

January 21st, 2018
OPENING AND SHUTTING THE
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN
John 20:21-23

The most important thing you can hear

Carl Trueman once told his students regarding preaching that if your listeners are not convinced within the first 60 seconds that this is the most important thing they have heard all week, then you are not preaching. If there was ever a proof text for that statement, certainly it would be here in Jesus' words. Jesus says "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you...If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."¹ Apostolic preaching, which today equates to the faithful preaching of the Word and the Gospel is bar none the most important, vital, life-changing, eternity-hinging speech on planet earth. It is the opening and shutting of the kingdom of Heaven. It has no counter-parts to which it could be compared. Trueman again says "The preacher finds his counterpart not in the lecture, theatre or the classroom or, most ghastly of all, on the stand-up comedy circuit. [Not in Congress, the White House, not from great statesmen of old. No, He only²] finds him in the Old Testament prophets, bringing a confrontational word from the Lord which explains reality and demands a response."³

The reality of sin and the fear of God

And what is missing in much preaching today is the reality of sin and the fear of God. Three times in **v.23** Jesus mentions forgiveness. If you *forgive* the sins of any, they are *forgiven* them; if you withhold *forgiveness* from any, it is

¹ v.21b, 23

² My addition

³ Source: <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/why-is-so-much-preaching-so-poor.php>
accessed January 20, 2018

withheld.” What does forgiveness imply? Guilt. Conversion—becoming a Christian, is not about subscribing to a statement of faith; Christianity is not becoming a white middle class Republican; conversion is not self-reformation or improving your morals. Conversion is deliverance from the power and penalty of sin. Conversion is the complete removal of guilt. You need forgiveness because you are guilty. The problem with guilt in our age, is that half-way gospels are being offered as remedies which are no remedies at all. Half-way gospels which strip God of His holiness and wrath against sin and relegate Him to your buddy. Half-way gospels which reduce the Christian message to “God loves you.” Half-way gospels which reduce either sin to *merely* the grosser violations of the law, or never mention sin at all. Half-way gospels dethrone God, because they give us no reason to fear Him. Where is the fear of God? The fear of God was a very present reality in the early church.

Jesus told His own disciples “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather *fear him* who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (**Matthew 10:28**).

When Peter preached at Pentecost, the crowd panicked and cried out “What shall we do?” (**Acts 2:37**)

After the judgment of death fell upon Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit it says “And great *fear* came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things” (**Acts 5:11**).

When Paul who was in chains spoke to Felix the free judge “...about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away...” (**Acts 24:25**)

And this fear of God has been present in every true revival since the beginning of the world. When Jonathan Edwards preached his sermon *Sinners in the Hands*

of an Angry God to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut in 1741, he was “interrupted many times...by people moaning and crying out, ‘What shall I do to be saved?’”⁴ In the revival that took place in Korea in 1907, one eyewitness recorded:

“Every man forgot each other. Each was face to face with God. I can hear yet that fearful sound of the hundreds of men pleading with God for life, for mercy. The cry went out over the city till the heathen were in consternation... Looking up to heaven, to Jesus whom they had betrayed, they smote themselves and cried with bitter wailing: ‘Lord, Lord, cast us not away for ever!’ Everything else was forgotten, nothing else mattered.”⁵

Opening and shutting the Kingdom of Heaven

Why these effects? Why this fear of God? Because the gospel that risen Christ delivered to the apostles was preached. That’s not to say that wherever you don’t see these *positive* effects, the true gospel is not preached. The true gospel often produces *adverse* effects. When Jesus preached in John 6, thousands of disciples left. Yet even these *adverse* effects are not failings. Both of these effects—positive and adverse—will always accompany true gospel preaching. That’s what Jesus appointed the apostles and the church to. ‘Just as the Father sent me, I’m sending you...to preach this message. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. To those who believe—you have the authority to declare they are forgiven. To those who don’t believe you have the authority to declare that they stand condemned.’ Jesus words shape all of reality. You have either had your sins pardoned and you have been adopted into the Kingdom of Heaven where you will have unbroken fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or you stand under the threat of damnation, and you are hopeless, helpless, and headed for hell. There’s no middle ground. That’s why this message has no equals. This is not a message of self-improvement, self-empowerment, self-esteem, or seven principles to a happier

⁴ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners_in_the_Hands_of_an_Angry_God accessed January 20, 2018

⁵ Iain Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), pg. 4-5

healthier life. This is a message that either opens up Heaven to you or shuts it in your face. Gospel preaching is the opening and shutting of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Big Idea...

The key to opening and shutting the Kingdom of Heaven is found no where else except the gospel of Jesus Christ

- ☆ The Peace and Purpose of Christ
- ☆ The Promise and Presence of the Spirit
- ☆ The Preaching and Power of the Gospel

I. The Peace and Purpose of Christ

Where have we been?

This is the fifth resurrection appearance of Jesus Christ. In chapter nineteen, Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate the Roman governor by the Jewish authorities to be crucified. The reason why the Jewish leaders hated Jesus was because His message was radically different from the message the Pharisees preached. Puritan Anthony Burgess said in 1654 “Those who lived under the Pharisees’ teaching would never have been convinced that the thoughts and affections of the heart were breaches of God’s law; they did not understand that there was heart-adultery, and heart-murder as our Savior instructed them.”⁶ Jesus had told his disciples before his crucifixion “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (**Matthew 5:20**). In one sweeping statement, Jesus not only showed that the disciples were not good enough to enter Heaven,

⁶ *ibid*, pg. 2

but those who they thought were the most religious people alive—the Pharisees and the scribes—were not good enough. There is nothing more offensive to natural man to say “You are not good enough, and nothing you can do will be good enough. You are wrong at your very core” Think about how radical that is. ‘Mother Teresa all your ministering to the poor in Calcutta, all your rescuing of babies counts cannot make you good enough in God’s court. Bill Gates the 27 billion dollars that you have given to charity does not earn the righteousness that God demands. Desmond Doss those 75 men that you rescued in WWII risking your own life, does not give you one credit towards your own salvation.’⁷ That was Jesus message. The Jewish leaders would not stand for it, because that meant they themselves were guilty before God. They put Jesus on a mock trial, and then He was crucified.

The disciples thought the Messianic revolution was over. They lost hope. But a dead Savior can’t save anyone. Jesus rose from the dead. Death could not hold him because He never sinned. Death only came into the world because of sin.⁸ Without sin, there would be no death. Death is the great witness to all of humanity, that all have sinned, because all die. But Jesus did not sin. And dear congregation, His resurrection is why we are saved. “Because I live, you also will live” (**John 14:19**).

Last week we saw Jesus pronounce this over His disciples when He suddenly appeared to them. He said in v.19 “Peace be with you.” The most significant words that can ever be spoken to a human soul. What Jesus meant was “My work on the cross is complete, and now because I was punished for your sin, you now have been reconciled to God through faith.” That was the first “Peace be with you” that we saw in our text.

⁷ Source: <http://www.historyvshollywood.com/reelfaces/hacksaw-ridge/> accessed January 20, 2018

⁸ Romans 5:12

The second “Peace be with you”

Now we arrive still at what Jesus said next. Look with me at **v.21** Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” What unfolds here in **v.21-23** is John’s version of the great commission. All four gospels have a great commission—Matthew has one (**Matthew 28:18-20**); Mark has one (**Mark 16:15-16**); and Luke has one (**Luke 24:47-49**). But why this repetition of “Peace be with you?” Why does Jesus say it again? Because Jesus’ very first charge to the disciples was to go into the world and preach the gospel. And this was a painful and weighty charge. All the disciples minus John would be martyred for this cause. They would need peace for this mission. And that is how the rest of the text flows. Jesus’ pronouncement of peace and Jesus’ purpose in sending them converge. Why can the disciples have peace? Because Jesus is going to send them *just like* the Father sent Jesus. In this place, that means two things **1)** They will be sent with the presence of the Holy Spirit (**v.22**), and **2)** They will be sent with the power of the gospel (**v.23**). Meaning that they will never be alone because the Holy Spirit would be with them, and their mission can not fail, because the gospel will succeed in forgiving sinners or holding them under condemnation. So that is where we are going in our two remaining points. Why can the disciples have peace? Why can the church *have peace* when the gospel is labeled as hate speech, when we are like sheep sent among the wolves? Because we are promised the presence of the Holy Spirit, and we are promised the power of the gospel that though we may suffer personal loss, the gospel will never suffer loss in fulfilling what it was sent to do, namely the opening and shutting the Kingdom of Heaven.

II. The Promise and Presence of the Spirit

Were the disciples’ saved before this?

After Jesus said in **v.21** “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you,” **v.22** says “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to

them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” What does Jesus mean here? Lots of ink has been spilled trying explanation. Let’s take the problems one at a time. First, were the disciples saved before this? Yes. Jesus told them in **John 15:3** “Already you are *clean* because of the word that I have spoken to you” (cf. John 13:10). They were clean—meaning they were already forgiven pre-crucifixion just like all the saints of old, because they had believed the promises.

Did the disciples have the Holy Spirit before this?

Secondly did the disciples have the Holy Spirit before Jesus said this? John’s gospel has recorded that there was a sense in which *nobody* had the Holy Spirit yet. Turn to **John 7:37-39**. Jesus at the Feast of Booths, one of the major Jewish holy days in Jerusalem. And He stands up on the last day of the feast and says, [halfway through v.37] “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. [38] Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” [39] Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet *the Spirit had not been given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The Spirit had not *yet* been given. And Jesus confirms this in the upper room. Turn to **John 16:7**. Here Jesus gives His longest discourse on the Holy Spirit. He says “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” ‘Only when I go,’ Jesus says, ‘will I send Him.’ So did nobody have the Holy Spirit prior to this?⁹

King David did. After his sin of adultery and murder, he prayed “Cast me not away from your presence, and *take not* your Holy Spirit from me” (**Psalms 51:11**). David had the Holy Spirit. The Psalmist prays in **Psalms 139:7** “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?” The Psalmist couldn’t escape the Holy Spirit. So how do we reconcile these

⁹ Additionally John 14:16-17 says “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, [f] to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

accounts? John says the Spirit hasn't come yet, and yet the OT saints said they possessed Him.

First solution: *with* vs. *in*

I believe there are two possible solutions. The **first solution** is that in the OT the Holy Spirit was *with* the saints, whereas in the NT the Holy Spirit was *in* the saints.¹⁰ In the words of Abraham Kuyper “[In the Old Testament] the Holy Spirit was...working on the saints from *without*, while in the New Testament He is said to be *within* them.”¹¹ Under the Old, the Spirit was *with*, under the New, the Spirit is *in*.¹² My issue with this view is that nobody can be saved without the indwelling Spirit.¹³ Nobody can overcome sin unless the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within you.¹⁴ That's how radically deprave humanity is. Turn to **Romans 8:7-9** to see this more clearly. Paul here is contrasting the sinful nature, with the nature of those in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit, v. 7 “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those *who are in the flesh* cannot please God. [So nobody, NT saints and OT saints will never please God if they are *in the flesh*. So then, what is the solution? How can we please God? v.9 continues] You, however, are not in the

¹⁰ The saints who lived under the old covenant had the Holy Spirit as a *companion alongside of them* whereas new covenant saints have the Holy Spirit as a *comforter who indwells them*.

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., Reprinted 1969), pg. 121

¹² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Luke 1-5*, (Chicago, IL.,: Moody Publishers, 2009), pg. 179-180

¹³ That was Jesus point about the new birth by the Spirit in John 3. As John Piper says here: “The OT believers experienced the new birth and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When Nicodemus was bewildered about Jesus’ demand for new birth by the Spirit, Jesus responded ([John 3:10](#)), “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand this?” In other words, I’m not teaching or requiring anything new. Any Israelite who has ever been saved had to be born again by God’s Spirit. Otherwise how would they ever overcome their natural hostility to God? How could they have ever submitted to God’s law and pleased him—as many did, like Abel and Noah and Abraham and Moses and Rahab and Ruth and Deborah and David?” Source: <http://headhearhand.org/?s=10+ways+that+believers+experienced> accessed January 20, 2018

¹⁴ John 6:63 “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”

flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God *dwells in you.*” There it is. The only way anyone ever overcomes sin—including everyone before Christ—is if the Spirit of God comes and dwells in you. And we see this in the examples in the OT of the saints experienced the indwelling Spirit. **Numbers 14:24** “But my servant Caleb, *because he has a different spirit* and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went.” **Numbers 27:18** “So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man *in whom is the Spirit*, and lay your hand on him.” So I don’t think the answer is that in the Old the Spirit is *with*, and in the New the Spirit is *in*. “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (**Romans 8:9**).

Second solution: the Spirit had not been given like *this* before

The **second solution** is that the Spirit had not been give like *this* before. Because the New Covenant far exceeds¹⁵ the Old covenant *comparatively*, it’s as if the Holy Spirit never came at all. In other words, the Holy Spirit has never come *in this way*. It is something new, never experienced by any saint before. When Jesus said in **John 7:38** that out of your heart will ‘...flow rivers of living water’ and this was spoken of “the Spirit who had not yet been given,”¹⁶ He meant ‘I’m not just going to quench your thirst for eternal life, I will cause—through the Holy Spirit—rivers to flow from your heart so that you will help the nations drink.’ This had yet happened. Salvation had been largely restricted to Israel. But it had been promised from the very beginning to all nations. To Abraham, God said “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (**Genesis12:3**). With the coming of Christ, that promise was coming to fruition. With the coming of Christ came a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit such that *comparatively* it was like He never came before. David Murray provides a helpful illustration:

¹⁵ Hebrews 7:22, 8:6

¹⁶ v.39

“Think of a dry sponge on a hot day. Now imagine a water dropper. The dropper drips water so slowly on to the sponge that while it gets wet, it never fills it up so much that the water begins to run out of the sponge. This was the OT believers and NT disciples experience of the Spirit up until now. Christ kept them supplied with a continual “dripping of the Spirit” that kept them spiritually alive and fruitful, but rarely so much that their spiritual life overflowed into the lives of others. The same would be true of the Old Testament Church as a whole.

But now imagine I come along with a pressure washer and start jetting the sponge. Almost immediately it would not only fill with water, but water would be flowing out of it in every direction. Welcome to Pentecost. Welcome to what Jesus was predicting in this verse.”¹⁷

The pledge of Pentecost

In v.22, when Jesus *breathes* on the disciples (which is very symbolic of **Genesis 2:7** when the God breathed life into Adam¹⁸) and then says “Receive the Holy Spirit,” this wasn’t the full-orbed deal.¹⁹ This was a pledge of what

¹⁷ “Out of the New Testament Church and out of the New Testament believer would flow rivers of living water. No longer, “It was not yet Spirit.” Now, “Spirit-filled rivers of living water.” Source: <http://headhearhand.org/?s=a+sponge%2C+a+dropper%2C+and+a+pressure+washer> accessed January 20, 2018

¹⁸ Or Ezekiel 37:9-10 which says “Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

¹⁹ “Perhaps it is worth recalling the similar sense of ‘imminence’ generated by the approach of the Greeks (12:20ff). From that time on, Jesus speaks of his ‘hour’ as having arrived (e.g. 12:23, 31; 13:31; 17:1, 5). Indeed, John 17:5 is cast in the form of an imperative: ‘And now, Father, glorify me in your presence...’; but that does not mean the glorification takes place even as Jesus speaks. Similarly, John 13:31 (‘Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him’) is followed by the new commandment, which in the nature of the case was unlikely to be the lodestar of the earliest disciples until after the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. So there is no intrinsic reason for thinking that the imperative of 20:22, *Receive the Holy Spirit*, must be experienced immediately.” D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), pg.653

they were to receive at Pentecost about 7 weeks from now.²⁰ At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was going to be poured out so powerfully, so abundantly that instantaneous revival would take place. Peter preaches and thousands of people place their faith in Jesus Christ and are saved. Why? Because then the full promise of the Holy Spirit was given. Jesus is preparing them for that. He's giving them a pledge. "Just as the Father sent me—with the fullness of the Holy Spirit—so I'm going to send you."

When the world laughs

And that is what we need today. Dear congregation this is why prayer meetings are important. How does the church grow? How are the lost brought in? Is it by spending lots of money on advertising and programs and cutting edge technology so that we can be attractive to the world? No the world can do that way better than the church. And when the church tries to mimic the world, the world laughs at us. We are always behind the trend. No, the church grows when the Holy Spirit makes a visitation. That's why prayer meetings are important. So that we can call on God to send His Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus told His disciples to do. Go to Jerusalem—pray and wait. **Luke 24:49** "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

Religion without the Holy Ghost

William Booth, who was a contemporary of Charles Spurgeon, and founder of the Salvation Army. He lived from 1829 to 1912. He was "asked by an American newspaper what he regarded as the chief danger ahead for the

²⁰ This is how John's account of giving the Spirit (20:22) is squared with Luke's account of saying that the Spirit is to come (24:49). Calvin says here "the Spirit was given to the Apostles on this occasion in such a manner, that they were only sprinkled by his grace but were not filled with full power; for, when the Spirit appeared on them in *tongues of fire*, (Acts 2:3) they were entirely renewed. And, indeed, he did not appoint them to be heralds of the his Gospel, so as to send them forth immediately to the work, but ordered them to take repose, as we read elsewhere, *Remain ye in the city of Jerusalem till ye are endued with power from on high*, (Luke 24:49)." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries XVIII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 268-269

twentieth century, he replied tersely: ‘Religion without the Holy Ghost.’”²¹ Without the Holy Spirit Christianity will fall. No one, not the disciples, not John Piper, not Billy Graham, not the Apostle Paul, no one is qualified or able to speak the gospel *truthfully* without the power of the Holy Spirit. **1 Corinthians 12:3** “no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.” Dear church this is why we pray. That the power of God might show up. Do you know what this service would turn into if the Holy Spirit fell on this place like it has throughout history? There would be weeping over sin. There would be shouts of joy over salvation. All else would be forgotten or ignored. The only thing that would matter is Christ and Him crucified. It would fixate our minds, ravish our hearts, and cause our feet to run with the gospel of peace to our neighbors.

This is why Jesus gives the pledge of the Holy Spirit here. Because He wants us to see that the Holy Spirit can never be separated from our proclamation of the gospel Without Him, there is no power in the gospel message. Religion without the Holy Spirit is death.

III. The Preaching and Power of the Gospel

So review where we’ve been. Jesus tells the disciples “Peace be with you.” Why? Because He is sending them out just as the Father sent Him. And this is the most difficult of all missions. But He promises “Peace” because He’s giving them the Holy Spirit (as we just saw), and because this gospel message will not fail—it has all the authority and power of Heaven behind it. Look at v. **23** “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” I want us to notice four truths about this verse.

²¹ The full quote is “Religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God and heaven without hell.” Iain Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), pg. xi

Truth 1: There are only two kingdoms

William Brakel once said "...consider first of all that there are but two [kingdoms]...the kingdoms of Christ and of the devil, which are mortal enemies to each other. A third kingdom does not exist. Every person upon earth is either a subject of King Jesus or of the devil, the prince of darkness. No matter who you are individually, you are truly a subject of one of these two kingdoms. You are neither neutral nor a subject of both kingdoms simultaneously. Therefore, to which kingdom do you presently belong?"²² That's **truth number one**: there are only two kingdoms.

Truth 2: Jesus has entrusted the keys of the kingdom to the church

Jesus uses language here which has been interpreted very wrongly throughout the history of the church. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." Historically Rome has interpreted this passage to support their sacrament of confession. If anyone fails to confess to one of Rome's ordained priests, they ought not to expect any forgiveness. If a person on the other hand confesses, the priest has the intrinsic power to absolve their sin. Now Jesus does not mean this. No man, not any of the apostles, not any living pastor, no man has the power in himself to forgive or to withhold forgiveness. Even the Pharisees recognized this when they asked rhetorically "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (**Mark 2:7**). Only Christ can forgive sin. **Isaiah 43:25** says "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

So then, what is Jesus getting at here? Jesus is deputizing the Apostles with authority. This verse deals with the keys of the kingdom. Jesus had told the Apostles earlier "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" (**Matthew 16:19**). When Jesus mentions keys, He is speaking symbolically. What do keys represent? Keys are symbols of authority.

²² Wilhemus A Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service, Vol. 2: The Church and Salvation*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), pg. 56

Jesus is giving the Apostles authority. Now by good and necessary consequence, this authority is conferred on the True Church throughout all the ages because we have preach the Apostolic Word.²³ Historically the Reformed church has seen two primary keys:²⁴ the ministry of Word²⁵ and Church discipline.²⁶

v.23 deals with the first key—the Word of God. Jesus has given His Word—His Gospel—to the church, “and has authorized her to proclaim it in His name.”²⁷ Jesus said in **Luke 10:16** “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” This is massive. When the Word of God is preached faithfully, it is not men you are dealing with, it is Christ Himself. Anyone who despises the message is despising Jesus. That’s **truth number two**: Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to the church, so that when she speaks according to the Apostolic Word, it is Christ Himself who is speaking.

Truth 3: True Holy Spirit inspired gospel preaching can never be separated from the need for forgiveness from sin.

The most important Word that Jesus wanted His disciples to hear was “forgiveness”—v.23 “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” As Calvin says, this is “the only

²³ The church is built on the Apostolic Word (Eph. 2:19-20), and this authority has been passed down to all her lawful ministers (cf. Titus 2:15; Heb. 13:17; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Cor. 4:1; 2 Cor. 13:3, 10)

²⁴ I’m not sure if this is the consensus view. Francis Turretin said that there are three keys. “But others more fitly divide it into three parts: (1) dogmatic; (2) ordinating; (3) judicial and disciplinary. The first is occupied with the doctrines of faith, the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments. The [second] with ecclesiastical laws and constitutions and the government of the church by them. The third has reference to the exercise of discipline and embraces both the right or censuring sinners and of excommunicating them...also the right of restoring those thus excommunicated when they have repented.” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology Volume Three*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.,: P & R Publishing, 1997), pg. 275

²⁵ Which includes its proclamation and the sacraments.

²⁶ Wilhemus A Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service, Vol. 2: The Church and Salvation*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), pg. 159

²⁷ *ibid*

subject which is handled in this passage...the principle design of preaching the Gospel is, that men may be reconciled to God, and this is accomplished by the unconditional pardon of sins.”²⁸ The church that Monica and I were first in as a married couple was connected to the Charismatic movement. And the leadership very often spoke of the Holy Spirit. They had classes on how to engage with the Holy Spirit, how to develop your gifts and minister to other people through the Holy Spirit. But in all of this, very little was ever spoken about sin. They were well meaning, but they were missing it. Jesus said in **John 16:7-8** “But [when]²⁹ I go, I will send him [the Holy Spirit] to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:” If in any local church, the preaching does not bring conviction of sin, and the need for righteousness, and the coming judgment, then the Holy Spirit is not at work, no matter how many times His name is used. Listen to what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says on this point:

“There is no true [preaching]³⁰ without the doctrine of sin, and without an understanding of what sin is...a gospel which merely says “Come to Jesus”, and offers Him as a Friend, and offers a marvelous new life, without the convicting of sin, is not New Testament evangelism...[it³¹] must start with the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man and the eternal consequences of evil and wrong-doing...”³²

²⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XVIII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 267, 281

²⁹ original—“if”

³⁰ original—“evangelism”

³¹ original—“evangelism”

³² “[False teaching] does not emphasize repentance in any real sense. It has very wide gate leading to salvation and a very broad way leading to heaven. You need not feel much of your sinfulness; you need not be aware of the blackness of your own heart. You just “decide for Christ” and you rush in with the crowd, and your name is put down, and is one of the large number of “decisions” reported by the press.” Iain Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), pg. 69

Lloyd-Jones, who was a medical doctor before his entrance into the pulpit, always started with first principles. First, what is the diagnosis? — meaning what is wrong? Then he went to the prognosis—how do we cure it? If you start with the cure first, it makes no sense. People who think they are well never go to a physician. On the other hand, the Puritan John Flavel says “There is no need of rhetoric to persuade a condemned [criminal³³] to accept his pardon, [or] a hungry man to sit down at a full table; but, alas! [wherever] Sin is not felt, Christ is not known;”³⁴ That’s **truth number three**: True Holy Spirit inspired gospel preaching can never be separated from the need for forgiveness from sin.

Truth 4: True Gospel preaching opens and shuts the kingdom of heaven

Dear congregation this is why preaching matters. Because in it, the salvation and damnation of souls is proclaimed. Because Jesus gave this authority, I can stand up here and proclaim to believers without any fear of error “Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life;” (**John 3:36**). Not might *have*. Not I hope you *have*. But *has*. That’s what Jesus means when He says “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;” **John 5:24** “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” That is the opening of the Kingdom of Heaven. Can’t you sense the power and authority behind that proclamation. Paul pointed to this when dealing with the Corinthians. He said in **2 Corinthians 13:3** “He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.” Gospel words are meant to be felt, because they are not of human origin, but divine. The gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (**Romans 1:16**).

How is this relevant for Monday morning when you go to work? For Wednesday night when you get an argument with your spouse? For Friday afternoon when you want to quit your job. How are this Gospel relevant then? These are the only words that are relevant. If this is the Word that opens

³³ original—“malefactor”

³⁴ Iain Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), pg. 7

Heaven to you, is it not a sufficient Word for your earthly life?³⁵ This word “You are forgiven in Christ” empowers you to be the freest person in the universe. Because now you can look on God’s friendly face. No matter what sin finds you out, you never have to be afraid because that sin has already been imputed to Christ. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (**Phil. 1:6**).

On the other hand, when Jesus said “if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld,” He gave the the church the authority to shut the Kingdom of Heaven to those who do not believe—“Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (**John 3:36**). “There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil,” (**Romans 2:9**). “There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.” (**Isaiah 48:22**). Unbeliever, your greatest need is forgiveness. You have sinned against a holy God. No amount of self-reformation will do. Without forgiveness, all you can anticipate is eternal condemnation if you continue on the path you are on.³⁶ But you can’t be forgiven by your own goodness. No amount of self-reformation will work. God provided a way for your reconciliation. He sent His only begotten Son into the world to be punished for sinners. That’s what the cross was all about—punishment for sin. But Jesus wasn’t a sinner. He was punished for sinners. If you put you hope in Him *alone*, He promised to take your sin for you. It’s called the great exchange. He takes your sin, and He gives you His righteousness—His perfect record, so that you can stand before God on the day of judgement. But if you don’t repent, you will surely never see Heaven. I implore you, I plead with you, as an ambassador of Christ, be reconciled to God. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” (**Acts 16:31**).

³⁵ “Nothing is of more importance to us, than to be able to believe firmly, that our sins do not come into remembrance before God.” John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. XVIII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 271

³⁶ Wilhemus A Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service, Vol. 2: The Church and Salvation*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), pg. 181