

IT IS FINISHED

CrossWords Series (Part 6)

Text: John 19:30-37

I

"*It is finished*," said the woman to her friend, explaining through her sobs that her husband had left her for someone younger. "*It is finished*," said the exhausted owner, facing the collapse of a once-thriving business. "*So, it's finished*" said the patient to the doctor who'd just reported that the chemo was no longer working. How many seniors in high school or in college athletics have declared those words over the demise of what looked to be one of the best seasons life, until the coronavirus came and cancelled it? Life is full of painful endings, cut flowers, frustrated dreams; but few sentences carry the heaviness and loss that comes with them than those three words: "*It is finished... It is finished... It is finished.*"

When pressed face-up against an END of any kind, it is almost always difficult to see a larger picture. Maybe that helps to explain why -- when Jesus of Nazareth spoke those words of finality Himself -- His enemies and loved ones alike naturally took them as a cry of despair or defeat. But things are not always as they seem at the moment. As William Ralph Inge observes: "*The private in the trenches is oft'times a poor judge of the fortunes of a great battle.*" Sometimes, the ending of one thing is a necessary step to a new beginning. This, I believe, is one of the crucial takeaways from the sixth set of words that Jesus speaks from the Cross.

II

It is impossible to understand those words fully except in light of the broader scope of Christ's teaching. Shortly before Palm Sunday, Jesus told a parable that brings into focus the incredible wonder of His words here like no other of which I know. It is a story we've reflected upon together before -- about a slave who was brought before his Master to settle up accounts for what he owed. As you may recall, the slave begged the Master, **Be patient with me and I will pay back everything. (Mat 18:23-35)**

Here, however, this story of Jesus transforms from an innocuous anecdote into a completely outrageous tale. In the economy of first century Palestine, if an ordinary worker saved up everything he or she made for fifteen years -- never spending even a single cent on food, housing, or extra toilet paper -- that person *might* accumulate as much as one Roman talent. But this particular slave owes the Master ten thousand talents. The slave insists that if the Master will only grant him a little more time, his loyal servant will pay off all of his debt. And he certainly could, in about 150,000 years!

Now, I always laughed at that scenario, until one day I realized that Jesus was saying: *"Dan, that slave is you. You believe that over the course of your life, you will surely rack up enough moral merit points to satisfy the holiness of God. You compare yourself, Dan, to all the 'really bad' people in the world and think you need maybe a little bit of grace at best, that you're only a little bit behind on your moral payments, or that God grades on a curve. But, my Father in heaven,"* says Jesus, *"is pure and holy beyond your imaginings. To him, your indifference to the needs of the homeless child is as serious as grand larceny. Your bitter intolerance of the failings of others is as bad as murder. Your fantasies are as atrocious in my Father's sight as adultery or rape."*

Now you must get tired of hearing me harp on this theme, as I know I have over the last few weeks. Believe me, I wouldn't do so if this idea were not so central to the meaning of the Cross, or if it wasn't so hard for me, personally, to embrace it. Perhaps, you too. But let me be ruthlessly honest here. We can't afford to think of ourselves – even for an instant -- as pious and pretty good people, when we are carrying the virus of sin. It is only where that self-righteous delusion is truly finished, that genuine hope begins.

Until we put to death our spiritual smugness, and live daily with a profoundly humble and personal grasp of just how deeply we ARE or HAVE BEEN in spiritual debt – that we couldn't pay off what we owe even if we had 150,000 years to try — then God's work in our lives can't unfold. But IF we can get to that place – if we can return regularly to the foot of the Cross and know that we belong up there – then we will hear some good news that completely reorients our lives.

Many years ago, while digging in the ruins of an ancient Roman city, archaeologists came across remnants of what they believed was a library dating back to the first century A.D. Among the scraps of parchment, investigators found some on which were written long inventories of precious goods, and alongside these some columns of numbers. It didn't take long for the discoverers to determine that this library had belonged to some prominent merchant, and that these documents were actually bills of sale.

What puzzled some of the researchers, however, was that across some of the documents was scrawled a single Greek word – *"tetelestai."* The word comes from the root word *"teleo,"* which means "to complete." *Tetelestai* is the aorist tense of that verb. It suggests an action in the past whose force continues into the present. It most literally translates: "It is complete and continues to be so." Archaeologists finally concluded that the word, when printed on such invoices, could only mean one thing. It was the equivalent of the statement that a modern-day merchant might stamp across an invoice in bold red letters -- the one that makes the heart of an over-burdened debtor leap with joy -- the one that reads: "PAID IN FULL."

Now any guesses as to what the Greek translation of Jesus' sixth words from the cross is? Actually, it's only one word. You guessed it: It's *"tetelestai."* What my cynical, bean-counting heart wants to know is *how?* I mean how is it possible that *that* word

should be written there. Ancient bills of sale for camels and grain are one thing, but I mean there is no way that my moral debt -- and that of you and every other human being who has or who will ever live -- could *ever* be paid off. Friends, we're talking about 150,000 years of goodness times billions and billions of people! Why there is only *one* Being in the entire Universe who possesses those kind of moral resources, and that Being is the very One to whom the debt is owed!

But, assuming for a moment that this One crazily chose to balance the spiritual ledger, wouldn't it cost everything He had -- His pride and glory, His riches and power? Wouldn't that One have to be willing to pour all of that out to balance the scales? Yes, God would. Maybe that is why the word "*tetelestai*" wasn't printed on a thin piece of parchment, but upon a thick piece of lumber that reminds us of the combined ledger sheets of all humanity. Maybe that is why it wasn't written in neat word-processed ink, but in capital, blood-red letters: "*Tetelestai*... It is completed... It is finished... the debt is paid in full!" It is the Ultimate CARES Act.

III

O.K., now give me some help here. WHY would God do such a thing? I think it is because of the second and final piece of good news I'd like to share with you before leaving today. It has to do with another meaning of this word "*tetelestai*." You see, while in some ancient usages the term means the cancellation of debt, in others it means the completion of a great work -- as in the way that a sculptor rounds off or perfects a piece of stone that has been left undeveloped or damaged. The apostle Paul picked up on this idea when he suggested that in Jesus Christ we have not only an image of the divine nature, but also a vivid a picture of fallen humanity repaired.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that where Adam and Eve were disobedient to God's law, Christ shows us what a life looks like to live in perfect obedience to God. Where Adam and Eve mistrusted God, Christ shows us what it looks like to trust God's will completely. Where Adam and Eve tried to shift responsibility for sin out of disregard for others, Christ shows us the kind of character that is willing to take the price of sin onto Himself out of love for others. Where Adam and Eve selfishly stole what wasn't theirs and thereby brought sin and death to humanity, Jesus gave away what was His to keep and thereby brought forgiveness and life to the world. In short, in Jesus Christ we have a picture of what humanity looks like when the damage done by sin is removed... when the perfection God intended is finished.

But there's more to the good news than that -- something that I'd like to share by offering in closing a lesson in counterpoint. How many of you are familiar with the work of Michelangelo? He excelled as a painter, sculptor, architect, and designer. His sculptures of David as he prepared to face Goliath... or of Moses when he descended from Mount Sinai and found the Israelites worshipping a golden calf... or of Mary holding Jesus after his crucifixion (the *Pieta*)... these finished works continue to inspire millions.

What many of us may not know, however, is that there is a hall in Florence, Italy, that is filled with Michelangelo's unfinished works. Because of COVID-19, no one is visiting them right now. But if you could, you would find figures that seem to be struggling to break free of the stone that binds them. You'd see faces and bodies where the Master's chisel seem to have gone amiss. You'd see sculptures that have been cracked from falling. When I saw those sculptures back in 2004, I thought, "Wow. That's the way WE are." Maybe especially right now. Have you been to that hall?

There is another hall none of us have been to yet. But, one day, in the twinkling of an eye, you and I will be there (1 Cor 15:52). You will not see one unfinished work in that place, for the Master who walks these halls always completes what He starts. He does it with a genius and tenacity that will make Michelangelo look like a kid working in Play-Doh. As you pass through that hall, you will notice that you are surrounded by works of perfection, individuals who bear a striking likeness to the One who even in his dying showed us what it means to live. And miracle of all miracles, as you pass by a mirror you will see that *you* much more closely resemble Him than you ever dreamed possible.

The people on Palm Sunday hailed Jesus as their Messiah one day; but they weren't willing to wait to see their plans fulfilled. But, you and I, we would be wise to wait for the fulfillment of God's plan. As the Apostle Paul once wrote: **I am absolutely confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6)**. Which is simply God's way of saying: "A day is coming when the virus of sin will be gone and all the damage done will be repaired. I have given you my Son that you might see the sort of life I have in mind... and to give you confidence that, as far as eternity goes, the work is already done. *Tetelestai*. It is finished." Believe this good news, my friends. The God who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion. These are words you can live by.

Let us pray...

O God our Master, if there are any here today who are blind to the magnitude of the debts they owe, open their eyes I pray. Then seeing clearly, let them also hear the words of your Son, declaring above the din of this world: Tetelestai, it is finished, your debts have been paid for in full. Grow in each of us an ever-deepening confidence that we are today a clean sheet, a new creation, a fresh block of stone. Enable us to believe with all our hearts that there is no change of character, no venture of faith, hope, or love that is impossible by the power at work within and upon us. And then, grant us grace to accept the blows of Your hammer and chisel upon us; for although they will sometimes hurt, it is indeed to make us perfect. In the name of Him who has promised to complete in us the work He has begun. Even Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.