

The Unfinished Work of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said today, we are continuing our study in John's Gospel. Next week we'll reach the end of this study that we've been doing for the last year or two.

We're still in chapter 20, the Great Resurrection Appearances of Jesus. And last week we looked at four reactions to the resurrection that are recorded in this chapter.

We saw Mary's tears and then her joyous. She met Jesus. We saw Peter coming with the baggage of his denial and yet we saw how Jesus, that didn't stop him coming to Jesus and believing in the reality of his resurrection.

We looked at Thomas' doubts and saw how Jesus graciously helped him through those. And we also recognized that we also have John himself recorded in the chapter.

And there's nothing particularly spectacular about John's reaction to the resurrection, a great reminder that our response to Jesus doesn't need to be spectacular. It just needs to be a genuine faith that is trusting him.

[1 : 0 2] As we look at this chapter a little bit more this week, I want to focus on one verse in particular and as we do that, we're going to look at something surprising, confusing, and extremely important that Jesus says.

And it's what he says in verse 23, but we're going to look, I'll read from verse 21. Jesus said to the disciples again, Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

And when he said these things, 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.

Now these words, especially the words of verse 23, are not really the easiest for us to understand because we think, well, what exactly does Jesus mean?

How does that statement fit in with everything else that the New Testament teaches? And what are the implications for us as a church of a statement like this that Jesus makes?

[2 : 1 0] That's what I want us to think about together today and as we do so, I hope that we're going to discover that here Jesus is doing something very important and he's doing something very beautiful.

In order to understand this better, we're going to think about two things. We're going to think about a broad principle that Jesus is reinforcing here and then we're going to look at a specific lesson that Jesus teaches.

And as usual, I've got too much to say, so we're going to do a bit this morning and a bit tonight. This evening, we're going to look at the specific lesson about forgiveness that Jesus is teaching in these verses.

But this morning, we're going to look at the broad principle that lies behind Jesus's statement. And as we do that, our title is The Unfinished Work of Christ.

Now, that title might sound a wee bit odd and maybe even sounds a little bit controversial, but it's highlighting a crucial principle that we must never forget.

[3 : 14] And the crucial principle is this. Behind Jesus's statement lies the fact that at the heart of the church's mission and purpose, we are continuing the ministry that Jesus himself began.

That's the principle that we're highlighting here. The church continues what Jesus himself started. And that's captured in the words of verse 21.

Jesus says, as the Father sent me, even so, I'm sending you. So the church continues the work that Jesus began. The church shares the message that Jesus announced and the church behaves in a way that Jesus exemplified.

What we do each week as individual believers and as a church family together is to be a continuation of everything that Jesus started.

And as we do that, Jesus is not just a spectator in heaven sitting with his feet up, leaving us to get on with it. No, Jesus is actively helping us and empowering us.

[4 : 29] And the means by which he does that is through sending his spirit. And that's exactly what we see in these verses. He says in verse 22, receive the Holy Spirit.

Just as he had promised in John 14 and in John 16, as Jesus returns to heaven, he is sending his spirit to remain with his church. And through that empowering presence of God, the Holy Spirit, we are continuing the work that Jesus started.

And in fact, Jesus himself said that we will do even greater things. You see that in John 14, he said, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do and greater works than these he will do because I'm going to the Father.

So that's the big principle that's been highlighted here. The church continues what Jesus began. And as we just think a little bit about that this morning, I want to explore five examples of how that happens.

They are going to people, teaching people, welcoming people, helping people, offending people and we'll go through them one by one.

[5 : 36] So first of all, as we continue Jesus' ministry, that involves going to people. You see that in these verses, Jesus says, as the Father sent me, so I am sending you.

And when you look at Jesus, that's exactly what he did. He went to different places. He went to urban areas like Jerusalem. He went to rural areas like Galilee and everywhere in between.

He went to people who lived in poverty and obscurity. He went and dealt with the affluent tax collectors, the important religious leaders. He dealt with those people who were committed to God.

He dealt with those people who in many ways were secular and not particularly interested. He went to people. And when it came to that work, you see Jesus frequently taking the initiative.

He's the one who starts conversations. He's the one who invites people to follow him. He's the one who starts the process. At the same time, he took lots of risks speaking to people that were seen as social outcasts, mixing with people that led to the criticism of the religious elite.

[6 : 49] He put his reputation on the line again and again and again in order to go people, go to people. As he did it, he experienced mixed results. Some people listened to everything that he said.

Other people couldn't really be bothered. And some people were greatly offended and became his enemies. Yet through it all, Jesus kept on going.

He kept on going. And as the church, we need to do exactly the same and we need to expect the same. So we go out to reach people.

We reach as many people as we can and we make no distinction about their background, their circumstances or anything like that. And just like Jesus, we will experience mixed results.

Sometimes the spirit of Jesus will open doors. Sometimes he'll close doors. Sometimes we won't know what the results actually are. The key point is that the church is sent, commanded and commissioned by Jesus.

[7 : 56] Lots of you, like me, are football fans and follow the Scottish football, also follow English football. And many of you will have heard of Jürgen Klopp, who is the Liverpool manager. He's about to step down as the manager of Liverpool after, I think, eight or nine years he's been their coach and he's been hugely successful. He's one of the best coaches in the world.

And one of the fascinating things about Jürgen Klopp is that when he first came to Liverpool, he just brought a whole new level of energy, both to the club as a whole, but also to the way that the team played.

And now if you look at lots of other teams, they will very often copy the way that Jürgen Klopp got his team to play. And they've had some very successful seasons and Jürgen Klopp kept on emphasising the importance of the next game, the next game, the next game.

So after a game, they played well, they'd won and they'd say, you know, it was great and he would say, well, we go again. We go again. And that phrase kept coming up again and again. We go again.

[8 : 59] We go again. We go again. Next game, keep it up, keep it up, keep it up. And Jürgen Klopp, again. This is part of the reason why the church meets at the start of every new week.

We're here to say, we go again. We go again into a new week sent by Jesus, following him, serving him, living for him. Because all around us, there are people that need to be reached.

Jesus is sending us to them. We are here to re-energise, to refresh ourselves, to be encouraged by Jesus and then we go again together.

And I guess the key lesson of that is that it's reminding us that we cannot be Christlike if we sit and wait. As a church, it can be so easy to do that and I've made that mistake many times in the past as well.

We're sitting and waiting and yet that's not what Jesus did. He went to people. He went for it. We need to do the same.

[10 : 08] Jesus went to people. Second example, we continue what he started. Second example we see of Jesus is that he taught people.

He went around teaching people. The great commission that Ken read from in Matthew 28 makes a crucial link between going and teaching. We're told to go and we are told to teach the two things, go hand in hand.

Go therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that have commanded you.

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus linked the importance of teaching with the coming of the Holy Spirit. We saw that back in John 16. He said, I've got many things to say to you.

You can't bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak in his own authority, whatever he hears he will speak. He will declare to you the things that are to come.

[11 : 10] He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. Jesus is saying to the disciples, the Holy Spirit. Here in John 20, to learn and understand more.

Here in John 20, at the resurrection appearances, what does Jesus say to the disciples? He says to them, receive the Holy Spirit.

And so everything that he's promised is now starting to happen. At one level, the apostles to whom this was said, the disciples, they had a unique role because they were the ones who would commit the teaching of Jesus to writing, which is what we now have as the New Testament.

But the principle extends beyond the apostolic era because it's now the church's job to teach and instruct people about the truths of the gospel that have been set out for us in the New Testament.

That's why a key part of a minister's role is to be a shepherd teacher. That phrase there that Paul uses in Ephesians for, shepherds and teachers, it's kind of one role.

[12 : 14] Sometimes you'll see it translated as pastor teacher. I won't go into it, but the way the Greek is written indicates that it's not two separate roles, it's not shepherds and teachers, it's a combined role, pastor teacher.

That's a crucial aspect of what my job should involve. That's why we put so much emphasis on preaching in church. Every sermon should help you learn more and more about the gospel, both the doctrinal truth that it contains and the practical application that arises from it.

And that of course is exactly what Jesus did. He went around preaching and teaching. What did Mary call him? Rabboni, which means teacher.

He taught people, he answered their questions, he guided them about how to live. It's an amazing reminder that if Jesus is a teacher, it means he does not expect you to know everything.

He recognizes that we've all got so much to learn and the church continues that work. Never ever think that following Jesus involves leaving your brain behind.

[13 : 29] So often people will give that impression of Christianity that it's like, oh, you just have to kind of blank your mind to the facts of the world around you, to the discoveries of science and the truths of culture and you just need to stop thinking and start believing.

That is not, not, not what the gospel is about. The church's role is never ever to stop people from thinking.

Our role is to help people think more clearly than they ever have before. And the more we understand the gospel, the more we understand the gospel, the more life will make sense in every way.

We cannot be Christlike if people aren't learning. So much of what he started involved teaching people. That work isn't finished.

We continue what he started. Third example is the fact that Jesus welcomed people. All through the gospels you see Jesus welcoming people.

[14 : 35] Very often the people he is welcoming are those who were rejected by the rest of society. You go back to John 4, he went and spoke to the woman of the well. John 8, Jesus spoke so tenderly to a woman caught in adultery.

And he does it again and again and again. If you go to Luke's gospel, you see that this is something that Jesus was actually criticized for. I think I'd do my arrow in the wrong place there. I did. Look at that. That's terrible.

Welcoming people. Sorry, we're not in the fourth point. Just the third point. So Luke's gospel records it. The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.

I once heard a wonderful quote from a man called Leslie Newbighan. He was a theologian and a missionary in the 20th century. And he said something that I've never forgotten. He said, the church's job is to continue the ministry of Jesus whereby he receives sinners and eats with them.

And I thought that was such a brilliant description of what church should be all about. Jesus received sinners and ate with them. That was the people that had made mistakes.

[15 : 52] That was people that many parts of society, especially the religious elite wanted to avoid. It was people who had been judged, people who were looked down on, people who had stuffed up, people just like us.

Jesus received them and ate with them. And our job as a church is to continue that ministry that Jesus began.

And that applies in so many practical ways. It involves inviting people. It involves welcoming people. And I am so grateful to you all. You've always been so, so good at welcoming people to our church.

Please keep it up. Though keep going. If you see someone new, if you see someone on their own who comes every week, please, please talk to them. Always be on the lookout for people to talk to.

It's so, so important that we maintain that. We also need to eat with people. And that means welcoming them to our homes. You don't need to tidy your house and you don't need to produce a fancy meal.

[16 : 58] All we want to do is just open our homes, our hearts to people and say, look, we just love to spend time together. That's exactly what Jesus did.

And it's a great reminder that if we're not making people feel welcome, then we're not being Christ-like. Now, that doesn't mean always agreeing with people.

Jesus was never a coward who felt that he always just had to say what people wanted to hear. He never, ever did that. That's one of the things I admire most about Jesus.

So he didn't agree with people and he didn't agree with the choices that they'd made in their lifestyles, but he still welcomed them and still spoke with them and still ate with them and built a relationship with them.

It's all reminding us that our churches must never, ever be a closed shop or an exclusive club or a kind of society that has to just stay the way we like it to be.

[17 : 58] Jesus welcomed people and that work isn't finished. We continue what he started. Fourth example is helping people.

So alongside welcoming people, Jesus constantly provided help to people who were in need. And you see that as you read the Gospels. He healed the sick. He cured the blind and the deaf.

He delivered the disciples when they were in danger in a storm. He fed the hungry. He liberated those who were oppressed by evil spirits. He comforted those who grieved. Jesus was so beautifully kind and generous and merciful and compassionate.

I heard a brilliant talk yesterday. I was at the camp's training day in Inverness yesterday and a brilliant talk from Robbie Sweet where he said that compassionate is the number one description used of Jesus in the Gospels.

And that is exactly what we see. One of my favorite examples of that is in Mark 1 where a leper, and you'll remember that a leper in the first century was a complete outcast.

[19 : 02] They were contagious, unclean, and they were expelled from the city. Nobody went near them, both for religious and for hygiene reasons.

And a leper came to Jesus imploring him and kneeling said to him, if you will, you can make me clean. Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean.

And immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean. Jesus was so willing to help people. But we mustn't forget that that help was costly.

It cost Jesus time and energy. Sometimes it cost him his reputation. One of the amazing things about Jesus is that he did not care about cost.

And what he started, we are to continue. And that's why the church should always be a place where people can find help. That can happen in so many different ways.

[20 : 02] That's why providing for the needs of the poor, supporting those who are ill, visiting those who are housebound, advocating for those who are mistreated, encouraging those who are struggling.

That's all crucial to the life and work of our church. Here is an interesting question to ask. Did anyone's life ever get spoiled by meeting Jesus?

You think of the Gospels, did Jesus make anyone's life worse? And the answer is no.

Everyone's life was improved, enriched and enhanced by meeting Jesus. Now, sometimes he disrupted people's lives, especially the religious leaders that he often challenged.

But that challenge that Jesus gave them was because their attitudes were wrong. And the disruption that Jesus brought to them actually did them good.

[20 : 59] So did anyone's life get spoiled by meeting Jesus? Did Jesus make anyone's life worse? The answer is no. It is a harder question.

Has the church ever made anyone's life worse? And we know that sometimes the answer is yes.

Because often the church, and I mean the church in general, has judged people too hastily, has rejected people too harshly, has neglected people, forgotten people, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes maybe more deliberately.

And there's a sense in which that shouldn't surprise us because the church is made of people and people are a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, of wisdom and of foolishness. We're all battling those things all the time.

But the principle here is just getting us back to the basics that matter most, the fact that we want to continue what Jesus started. And it's reminding us that the church should always be helping people.

[22 : 10] We should always be a beacon of encouragement, support, generosity, positivity, warmth and kindness.

Even at a very simple level, everybody should be able to look at this building and think, if I walk in there, I will be met with a smile.

Everybody should be able to look at us and know they are there for me. And so it's reminding us that, you know, again, we can't be Christ like if we're closing our eyes to the needs around us.

And that's why things like WFM are brilliant because that's just a simple but a really committed effort to help people who are in need. And there's hundreds of other ways in which you have done that over the years.

It's been so, so good. And we just want to keep that going because all of that is so crucial in terms of the work that Jesus started and that he wants us to continue.

[23 : 09] It's unfinished work, so we continue what he began. So we have all these examples, Jesus going to people, Jesus teaching people, Jesus welcoming people, Jesus helping people.

Those first four are all positive, they're all appealing, they're all attractive things to be involved in. But the last example is a bit different, but it's no less important.

In his ministry, Jesus frequently offended people and we need to be willing to do the same. Now, by that, I don't mean to go out and be deliberately offensive.

So please don't go to work tomorrow and be a complete nightmare and be like, oh, Thomas told me to do this. That's not what I mean at all. You know that.

What we mean by this is the fact that the teaching of Christianity and the lifestyle of Christianity and the core principles of the gospel are inevitably going to offend some people.

[24 : 18] And that will often lead to hostility and sometimes it will even lead to persecution. Here in the UK on a national scale, our experience of persecution is very minor and we are immensely blessed that we have a freedom and a safety in terms of our worship and our faith, our life of faith because so many parts of the world, people don't have that and the threat of persecution is much more real.

But at an individual level, you may very well have experienced all the pain of being rejected or mocked or judged because of your faith or maybe you feel the threat of that.

And you think, if I do follow Jesus or if I do tell people that I'm following Jesus, I'm going to get a lot of grief from those around me.

But if that happens, we have to remember that the reality of the church being persecuted is simply a continuation of what happened to Jesus.

He spoke about that earlier in John's Gospel. We saw it in chapter 15. He says, if the world hates you, know that it's hated me before it hated you. If you're of the world and the world would love you as its own, but because you're not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

[25 : 41] The word that I said to your servants, not greater than his master, if they persecuted me, they'll persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep you.

That's the reality that Christians frequently face. And that opposition shouldn't actually surprise us because the core claims of the Gospel are challenging.

They are challenging. Do we accept that God is God? In other words, do we accept that he is in charge and that we're ultimately accountable to him?

Do we accept that sin is sin? In other words, do we accept that certain things are wrong and that we have made the wrong choices and we are actually guilty before God?

Do we accept that Jesus is Savior? In other words, do we accept that no one and nothing else is Savior except Jesus? Do we accept that grace is free?

[26 : 46] In other words, that we can't fix things on our own and we can only come to God with empty hands. And do we accept that everything that we talk about together at church is incredibly serious?

Do we accept that nothing in your life is actually more important than this? And for so many people, questions of that level of intensity, questions that challenge our deepest understandings of ourselves and of the world around us, questions like that are impossible to ignore or dismiss and they're not easy.

They're uncomfortable questions and for so many people they are not welcomed. Instead, they're offensive.

Now, it's so crucial, so crucial that as a church we are not offensive for the wrong reasons because that can happen.

We must not offend people because we're gossiping about them or because we're judging them or because we're making out that we're better than them. That's just sinning. That's not the kind of offending that Jesus did.

[28 : 01] Jesus never sinned in the things that he said that people found offending. Instead, we must just live and speak the truth of the gospel in every aspect of our lives.

And we've got to recognize that continuing what Jesus started means that we're not going to be able to keep everyone happy. And I am the biggest people pleaser that I know and that's hard at times.

And it might land very close to you. And so as you follow Jesus, whether you are continuing to follow Jesus or whether you are taking that step for the first time or whether you are going to take the step whereby what you know is in your heart actually becomes something that you will admit to others.

As you think about that next step in your journey of faith, you might risk people talking about you. And you might risk people taking a step back from you.

And it might be that if you think, well, actually, you know, I am not going to carry on drinking to the level that my friends do because I know that they're going too far.

[29 : 17] But if you think to yourself, I'm not going to speak the way everybody speaks anymore. I am going to hold back.

But I am not going to approach relationships and sex in the way that the world and TV and everything else does. I'm going to follow Jesus' ethics on that and on every other area of my life.

If we are going to take these steps, it may be that people aren't happy with us. It may be. But that's what Jesus experienced.

As we follow Him, we are ready for the same. That's one of the reasons why He said, I'm with you always. I'm with you even when it's tough and even when people are giving you a hard time.

And it raises the question, you know, if we never face opposition, are we being Christ-like? Are we following Him the way we want to?

[30 : 26] Our title for this sermon is the unfinished work of Christ. And as I said, that's a bit of an odd title. It's a bit of a controversial title because in so many ways, our theology is grounded on the finished work of Christ.

And we actually saw that just a week or two ago in chapter 19, where Jesus said, it's finished. The finished work of Christ is so central to the gospel. His atonement accomplishes everything.

We add nothing. We contribute nothing. We simply receive His perfect salvation by His grace. But at the same time, there is unfinished work still to do.

As a church, we are now on that mission to make disciples of all nations. As we do that, we're continuing what He started. And that means that as a church, we can never accomplish anything if we are not Christ-like.

And that's maybe one of the most simple, most logical, and really most obvious points that we can ever make about the church, about us as individuals and us as a church family together.

[31 : 31] The followers of Jesus should follow Jesus. The people who like Jesus should be like Jesus.

What He started, we continue. And by the presence and power of His Spirit, that's what we are here to do for the rest of this week and for the rest of our lives.

Amen. Let's pray.