

# "Can We Forgive Sins?"

*John 20:23*

The verse before us this morning is the foundation for the false teaching that one can simply have their sins forgiven by confessing them to a clergyman from a specific denomination and they are absolved. Without studying it – and if we only quote this one text – it could sound like the apostles could have been given the power to forgive sins. However, as we've been emphasizing in this series called 'One Verse sermons', Scripture was written in whole books or letters, broken down into smaller grammatical sections called paragraphs which need to be studied as a whole; in the surrounding context of the verses, and as we'll see this morning, in other sections of Scripture that shed light on the passage at hand.

Suppose for a moment you're in English class and your teacher has assigned you to write an essay on a subject like, global warming. And you grab 10 books and from those books you take 4 or 5 quotes from these different authors and copy and paste them in your essay and hand it in. Your teacher would not be impressed. There is no context. There is no coherence. You've just taken a bunch of quotes from different authors about global warming, lumped them all together to makes them say something that may not convey what the authors originally intended. Yet we do that with the Bible sometimes don't we? When we study the Bible in the context in which it was given to us, carefully cross-referencing what different authors said about the same thing and making sure what the author's other writings said, as he was led by the Spirit, we will come up with a better understanding of the intent and then we will know how to carefully apply it.

One of you wrote down this verse and put it in our 'sermon can'. Most of the ones we've looked at so far were favourites or very familiar ones. But last week's and this week's are more along the lines of perplexing. Does John 20:23 say the apostles could forgive people's sins, thus declaring people right with God?

John 20 is John's account of the resurrection. Most of what he gives us is unique to him (like Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene) although the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in the locked room is mentioned by Luke also. Here John emphasizes the setting;

*<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"*

It's Sunday evening which means John and Peter already were at the empty tomb and already heard the reports that the women had seen the risen Jesus. They're sad, disappointed in themselves for abandoning Jesus, puzzled and scared of the Jews. How scared? The phrase the doors were locked means 'They kept making sure the doors were locked'. They were scared of the Jews because 1) the Jews already persuaded the Romans to have Jesus killed and maybe they were next. 2) Jesus' body has disappeared; who's the most obvious people to blame for stealing the body to prove Jesus rose? Matthew 27 tells us the Jewish leaders already thought this was possible.

But all this changes when Jesus miraculously appears and proves His identity by His scars and pronounces 'Shalom'. This is huge because shalom means to wish you complete physical, relational and spiritual health. The disciples are overjoyed because Jesus is alive but essentially Jesus just forgave them. A few nights ago, at the Last Passover He said to them,

*14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

This reassurance of His peace/shalom on them – even though they abandoned Him - affirms what we all know is true from Genesis to Revelation:

## **We are Not Qualified to Offer Forgiveness of Sins**

The sinner cannot offer forgiveness of sins because he is a sinner! The whole sacrificial system spoke repeatedly of the need for clean and pure animals. No damages. No defects. No roadkill's. When we come across a verse that seems to say something that contradicts all of Scripture, then we need to study and find out what it actually says. This is a good way to approach verses like this. We know it can't say the apostles were given the power to forgive sins because we know

### ***Only the Father and the Son are Qualified***

Back in Mark 2 Jesus is in a home in Capernaum sharing about the kingdom of God. The house is so full that four friends climb onto the roof top to lower their paralyzed friend down to Jesus, hoping He would heal him. We read,

*<sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

We have to understand that most Jewish people believed if you had something very wrong with you that it was because of sin. So, Jesus uses this to imply He is God. The religious leaders didn't miss this.

*<sup>6</sup> Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, <sup>7</sup> "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

*<sup>8</sup> Immediately Jesus knew in His spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and He said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? <sup>9</sup> Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? <sup>10</sup> But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, <sup>11</sup> "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." <sup>12</sup> He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all.*

If any of those things are easier to say it's 'Your sins are forgiven' because how do you prove that. However, Jesus proves He is the son of God by doing what only God can do – perform a miracle of complete healing – which proves He can also do what only His Father can do, forgive sins. [And read minds – something that they seemed to miss!!]

Another thing Jesus affirmed from the Old Testament is that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. God required a perfect human sacrifice for sins. That's why the blood of goats and bulls could never take away sin, it only covered sin until the perfect sacrifice came along. And Jesus Himself said he was that sacrifice. At the Last Passover, Jesus took the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 4 cups of wine drunk at the Passover, called the Cup of Redemption, in which normally a blessing is prayed thanking God for redeeming Israel from slavery. Instead Jesus says in Matt. 26:27,

*... "Drink from it, all of you. <sup>28</sup> This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."*

This covenant Jesus is referring to is the New Covenant (Luke has Jesus saying 'New Covenant') which we read about in Jer. 31:31-34,

<sup>31</sup> "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God promised to pour out His Spirit on the nation of Israel when He forgives their sin of rejecting Him – a promise that won't be completely fulfilled until Jesus comes back and brings in the reign of God from Jerusalem over the earth. Yet, for now Jesus tells us the New Covenant has begun when His blood is shed and the Spirit is available now as people put their trust in Jesus – something Peter affirms on Pentecost in Acts 2.

So, the Bible is very clear that only a sinless sacrifice makes forgiveness of sins available and only Jesus is that sacrifice and only He and the Father are qualified to forgive people's sins.

There's a rather simple test as to whether Jesus authorized the apostles to forgive sins or not – read the book of Acts and notice when the apostles mentioned forgiveness of sins. So let's look. First on Pentecost itself, Act 2:36, Peter says

<sup>36</sup> "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

<sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

When Peter and the others were questioned by the Sanhedrin – the same group that condemned Jesus weeks earlier – in Acts 5, Peter responded in v.30

<sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

When Peter was led to Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman centurion, Cornelius bowed down to Peter but Peter told him to "stand up for I am only a man myself" (Acts 10:26). And then he said in v.42 about God's message,

<sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

And the apostle Paul, when recounting his Damascus road salvation experience said to King Agrippa in Acts 26:17 that Jesus said to him

*<sup>17</sup> I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

So, if the apostles never understood the resurrected Jesus to say that they had the authority to forgive people's sins, then I think we can confidently say that no human being has the authority to forgive anyone's sins. So then, what did Jesus say the apostles – and us – can do?

## **We are Equipped to Announce that Forgiveness of Sins is Available through Faith in Jesus (20:21-23)**

These scared disciples were not equipped yet to announce to others that Jesus alone forgives sins. So how did Jesus equip them? What do we need to be able to announce the bold truth that forgiveness of sins is available through faith in Jesus alone?

### ***We have to be right with God ourselves (20:21a)***

When Jesus declares 'Peace' to His disciples He is assuring them that they are still one with Him. That their relationship with Jesus is still intact. Jesus gave them His shalom earlier. He said He left it with them. He never removed it. He repeated it here to assure them that His shalom was still there and they are one. They believed who Jesus was. They had faith that He was the Messiah. It was a growing faith because they didn't understand resurrection, but now they do and they rejoiced!! And there is an emphasis on this.

Faith in Jesus establishes peace/shalom between us and God. Our sins have been forgiven. We are one with Him. We are at peace. Paul wrote in Rom. 5:1,

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.*

Peace with God gives us confidence in God and a hope worth telling others about. Why would we announce to people they can have their sins forgiven through faith in Jesus if we weren't sure ourselves? Jesus took away the wrath of God that was hovering over us. Sins have been forgiven. Judgment has been removed. We are no longer condemned.

If you are saved you have all that and more. That alone equips you to tell those who don't have that how to get that in Jesus. So Jesus assures them of His forgiveness and continued peace and then recommissions them

### ***To continue the ministry Jesus began (20:21b)***

*"As the Father has sent Me, so I send you."*

It is fascinating how this is written in the Greek. Jesus literally says as the Father sent and continues to and always will be sending Me, so I am sending you.' It reads in such a way that the sending of Jesus wasn't a past act but a continuous, on-going act, which, we now continue. Which also means, God sends us. God assures us of His presence and forgiveness before He shows us our purpose. You have to be saved before you can understand your purpose in life. Our purpose is to glorify God by telling about Him and His Son to others. Make it about them not us.

But how can we do this? Through the power of the Spirit.

### ***We have to have the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us (20:22)***

When Jesus breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit' did they get it then before Pentecost, or part of it then and the fullness on Pentecost? In case you think John was confused when the disciples receive the Holy Spirit go back and read John 7:38-39,

*<sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." <sup>39</sup> By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*

John says the Spirit didn't come until Jesus was glorified. Jesus said the Spirit wouldn't come until He left. By this it must refer to Jesus' ascension when they witnessed the risen Lord disappear on the clouds in His glory. Jesus didn't say the Spirit was there now, He just invited them to receive the Spirit, who in Acts 1 He said they were to wait for yet. Acts 1 follows this because there the disciples were with Jesus in Galilee not Jerusalem.

When the Spirit came at Pentecost how did it come?

*Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.*

Wind. Jesus blew on them. Could Jesus symbolically blow air on them so that when the Spirit came in a violent wind, that this was Jesus assuring them that this was the sign of the Spirit, of new life. Is there anywhere else in Scripture where God breathed and new life happened? Of course, Gen. 2:7 God breathed life into Adam and he began to live. In Ezek. 37 God told Ezekiel to preach to these dead bones. And when he did the dead bones of Israel began to take on flesh and move again.

I think Jesus' breathing on them was a symbolic gesture to prepare for the Spirit, who would come with a strong breathing from heaven. Without the Spirit we don't have new life. Eph. 1:13-14 says we received and were sealed with the Spirit when we believe in Jesus. He empowers us to serve and speak truth in Jesus' Name. And our responsibility now, as was the disciples, was to

### ***We invite people to faith in Christ so that God will forgive their sins (20:23)***

We already established that the disciples did not forgive people's sins but they did announce that the forgiveness of sins was available through faith in Jesus over and over and over again. The disciples were and now we are, the voice of Jesus. Paul says we are His ambassadors; we speak on His behalf. So, if we announce that forgiveness of sins is available through faith in Jesus – and they believe our message about the gospel – we can confidently assure them that their sins have been forgiven. Not by us but by Jesus. If they don't believe our message, we can also confidently say their sins are not forgiven, as Jesus said.

It's good to clear up these sometimes confusing passages by studying Scripture to understand what it meant. But now having done that we are responsible to do what it says. Jesus we are blessed when we hear His Word and do what it says. We need to continue Jesus' mission of declaring graciously that the penalty for sin has been paid and forgiveness is available by confessing they are sinners to Jesus and are desperately in need of salvation through faith in Him. His death paid the price. His resurrection assures us that sin can be conquered; after we die of course but also through the Spirit we now can have victory over sin in our own life.

Who will you meet this week that needs to hear that sins can be forgiven through faith in Jesus? When we are hesitant to share let's remember the confidence Jesus and God have in us. We are at peace with Him. We have His authority to announce forgiveness of sins is available. His Spirit is with us and enables us to communicate truth. Don't be afraid. Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world. Pray for opportunities. Pray for holy gracious boldness. And rejoice that God has given you His peace, purpose and power to carry on the ministry Jesus started.

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