

Peace, Purpose & Power

(Outline Courtesy of John Piper)

John 20:19-23 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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

- John 20:19-23, ESV

Introduction: A Clear and Stunning Display

All day the disciples were gathered together, wondering what would happen next, talking about the unbelievable reports. Mary Magdalene and the other women who had gone to the tomb had seen angels and then had even seen Jesus Himself. Peter and John had seen the empty tomb and the grave clothes. John believed Jesus was risen from the dead. Others were not sure. Jesus had told the women to tell His disciples He would meet them in Galilee. Was it safe for them to try to travel back home to Galilee? Was Jesus really alive? How would He travel back to Galilee? Why didn't He just show Himself to all of them?

Of course, we don't know exactly what was said in the disciples' conversations in the Upper Room. We know they were afraid and had locked the door out of fear. We know that some of them believed and some of them doubted. We know it had been an incredible day, following an incredibly stressful week of activity, expectation, loss, despair and confusion, beginning with the Triumphal entry the previous Sunday.

And then we know that Jesus miraculously walked into their midst and greeted them, "Peace be with you." Then, He showed them His hands and His side, to clear away any doubt about who He might be. This appearance by Jesus shows us His power and His graciousness. He had already appeared to the women and had already told His disciples He would meet them in Galilee. But He knew their faith was shaky. He knew they were struggling and afraid, and so He showed His power by walking into their midst despite the fact that the door was locked. Clearly, this man was not going to have to worry about being arrested and crucified again, if locked doors and walls couldn't stop Him. And He cared enough to not only go to His disciples in their doubt and confusion but also to show His wounds to them, including His pierced side, so they would know without doubt that He had conquered death and come back to them.

A. Peace

I. A Common Greeting

The greeting Jesus gave His disciples was the most common Hebrews greeting, "*Shalom Aleikhem*," "Peace be with you" or "Peace be upon you." This is still the way Jewish people in Israel greet each

other today. It's as common as hearing "Aloha" in Hawaii, which is a word that actually means love, peace and compassion.

Who knows how long people in Israel had been greeting each other in this way? This common and yet deeply meaningful way of greeting had been something the disciples had heard and said thousands of times in their lives.

What is interestingly missing here in this account is a response to Jesus' greeting. In Jewish custom, *Shalom Aleikhem* is replied with *Aleikhem Shalom*. In fact, some rabbis say that to fail to respond to the giving of peace in this way is to steal the peace from the other person, because you haven't returned it to them. And yet here we have no recorded response from the disciples. I suppose that's not surprising, given their shock.

So, Jesus shows His wounds to them to confirm His identity and then He greets them again, "Peace be with you."

2. An Uncommon Blessing

While *Shalom Aleikhem* was and is a common greeting, Jesus was not just tritely greeting them with a casual "Howdy!" His greeting of them had profound significance. In fact, we could even say that Jesus' greeting of the disciples on this first Resurrection Day was the fulfillment of the wish expressed in this common greeting exchanged for thousands of years.

In the resurrection of Jesus, salvation has been accomplished. Romans 4:25 says Jesus "*was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*" With the payment for sin being made and the resurrection unto eternal life being accomplished by Jesus, we now have true peace. Thus, Jesus' greeting was, unlike all others, not the expression of a wish but the true imparting of a real gift of lasting, eternal peace.

Here's what New Testament scholar G.R. Beasley-Murray wrote about Jesus' *Shalom* greeting on this Resurrection Day –

It is well known that that was (and still is) the everyday greeting of Jews in Palestine – '*Shalom* to you!' But this was no ordinary day. . . . Never had that 'common word' been so filled with meaning as when Jesus uttered it on Easter evening. All that the prophets had poured into *shalom* as the epitome of the blessings of the kingdom of God had essentially been realized in the redemptive deeds of the incarnate Son of God, 'lifted up' for the salvation of the world. "His '*Shalom!*' on Easter evening is the completion of 'It is finished' on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is now imparted. '*Shalom!*' accordingly is supremely the Easter greeting. Not surprisingly it is included, along with 'grace,' in the greeting of every epistle of Paul in the NT.

As we saw this past summer in our series on the Songs of Ascents in the Psalms, peace was the central longing and the culminating blessing of worship for Israel. The people of Israel went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times per year to worship the Lord and be with His people. The high point of the worship was the blessing the priests would pronounce on the people, which God gave them in Numbers 6:22-27 –

22 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 23 “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

24 The LORD bless you and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

27 “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” (ESV)

In the Gospel, because of the person and work of Jesus, God gives us a three-fold peace:

1. He gives us peace with Himself, as our sins are forgiven, we are declared not guilty, and we are adopted as His children forever.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” – Romans 5:1-2, ESV

2. He gives us peace with one another, as we are reconciled to Him and to one another in the body of Christ:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” – Eph. 2:14-15, ESV

3. He gives us His peace as our peace of heart and mind within ourselves:

“The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 4:5-7, ESV

Now, we may not always experience the realities of this three-fold peace, but Jesus has secured this peace for us and gives this peace to us through the Gospel.

B. Purpose

As soon as Jesus repeats His pronouncement of peace to the disciples, He gives them their new purpose for living, in John’s version of The Great Commission: *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”*

I. What Now?

The disciples had to be immediately wondering, “What now?” If Jesus was really alive again and standing in their midst, what did this mean for them and their hopes and plans for the future. Everything seemed

to be completely crushed when Jesus died and was buried. So, now what? Would Jesus start preaching publicly again, doing miracles again, essentially picking up right where He left off? How would the Jewish authorities respond?

So, before they even have a chance to ask their questions about what now, Jesus tells them, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” Here in just a few short words, they are told their commission and their mission, of their authority and their ministry priorities:

1. Jesus Himself was sending them with His own authority, just as the Father had sent Jesus from heaven to earth. To be an “apostle” is to be a sent one, and these disciples were now being commissioned to be apostles, sent by Jesus on His authority to represent Him and His kingdom.
2. As they were sent by Jesus, their ministry priorities would be the same as His. They would proclaim the kingdom of God by preaching the Gospel and calling people to “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” This was Jesus’ highest priority and would be their highest priority, too. And just as Jesus demonstrated the reality and power of the kingdom by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, casting out demons, setting the oppressed free, and doing other works of mercy and kindness, the apostles would do the same.

In fact, the Holy Spirit would empower the apostles to do many of the very same things Jesus did – even raising the dead, something both Peter and Paul did. Pentecost itself, recorded in Acts 2, can be seen as a corollary to the Feeding of the 5,000, only instead of feeding people bread and fish, Peter feeds the multitudes with the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, and 3,000 souls are to the church.

2. Jesus’ Replacements?

But we should not understand the disciples, now apostles, as replacements for Jesus. It’s not like the spiritual equivalent of a tag-team wrestling match, with Jesus tagging out to go back to heaven and the apostles taking His place in doing earthy ministry. This is where the old idea of “Apostolic Succession” is mistaken. The Apostles don’t take the place of Christ, and they don’t pass their apostolic office down to anyone else either.

Rather than replacements, the apostles are commissioned as unique leaders and foundational members of the body of Christ. They are Christ’s emissaries, and the work Christ began in His earthly ministry, He continues through them.

The church today remains the body of Christ and His ambassadors in this world, representing Him and His kingdom. While the apostles had a unique role as those personally commissioned and sent by Christ with His authority, the church today continues to operate under the same commission with the same mission. We are sent into the world by Christ, just as the Father sent Christ into the world.

So, we are to have the same ministry priorities: Preach the Gospel. Proclaim the kingdom of Christ. Demonstrate the power and compassion of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and setting the oppressed free. The church has sometimes done this very well: proclaiming the Gospel and planting churches, while also establishing hospitals, doing medical missions, caring for widows and orphans,

working to abolish slavery, and set captives free. Sadly, at other times, we have had other priorities and have been too busy building our own kingdoms and seeking our own glory.

C. Power

If the disciples' first question was "What now?" their second might have been "How?" How could they represent Christ and do His work in the world? They had not exactly shown a brilliant track record. They had failed repeatedly to understand, believe and do what Jesus had told them. Just a couple of days ago, they had all fled when Jesus was arrested, and Peter had vehemently denied even knowing Jesus.

So, Jesus shows them how they will have the power to fulfill their purpose.

I. A Promise

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This verse can cause some confusion: Is Jesus actually giving the disciples the Holy Spirit here? If so, how does this scene relate to Pentecost, which comes almost 50 days later, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples? Why would Jesus tell His disciples, right before His ascension, to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit, if He had already given the Holy Spirit to them?

The best way to understand what's happening here is that Jesus is giving them a demonstration of promise: He is repeating His promise of the Holy Spirit with an enactment, a demonstration, by breathing. Despite the ESV's rendering, which matches almost every English translation, the best translation is simply "he breathed" and not "he breathed on them."

Earlier, when Jesus taught on the Holy Spirit, He told His disciples He had to go away in order to send the Holy Spirit, tying the gift of the Holy Spirit to the ascension of Christ and His seating at the Father's right hand in heaven. And after this breathing here in John 20, we don't see a radical transformation in the disciples, as we would expect if they had indeed received the Holy Spirit. Rather, in the next chapter, they go back to fishing. This is why Jesus tells them, in Acts I, to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Spirit.

So, Jesus is giving them a promise here.

2. A Needed Provision

But the promise He makes is an important one, a vitally necessary one. The disciples will be entirely unable to go into the world representing Jesus and doing His work unless they have the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling them.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, and He indwells all believers. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we are given the gift of faith, united to Christ by faith, receive the full benefits of Christ's redemption, applied to us, are filled with the powerful presence of Christ, and are gifted for service in His kingdom. We cannot become children of God without the Holy Spirit, who is called the Spirit of Adoption in Romans 8, and we cannot minister in the name of Jesus and for His glory without the Holy Spirit.

If we do receive the Holy Spirit, we are children of God and we are authorized and empowered to be ambassadors for Christ in this world. And so Jesus tells the disciples: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”*

Does Jesus mean that the disciples can simply decide who gets to be forgiven and who doesn't? And do we have this same power? Did they get to decide who would go to heaven? Do we? Well, no. But yes, in a sense.

This promise needs to be connected to the commission that was given and to the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. If we do that, we can see that this is a Gospel-proclamation authority. We are given the good news of the Gospel to proclaim to a world that is at enmity with God and needs His forgiveness. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way anyone can ever receive true forgiveness from God.

If we look at the Book of Acts, we see the apostles living out this Gospel commission and we see people responding to the power and authority of their proclamation empowered by the Holy Spirit:

1. At Pentecost in Acts 2, we see Peter preach the Gospel and the crowd is cut to the heart and responds, *“Brothers, what shall we do?”* and Peter tells them: *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

2. Then, later in Acts 16, Paul and Silas are in prison in Philippi, and the Philippian jailer hears them singing and praising God at midnight when an earthquake looses their chains and throws open the prison doors. The jailer thinks they have escaped and he prepares to kill himself, when Paul tells him to stop and assures him that they are still in the prison. The Philippian jailer is convicted by their testimony and asks, *“What must I do to be saved?”* Paul tells him, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”*

Later, Paul writes in Romans 1:15-17:

I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (ESV)

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. The preaching of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit opens the door of the kingdom of heaven.

This is how Jonathan Edwards powerfully pleaded with people in his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of a Angry God” in 1741 –

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south;

many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a condition? Are not your souls as precious as the souls of the people at Suffield, where they are flocking from day to day to Christ?

Are there not many here who have lived long in the world, and are not to this day born again? And so are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and have done nothing ever since they have lived, but treasure up wrath against the day of wrath? Oh, sirs, your case, in an especial manner, is extremely dangerous. Your guilt and hardness of heart is extremely great. Do you not see how generally persons of your years are passed over and left, in the present remarkable and wonderful dispensation of God's mercy? You had need to consider yourselves, and awake thoroughly out of sleep. You cannot bear the fierceness and wrath of the infinite God.—And you, young men, and young women, will you neglect this precious season which you now enjoy, when so many others of your age are renouncing all youthful vanities, and flocking to Christ? You especially have now an extraordinary opportunity; but if you neglect it, it will soon be with you as with those persons who spent all the precious days of youth in sin, and are now come to such a dreadful pass in blindness and hardness.— And you, children, who are unconverted, do not you know that you are going down to hell, to bear the dreadful wrath of that God, who is now angry with you every day and every night? Will you be content to be the children of the devil, when so many other children in the land are converted, and are become the holy and happy children of the King of kings?

Will you hear the pleading of Christ for your souls today? And will those of us who have received His mercy plead with others with passionate urgency, even as Peter and Paul and Jonathan Edwards did?