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A Great Consolation

John 20:22-23

Intro: To bring us up to date on our current study of **ch20** – Jesus has been arrested, tried, condemned, executed and buried in a borrowed tomb. But, 3 days, later, early on a Sunday morning, He rose from the dead, having finally accomplished the work of atonement for sin and the redemption of sinners which the Father had sent Him into the world to complete. We know He completed this work because He said so Himself on the cross, It is finished! (**19:30**).

We know that the Father accepted the sacrifice of His life as payment for sin as evidenced by the resurrection. Now, though heaven is fully aware of the arrival of God's plan of salvation for mankind, earth is still quite in the dark.

The first revelation of the risen Savior in John's Gospel was to Mary Magdalene. In their meeting, Jesus admonished Mary not to cling to Him. This wasn't because He couldn't or shouldn't be touched but to inform her and all the others who had known Jesus before His death and resurrection that their relationship with Him would not be the same as it had been before. Before, they knew him in His humiliation but now He is the exalted, victorious, glorified Son of God and must be honored as such. So, as the sun slowly rises on the Sunday morning, so to, the followers of Jesus are slowly waking up to not just a new relationship with Jesus but a whole new spiritual reality!

We've also been looking at the 7 last words of Jesus as recorded by John in **ch20-21**; 7 statements made by Jesus to His disciples after His resurrection that reveal the new spiritual reality that now exists because of the resurrection. The 1st of these was a great bequest, the great gift peace. Jesus not only announced peace with God but granted to all those who believe on Him the very peace of God. This gift of peace was immediately followed by the deliverance of a great Commission. Those who have experienced peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ are then sent into the world to proclaim the gift of salvation. Not only does He tell us what we are to do, He also tells us how we are to do it: "as the Father has sent Me" (**21b**). Jesus became human so that He might identify with us; He came to teach; to rescue; to suffer for truth and righteousness. We are also called to

identify with the lost and proclaim truth.

But, let's face it; how could these disciples ever be expected to do that? To a person, each of them was as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs! How are they supposed to carry the Gospel into all the world if they're too scared to leave the room? That question brings us to the 3rd of Christ's 7 last words in [vs22-23](#). Here is the offer of a great consolation but this offer is delivered in 2 parts: the 1st concerns the presence of the Holy Spirit and the other speaks to the forgiveness of sin. This 2nd part, specifically the interpretation of [vs23](#), is one of the main theological differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants. This is not a minor issue and since we are concerned with what the Bible actually says, not what people think it says, we need to camp out here a while.

23 – The real focus of this text is on divine forgiveness. On the basis of this text and others, the Catholic Church has built the doctrine of a special priesthood that's been granted the authority to absolve sin. This power is usually exercised in the confessional. Most Catholics would acknowledge that ultimately, it's God that forgives sin on the basis of Christ's death. But they would also add that God only does this in response to the action of a priest: if the priest absolves – God forgives; if the priest does not absolve – God allows the sin and judgment to remain. Protestants see this view as being completely backwards. They hold that what really happens is that God first forgives; then on the basis of this forgiveness, believers proclaim that it is so.

Why do Protestants take this verse this way? Aren't they just twisting a text that in its clearest and simplest sense seems to be granting a special authority to forgive sins to a certain group of chosen men and their successors? Not at all! The Catholic view is actually not the clear or simple meaning of the text. Nor does this theology appear anywhere else in the Word of God. There are several specific reasons from the Bible that form the Protestant view.

1) The Bible teaches that no one can forgive sins but God. The power of forgiving sin is His prerogative alone ([Mark 2:5-12a](#)). What the scribes declared in [vs7](#) was a true principle and Jesus used it to lead them to consider His claims to divinity. His argument was that physical healing and forgiveness of sin were both the sole work of God so, if Jesus had the

power to heal the man, He also had the power to forgive his sins and thus, it proved that He was God. This argument would be meaningless if humans were able to forgive sins under any circumstances at all.

2) There is absolutely no occurrence in the NT of any apostle exercising the authority to absolve or pardon sin. For doctrines specifically related to the church, there is a 3-phase rule of thumb that has served the church well over the centuries: did Jesus teach it? Did the Apostles practice it? Do the epistles clearly declare it? If any of those questions produce a negative answer then the doctrine is suspect.

Did the disciples believe Jesus was granting them exclusive authority to forgive sin? Not at all! If they had, they would have certainly claimed and exercised such power but what do we find? All throughout the book of Acts, over and over, the Apostles constantly affirm that the remission of sin is in Jesus and by Jesus only. What they did do is preach the gospel, declaring with authority the terms by which God forgives sins: through faith in the person and work of Jesus alone. They understood that the authority Jesus gave them was that of a preacher and not of a priest.

3) There were other believers besides the Apostles present at this meeting so, the authority given here was given to them as well as the Apostles (Lk 24:33). Thus, it's given to all believers generally. This fits the context of the whole passage. The authority to forgive or retain is preceded by the gift of peace, the Great Commission, and the imparting of the Holy Spirit, all of which are clearly given to all Christians. If this authority is restricted to a special order of priest, then the peace, the Great Commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit must be restricted to them also. If the other gifts are not restricted, and they're not, then all believers can proclaim forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

4) In the original language, the verbs "forgive" and "retain" are in the perfect tense which suggests the forgiveness involved here is something that's already been determined in heaven and is now merely proclaimed on earth. This does not prove the point conclusively but it does show that the best translations reflects the verb tense as reading "have been forgiven" or "have been retained."

All of this leads us to conclude that vs23 is to be taken in exactly the way

Luke records Jesus' teaching on the same occasion. Luke says that after Jesus opened the disciples' understanding to what the Bible says about His death for sins, He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:46-48). In neither of these texts is anyone authorized to remit sins; rather all are commissioned to preach it on condition of repentance and faith.

If this is the correct interpretation of vs23, then several important applications should directly flow from this truth.

1) Our mission in the world must contain involvement (identification) and proclamation. If we are sent into the world as Christ was sent into the world, then we must really be in the world and not just shouting the gospel to it from afar. This is the principle of the incarnation – Jesus became one of us so that He could reach us with the truth. But, if it's true that Christians must be involved in the world if they are to reach the world, it's also true that they must have a message for the world and actually proclaim it to the world if they're going to fulfill the Lord's commission. Our message is the forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. We must never give up proclaiming the Gospel of salvation that has been entrusted to us by our Savior and Master.

2) There is no biblical distinction of privilege between clergy and laymen. All believers have the same privileges before God; all have the same duties. All are to serve together within the one fellowship of the church. If a biblical distinction is to be made, it must be made between the great Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, and his followers—just as it can also be made between Jesus as the Prophet and ourselves as lesser prophets or between Jesus as the King and ourselves as those who rule only because He rules.

We're not the priest, the prophet, or the king. But as the Father has sent Jesus into the world, so also does He send us into the world with the result that we're to function in each of these areas. We function as priests in offering ourselves up to God in service and in praying for and with others. We function as prophets in proclaiming what God has recorded in Scripture for our benefit and that of others. We function as kings when we first rule ourselves well and then also those for whom we are responsible.

The question is, Do we actually do these things or do we leave our responsibilities to others? Do we take the gospel of God's grace in Christ to those who need to hear it? Do we proclaim on God's authority that those who will repent of their sin and turn in faith to Jesus as their Savior have had their sins forgiven and those who won't come to Jesus are not forgiven and will have to face God's judgment? Believers have many privileges. But they also have many responsibilities, most important of which is the faithful proclamation of the gospel.

3) How do we begin to accomplish these things? We have pointed out that the privileges and duties spoken of here are for all believers, we must also reiterate that they're only for believers. A casual acquaintance with spiritual truth isn't enough; membership with a church isn't enough; calling yourself a Christian isn't enough. What's necessary is new life from God which is the result of turning away from sin to faith in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior. This is where [vs22](#) comes in.

[22](#) – breathed – having commissioned them, Jesus now bestows upon His followers the equipment needed to accomplish their commission. The means by which Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit is significant. It seems John is making a deliberate connection between this breathing on the disciples and when God breathed life into man at creation ([Gen 2:7](#)). The breath of God in the original creation meant physical life and the breath of Jesus in the new creation means spiritual life. This is seen as a work of recreation, just as God breathed life into the first man.

Some scholars contend that this is when these disciples were actually saved. I think that is true in the NT sense of salvation, by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, does this mean they weren't saved before? It hardly seems possible given all they had been through with Jesus up to that point. Clearly, Judas wasn't a believer but what about all the others? The confusion comes from a misunderstanding of how OT saints were saved. People in the OT were never saved by keeping the Law, they were saved by believing in the Person and promises of God.

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness centuries before the Law was given. In fact, Israel was chosen by God to be His own people before the Law was given. God delivered Israel out of Egypt

before the Law was given. The purpose of the Law was not to provide a way for Israel to attain salvation. It was given to instruct them how to live out their special calling as God's people. It taught them what their responsibilities were to God and to each other. Godly living is the natural consequence of salvation, it is never the cause. It is clear that these faithful followers of Jesus were saved in the OT sense before His resurrection and then, having understood the real reason behind His coming, entered into that new relationship with Jesus made possible only by the resurrection.

Some people imagine a contradiction between what John records here in vs22 and what Luke describes in the 2nd chapter of Acts, which speaks of a special coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost some 50 days later but this is not accurate. Clearly, the Holy Spirit came in power in a special way on Pentecost to inaugurate the church age. But, does this mean there was no working of the Spirit in disciples' lives before then? When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, did he do it from his own knowledge? No! Jesus even said this had been revealed to Peter by God. Was this apart from the Spirit? Did Peter believe without the opening of his mind and heart by the direct action of the Holy Spirit upon him? Earlier that morning when John entered the tomb and "believed" in the resurrection; was this knowledge achieved apart from the Spirit? No! The Holy Spirit was there all along and would be so in even greater measure at Pentecost.

What we see in this is the 3-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit. Before the resurrection, the Holy Spirit was with them, working in and through Jesus to guide them into truth. After the resurrection, the Holy Spirit was now breathed into them by Jesus, recreating – making them new creations in Christ. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit would come upon all of them in a new and greater way – empowering them to serve, emboldening them to preach without fear or doubt. The Spirit ministers to us the same way today. He is with us before salvation, convicting of sin and drawing us into the truth of the Gospel. He enters into our hearts at the point of conversion, bringing new life and becoming the earnest of our salvation. Then, He also comes upon us and empowers us to serve the Lord. Sometimes these last 2 are instantaneous, sometimes that happen at different times but the power is there, it's ours for the using.

The point is the disciples received the same Spirit that was in Jesus; the same Spirit that empowered and enabled all of His words and works. The

breathing upon them was meant to convey the idea that His very own Spirit had been imparted to them. What Jesus is indicating in our text is that He is the source of the Holy Spirit and nothing can be done in the Christian life (not even becoming a Christian) apart from the Spirit's activity. We must be created anew if we are to truly belong to Him and faithfully serve Him.

Have you been made new by the Holy Spirit? If so, then all things have been made new in your life and God's blessings are yours in full measure.

Has God made these gifts new in your life? If not, He can and will through Jesus Christ, who calls you to repent of your sin and turn to Him in humble faith. He died for you for just this reason. Won't you believe it, accept it and come to Him? 😊