

The Power Of Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] Okay, tonight we're continuing our study of John's Gospel, which we will finish next week, but tonight we're still in chapter 20, and we're looking together at verses 21 to 23.

Jesus said to his disciples again, peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I'm sending you. And when he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. We've been looking at these verses together this morning and this evening, and in the morning we saw that these verses highlight a broad principle that we must never, ever forget.

It's highlighting the fact that the church continues what Jesus began in his ministry. Jesus went to people, Jesus taught people, he welcomed people, he helped people, and as we engage in the mission of making disciples of all nations, we continue all that work that Jesus started.

As we do that, as we saw this morning, there will be the risk that people will be offended. There will be times when we will face opposition. If that happens, when that happens, it's simply a continuation of what Jesus himself experienced.

[1 : 18] It's all reinforcing the fact that for us as a church, both as individual believers and as a church family together, the most prominent and the most obvious aspect of our reputation is that we are to be Christ-like.

In other words, if people were to read the Gospels and then come and look at us, they should see so much that's the same.

We continue what Jesus began. That principle applies in lots of different areas as we saw this morning. In verse 23, Jesus applies it specifically to the subject of forgiveness.

As he does that, he gives us a statement in verse 23 that's a little bit surprising and maybe a little bit hard to understand. Now, at one level, verse 23 is not that hard to understand because it's not a complicated statement.

It's just too corresponding if-then statements. You've got an if-then and you've got an implied-then here and then you've got the same here if-then and you have an implied-if-then and an implied-then here.

[2 : 29] They're not complicated statements. They're pretty straightforward propositions. The difficult part is trying to understand why Jesus said this and to understand what are the implications of his statement.

One of the traps that we can easily fall into when we're reading the Bible is that we can adopt the policy which basically runs along the lines of, if something is hard to understand, then it's easy to ignore.

We read a chapter like this and we read about Mary and Peter and Thomas and John. We move on into chapter 21 before we stop and think, well, what exactly does verse 23 say?

We mustn't do that because every part of the Bible is important. This in particular must be an incredibly important statement because this is one of the first things that Jesus wants his disciples to know when he appears to them after the resurrection.

That's fascinating because you think of all the core gospel truths that Jesus could have highlighted here. He could have said, now make sure you remember the doctrine of the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, three persons.

[3 : 47] Make sure you remember justification by faith. That's the key for how we are saved. Make sure that you are clear on substitutionary atonement. These are all utterly crucial documents, but Jesus doesn't mention any of them.

Spirit, he says this, as he confirms the reality of the resurrection, as he prepares them for the coming of the Holy Spirit, he says, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.

If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. Why on earth does Jesus say that? Well that's what I want us to think about tonight and our title is The Power of Forgiveness and there's two key truths contained within that title that arise from this passage that we're going to look at together.

The first one is that the church has power and the second is that forgiveness is powerful. So looking at this one together first, all of this raises a topic that we don't often talk about, but one that's actually very important.

It's pointing us to the subject of church power. Now by that we mean the power and authority and the responsibility that Jesus has invested in his church.

[5 : 11] It's not something that we talk about very often, but if you were to read older books on theology, you'll frequently come across that phrase, church power, especially when it's talking about ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church.

It's all highlighting the fact that the church, as the channel through which Jesus fulfills his purposes and as the avenue through which he continues his ministry, that church has certain powers given to it.

And historically theologians have often thought about church power in contrast to the power that's given to the state. So Jesus is risen from the dead.

Jesus is exalted at the right hand of God. He is Lord over everything, over the whole church and over all the nations, but as Lord of all, he has delegated certain power.

And some of that power is delegated to the church, some of it's to the state. So the state has certain responsibilities and powers, so too does the church.

[6 : 19] And theologians have classified it in I think a very simple and helpful way whereby they've said, the best way to think about this is to think that the state has power and responsibility over external matters, things like the economy, law and order, national security, taxation.

That's the state's business. They have the power to deal with that. External stuff like that. The church has power and responsibility over internal matters, matters of faith, of conscience, of morality and of spirituality.

And I think that's a really helpful distinction to have. In many ways, the state is responsible for the external functioning of society. The church is responsible for your heart and for mine.

Now you don't need to know much about history to know that frequently either of these two bodies, the church and the state, have frequently overstepped and overreached into the other one's prerogative.

So sometimes churches have tried to control societies, fight battles, govern economies. And sometimes nations have tried to set moral axioms and tried to tell people what they should and should not believe.

[7 : 38] For a long time in Europe, historically, it was the first of these that was happening. The church was heavily involved in the affairs of the state and you can go back a thousand years and at that time, the pope was the dominant political figure in Europe economically in terms of military power and influence.

Today it's the opposite issue. It's the other one that happens when it comes to issues of ethics, morality, truth, faith. Our nation is not particularly interested in what the church has got to say.

And it makes up its own mind and today we're probably at the point where our state is getting very close at times to telling us what we can and can't believe.

So when it comes to the gospel, history and current affairs will frequently show us how not to do it. But that doesn't mean that the fundamental principles don't apply. They do.

As Jesus returns to heaven, he invests certain power into his church and part of that power is the power of forgiveness that we're thinking about tonight.

[8 : 54] What that means at a very basic level is that if a government says to you, your sins are forgiven, that statement has no ultimate significance. It has no effect. A government doesn't have the power to say that.

A king, a queen, a prime minister, a first minister who stands up to the nation and says, I want the whole country to know that your sins are forgiven. If they do that, it means nothing.

But if the church says your sins are forgiven, that statement does have significance. It does have an effect. The church has the power to say that.

How does that power work? It's probably best to start by thinking about what this is not saying. It's not saying that people in church can make a split second decision about whether or not someone's sins are forgiven.

So it's not like somebody can just walk in the door and I can just stand here and be like, yeah, they're forgiven. No, they're not. That's not what it's saying. It's not saying that we, as me as a minister or as the elders here, we, it's not saying that we can determine someone's eternal destiny as though God is saying, well, I'm waiting for Thomas to make up his mind to whether or not there's sins.

[10 : 12] That's not how it works at all. And the reason we know that that's not what Jesus is saying is because of the broader principle we highlighted this morning, the fact that the church is continuing what Jesus began.

In other words, the church can only speak with authority when her speech aligns with the one from whom she's sent.

And that actually just makes perfect sense in any delegation of power. When power is delegated from one party to another, it's only when the power of the person sent aligns with the sender that that voice has authority.

So a government's foreign minister can only speak with authority if her speech aligns with the government who appointed her. A press officer in our local council can only speak with authority when he is actually accurately declaring the position of those who've sent him.

It's exactly the same in the church. We have to remember that the church cannot override Jesus. And so as we're talking about this, it's not saying that we can make the decision as though Jesus isn't watching or isn't interested or as though he is powerless.

[11 : 19] And again, this makes sense of the imagery that the New Testament gives of the church, one of the most famous images of the image of the body, the church is the body, Jesus is the head. And so any exercise of power by the body has to align with the head.

That just makes sense. It all fits together. So when Jesus here speaks to the church for giving sins and not for giving sins, all of that's in the context of an alignment between what the church says and what Jesus says.

And the more we think about that, the more we see that that's not really controversial at all. It actually just makes perfect sense. It's reminding us that what we say as a church must be grounded in Jesus's promises and on Jesus's warnings.

All who trust in Jesus are forgiven. All who reject Jesus are not.

That was Jesus's own message. And he's sending us out with the same message. He's sending us out to make disciples of all nations.

[12 : 33] And really what that verse is saying is just a logical consequence of preaching the Gospel. The Gospel is calling everyone to repent of their sins. And if people respond to that call, then the church has the power to say, your sins are forgiven because anyone who responds to Jesus in faith has their sins forgiven.

And equally if somebody doesn't respond, if someone rejects Jesus, if someone refuses to repent and someone says, no, I am not going to bow before Jesus, then the church has the power to say your sins are not forgiven because they're not forgiven.

Now that may change and the great hope, the great mission of the church is that more and more people would come to repentance. That's what we're doing.

We're calling people to repent and to trust in Jesus. But as long as people refuse, the church cannot declare them forgiven because they're not yet forgiven. And it's all grounded on that continuity between what Jesus began and what is continued through the church.

So maybe the clearest way to think of it is to think of it like this. If you could walk up to Jesus in 1st century Jerusalem and say to him, I am sorry for my sins.

[13 : 43] I am trusting in you. He would say to you, your sins are forgiven because they're forgiven. If you could walk up to Jesus and say that, that's what his reply would be.

We continue that ministry. So if you walk up to Jesus's church and say, I am sorry for my sins, I'm trusting in Jesus, we can say to you, your sins are forgiven because they're forgiven.

And all of that is grounded on the promises and the warnings that Jesus gives. And so as long as there is an alignment between what Jesus is saying and what the church is saying, the church has the power to speak in the way that verse 23 describes.

And that ties in with the passage that we read from Matthew that speaks about the keys of the kingdom. Peter had a knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And Jesus answered him, blessed are you Simon Barjona for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And I tell you, you're Peter and on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

[14 : 56] Again as a difficult passage to understand, you think, what does that mean? What does this talk about the keys of the kingdom? Well, what is telling us? It's always important when you see that not to overcomplicate it, just to try to use the imagery that Jesus is using, try to think of a key and a door.

And it's telling us that the church has the power to open the door to somebody and say, you're forgiven. You're free. You can enter in and enjoy all the promises of the gospel.

You're trusting in Jesus. You're forgiven. The doors wide open. But equally the church has the power to say to somebody who's not yet a believer, somebody who's not repenting and say to them, the door's not open for you yet.

You haven't come in to Christ's household. You haven't come into his family because you need to repent and you need to trust in Jesus.

Maybe to illustrate this, it's helpful to think of an oncologist, a cancer doctor, and he's got a patient who needs chemotherapy. So the chemo is going to cure the patient.

[16 : 04] And it's not the doctor who cures them, it's the chemo. And the doctor didn't invent the chemo. He didn't manufacture it, but he knows that it will work.

And so the doctor communicates the message to the patient. He points the patient towards the treatment that they need. And if the patient responds and receives the chemo, and I know this is a simplistic illustration, so just imagine that you only needed one dose of chemo and he was able just to give it there and there in his office.

And he gives the dose of chemo, it cures the cancer, he is able then to go and open his door and say, you're discharged. You're free, you're healed.

But if the patient refuses to listen, if the patient refuses to take the treatment, the doctor can't open the door and say, you're discharged. He can't say you're healed. He can't say go because that door remains closed.

And that's the kind of imagery that's been used here. The church has power, power to declare whether somebody has been forgiven or whether somebody has yet to receive that forgiveness.

[17 : 20] And it's so important that we remember that. This concept of church power is something that we don't think about very often, but it's something that we really need to remember, the church has power. It's reminding us that the church has a solemn responsibility from Jesus.

The church, Jesus has passed on the most important job in the world to his church.

And the church has a duty to fulfill. And it has that authority that it must use well. It must never, ever, ever abuse that authority.

It has done so many times. It must never, never do that. And it's also reminding us that the church is not some old fashioned, irrelevant charity that is slowly dying.

The church is central to Jesus' plans. He's building his church. As he said to Peter, he's continuing his ministry through the church. He's invested her with power.

[18 : 20] He's invested her with authority and responsibility. And that power is real and permanent. The church has power. Now when I say that, I am sure everyone here can instantly think of examples of how the church has stuffed that up over the years.

And you will be able to see that if you look at church history and you've maybe seen it in your own experience or maybe in the experience of your family. When we talk about church power, it's so easy to think of the ways in which that church power has been misused.

That's something to repent of. But it's not the most important thing to think about. The most important thing for us to think about when we talk about church power is to remember that that power now lives with us.

And we are the ones who have to use it wisely. The church has been given power by Jesus.

But I also want us to think about the fact that forgiveness is powerful because it's in relation to forgiveness that Jesus is saying this. As we said at the start, not only is Jesus saying to the disciples that the church has the power to say, if you forgive the sins of any that are forgiven, if you withhold forgiveness, it's withheld.

[19 : 42] Not only did Jesus say that, Jesus made that one of the very first things he told his disciples after his resurrection. That means that to Jesus, this truth is a priority.

It's something that we have to know. And it's actually something that should be at the forefront of our thinking. And I think part of the reason why Jesus chooses to say this first is because forgiveness is incredibly powerful.

Forgiveness is incredibly powerful. And that power works in two ways. Forgiveness is incredibly powerful when it's granted.

And it's incredibly powerful when it's withheld. And that's why Jesus emphasizes both in verse 23.

And all of this is teaching us that there's two very simple but two utterly crucial things that the church says as it fulfills its mission given to it by Jesus.

[20 : 44] The church knows when to say it's okay. And the church knows when to say it's not okay.

And these are two incredibly powerful and important statements. And they all arise from the reality of sin. Sin as you know has caused so much damage and so much pain.

Sin hurts other people. Sin hurts us. Sin wrecks our relationship with God. Every one of you knows the pain of gossip, of greed, of selfishness, of anger, covetousness, arrogance, bitterness, all of these things ruin our lives.

They all hurt us. They all hurt other people. And most seriously of all, our sins leave us all guilty before God. And so often people in life are trying to mask that pain.

They're trying to push that reality to one side, trying to pretend it's not there. And we do it in a thousand ways whether that's trying to achieve stuff in our careers or whether it's trying to find a relationship where we feel loved and fulfilled or whether it's trying to gain more possessions in our lives or whether it's trying to just drink away our struggles or throw ourselves into some hobby or activity that can consume us.

[22 : 06] And maybe that will work for a while, but the reality of sin does not go away. And the reality of our guilt doesn't go away.

And that hole in our heart doesn't get filled. And the brokenness that we feel within doesn't go away. And so often that leaves us feeling empty. It leaves us feeling frustrated.

And it leaves us wishing that things were different. And maybe that is exactly how you feel. Maybe that is exactly how you feel. You just feel like everything is rubbish.

You feel hopeless. The amazing thing about the Gospel is that it means that if you trust in Jesus, the church can say to you, it's okay.

It's okay because Jesus has dealt with it all. If you're trusting in Jesus, He's forgiven you. And His blood cleanses us from all our sins.

[23 : 15] You might be thinking, but I've messed up so much. I have wrecked things. I've been so stupid. I've done things, I've said things, and I just feel I've made such a mess of things.

If you are trusting in Jesus, it's okay. Everything is okay.

Everything has been dealt with. You are forgiven forever. And this is where we see that forgiveness is so powerful because it can do what making up for things can never do.

When we try to make up for our mistakes, it never works because we never feel like we've done enough and the regret of the mistake will always overshadow whatever achievements we try to do to make up for it.

Forgiveness is so much more powerful than trying to make up for it because forgiveness just wipes everything clean. God washes away your sin forever and the church is proclaiming a message of forgiveness.

[24 : 26] And that gospel message means that we as a church have the power to say to anyone who trusts in Jesus, it's okay.

It's actually okay. But the pain that sin can cause and the reality of the damage that sin has done is also the reason why the church can and must also say it's not okay.

As people are sucked in by the temptation to sin, as the devil deceives people into thinking that good is evil and that evil is good, as people reject God and turn after idols, as people make themselves their own lord and they make money or power or sex their own savior, the church has the power and the duty to say that's not okay.

Sin and injustice and idolatry and exploitation and blasphemy and rebellion is not okay. And if we reject or ignore Jesus, it's not okay.

If you reject or ignore Jesus, your sins are not forgiven. And the devil is leading scores of people into hell with a lie that says it's okay.

[25 : 43] You don't need to think about God. You don't need to worry about eternity. You don't need to repent of your sins. Focus on your job. Go and have a look at Facebook. Turn on your favorite TV show. You don't need to bother with Jesus.

That is not okay. That is absolutely not okay. And please, please don't listen to that lie. If someone's not trusting in Jesus, if you're not trusting in Jesus, your sins are not forgiven.

Forgiveness remains withheld and that's not okay. It's got to change. And the whole reason you're here tonight is because Jesus is calling you again to trust in him.

And whether you're here in the building or watching online, Jesus is calling you to trust in him so your sins will be washed away. Just as a doctor has the power to declare that cancer's not yet clear, the church has the power to declare to somebody, look, it's not, your sins are not yet forgiven.

The church has got to tell people that it's not okay. Now, as we say that, there is a very, very important caution that I want to highlight. When we talk about withholding forgiveness, we must remember that wrongly withheld forgiveness is a thing that happens a lot and it's just as powerful, but it's powerful in a damaging and harmful way.

[27 : 07] Sometimes people will hurt us or offend us or let us down and we refuse to forgive them. And that's powerful because it breaks friendships, it heightens tension, it leaves deep scars in people's heart.

It's also unacceptable because it's a direct contradiction of Jesus' command to us to forgive one another. So wrongly withheld forgiveness is a terrible thing, we've got to guard against it.

But rightly withheld forgiveness is actually crucial if salvation is going to happen because you can't be saved if you're going to reject Jesus. Someone can't come up to us and say, this is nice, but I don't think I need to think too much about Jesus, that's not okay.

It's not okay. It's not okay. Sometimes people have got to know that and we've got to be ready to say it.

So the church has the power to say it's okay and the church has the power to say it's not okay and the key point is that it's actually only with Jesus that we can make these two statements.

[28 : 15] It's only with Jesus that we can assure people of their eternal security. It's only because of the cross that we can say to somebody, it's okay and without Jesus all we've got is empty promises.

And it's only with Jesus that we can actually say that something's not okay because without Him what basis do we have for determining good or evil or right or wrong or truth or lies?

As a church, we offer a beautiful message of forgiveness and the amazing promise of the gospel is that His forgiveness is so powerful, it will wipe away every sin.

No one else has that message. It's been entrusted to the church, to us. We need to proclaim it. We are the ones that have the message that the people around us desperately need.

And that message is not a vague message that says, oh, it's fine, don't worry. The gospel is not a message that says sin isn't a problem.

[29 : 12] The gospel is the message that says the problem of sin has been solved for all who trust in Jesus. Forgiveness is so powerful because it reminds us of the seriousness of sin.

It has to be dealt with without Jesus. It's not okay. But forgiveness is also so powerful because it reminds us that if you trust in Jesus, your sins have been forgiven with Jesus.

It's actually okay. You are safe forever. And it's all reminding us that as a church, we have the power to proclaim a message of incredible power.

We have the power to proclaim a message of incredible power. Jesus has invested that authority and responsibility in us. And He's not left us to get on with it on His own.

He has sent the Holy Spirit to help us, to guide us, to strengthen us in every way that we need. And that power is exciting. It's overwhelming.

[30 : 26] It's intimidating. It's inspiring. It's all reminding us that as we follow Jesus together, He is not messing about and we are not messing about.

This is the stuff that matters more than anything. Because these are the issues of ultimate reality. These are the conversations of ultimate consequence.

The issue of our sin and forgiveness is the thing that matters more than anything else. And thank God He has not left us out of that conversation.

Thank God He has not left us out of that conversation. And when we think about things like this, sometimes we can think, you realize the gospel is sometimes a bit of a hard thing.

And it kind of challenges us to the very core of our being. And you think, oh, this is sometimes a hard thing.

[31 : 33] I'm sure many of you are like me when you find it hard to say hard things. You find it hard to say hard things to people.

And I find in my life that the only times I can say really hard things is when it's to people that I really, really love.

And that is why Jesus tells these things to us. That's why He says them to you. In fact, the reason Jesus cares about you so much, this is one of the first things that He wants us to know.

Jesus cares about you far too much to leave you out of this conversation. He's offering His forgiveness to all of you tonight. And whether that's someone who feels, you know, they've maybe not yet come to faith, or maybe it's somebody who has come to faith, but has felt that they've stuffed up and wondered and made a mess of things.

Oh, the amazing thing about Jesus' forgiveness is that it's just new every morning. It can never run dry. And we can keep coming back to it.

[32 : 57] And that's His message to us. That's what He's saying to us. The massive, massive question is whether we're prepared to listen. Amen. Let's pray.