

A People of Peace

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on April 25, 2021.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had 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” (John 20:19–23).¹

At the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus commissions his church in what we call the Great Commission, but it is not the only commission he gives. Prior to their meeting in the hills of Galilee, he meets his disciples on a Sunday evening in a room behind locked doors. His arrival is both unexpected and comforting, greeting and blessing, saying, “Peace be with you,” reminding us that he who is peace gives it.

Not to make light of the moment, but it is a time of show and tell, as Jesus, risen and glorified, still carries the marks of his suffering. Upon his hands are the visible puncture wounds of the nails that held him to the cross. On his side is the pierced point from which flowed both blood and water. At the least they are marks of identification but also reminders of his willing sacrifice to atone for our sin.

In what may be one of the greatest under-statements in the historical account, John writes, “Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.” When Jesus confirms his resurrected identity before them, what else could they be? Glad? Undoubtedly! But it is more than a passing comment of the joy of reunited friendship. Rather, it carries the evidence of Jesus’ greeting; his presence brings peace. J. C. Ryle observes,

‘Peace on earth’ was the song of the heavenly host, when Christ was born. Peace and rest of soul, was the general subject that Christ continually preached for three years. Peace, and not riches, had been the great legacy which he had left with the eleven the night before his crucifixion. Surely it was in full keeping with all of our Lord’s dealings, that, when he revisited his little company of disciples after his resurrection, his first word should be ‘Peace.’ It was a word that would soothe and calm their minds.²

And so it did, and they were glad, as are all disciples who receive the Word and enjoy the presence of the Lord.

It is, however, a peace contrary to the world’s definition. Who else but a true disciple would consider peace to be the Word and presence of Jesus? And yet, this is the peace that every

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts On John* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 1:282.

Christian is given, and it is the “gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15) that we proclaim. For, in Christ we are a people of peace, served by Christ, sent into the world by him, and filled with his Spirit.

Served

The peace that Christ gives is possible only because God the Father sent him to serve us. As Jesus explained to the mother of James and John, as well as the other disciples, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). The world considers religion as serving a god or higher power, but *true* religion is only known by those who have first been served by Christ.

How are we served by Christ? Some would point us to his ministry of mercy, providing an example for us to follow. But as merciful as his earthly ministry was, it misses the point of his service. What we need most is not an example but a monergistic act. It is only when we look to the consequences of the Fall in our sinful human nature in comparison to the perfect holiness of God that we see that we cannot serve God until he has first served us. It is only in the perfectly righteous, substitutionary sacrifice of the Son of God that we see the ultimate service of our Savior. And by faith we look to him to serve us by saving us from the curse for sin and its consequences of death and eternal damnation.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). It is in God’s giving that we are served. And it is Christ’s cross that we are saved. But we are not served and saved to be removed from this world or to isolate ourselves in a protective cocoon. Rather, Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

Sent

Jesus sends his disciples out of a locked room into the world to proclaim the truth of his gospel. But he sends them, and us through them, beyond four walls, beyond national borders. As a people of peace, we are commissioned: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). It is a commission to take the gospel of peace to our neighbor and the nations.

Of course, Jesus does not send us into the world in the same way. We are not called to die a substitutionary, atoning death upon the cross. That was God’s gift, Christ’s work, and it is finished. But the message of this gift is not. That a soul at enmity with God may be at perfect peace with him by God’s grace through faith in Christ is a glorious message to carry and deliver: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom. 10:15), indeed.

Sadly, in the individualistic culture in which we live, it is easy to think of ourselves only, as if we may harbor the gospel for us and our own. But selfishness is never congruent with godliness, and as God is love, it is in love for God and our neighbor that leads us to share the gospel. Does the gospel you believe lead you to love your neighbor, or have you grown cold and callous to the ultimate need of your neighbor? Do you see the world through the political lens of protectionism,

through which the lost and dying are your enemies? Or would you recall that God so loved the world, that he sent and gave his only Son, who also has sent us into the same world? The church's good news to a lost and dying world is that there is a living God whose love is inexhaustible, and far-reaching enough to save a vile sinner like me.

Thankfully, God does not send us alone nor in our own strength. He has given us a helper, indeed his presence, to enable and empower us to go to our neighbor and the nations with the gospel. In fact, it is only by the Holy Spirit that a people of peace may carry the gospel of peace that the Prince of peace may get all the glory.

Spirit-filled

Just as we are not sent by Christ until we are served by him, so we are not sent apart from Christ but with his Spirit. He who served us and sends us fills us with his Spirit to serve our neighbor and the nations. To communicate this reality, Jesus *breathes*, or expels a deep breath, on his disciples.³ It is the same verb translated (from Hebrew to Greek to English) in the creation account: "the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7). It is also the same verb translated in Ezekiel in which the Word of God breathes new life into the slain (Ezek. 37:9).

As the living Word of God, John's choice of verb is not coincidental. Just as God breathed life into the first man, so Jesus breathes life into his new creation, a church to be built from all nations. And just as the Word of God breathed life into the slain before Ezekiel's eyes, so the ministry of the Holy Spirit is life-giving. It is, so to speak, this life-giving breath that Jesus gives to his disciples, his church collectively, a gift from God through his Son to his children. The breath Jesus breathes gives the spirit-filled life his church needs to carry the gospel to the world. Rightly, then, do we confess in the Nicene Creed, "we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son."

Now consider this truth in light of the Great Commission, which begins with Jesus' revelation of his authority: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (Matt. 28:18). That Christ's church is to go to the nations, make disciples, administer the sacraments, and teach the Word of Christ is all predicated on the fact that we have the authority to do it. And it is through the gift of the Holy Spirit that we are empowered to do it. So, as Christ's church, we have both the authority and power to do what he has commissioned us to do.

Therefore, as the "Lord and giver of life" empowers us to advance the gospel, we carry to our neighbor and the nations the good news that our sins are forgiven by God's grace through faith in Christ. Or, as Jesus puts it, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." What Jesus says is not a statement implying individual or collective power but rather the power of the gospel through the Holy Spirit. As we are faithful to carry and proclaim the gospel, the Holy Spirit gives life to some who through faith are forgiven their sins. Others are left in their sin without life and faith and therefore remain unforgiven.

³ Schonfield quoted Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 747.

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To be clear, the mission of the church is not to tell people that we refuse to forgive their sins, as only God forgives, but we do have the responsibility to explain that there is absolutely no forgiveness apart from faith in Christ. If you do not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, your sins will *not* be forgiven. Forgiveness is “withheld.” But if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, your sins *will* be forgiven. You are “forgiven.” Jesus has given us, his church, the authority and the power to make both of these statements. We may be emphatic in both statements, because as Christ’s church he has given us both the authority and the power to do it.

Therefore, no individual nor the church may absolve, or not absolve, the soul of a person. We do not have the authority or power to do what only God can do, but we do have the authority and power to proclaim, as Peter did, that “everyone who believes in [Christ] receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43), or as Paul did, who preached that there is “forgiveness of sins” for “everyone who believes” in Christ (Acts 13:38-39). Rather, Christ has given us the power and authority to proclaim with boldness and pronounce with surety, as Peter preached, “there is salvation in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Therefore, Christ has not commissioned us to do something we should not or that we cannot do. Rather, he has given us both the authority, through his Word, and the power, through his Spirit, to take the gospel to our neighbor and the nations, confidently pronouncing the forgiveness of sin that is found in Christ alone. And this is not a commission for some but for all of us, according to our gifting and calling. Some are called to go to other countries, to different people with different languages. Some are called to serve here, continuing to make and mature disciples, administer the sacraments, and preach the Word. But all of us are called to pray for and support the ministry of the church, in her going, sending, and equipping, which we do in the authority and power of Christ Jesus our Lord, who is with us always, to the end of the age.