

**Did you Hear It? Forgive or Withhold!**  
**John 20:19-31**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

The disciples sat together and were talking in that upper room. We may wonder about that conversation. "They killed Him!" They finally went and did it! The Jewish leadership had been looking for a way to arrest Him and silence Him. They had been talking about how they were going to do it for a while. We knew that they were out to get Him, and we warned Jesus not to come into Jerusalem, but He didn't listen to us."

"It has been three days since He died, now!"

"John and I saw the empty tomb."

"Mary told us that she had spoken with Jesus, that He is alive."

"We spoke with Him on the road to Emmaus, and then He broke bread, and that is when we recognized Him."

"But how can you be sure it was not a ghost, that it was not some vision or wishful thinking. After all, after He broke the bread, you said that He just wasn't there anymore, He just vanished."

"What are we going to do?"

"Will the Sanhedrin come after us next? Will we be called before the High Priest?" "Will we be dragged before Pilate, flogged, beaten, maybe crucified?"

"Hey, will someone check and make sure those doors are locked one more time?"

I wonder if that was the conversation going on in the upper room that Sunday evening. So much had happened since that early morning.

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.

"Peace be with you." Did you hear what He said to us? We doubted the words of Mary, we did not believe that our friends really saw what they expressed, and even worse, we doubted what Jesus Himself had told us before all the events of the past week took place.

We sinned against our friends and against the Lord, and He said, "Peace be with you." In other words, "I know how scared you are – be at peace! I know how the things of this world have planted the seed of fear in your heart – be at peace! And know this most of all, that even for your lack of faith, I forgive you – be at peace!"

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 anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

To these disciples, Jesus gave a task – to forgive **AND** to withhold forgiveness. Did you hear it? He gave them the authority to **forgive** and **withhold** forgiveness. We hear the instruction to forgive, but we tune out the second half of those instructions Jesus gave, the authority to withhold forgiveness. But both commands are there, and that authority has been given to Christ's church, for His ministers to use, the authority to both forgive and withhold forgiveness.

Christ had informed the disciples earlier, that He would give them this authority. He informed them that by their word, where they forgive sins **OR withhold** forgiveness, the same will be true even in heaven, "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." (Matt. 16:19 ESV) Yes, this authority is what we refer to as the Office of the Keys, for this authority either opens or locks the gates of heaven.

This is not some command of our Lord to be taken lightly though. So, we must ask seriously, "How do we know when to use which key?"

Jesus does not leave that question unanswered, He gives instructions about it. "If your brother sins you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 18:15-18 ESV)

Where there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness. And with repentance, comes the fruit of repentance, just as Jesus told the woman caught in the act of adultery. He did not simply say that her sin was forgiven, but instructed her that her faith must continue, and now she must do works in keeping with repentance. He said it very simply, "Go and sin no more." When sin has been forgiven, it is not a license to continue doing the same thing. (John 8:11) Repentance includes the desire and effort **not** to continue in the same sin any longer.

This authority to withhold forgiveness is given so that the severity of sinfulness might be shown to the sinner. As one is brought to realize that without repentance, there is no forgiveness; that their sinfulness might keep them out of heaven and enduring incredible torment for all eternity; it is then that the stubborn sinner might be brought to see horror of their sin, the wrath of God against their sin, the error of their sin – AND repent.

Why? For where there is repentance, there is forgiveness of sins. God would have all men come to repentance and be saved. Yes, there is a command to withhold forgiveness from the impenitent, for to be impenitent is to belittle and spit upon Christ's passion.

What is it that Jesus did upon the cross? Why did the Father send Him to endure such agony, pain, and death? He carried the cross up the hill called Golgotha in order to purchase forgiveness for you. You know the cost, it did not come cheaply. The agony of Christ's suffering abuse at the hands of the Jewish leadership and the Romans, and His death upon the cross was real.

He rose on Easter so that forgiveness might be dispensed to you. He appeared to the disciples another time and He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.” (Luke 24:44-47 ESV)

What is to be proclaimed to you? What is of the most importance? What did Christ purchase for you, and desire to be declared that you may hear it? That your sins are forgiven. It is a word that Christ commands to be spoken into your ear that you might hear it, in order that your sins might be removed from you as far as the east is to the west.

As God’s servant Ezekiel prophesied and dead, dry, bones came back to life, so also we who are dead in trespasses and sins are given new life. We come to life as the Word God commanded to be spoken to us, is proclaimed by His servants.

This Word of forgiveness comes to you in Baptism, that you might cling to it whenever you encounter water. With water as a daily part of your life, you live daily in your baptism – in daily contrition and repentance – and water is your reminder that your sins are forgiven in Christ.

That you might know of your forgiveness, Christ commands His pastors to dispense forgiveness into your ear, that you might hear and believe. He calls His pastors to deliver that Word to you privately, when you have a need and desire to hear it. He delivers that Word to you regularly when His Spirit gathers you together to hear that Word preached and proclaimed to you publicly, cleansing you of your sin.

It is that word of forgiveness which you ingest with the bread of His body, and the cup of His blood in the sacrament, for you are eating and drinking for the forgiveness of your sins.

All these blessings are the means of God’s grace, for where they are present, His word works miraculous things, first among them is the forgiveness of sins. And where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation.

Again you have gathered in God’s house, and you are hear for a single purpose, that the Word of Christ might be proclaimed to you – a word of forgiveness – that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Amen.