



Part 74 – Jesus Gathers His Church

John 20:19-23

The final two chapters of John's Gospel bring resolution to the ministry of Jesus. This portion of the narrative centers on Jesus' resurrection which John means for us to understand as an actual event and which he passes along as an eyewitness. All along, John has taken great care to establish that God's saving power and presence are made manifest in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. The message of this great salvation

was first entrusted to the Apostles and through them to the church. Though the previous sections of this passage focus on Jesus' appearances to Mary (and the other women), Peter, John, and Thomas, the emphasis here "speaks more directly to the church and its relation to the fullness of God's person and work, guiding the reader to see how the church is now participating in the mission of God through Christ and in and by the Spirit."¹

1. The church is blessed with the peace of God.

- Having accomplished atonement and being raised from the dead, Jesus now gathers his church. The ten disciples hiding in a locked room became the first official Christian assembly on the new Sabbath of a new creation. The new covenant church is formally assembled at this moment for the first time. Here he calls the disciples to mission and grants them spiritual authority. This is the moment that the disciples became the Apostles who will serve as the foundation upon which Jesus builds his church (Eph. 2:20).
- In the room were 10 of the original 12. Absent were Judas and Thomas. It must be pointed out that this is hours after Peter and John saw the empty tomb and believed. But this belief was still uninformed and immature for as John tells us about Peter and himself, "as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (vs. 9). In other words, they saw the empty tomb but did not understand its significance. Though they may have known they had a living Jesus, they did not yet understand that they had a living Savior.²

Vs. 19 – "...the first day of the week..." – As we noted in the previous message, there is great significance to Jesus' resurrection occurring on the first day of the week. John alludes to Genesis throughout his Gospel. This is especially true of various elements of the creation account. Just as light burst forth on the first day of the first creation, so now Christ's salvation cuts through death's darkness on the first day of a new creation.

That the disciples are behind a locked door "for fear of the Jews [the Jewish religious leadership]" tells us that they had no expectation that Jesus would be raised. Whether this was due to their not understanding what Jesus had told them about his death and resurrection or simply outright unbelief is hard to tell. It is a sad irony that on the greatest day in human history, the very day God dealt death a fatal blow and inaugurated the restoration of the creation, his closest followers cowered in fear. The disciples' radical shift from unbelief to unshakable belief on the third day following Jesus' death testifies to their certainty that Jesus had been raised.

"Peace be with you." – Having atoned for their sins, Jesus announces that they now have peace with God. What is more, having been raised from the dead they now have the peace of knowing that Jesus has overturned the ruling power of death. The Hebrew word for peace is heavily freighted. Everything that the past generations had invested in the concept of *Shalom* is now brought to fullness in Christ.

Vs. 20 – "When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side..." – The crucifixion wounds upon Jesus' body were the visible verification that the peace he grants them has been purchased by divine acts of justice and mercy. A sinner's peace with God is wholly the work of God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. The wounds upon Jesus' body were the physical testimony to this new peace.

2. The church is entrusted with the mission of God.

- God's mission in the world is to gather his elect for the sake of their salvation to the praise of his glorious grace (Ephesians 1:1-14). Here Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them out on that mission. God is described in John's Gospel as one who sends. He sends his Son into the world. He sends the Spirit.

¹ Edward W. Klink, *John*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016) p. 858

² Gordon Keddie, *John*, Vol. 2 (Leyland, England: Evangelical Press, 2001) p. 363

And through the Son he sends his Apostles into the world. Since there is perfect unity between God's actions and his being, we can say that the Lord's sending of his Apostles (and the church) into the world is inextricably tied to his very nature. "The reason why missions is of the very being of the church is that missions is not just imitating the sending forth of Jesus. It is a participation in the Father's own sending of the Son...mission is rooted in the very being of the Triune God."³

Vs. 21 – "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you...'" – Jesus' second pronouncement of peace is a reminder that this is no mere greeting but the very ground upon which the Apostles now stand. The peace of Christ is to be both the launching pad and the message of their mission. And with these words, Jesus drafts the disciples into ministry as his Apostles: "As the Father has sent me even so I am sending you." The very meaning of the word *apostle* is "sent out one." The Apostles are being sent to carry out on Jesus' mission. Jesus is not resting from the mission. Rather he is calling the Apostles to join him in the mission of God. They are being sent to declare the gospel of the Lord's salvation, the everlasting peace of God accomplished by the dying and rising of Christ. And from the Apostles, the church is "called to participate in the mission of God...The mission of the church is defined by the Son who sent them, from whom the nature and direction of its mission are derived."⁴

- The mission of the church flows from the love of the Triune God for the world. So it is necessary that the church remain in and embody the love of God because "love comes from God" (1 John 4:7). Only those who walk in God's love can adequately take his love to their neighbors. "The church's mission not only flows from and through the love of the triune God; it also flows to the love of the triune God. The Father, after all, seeks worshippers (John 4:3). The Father sent the Son to make his great and holy name known to his people (John 1:18; 17:6). The church's mission therefore ultimately consists in reaping a worldwide harvest of worshippers (John 4:35-38) gathered by the Son, through the Spirit, to serve and adore the 'Holy Father' (John 17:11; Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 22:3-4)."⁵

3. The church is empowered by the Spirit of God

Vs. 22 – "Receive the Holy Spirit." – The connection between the Holy Spirit and the church's mission should be an obvious one. The church's mission is ultimately God's mission. And the mission of the church can only be adequately provided for by the power of God's indwelling Spirit.

The word translated "breathed," is not the word typically used for "breathe." Rather it is a word that is much closer to "blow," like someone blowing out a candle. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word used in Genesis as God "blew into his [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living person" (2:7). Likewise, it is the same word found in Ezekiel 37 which depicts the Holy Spirit bringing to life the people of God: "Blow into these slain that they may come to life" (vs. 9). This was a symbolic gesture on Jesus' part not unlike the sorts of gestures used by the prophets.

- One may ask, "So when was the Holy Spirit given? Here or at Pentecost?" Here it is important for us to understand that from the days of creation, to the regeneration and sanctification of the Old Testament saints, to the inspiration of the Scriptures from Genesis onward, the Holy Spirit has been present and active. Certainly, with the completion of Jesus' redemptive work, the Spirit will be present among his people in a way fitting for the new covenant. But Jesus' words and action here has less to do with chronology and more to do with the nature of the Triune God who is always and everywhere present. It may well be that Jesus' symbolic act accompanied by the announcement concerning the Spirit are in anticipation of Pentecost.

4. The church is granted the ministerial authority of God

Vs. 23 – "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." – Here Jesus describes the ministerial authority of the Apostles which is granted to them by virtue of their unique calling. Jesus is not establishing the Papacy or a sacrament of penance. He is not investing any one individual with the power of absolution. At the same time, Jesus is imparting to the Apostles a sort of spiritual authority that is difficult for many contemporary evangelicals to understand with their emphasis on personal autonomy and suspicion of authority in the church.

³ Paul Fiddes, quoted in Klink, p. 861

⁴ Klink, p. 860

⁵ Andreas Kostenberger & Scott Swain, *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity in John's Gospel*, NSBT (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008) p. 164

What Jesus states here is very similar to his words recorded in Matthew 16:19: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven..." This ministerial authority will pass to the church which is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). This application of ministerial authority to the church is also indicated in Jesus' words in Matthew 18:18 and Paul's instructions regarding church discipline in 1 Corinthians chapter five.

This is not to say that the church actually absolves sins. Only God forgives sinners and this through Jesus Christ. The grammar is helpful. The verbs are in the perfect passive tense which means that God is the primary actor.

But this does not strip the force from Jesus' words. The church most certainly does "functionally represent the work of God in the world."⁶ The words and life of the church work together to proclaim the gospel. We witness to the forgiveness of sins for all who repent just as we warn of the judgment to come for all who remain in their sin. We bear witness of this by the authority of God and the witness of his Word. The Apostles – and through them, the church – were given the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins to all who repent.

The church's ministerial authority is declarative rather than judicial in any literal sense. That is, the church, being built by Jesus upon the foundation of the Apostles, has the authority to declare what God has done and said. But the power to actually grant absolution from sin always and only belongs to the Lord. But because of the relationship between God and his people, the church has been granted stewardship of the sacraments, the visible signs of fellowship with God and forgiveness of sins. This means that the church exercises her ministerial authority through either admission to or exclusion from the "sealing ordinances" of baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁷

"The total mission of the church could be summarized by the forgiving and retaining of sins. For everything the church does is a prolongation in time and space of the victory of the Lamb over the world's sin by making it a victory over our sins... The message of the church is the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and the mission of the church is to liberate the world from the power of sin... The resurrected presence of the Lord by the Spirit is now with his people in such a way that the church's ministry is ultimately his ministry (cf. John 13:20) with the church serving as the God-established 'embassy of salvation and eternal life' in the world."⁸

⁶ Klink, p. 869

⁷ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: 1949) pp. 492-493

⁸ Klink, pp. 866, 869