

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
20:19-23

19. Then the same day at evening, being the first *day* of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them, Peace *be* unto you. 20. And when he had said this, he showed them *his* hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21. Then Jesus said to them again, Peace be unto you; as *my* Father has sent me, even so I send you. 22. And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and said to them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. 23. Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted to them; and whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained.

19.--[*Then the same day, etc.*] This verse describes our Lord Jesus Christ's first appearance to the Apostles, in a body, after He rose from the dead. It took place in the evening of the same Sunday when He had appeared to Mary Magdalene in the morning. Between that morning and that evening He had already appeared three times--once to the company of women returning from the sepulchre, as described by St. Matthew; once to Simon Peter, as we are told by St. Luke and St. Paul; and once to the two disciples walking to Emmaus. (Matt. 28:9, Luke 24:34, 1 Cor. 15:5, Luke 24:13, etc.) This, therefore, was the fifth appearance that our Lord graciously vouchsafed. Each of the five appearances, we should observe, was peculiar in its circumstances and unlike the others. We need not wonder that this Sunday, from the earliest ages, was always marked by the Church as a day which ought to be had in remembrance and kept with peculiar honor.

The beginning of the verse would be more literally rendered, "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week." The precise *hour* is not specified; but, considering all things, it seems probable that it was after sunset and when it was dark, in order to avoid observation. The *cause* of the disciples assembling, we may reasonably suppose, was the tidings received from no less than four distinct sets of witnesses, that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive. It would have been strange indeed if they did not assemble on hearing such news. The *place* where the disciples assembled is not mentioned. But at a time like the passover feast, it would not be difficult to find some "upper room" where ten men might meet together. I can see no improbability in the supposition that the very room where the Lord's Supper was instituted on the previous Thursday evening might be the same room where the disciples gathered together on Sunday night. The words of St. Mark incline me to think that the person to whom the "upper room" belonged was one of those Jews who were friendly to Christ, though he had not courage to confess Him openly. (Mark 14:13-15.)

That the doors should be shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, is a circumstance that need not surprise us. The Apostles might well regard their lives as being in imminent danger when they remembered how their Master had just been treated. Moreover, the story of the guard that was placed around the tomb--that "the disciples had stolen

the body of Jesus"--might reasonably incline them to expect further ill treatment themselves. They did their best therefore to avoid observation, and closed the doors of the room where they assembled after sunset.

Concerning the precise manner in which our Lord appeared to the disciples, there is no little difference of opinion. (a) Some think, as Calvin and many of the divines of the seventeenth century, that He suddenly caused the doors to open, passed through them when open, and suddenly stood in the midst of the company assembled. (b) Some think, as Chrysostom, Cyril, Augustine, the Romanists, and nearly all Lutherans, that the doors continued fastened, and that our Lord miraculously appeared standing in the room where the disciples were, instantaneously, in a moment, and without notice. I do not know that it signifies much which view we take. *In either case a miracle was worked.* Our Lord's risen body must evidently have had a power of moving from one place to another, and of being visible or invisible as He thought fit, according to His good pleasure, after a manner that we cannot understand. In any case, we must carefully remember that it was a real material body--a body that could be touched, felt, seen, and handled, and yet a supernatural and peculiar body. With such a body it was as easy for our Lord to appear suddenly standing in the middle of the room, while the doors remained fastened, as it was to open the doors (as He did the doors of Peter's prison), and to walk into the room like any other man. To my own mind there is no proof positive either way, and I must leave it to my readers to choose for themselves. One thing alone we must not forget. Even if our Lord did appear in the room without unfastening the doors, it is no proof that He can be literally, and locally, and corporally present in the Lord's Supper under the forms of bread and wine. Moreover, it does not follow, because He could move from place to place invisibly, that His body could ever be in more than one place at one and the same time. When He rose from the dead, He rose with a body of a far more spiritual kind than He had before, but a body for all that which was a real human body, and not a mere seeming and shadowy body like that of a ghost or a spirit.

The first words that our Lord spoke to the disciples afford a beautiful proof of His loving, merciful, tender, thoughtful, pitiful, and compassionate spirit. He said "Peace be unto you." That expression, in my opinion, must on no account be taken as a mere formal salutation without meaning. It was intended to reassure and cheer the minds of the disciples by exhibiting at once His mind towards them. Not a word of reproof, rebuke, fault-finding, or blame falls from our Lord's lips, notwithstanding all their sad faint-heartedness and desertion on the preceding Thursday night. All is forgiven and forgotten. The very first word is "Peace." This was almost the last word that our Lord had spoken on Thursday night before He prayed: "These things I have spoken that in Me ye might have peace" (John 16:33). This was the last legacy He had left His disciples. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:27). Can we doubt that this comfortable word would cheer and calm the minds of the little company when our Lord suddenly appeared? "Once more I stand among you, and once more I proclaim peace--not excommunication, not rejection from my friendship, not rebuke, but peace." We cannot realize the fullness of comfort that the word would supply unless we bear in mind the events of the last few days, and especially the conduct of the Apostles

on the night before the crucifixion when, after loudly professing their faithfulness, they all "forsook Him and fled."

The parallel account in St. Luke would lead us to conclude that there were others present on this occasion beside the Apostles. He speaks of "them that were with them" (Luke 24:33).

20.--[*And when He had said this, etc.*] After speaking, our Lord proceeded most graciously to supply tangible evidence that He had really risen from the dead and stood before His disciples with a material living body. When it says that He showed them His hands and side, we cannot doubt that He invited them to touch Him. In fact St. Luke, when describing this very same interview, expressly records that our Lord said, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones, as ye see I have" (Luke 24:39).

The mention of the hands and side points clearly to the wounds made by the nails on the one, and by the spear in the other. Those wounds appeared visibly and unmistakably in His risen body, and our blessed Master was not ashamed of them. Even in the glory of heaven, according to Revelation, John saw Him appear as a "Lamb that had been slain" (Rev. 5:6). I think we need not doubt that when He ascended up into heaven, those wounds went with Him, and they are a perpetual witness to angels that He has actually suffered for man's sins. When we see His real presence in the day of His appearing, we shall see "the man Christ Jesus," and see the marks of His crucifixion. I give this, however, as my private opinion, and I think it is fair to say that many divines think differently. For instance, Calvin strongly holds that our Lord's "use of the wounds was only temporary, until the Apostles were fully convinced, and that His glorified body is without them." I cannot, however, agree with him. After a great victory, the scars of a conqueror are marks of honor.

Concerning the actual condition of our Lord's wounds, it becomes us to speak reverently. A very slight acquaintance with surgery will tell us, of course, that a lacerated wound in the hand or foot, or a deep wound in the side inflicted on Friday would naturally, to say the least, be very painful and inflamed on Sunday night. But we must carefully remember that our Lord's risen body, though a real and material body, was evidently not subject to all the conditions of an ordinary human body, or of His own body before His death. It was, in fact, such a body as we may hope to have when we rise again. We may therefore conclude that the wounds made by the nails and spear were not wounds that were sore and inflamed, though it is equally certain that they were not closed up and only scars left behind.

How it was that the two disciples going to Emmaus did not recognize our Lord by the wounds in His hands and feet is a question that admits of two answers. Either we must suppose that "their eyes were holden," and that they were miraculously unable to discern who it was who walked with them and did not even know Him by His voice; or else we must suppose that our Lord's hands and feet were covered during the walk, and that they only saw the wounds in His hands when He broke the bread. St. Mark's account would lead us to believe that our Lord was pleased to assume another body on the way to Emmaus. He says, "He appeared in another form" (Mark 16:12).

The expression "were glad when they saw" would be more literally rendered "rejoiced seeing" and "having seen." I cannot myself think that these words fulfilled our Lord's saying, "I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice" (John 16:22). That joy, I believe, is the joy of the whole Church at the Lord's second advent, and is yet to come. It is a joy of which our Lord said, "No man takes it from you." I believe the phrase before us simply means that the disciples were greatly delighted, and that they rejoiced when they saw before them their risen Master. It relieved their anxious minds, revived their hopes, and set at rest all their fears. "Our Master is actually alive again and has overcome death. Now all will be right."

We should not fail to observe how our Lord condescended to satisfy the senses of His disciples--the sense of sight and the sense of touch--when He showed Himself to them after His resurrection. If their senses had contradicted the news that His body had risen again to life, He would not have required them to believe it. Things above reason and sense, the Gospel calls on us to believe often; things contrary to reason and sense, never. This is precisely what we should remember when a Romanist bids us believe that the consecrated wafer in the Lord's Supper is the real Body of Christ. Sense, sight, taste, and chemical analysis combine to tell us that the wafer is still bread. The Romanist, therefore, has no right to demand our belief.

Rollock remarks: "When I mark this place, I see in it what then shall be the estate of the godly when they shall meet with their Lord. The first sight shall so ravish them that they shall wonder there ever could be such glory."

21.--[*Then Jesus said...again, etc.*] In this verse our Lord proceeds to tell the disciples the work that He now wished them to do, but in general terms. He meant to send them forth into the world to be His ministers, messengers, and witnesses, even as the Father had sent Him into the world to be His messenger and witness. (Heb. 3:1, John 18:37.) As He had gone up and down preaching the Gospel, testifying against the evil of the world, and proclaiming rest and peace to the heavy laden, so He intended them to go up and down as soon as He had ascended up into heaven. In short, He at once prepared their minds for the work that was before them. They were to dismiss from their minds the idea that the day of ease and reward had come, now that their Master had risen and was with them once more. So far from that being the case, their real work was now to begin. He Himself was about to leave the world, and He meant them to take His place. And one purpose for which He appeared among them was to give them their commission.

The repetition of the salutation "Peace be unto you" is very noteworthy. I cannot doubt that it was specially intended to cheer, comfort, and animate the disciples. Glad as they doubtless were to see the Lord, we may easily believe that they were frightened and overcome by a mixture of feelings; and the more so when they remembered how they had behaved when they had last seen their Lord. Jesus read the condition of their hearts and mercifully makes assurance doubly sure by repeating the gracious words "Peace be unto you," just as Joseph said to Pharaoh, "the thing was

doubled" in order to make it sure and prevent the possibility of mistake.

Augustine says: "The iteration is confirmation. It is the 'peace upon peace' promised by the prophet" (Isa. 57:19).

It is curious that two entirely different Greek words are used to express the English "sent" and "send" in this verse. Parkhurst says that the word used where our Lord says "My Father has sent Me" is a more *solemn* word than the one used when our Lord says "I send you." Yet I do not think this is proved; and certainly Liddell and Scott flatly contradict the idea. At any rate, the second or less solemn word is repeatedly used in St. Luke [*sic*; John?] in the most solemn sense. (John 5:23,24,30.) It is just one of those things that we ought to notice, but cannot explain. There is doubtless some reason why two words are used, but what it is has not yet been discovered.

22.--[*And when He had said...breathed, etc.*] In this verse our Lord proceeds to confer a special gift on the disciples and, as it were, to ordain them for the great work which He intended them to do. And we have in it a remarkable emblematic action and a no less remarkable saying.

The action of our Lord--"He breathed on them"--is one that stands completely alone in the New Testament, and the Greek word is nowhere else used. On no occasion but this do we find the Lord "breathing" on anyone. Of course it was a symbolic action, and the only question is, "What did it symbolize and why was it used?" My own belief is that the true explanation is to be found in the account of man's creation in Genesis. There we read, "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Just as there was no life in man until God breathed into him the breath of life, so I believe our Lord taught the disciples by this action of breathing on them that the beginning of all ministerial qualification is to have the Holy Spirit breathed into us; and that, until the Holy Ghost is planted in our hearts, we are not rightly commissioned for the work of the ministry.

I do not, however, feel sure that this view completely exhausts the meaning of our Lord, when He breathed on the disciples. I cannot forget that they had all forsaken their Master the night that He was taken prisoner, fallen away from their profession, and forfeited their title to confidence as Apostles. May we not therefore reasonably believe that this breathing pointed to a *revival of life* in the hearts of the Apostles and to a restoration of their privileges as trusted and commissioned messengers, notwithstanding their grievous fall? I cannot help suspecting that this lesson was contained in the action of breathing. It not only symbolized the infusion for the first time of special ministerial gifts and graces, but it also symbolized the restoration to complete power and confidence in their Master's eyes, even after their faith had so nearly breathed its last and given up the ghost. The first symptom of returning life, when a man is recovered from drowning, is his beginning to breathe again. To set the lungs breathing, in such cases, is the first aim of a skillful doctor.

When we remember that the wind is preeminently an emblem of the Holy Ghost

(John 3:8, Ezek. 37:9, Acts 2:2), we cannot fail to see that there is a beautiful fitness in the symbolic action which our Lord has employed.

Lampe thinks that our Lord breathed on all the disciples at once and not on each one separately. It is probable that it was so, in my judgment.

Hooker remarks (Eccles. Pol.6, v.c.77): "The cause why we breathe not, as Christ did on the disciples to whom He imparted power, is that neither Spirit nor spiritual authority may be thought to proceed from us, who are but delegates and assigns to give men possession of His grace."

The words "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" are almost as deep and mysterious as the action of breathing. They can only signify "I bestow on you the Holy Ghost." But in what sense the Holy Ghost was bestowed is a point that demands attention, and we must beware that we do not run into error.

(a) Our Lord cannot have meant that the disciples were now to receive the Holy Ghost for the first time. They had doubtless received Him in the day when they were first converted and believed. Whether they realized it or not, the Holy Ghost was in their hearts already. "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3).

(b) Our Lord cannot have meant that the disciples were now to receive the Holy Ghost for the purpose of working miracles and speaking with tongues. They had worked many miracles already, and the gift of speaking with tongues was specially conferred afterward, on the day of Pentecost, when they were endued with power from on high.

(c) Our Lord, in my opinion, must have meant, "Receive the Holy Ghost as the Spirit of knowledge and understanding." He must have meant that He now conferred on them a degree of light and knowledge of divine truth which up till now they had not possessed. They had been greatly deficient in light and knowledge up to this time. With all their faith and love toward our Lord's Person, they had been sadly ignorant of many things, and particularly of the true purpose of His coming and the necessity of His death and resurrection. "Now," says our Lord, "I bestow on you the Spirit of knowledge. Let the time past suffice to have seen through a glass darkly. Receive the Holy Ghost, open your eyes and see all things clearly." In fact, I believe the words point to the very thing that St. Luke says our Lord did on this occasion: "Then opened He their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Light was the first thing made in the day of creation. Light in the heart is the first beginning of true conversion. And light in the understanding is the first thing required in order to make a man an able minister of the New Testament. Our Lord was commissioning His first ministers and sending them out to carry on His work. He begins by giving them light and knowledge: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. I commission you this day and confer on you the office of ministers. And the first gift I confer on you is spiritual knowledge." That this is the true view of the words is proved to my own mind by the extraordinary difference in doctrinal knowledge which from this day the Apostles exhibited.

Theophylact thinks that our Lord only meant, "Become fit for receiving the

Holy Ghost." This seems weak and poor.

The expression before us is one of those that seem to me to supply strong indirect proof of the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Ghost from the Son as well as from the Father. It seems to me that when the Lord Jesus Christ could say with authority "Receive the Holy Ghost," it is very strange to say that the Holy Ghost does not proceed from Him! Yet the Greek Church does not admit this.

The expression before us is one that, strictly speaking, no one but our Lord Jesus Christ could use. It is evident that no mortal man has the power of conferring the Holy Ghost upon another. This is a prerogative of God alone and of His Christ. When, therefore, the ordination service for Presbyters, in the Church of England Prayer-book, puts into the Bishop's mouth these solemn words "Receive the Holy Ghost," I have never felt a doubt that the compilers of our Liturgy only meant the words to be used as in an optative, and not a positive sense, as a *prayer*: "I pray that you may receive the Holy Ghost." Archbishop Whitgift in his reply to the objections of the famous Cartwright says: "To use these words in ordaining of ministers, which Christ Himself used in appointing His Apostles, is no more ridiculous and blasphemous than it is to use the words that he used in the Lord's Supper." "The Bishop, by speaking these words, does not take upon him to give the Holy Ghost no more than he does to remit sins when he pronounces the remission of sins; but by speaking these words of Christ, he does show the principal duty of a minister, and assures him of the assistance of God's Holy Spirit, if he labor in the same accordingly." (See Blakeney on the Common Prayer, p. 513.) While, however, I say this, I shall never shrink from expressing my regret that the words "Receive the Holy Ghost" were adopted by the compilers of our Prayer-book. They do not trouble my conscience, but I consider them likely to offend the consciences of many, and I think it would have been wiser to throw them distinctly and unmistakably into the form of a prayer. It is a simple historical fact, which ought not to be forgotten, that these words were never used in the ordination of ministers for more than a thousand years after Christ! (See Nicholls and Blakeney on the Common-Prayer.)

One practical lesson, at any rate, is very plain in this expression. The first thing that is necessary in order to make a man a true minister of the Gospel is the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. Bishops and presbyters can lay hands on men and make them clergymen. The Holy Ghost alone can make a "man of God," and a minister of God's Word.

23.--[*Whose soever sins ye remit, etc.*] In this verse our Lord continues and concludes the commission for the office of ministers which He now, after rising from the dead, gives to His Apostles. His work as a public Teacher was now finished. The Apostles henceforth were to carry it on. The words which form this commission are very peculiar and demand close attention. The meaning of the words, I believe, may be paraphrased thus: "I confer on you the power of declaring and pronouncing authoritatively whose sins are forgiven and whose sins are not forgiven. I bestow on you the office of pronouncing who are pardoned and who are not, just as the Jewish high priest pronounced who were clean and who were unclean in cases of leprosy." I believe that nothing more than this *authority to declare*

can be got out of the words, and I entirely repudiate and reject the strange notion maintained by some that our Lord meant to depute [assign] to the Apostles, or any others, the power of absolutely pardoning or not pardoning, absolving or not absolving, anyone's soul. My reasons for maintaining this view of the text are as follows:

(a) The power of forgiving sins in Scripture is always spoken of as the special prerogative of God. The Jews themselves admitted this when they said, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" (Mark 2:7, Luke 5:21). It is monstrous to suppose that our Lord meant to overthrow and alter this great principle when He commissioned His disciples.

(b) The language of the Old Testament Scripture shows conclusively that the Prophets were said to "DO" things when they "DECLARED" them about to be done. Thus Jeremiah's commission runs in these words: "I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). This can only mean to *declare* the rooting out and pulling down, etc. So also Ezekiel says "I came to destroy the city" (Ezek. 43:3), where the marginal reading is "I came to prophesy the city should be destroyed." The Apostles were doubtless well acquainted with prophetic language, and I believe they interpreted our Lord's words in this place accordingly.

(c) There is not a single instance in the Acts or Epistles of an Apostle taking on himself to absolve, pardon, or forgive anyone. The Apostles and preachers of the New Testament declare in the plainest language whose sin is pardoned and absolved, but they never take on themselves to pardon and absolve. When Peter said to Cornelius and his friends "Whosoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 16:43), when Paul said at Antioch in Pisidia "We declare to you glad tidings" and "Through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:32,38), and when Paul said to the Philippian jailor "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31), in each case they fulfilled the commission of the text before us. They "declared whose sins were remitted and whose were retained."

(d) There is not a single word in the three pastoral Epistles written by St. Paul to Timothy and Titus to show that the Apostle regarded absolution as part of the ministerial office. If it was he would surely have mentioned it, and urged the practice of it on young ministers for the relief of burdened souls.

(e) The weakness of human nature is so great that it is grossly improbable that such a tremendous power as that of absolutely pardoning and absolving souls would ever be committed to any mortal man. It would be highly injurious to any man to trust him with such a power, and would be a continued temptation to him to usurp the office of a Mediator between God and man.

(f) The experience of the Romish Church, in which the priests are practically regarded as having the power to absolve sinners and shut heaven against persons not absolved, affords the strongest indirect evidence that our Lord's words can only have meant to bear a "declarative" sense.

Anything worse or more mischievous, both to minister and people, than the results of the Romish system of penance and absolution it is impossible to conceive. It is a system that has practically degraded the laity, puffed up and damaged the clergy, turned people away from Christ, and kept them in spiritual darkness and bondage.

A question of no small interest arises out of the text before us, which it may be well to consider. Was the ministerial office and commission conferred on the Apostles by our Lord in this place an office which they transmitted to others, with all its privileges and powers?

I answer, without hesitation, that in the strictest sense the commission of the Apostles was not transmitted but was confined to them and St. Paul. I challenge anyone to deny that the Apostles possessed certain ministerial qualifications which were quite peculiar to them and which they could not transmit and did not transmit to others. (1) They had the gift of declaring the Gospel without error and with infallible accuracy to an extent that no one after them did. (2) They confirmed their teaching by miracles. (3) They were, some of them, plenary inspired by the Holy Ghost to write portions of the New Testament. (4) They had the power of discerning spirits and knowing the hearts of others to an extent that no one after them possessed, as we see in the case of Peter's dealing with Ananias, Sapphira, and Simon Magus. In all these respects they stood alone and had no successors. *In the strictest sense, there is no such thing as Apostolical succession.* Modern ministers are not successors of the Apostles, but of Timothy and Titus. The Apostles were peculiarly qualified, and gifted, and furnished for the very peculiar work they had to do as the first founders of Churches. But, in the strictest and most accurate sense, their office was one that was not transmitted. With them it began and with them it ended.

But while I say all this, I maintain as strongly as anyone that there is a sense in which the verse now before us applies to all Christian ministers, and in this sense their commission resembles that of the Apostles. It is the office of every minister of Christ to declare boldly, authoritatively, and with decision, out of God's Word, who they are whose sins are forgiven and who they are whose sins are retained. This is his commission, and this the work for which he is set apart and ordained. Whenever a minister in his pulpit proclaims the full Gospel of Christ faithfully, he does the work that our Lord in this verse commissioned the Apostles to do, and may take comfort in the thought that he may expect our Lord's blessing. He cannot do it with such infallible power as the Apostles, but in a sense he is really their follower and successor.

The whole subject opened up in this verse is so important in modern days that I make no apology for quoting the following passage from Bishop Jewell's Apology, which throws light on it.

Jewell says: "We say that Christ has given to His ministers the power of binding and loosing, of opening and shutting. And we say that the power of loosing consists in this: that the minister (by the preaching of the Gospel) offers to dejected minds and true penitents, through the merits of Christ, absolution and does assure them a certain remission of their sins

and the hopes of eternal salvation; or, secondly, reconciles, restores, and receives into the congregation and unity of the faithful those penitents who by any grievous scandal or known and public offense have offended the minds of their brethren, and in a sort alienated and separated themselves from the common society of the Church and the body of Christ. And we say the minister does exercise the power of binding or shutting when he shuts the gate of the kingdom of heaven against unbelievers and obstinate persons, and denounces to them the vengeance of God and eternal punishment; or excludes out of the bosom of the Church those who are publicly excommunicated. God Himself does so far approve whatever sentence His ministers shall so give, that whatsoever is either loosed or bound by their ministry here on earth He will in like manner bind or loose and confirm in heaven. The key with which these ministers do shut or open the kingdom of heaven, we say with St. Chrysostom, is *the knowledge of the Scripture*; with Tertullian, is *the interpretation of the law*; and with Eusebius, is *the Word of God*. We say the disciples of Christ received this power (from Him) not that they might hear the private confessions of the people and catch their whispering murmurs as the Popish priests everywhere now do (and that in such a manner as if all the force and use of the keys consisted only in this), but that they might go and preach and publish the Gospel, that so they might be a savor of life unto life to those who did believe, and that they might be also a savor of death unto death to those who did not believe; that the minds of those who were frightened with the sense of their former ill lives and errors, after they beheld the light of the Gospel and believed in Christ, might be opened by the Word of God, as doors are with a key; and that the wicked and stubborn who would not believe and return into the way might be left, shut up, and locked, and (as St. Paul expresses it in 2 Tim. 3:13) might "*wax worse and worse.*" *This* we take to be the meaning of the keys, and that in this manner the consciences of men are either bound or loosed.

Calvin observes: "When Christ enjoins [instructs] the Apostles to forgive sins, He does not convey to them what is peculiar to Himself. It belongs to Him to forgive sins. This honor, so far as it belongs peculiarly to Himself, He does not surrender to the Apostles. He only enjoins them, in His name, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, that through their agency He may reconcile men to God."

Brentius says: "This is the true and heavenly mode of remitting sins, to wit, the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who do not preach the Gospel of Christ have no power of either remitting or retaining sins."

Bullinger says: "The Apostles remitted men's sins when by the preaching of the Gospel they taught that the sins of believers were remitted, and eternal life granted through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They retained men's sins when they announced that the wrath of God remained on those who did not believe."

Gualter says: "At this day ministers are said to remit sins when they promise remission of them in Christ to those who believe, and to retain sins when they denounce damnation on the unbelieving and obstinately impenitent."

Musculus says that this promise does not belong "to every and any minister, but to the real minister of the Gospel, who teaches nothing and promises nothing else but this--that those who repent and believe on Christ have remission of sin and eternal life, and that those who are impenitent and unbelieving remain in their sins and death. Doctrine like this is ratified and confirmed before God, because it is agreeable to the Gospel of the Son of God."

Lightfoot thinks that in interpreting these words we must carefully remember that they were probably spoken in close connection with our Lord's words in St. Luke, when He says that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46). He thinks that on hearing these words, scruples might arise in the Apostles' minds: "Is this so indeed? Must remission of sin be really preached in Jerusalem to men stained with Messiah's blood?" And then he thinks these words are spoken to encourage them. "Yes, you are to begin at Jerusalem. For whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them." Finally, Lightfoot asks with much sense, "On what foundation and with what confidence could the Apostles have preached remission of sins to such wretched men as the murderers of their Lord, unless authorized by a peculiar commission granted by the Lord Himself?"

Poole says: "The question among divines is whether Christ in this text has given authority to His ministers actually to discharge men of the guilt of their sins, or only to declare to them that if their repentance and faith are true, that their sins are really forgiven. The former view is contended for by many. But it does not seem reasonable (1) that God should entrust man with such a piece of His prerogative, and (2) that God--who knows the falsehood of men's hearts and the inability of the best minister to judge the truth of any man's repentance and faith, as also the passions to which they are subject--should give to any of the sons of men an absolute power under Him to discharge any from the guilt of sin. It is certain that without true repentance and faith in Christ no man has his sins forgiven, and therefore no minister who does not know the hearts of men can possibly say to any man with certainty, '*Thy sins are forgiven.*' What certainty the Apostles might have had by the Spirit of discernment, we cannot say. But it is certain that no one now has such certainty of any man's faith and repentance. For that reason it is to me apparent that no man has any further power from Christ than to declare to men that if they truly repent and believe their sins are really forgiven. Only the minister, being Christ's interpreter and ambassador and better able to judge of true faith and repentance than others (though not certainly and infallibly), such declarations from a faithful able minister are of more weight and authority than from others. This is the most, I conceive, should be in this matter."

I leave the whole passage with one general word of caution. Whatever sense we place on the words, let us beware that we do not give to ministers, of any name or denomination, a place, power, authority, position, or privilege which Christ never gave them. Putting ministers out of their proper place has been the root of endless superstition and corruption in Christ's Church. To regard ministers as mediators between Christ and the soul, to confess to them privately and receive private absolution from them, is a

system for which there is no authority in the New Testament and is the high road to every kind of evil. It is a system equally mischievous to ministers and to people, utterly subversive of the Gospel, and thoroughly dishonoring to the priestly office of Christ.

The three absolutions found in the Liturgy of the Church of England--that in the Morning and Evening Prayer, that in the Communion Service, and that in the Visitation for the Sick--were all, in my judgment, intended to bear only a *declarative* sense. But I can never refrain from saying that the absolution in the Visitation Service is liable to be misunderstood, and its wording is to be regretted.

Shepherd, on the Common Prayer, remarks: "The Church of England neither maintains nor countenances the opinion that a priest, by virtue of his ordination, has an absolute, unconditional power to forgive sin. The power that the clergy has received and exercised is purely ministerial, being defined and limited by the Word of God, which expressly declares upon what condition sin shall be remitted and upon what retained. To suppose that any minister of Christ since the Apostles possesses the power of remitting or retaining sin at his discretion is repugnant to the whole tenor of Scripture, as well as to every dictate of reason and common sense."