

The Power to Remit

There is an interesting passage in the Gospel of John about which I feel persuaded to make a comment. Before Jesus left the locked room where the 10 apostles had seen Him, we find the last recorded words He spoke on that occasion. In chapter 20 verse 21-23 we find the following: *“21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. 22 And When he has said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: 23 whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.”*

These little verses are something that Jesus chose to add at the close of His conversation with the 10 Apostles. Immediately thereafter, Scripture focuses on Thomas and his doubts as to what had happened in his short absence. Because the highlights of this portion of John’s Gospel deal with Thomas and his “doubts”, there is a tendency to simply glide over these verses, never recognizing their special significance. Some pluck them out for examination, and are surprised and disturbed at what they say, or seem to say. However in Matthew 16:19 and again in 18:18 we find Jesus telling the apostles essentially the same thing, except in these instances, He says that He will give them the power to “bind” or to “loose” rather than to remit. It is evident that to “bind” speaks of the authority to declare a person saved, just as does “remit” in the quoted verses from John.

Does this mean that Jesus chose to share the authority of forgiveness of sins with the Apostles? The whole of Scripture points uniquely to Jesus as the One and only valid Forgiver of sins. Prior to His suffering, death and resurrection, there had never been even one sin cleansed from any soul. The best that anyone prior to this could achieve was the mere covering of sins. Those souls had been forgiven their sins and were thereby “positionally” saved but did not have “experiential” salvation, which would have allowed them to ascend to heaven. This was given when Jesus, on the cross, paid for those sins. He then descended into Sheol, removed those coverings, and washed away the sins. The

souls of the Old Testament saints were placed in a pleasant part of Shoel where they had to wait for Jesus to come. Through His work on the cross, He obtained the power and authority to remove the “coverings” and the sins, so that those who had been waiting for that moment could then ascend to heaven. The power and authority was given to Jesus and only to Him, as the whole Word of God from Genesis to Revelation thunderously proclaims. We read that *“no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book neither to look there on.”* (Revelation 5:3). The one and only exception was the son of Man, Jesus. So also, no other being can forgive sins. This is a godly power and attribute given to Jesus and only Jesus. It never was, nor could it ever be, fundamentally transferable in any way.

Given all of this, which Scripture has made so very clear, how are we to deal with this apparent contradiction, that is this seemingly clear assignment of the power to “remit” that is to forgive sins? If you have a problem with this, I believe that there are two subtleties here that may explain it. First, notice that Jesus “breathed on them.” It is evident that this “pneuma” this breath was the filling of them with the Holy Spirit, the primary evidence of their salvation and their power to affectively recognize and deal with their own sins. Can you imagine what it was like to have received the Holy Spirit directly through the breath of the living reincarnate Jesus Himself? All who come to the true Christian faith are endowed with the Holy Spirit. The Apostles however, seem to be the very first, and I believe the only New Testament saints to have been so blessed. Absent the indwelling Holy Spirit, man is powerless to do anything that is pleasing to God, so they then, at least, had the basic credential needed to effectively serve the Living God.

Second, notice how this authority is expressed. The *“sins ye remit are remitted”*. Also *“whosoever thou shalt “bind” shall be bound...”* is the other manner in which this power is expressed. In each instance the statement of fact is followed by a confirming, or ratifying statement of the fact. I believe that if we put this in present day terminology and elaborate a little, we might say that Jesus said to them “you were and continue to be my faithful Apostles. This day I have given you, and filled you, with the Holy Spirit so as to assure your eternal destiny and to empower you to understand and do My will faithfully

and effectually. Among your duties will be to evangelize and bring sinners to understand how they can be saved. As you go about doing this, some will truly accept me and be saved, while others will not. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, I have given you and only you, the grace of infallible discernment in this matter. Therefore, the spiritual status of every soul you deal with will be known to you, so that those whom you declare saved have been saved, and those whom you declare as unsaved are unsaved. Of course you understand that I am the only one having that power of forgiveness, and that your pronouncements are merely the infallible expressions of these truths, which I have given you to discern through the Holy Spirit.”

This of course was a discernment given only to the apostles, and was not given to any other Spirit-filled souls. What was also uniquely given to the Apostles was the expression of certain other powers which we see displayed by them as we read about them in Scripture. These were such gifts as the power to heal and to restore life to the dead under certain conditions. I believe that Jesus gave them these extraordinary expressions of powers in order to help “jump start” His church. Through these spiritual attributes, the apostles were able to be much more effective evangelist. Remember it was not their power, but the power of Jesus that the people saw manifested in them. As we read all these things we find that these men never took credit for anything, but instead gave Jesus full credit. Their claims were strengthened by their assertions that He was the One with whom they had lived, learned from, and also witnessed His resurrection and ascension. This provided a most powerful testimony to Jesus’ deity and worthiness of worship.

In summary, it wasn’t that the apostles were given the power to forgive sin. They were given the power to discern and then accurately proclaim who had, and who had not been forgiven of their sins. These and many of the other supernatural powers were similarly entrusted to them and only to them. These powers did not continue on to the subsequent disciples. Remember, at the beginning of what became known as Christianity, there was no New Testament through which to discover the truth of Jesus’ ministry and identity. These extraordinary abilities with which the apostles were entrusted gave incredible

credibility to their ministries. This was a huge impetus to this fledgling “religion”. I believe that this is the only reason that they were so endowed and why these gifts were not continued to be given to future generations. The whole of the Holy Bible is ample evidence of Jesus’ deity and so these graphic evidences are no longer needed.