

April 12, 2026

“Power to Forgive”

John 20:19-23

Intro:

When I was around 12 years old, I took the babysitting course that was being offered through the Red Cross, and after passing, thought that babysitting would be a great gig. Looking back on those younger me days, I am still amazed that anyone would willingly let me be in charge of the care of their kids – both on a babysitting level and later at the camp cabin leader level. But desperate times, as they say, and so there I was all, of probably not nearly old enough, and eager to take on my first babysitting job. It was for a family that was just a few houses down from us, which seemed like convenient place to get my feet wet. The thing about responsibility like this is that it comes with a certain sense of power and authority. For those however-many hours it was going to be, I was the person in charge. I had the power and the authority. If I said it was time to clean up and go to bed, then those kids had better believe it was time for obedience.

It is amazing how kids can turn such perceived power on its head. Even though I was in charge (the parents said so), I had no power over those kids to get them to do anything. They did not recognize my authority and did not listen. There I was giving out orders (and ultimatums, and threats, and bribes, and anything else I could think of), and they could not have been less interested in listening to any of it.

I did not get a second babysitting job at that house. I also did not make a career out of babysitting.

Have you ever been in a situation where the given authority to do something seemed entirely out of place?

Only God Can Forgive Sins:

Most of us are familiar with the story of Jesus healing the paralytic. Mark and Luke's account are very similar, with Matthew's account leaving out a few of the details. The reactions of the religious leaders and Jesus are consistent though.

Jesus has arrived in town and the house he is staying at has been overrun with people who are eager to hear him teach and to see him (hopefully) perform a miracle. Mark points out that not only is the house full, but people are spilling out of the door and onto the front lawn. As Jesus is teaching, four men arrive on the scene and they are carrying a fifth man, their friend, who is paralyzed and restricted to being carried around on a mat. They are desperate to get in to see Jesus and to plead their friend's case that he needs healing. But they can't even get to the door, let alone through it. They are persistent though, and after some hurried conversation, land on the idea of climbing up to the roof, making a hole above the room that Jesus is in, and lowering their friend down right in front of Jesus. Surely, he would have to pause to deal with that. And so they do. They climb onto the roof, they cut a hole somehow, and they lower their friend down right in front of Jesus. When the mat touches the ground, all four faces eagerly and expectantly peer into the hole to see what Jesus will do.

I don't imagine that Jesus is surprised by many things, but this might be a new one for him. But he knows what is going on. He sees the man and his need, and he sees the friends and their need. And he offers the best solution to it that he can. He looks down at this frightened and helpless man, and with great kindness in his eyes and voice says, "My child, your sins are forgiven." What a great and wonderful gift! Being healed in your physical body is one thing, but to be healed in your soul and spirit? Well, that is the jackpot. With that gift given, it doesn't really matter that there are still physical ailments. I think that the man and his friends would have been content, thankful, and feeling blessed at that moment.

But there are others in the room who are not impressed by what they see and hear. The teachers of religious law – the ones who enforced a strict and legalistic adherence to the Mosaic law, are upset. Who does this Jesus fellow think he is?

Only God has the authority and power to forgive sins. Anyone else making such a claim is speaking blasphemy because they are basically claiming to be God.

Jesus knows what is on their minds and heart, even though they didn't speak the words out loud, and he uses this as a teaching moment. He responds to their unspoken thoughts with the spoken word of asking which is harder: to forgive sins, or to offer complete healing? Of course, the answer is that both are equally impossible for anyone who is not God (which is everybody). Jesus steps across that line and gives not only forgiveness, but also physical healing, and by doing both, proclaims his divine authority. The man gets up, picks up his mat, and walks out of the house – not doubt to be rejoined by his four buddies, who then all go off to have a celebration over the miracle they have just experienced.

Jesus has the power to forgive sins.

Who You Forgive:

Why am I telling you this story from the Scriptures? It is because this is what came into my mind when I read the verses from John 20 that we read just a few moments ago. Let me read them for us again...

²¹ Again he [Jesus] said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." ²² Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (NLT)

Do you see the connection, and the problem? The religious leaders were not wrong in their understanding that only God could forgive sins; they were just wrong in their understanding of who Jesus is. In that upper room after Jesus' resurrection, there is a commissioning service of sorts. The disciples, and as we read these words for ourselves today, Christians, are being sent out into the world just as Jesus had been sent by the Father. Then Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them, with the pronouncement that anyone they forgive will be forgiven, and anyone they don't forgive will not be forgiven. Since we have that same Holy

Spirit in us as Christians today, we are also the recipients of that same pronouncement.

But I am not God. And honestly, I am pretty sure I should not be entrusted with the authority to be the final word on whether someone has been forgiven of their sins or not. It sounds nice, but I am still human. I am still flawed. And there is a streak of pettiness that still lingers within me. I imagine you are in a similar state.

So how are we to understand this passage and this instruction for us? Are we to go around passing judgement on humanity? How do we decide someone's worthiness? How do we look past our own wounds to allow for grace to be visited on someone? How do we reconcile it when one believer would extend forgiveness to someone, while another would withhold it from that same person?

All I can do is fall back on the truth that only God can forgive sins, and it is only God who has the grace and the perspective to do so.

Conclusion:

I think that we need to see this passage from a slightly different angle. I am not suggesting that we re-write Scripture, but that we read it with a different perspective. In Matthew 6, we have Jesus giving instructions on how to pray. In that prayer (the Lord's prayer) we read the line "forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us." Listen to what Jesus then says in verse 14 and 15: "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Here is the thing: How can anyone know the forgiveness of God, if they do not see it in those who claim to follow Him? As believers, we are to be the light of Christ in the world. We are to be His hands and His feet. We are to go into the world, as He was sent into the world. He was sent to reveal the kingdom of God, and to bring forgiveness to the world. How does it look then, when we fail to do those things? When we hold onto grudges, when we judge others without knowing the

fullness of their lives, when we claim to have the only and correct understanding of Scripture and God, we fail to act in a way that reveals Christ.

In that light, of course people will not be forgiven – they haven't seen it being offered and they don't know it is possible. If we as Christians believe that we have been forgiven, then we should know the absolute freedom and release of the burden and weight of sin that comes with forgiveness. Why wouldn't we desire that same thing for everyone else? If there is hope for even a sinner such as I, then there is hope for that person who I am holding a grudge against, or the person whose life choices I don't necessarily agree with. It is not up to me to be their judge; it is up to me to be their window to see Jesus' love for them.

Let me encourage you today to ask God where you are withholding forgiveness that needs to be given. Open yourself to the Holy Spirit to work on softening any hardness in your heart so that you may be able to be an agent of God's forgiveness in your sphere of influence.

To God be the glory, Amen.