share the pain of your abandonment every time we are crucified for doing the right thing. Walk with us in this mystery so that we may speak our doubts without losing ultimate faith or hope.*

*It is finished. —John 19:30*

Jesus came among us to fulfill the divine commission of redeeming the world. His words of resolution upon completing that work resonate for anyone who has ever finished a cherished task or completed a significant undertaking with a welcome sense of a “job well done.” We experience this very human and eminently divine awareness upon completing a book, finishing a tour of duty, graduating from college, watching our children succeed, retiring from a career, and at the time of our death.



There is a novel and film appropriately titled, *An Unfinished Life*. Both the book and the movie tell the story of wounded individuals looking for closure in life because of broken dreams or unfinished business. We all know people in the world who seem

unfairly deprived by misfortune or an untimely death. Perhaps the Lord encompasses all of these unfinished lives in the redemptive grace of this moment of closure.

We all must cope with the reality of unfinished business. Even those who live a long life may harbor regrets over lifelong dreams that never came to fruition. We can imagine that Jesus had plans and hopes that were cut short by his death at a young age. Both faith and life remind us that such things are not fully under our control. We can make bucket lists, but the vicissitudes of fortune may have the final word. Faith bids us to find peace and gratitude in the time and opportunities we are given.



*Prayer: Lord, Jesus, we celebrate the courageous and glorious completion of your saving work. Inspired by your words and deeds, we pray to finish our lives with dignity and faithfulness.*

*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*  
—*Luke 23:46*

Christ's final words may be the most difficult for us to emulate. His last utterance is a prayer of surrender, a yielding to death. This is not an easy attitude to embrace in our culture. Society often bids us to resist surrender with every fiber of our being. Our heroes in the movies refuse to give up and our cultural icons are more famous for willfulness than submission. Rather than a blessing or grace, part of us regards surrender as ultimate failure.



We also live in a culture of youth and appearance, a society that both fears and denies death. In its stead, we idolize looking and feeling young. Our newspapers and televisions overflow with ads for beauty products, cosmetic surgery, therapies, and

regimens designed to delay aging and keep death at bay. Doubt leads us to hold on in fear, but Christlike faith bids us to let go in hope.

An image that suggests the grace of Christ's gentle submission to death can be found in blowing out a candle. When we extinguish a candle, the smoke drifts gracefully upward. So it is that when our individual lights are blown out, our spirits are reunited with the God who first breathed life into our nostrils. Life affords us plenty of practice in doing this, for we blow out candles on every birthday. When our light is extinguished for the final time, faith celebrates that day as our ultimate birthday.



*Prayer: Lord, Jesus, as you gently surrender your spirit, we admit our fear of letting go. Give us the faith and trust to commend our spirits into God's hands at the time of our death.*