

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



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Dear Brother Carter:

Could the apostles forgive sins? **John 20:20-23**

"20 When He had said this, He showed them [His] hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on [them], and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 **"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the [sins] of any, they are retained."**"

Answer:

Here are a few things to consider here.

1. In this passage, Jesus is sending the apostles out as His ambassadors.

This is what is indicated both by His breathing on them as a king would do when sending out ambassadors, and His statement in **verse 23**. The symbolism of breathing on your ambassadors was that you are putting your breath (words) into them and now they may speak on your behalf. Ambassadors could proclaim the terms of peace between parties. The Ambassadors did not determine those terms, but they were authorized to proclaim them to the "enemy".

2. It is clear that only God can forgive sins. Even the Scribes and Pharisees understood this.

"5 When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." 6 And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, 7 **"Why does this [Man] speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"** **Mark 2:5-7**

"20 When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." 21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, **"Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"**" **Luke 5:20-21**

"2 Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; **your sins are**

forgiven you." 3 And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, **"This Man blasphemeth!"** **Matthew 9:2-3**

God is the one who is offended by our sins and only He can grant forgiveness. However, the apostles, as His ambassadors, were given the authority to announce the terms of forgiveness to man. This they did in the book of **Acts**.

3. The book of Acts and the epistles give us no account or hint that the apostles could actually forgive sins like God.

What they do show is that the apostles announced the terms of pardon, nothing more and nothing less.

4. A good case in point is Simon the Sorcerer.

When Peter rebuked him for trying to buy the ability to pass on the miraculous gifts, he did not presume to absolve him of his sin. Instead, he told him to repent and pray to the Lord that if possible he may be forgiven.

"Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you." **Acts 8:22**

Simon responded by asking Peter to also pray to the Lord for him.

"Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." **Acts 8:24**

If Peter could actually forgive sins himself, this would have been a perfect time to do so. However, he left that to the Lord.

5. A similar thing is seen in Paul's ministry.

He said that through preaching, Jesus' forgiveness was proclaimed to them. He goes on to say that, by Him, everyone who believes is justified. Paul is not granting forgiveness, he is proclaiming the terms of forgiveness.

"38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the

forgiveness of sins; 39 "and by Him **everyone who believes is justified** from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses." **Acts 13:38-39**

Similarly, Paul tells Agrippa that Jesus sent him to the Gentiles to turn them to light that they may receive the forgiveness of sins.

Again he is not granting forgiveness, but proclaiming the terms of forgiveness.

"To open their eyes, [in] [order] to turn [them] from darkness to light, and [from] the power of Satan to God, **that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.**" **Acts 26:18**

Even when Paul recalls that all had deserted him, he doesn't pronounce forgiveness upon them but prays that it not be charged against them.

"At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. **May it not be charged against them.**" **I Timothy 4:16**

6. This is the consistent pattern throughout Acts and the epistles.

Even in **Revelation** as each of the seven churches is addressed, it is Jesus, not John, who is promising either forgiveness or judgment depending on their repentance.

7. Also consider that Paul disciplined his body daily to keep it in subjection lest after preaching to others he would become disqualified.

If he could forgive sins as an apostle, why would he have any worries about being a castaway? Couldn't he simply have granted himself forgiveness?

"But I discipline my body and bring [it] into subjection, **lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.**" **I Corinthians 9:27**

8. The apostle John writes that if we confess our sins, God forgives us.

Notice that God is doing the forgiving. Also notice that John says that "if WE confess our sins", which includes him. If the apostles could forgive sins, then there's no need for God to forgive sins. Further – John could forgive his own sin. But yet he includes himself as receiving forgiveness from God through confession of sin.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." **I John 1:9**

9. Finally consider what some of the commentators have said on this topic.

"It is certain God alone can forgive sins; and it would not only be blasphemous, but grossly absurd, to say that any creature could remit the guilt of a transgression which had been committed against the Creator. The apostles received from the Lord the doctrine of reconciliation, and the doctrine of condemnation. They who believed on the Son of God, in consequence of their preaching, had their sins remitted; and they who would not believe were declared to lie under condemnation." **Adam Clarke**

*"The power to forgive sin belongs only to God, but Jesus claimed to have this power and right (Mark 2:5-7). What he commits to the disciples and to us is the power and privilege of giving assurance of the forgiveness of sins by God by correctly announcing the terms of forgiveness. There is no proof that he actually transferred to the apostles or their successors the power in and of themselves to forgive sins. In **Matthew 16:19; 18:18** we have a similar use of the rabbinical metaphor of binding and loosing by proclaiming and teaching. Jesus put into the hands of Peter and of all believers the keys of the Kingdom which we should use to open the door for those who wish to enter."* **Robertson's Word Pictures**

"The meaning of the passage is not that man can forgive sins--that belongs only to God, but that they should be inspired; that in founding the church, and in declaring the will of God, they should be taught by the Holy Ghost to declare on what terms, to what characters, and to what temper of mind God would extend forgiveness of sins. It was not authority to forgive individuals, but to establish in all the churches the terms and conditions on which men might be pardoned, with a promise that God would confirm all that they taught; that all might have assurance of forgiveness who would comply with those terms; and that those who did not comply should not be forgiven, but that their sins should be retained. This commission is as far as possible from the authority which the Roman Catholic claims of remitting sin and of pronouncing pardon." **Barnes**

*"This text hath caused a great deal of contest. All remission of sins is either authoritative; so **it is most true, that none can forgive sin but God; and if we had no Scripture to prove it, yet reason will tell us none can discharge the debtor but the creditor, to whom the debt is owing**; or else ministerial; thus he who is not the creditor (amongst men) may remit a debt by virtue of a letter of attorney made to him, authorizing him so to do. The question therefore amongst divines is, Whether Christ in this text hath given authority to his ministers actually to discharge men of the guilt of their sins; or only to declare unto*

them, that if their repentance and faith be true, their sins are really forgiven them? The former is by many contended for; but it doth not seem reasonable,

1. *That God should entrust men with such a piece of his prerogative.*
2. *That God, who knoweth the falsehood of men's hearts, and the inability in the best ministers to judge of the truth of any man's faith or repentance, as also the passions to which they are subject, should give unto any of the sons of men an absolute power under him, and in his name, to discharge any from the guilt of sin; for certain it is, that without true repentance and faith in Christ no man hath his sins forgiven; so as no minister, that knoweth not the hearts of men, can possibly speak with any certainty to any man, saying, his sins are forgiven." Matthew Poole*

I think the rest of Scripture is pretty clear. It is God that we will all answer to, not the apostles,

"In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel" Romans 2:16

"10 But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God." 12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God." Romans 14:10-12

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things [done] in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." II Corinthians 5:10

"Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing." II Timothy 4:8

"They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." I Peter 4:5

"11 Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is [the] [Book] of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. 14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And

anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire." **Revelation 20:11-15**