**The Authority to Forgive Sins**

Based on [John 20:19-31](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn20.19-31)

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Easter 2

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When we live in the love of God, and the many blessings he showers upon his beloved, it’s easy to forget that we are, in fact, born enemies of God. It’s not just that God set up some rules for us to live by; we didn’t do them and now he’s torqued. It’s that we have Rebellious hearts. In our minds we are hostile to God. That we are by nature inclined to resist his lordship...more than that...to rebel.

We are by nature enemies of God, not that we do things to make him upset...but we challenge his rule over the world and over our lives. We get along fine with God when he stays in heaven and doesn’t affect our life on earth. **But if God was constantly with you, telling you “no, you shouldn’t watch TV right now, you should spend time with your kids.” Or “No, you don’t need ‘me’ time, you need to get back to work.”** If you leave God in the bible and close it, you get along fine with Him. But if he were always around, walking and talking, criticizing your every action, always “in-your-face” and having the right to be, well you would see just how much you are in rebellion against God.

That’s the effect Jesus had on his enemies. Not that he taught different things, or that he was unorthodox, healed a few people on the Sabbath which was a no-no. The Pharisees didn’t like Jesus because he was there and had authority. He was a walking, talking, living, breathing “conscience.” We have many ways of tricking our conscience into thinking we’re always doing “the best we can”, but Jesus isn’t as gullible as your conscience. He has authority from God, and for those of us who want to remain our own authority, don’t want to take anybody else’s advice would have a lot of trouble with a walking talking God named Jesus.

One time Jesus forgave a man his sins...just forgave him. And the Pharisees and scribes got all upset and said, “**Only God can forgive sins.**” And Jesus doesn’t say, “**Well, you’re right that only God can forgive sins...but I am the Son of God, so there**.” He said, “**The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”** The Pharisees say, “Only God can forgive sins, not men” and Jesus says, no that’s not true. **God gives to men the *authority* to forgive sins.**

That is the scandal to the world. That is why the world, like a broken record, is constantly calling Christians “hypocrites” over and over again. It’s because God gave sinners the authority to forgive sins. **God gave men that authority**. If you’ve ever wondered why the pastor says, “**I forgive you all your sins**.” It is in answer to all the Pharisees and skeptics who say, “**who do you think you are...only God can forgive sins.**” That is just plain incorrect. Jesus tells us that the authority to forgive sins is entrusted to men.

If “only God can forgive sins,” then what sense could we make of the passage we have here today? Jesus fought the battle to make forgiveness possible, and he won the battle. He shows up in the midst of the apostles alive, but with scars as proof of the fight. He announces peace and then says, “**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.”** No one who believes the bible can say, “**Only God can forgive sins.**” For God sent his apostles to do just that. God gives sinners the power to forgive sins on his behalf.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the importance of this cannot be exaggerated. God set up his church to forgive sins and to withhold forgiveness. That’s it. That is it! The church can do other things, have potlucks, fundraisers, charity drives. The church can rally for pro-life, the church can stand firm on the definition of marriage and it’s sanctity. The church can “focus on the family,” and be a presence in the community. The church can and ought to perform weddings and funerals, visit the sick and distressed, take special measures help people in every physical need; but the one thing that is non-negotiable, the reason Jesus set up his church is to forgive sins and withhold forgiveness.

Christians have a hard time with this authority to forgive sins. It’s because we rebel against all authority. We don’t mind God forgiving people in heaven, where we can’t see or hear him, but that he sends human beings to not only forgive, but withhold forgiveness on his behalf...well, it’s that “walking-talking conscience” problem all over again. They rejected Jesus authority, so too they will reject the authority of those he sends.

It makes perfect sense...that someone in authority, like God, would entrust that authority to men. We wouldn’t have a military without that practice. When a soldier goes off to war to fight for his country, he is given the authority to take lives. When the battle is raging and that soldier pulls the trigger and kills the enemy, it’s not just the soldier doing the killing. **It’s his country who pulls the trigger, because his country has given him the authority to do it.** His country trained him for battle and said, you are to fight for peace and freedom, go, if you kill anyone they will be killed; and if you spare anyone they will be spared. Jesus is sending his apostles as soldiers off to war. But he doesn’t give them guns, or gold, or swords. He gives them the weapon of forgiveness.

Now this is not a carte blanche. Jesus is not saying, to forgive and withhold forgiveness whenever, however, and to whomever you please. “Forgive those who are nice to you; and damn those who rub you the wrong way”--NO. **Nor does a country say to its infantrymen, "Go and shoot whoever you want civilians, mothers and children, friends enemies, whatever...it’s your call.** No, when we send our boys off to war, train them to use heavy artillery, it is with orders to shoot the enemy, but be careful to save the innocent.

I wasn’t born yet, but from what I’ve heard there were rogue soldiers in the Vietnam war...military men who lost their mind and began to think that all of Vietnam was the enemy, not just the soldiers and commanders and leaders, but the civilians too. I remember watching a movie once set in Vietnam. I remember a scene from a chopper where a soldier who had been in the war for too long, who had lost his mind, become desensitized, just began shooting his machine gun at random victims, mowing down villages arbitrarily. He had no orders to do it, but he got some satisfaction from it, thinking that everyone is the enemy. If he shoots, they are dead, and the nation didn't authorize it, but blood is on the country’s hands.

Ladies and gentlemen, Jesus sent his apostles out to forgive sins and withhold them. He authorized them to forgive and to retain sins, but not wily-nilly. Not in a trigger-happy fashion. **Forgive those who believe on Jesus Christ and repent of their sins, and pull the trigger on those who don’t in the hopes that they will see their wounds and repent.** If you forgive those you are not authorized to on God's behalf; you are releasing terrorists. If you retain the sins of those to whom God intends forgiveness...you might as well throw Jesus himself in prison. Men can mess that up, just like soldiers, but the war still has to be fought by men, the church still must remain militant.

This most important part of the gospel. This cannot be over emphasized. The entire point of Christianity in terms of the mission of the church is forgiveness. If we don't do it it don't get done. If this is not done...if instead we turn the sanctuary into a place of teaching how-to steps to better lives...you know, "**Here's the bible, its your blueprint manual to life to tell you how to have a nice marriage and good kids and build your finances better,**” well....guess what *doesn't* happen when we don't speak this forgiveness into action?...it isn't spirited...it's only spirited when it's breathed into human words when proclaimed by the office God made it for. The church is doing her job when called men walk around with the authority of God forgiving those who repent, and withholding forgiveness from those who thumb their nose at the authority of Jesus.

The church has the authority to forgive sins, but only through Jesus who has the POWER to make it happen. There is no forgiveness apart from Jesus. And so, the rebellion of mankind came to a head on Good Friday, when we arrested Jesus for claiming to have *authority* over us, and killed him for being the Son of God. That was the Jesus battle, Jesus charged the front lines, while his disciples dropped their arms and ran, and left Jesus to die. But on the third day he rose again, and appeared in their midst. Then Jesus shows his Battle scars, proof of the fight he fought. He doesn’t blame; he doesn’t withold forgiveness. Instead He says the words, Peace be with you! Man’s war with God is over, I the God/Man have won. Mankind is free to live in the forgiveness of God. Go forth and proclaim THIS gospel...and so we shall.