

Ministry of the Keys

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 16:19

The following Bible study was written for those who are interested in understanding how lay people living out the priesthood of all believers have been called to use the Ministry of the Keys. The teacher should have a good understanding of objective justification and the priesthood of all believers. This study covers catechism questions 304-310 regarding the keys.

It includes several “Key Quotes” to serve as memory pegs for those using the study.

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Ministry of the Keys

Part 1

Part 1 Introduction and Key Passages; Catechism Background
Basic Definitions and Understanding (addresses Catechism Questions 304-310)

Part 2 Digging Deeper: The Binding Key and the Loosing Key

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, in your grace and love you have given us your Word as a light for our path, to guide us in our journey of life. But your Word gives us more than just direction, it gives us life itself. Your Word is the power and strength of the Church on earth, and it is ours as well. Thank you for this priceless gift, lead us to treasure it above all things. Make us diligent students and eager learners that we may grow in grace and wisdom. Open our hearts to understand your teaching about the keys that we may faithfully serve you with our gifts and the power of your almighty Word. Bless our study that all we say and learn is in keeping with your truth; let our hearts and words bring you glory and build our fellowship. In Jesus name, Amen.

Introduction

Here are some basic questions lay people have expressed in reaction to the idea of using the keys – any of them sound familiar?

- *I can't judge hearts, how can I be expected to know whether someone is truly repentant or not? What if I use the keys incorrectly and forgive an impenitent sinner, or don't forgive someone who is penitent?*
- *I'm no better than the next guy. Why am I supposed to judge? I have my own sins to deal with.*
- *My church council and pastor have the power and authority to excommunicate, so what do I have to do with this?*
- *A spiritual matter as important as this should be dealt with by the pastor. He is the one with the training and authority.*
- *How do I balance the binding key of the law to impenitent sinners with God's command to forgive the trespasses of others? How do I use that key and still pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who sin against us?"*

Key Passages for this teaching

Leader's Note: Ask for volunteers to read through these passages and allow participants a moment to jot down key points and questions they may have. Do not cover their questions at this time, but be prepared to discuss them at the end of the study. After the lesson is completed, they will be encouraged to share their questions and how they would answer them now that they have studied these truths. The goal is to give them an opportunity to verbalize what Scripture teaches in their own words.

John 20:22-23
Matthew 16:19
Matthew 18:18

*If you forgive, they are forgiven, if you do not, they are not
I give you the keys, whatever you bind..whatever you loose
Whatever you bind will be bound, what you loose will be loosed*

My Question(s) or Key Points I See:

The Catechism Background

The Ministry of Keys is a valuable and critical teaching of Scripture, yet it is seemingly unfamiliar to many lay people. Although it is taught clearly in the catechism, many believers dismiss this doctrine as something used only by called pastors. A study of this teaching will encourage believers to see the power of the Word and the high and holy calling that all Christians have received to share it with others.

Interestingly, Luther did not include this section (often referred to as the fifth chief part) in the original catechism. Many of Luther's works confirm his agreement with this teaching but it was added to the catechism later. Dr. Becker commented that, "The section on the ministry of the keys was not added by Luther and to this day it is not printed in the Small Catechism as it appears in the Book of Concord and is therefore not a part of the Lutheran confessions" (p. 2). Professor David Kuske, editor of Luther's Catechism (Northwestern Publishing House, 1982) stated that the questions about the keys can be traced to three early sources: Nuremberg (1531), Brenz (1535), and Pomerania (1569).

The catechism divides the teaching about the keys into three sections: the keys (questions 304-310), the public use of the keys (311-318) and confession (319-328). This study will address the first section on the keys, which includes a basic teaching of the keys. The section on the public use of the keys focuses on how a Christian congregation will use the keys through their pastor who is called to use the keys publicly on their behalf. The final section on the keys discusses the two parts of confession, namely confessing our sins and then receiving forgiveness with the firm belief that our sins are indeed forgiven.

The current (1982) catechism published in cooperation with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has a slight change in the first section of the keys. Festerling points out that, "Instead of 'What do you believe according to these words?' we have 'How does the Christian congregation use the Keys?'" The purpose for this change is... a desire to shift the emphasis from pastor to congregation, that is, the universal priesthood" (p. 4). Becker further explains that "In the fifth chief part of the catechism special emphasis is being laid on the individual personal application of law and gospel to the penitent and impenitent sinner" (p. 5).

It is in that spirit that we wish to consider the use of the keys, to further stress the active participation of lay people in sharing Law and Gospel with individuals. Embracing the universal priesthood we can treasure the keys given to all believers as we "shine among them like stars in the sky as [we] hold firmly to the word of life" (Philippians 2:15-16).

The Basic Definitions and Understanding

1. The office of the keys, also called the ministry of the keys, or the use of the keys:

The keys are the power to forgive and retain sin. Based on a person's impenitence or repentance, believers announce the Law, "*Unless you repent, you too will all perish*" (Luke 13:3), or the Gospel, "*Whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life*" (John 3:16). The catechism states, "The use of the keys is that special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth, to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to refuse forgiveness to the impenitent as long as they do not repent."

Koehler emphasizes that this is a spiritual power, “because it pertains to the spirit, the soul, of man; it imparts spiritual blessings, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation; it uses spiritual means, the Word of God; it has a spiritual aim, the eternal salvation of the soul. (p. 255).



“This is a spiritual power [that] uses spiritual means, the Word of God.”

Dr. Siegbert Becker makes an interesting comment on why they are called the keys. He writes, “Why the power of forgiving and retaining sins should be called ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven’ is surely clear to all of us. Adam and Eve were driven out of paradise and reentry was barred by the angel with the flaming sword that turned every way as a result of the fall into sin, giving concrete expression to the declaration of the prophet Isaiah, ‘Your iniquities have separated between you and your God’ (Is. 59:2). The door of heaven is still closed and locked to everyone whose sins still rest on him. But the door of heaven is unlocked and opened wide to all those whose sins are forgiven” (p. 3).

Leader’s Note: *Although the Ministry of the Keys emphasizes the Gospel, it does not minimize the necessity of the Law to reveal sin and the need for a Savior. It is not just the Law, nor is it only the Gospel, it is the truth that the Law condemns sinners and the Gospel forgives them. These keys truly lock or unlock the gates of heaven! A wide perspective of the keys could include evangelism and ministry work because they are tied to Law and Gospel. A common perspective is the work of pastors as they use the keys in their public ministry. However, for the purpose of this study we will focus on the keys as they are used by lay people to talk to fellow believers about sin.*

Discussion Questions:

- a) Define the Law in your own words, site a passage.
Answer: *What we are required to do/God’s demands*
- b) Define the Gospel in your own words, site a passage.
Answer: *What Christ did for us/God’s gift to us*
- c) How might the messages become mixed?
Answer: *Minimizing sin or adding our works to Christ’s atonement*

Leader’s Note: *Clearly this part of the study could be a quick review or a longer in-depth conversation. Each group has a different purpose and the leader can determine how much time to spend on this. It may, however, plant seeds for a desire to learn more about Law, Gospel and the distinction between the two!*

2. The keys were given to all believers, not just pastors

Matthew 16:19	<i>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven</i>
Matthew 18:18, 20	<i>Whatever you bind...whatever you loose</i>
John 20:21-23	<i>I am sending you, receive the Spirit, if you...</i>
1 Peter 2:9	<i>Called out of darkness to declare</i>
2 Corinthians 5:18-20	<i>He committed to us the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors</i>

The words of Matthew 16 were addressed to Peter in the final year of Jesus' earthly ministry; and the dialogue in Matthew 18 occurred sometime after the transfiguration of Christ. The words of John 20 were addressed to the disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday. The epistle texts were written by Peter and Paul respectively. All these texts and apostolic writers (including Peter himself) reflect the truth that all believers are entrusted with the keys and called to use them.



"a special power and right which Christ gave to his church in earth."

WELS pastors and many others agree that the Greek texts confirm Christ's intention was not to give the keys just to Peter as a spiritual leader, but to the whole Christian church which is founded on the Peter's confession of faith that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah. It is an important truth and distinction that the keys were given to the church, meaning all Christians, not just pastors or formal congregations. All believers have been called to share God's Word with others and so we are all entrusted with the keys of the Kingdom! The catechism reflects this truth when it refers to the keys as a "special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth."

Congregations also use the keys under the direction of their pastor in a formal way usually related to membership or attendance at the Lord's Supper but this is not the only use of the keys. More on this aspect of the keys is covered in the catechism section on the public use of the keys (questions 311-318).

Leader's Note: *There are two truths that co-exist. The keys belong to pastors and the leaders of the church as they carry out church discipline and the responsibilities of the church with order according to their callings. This would include formal actions such as excommunication, membership action and the use of the Sacraments. However, the keys have also been given to each believer to use as they have opportunity in their daily lives. Believers will be in relationships and places that God has placed them to proclaim His truth. We will talk about this more when we talk about how we use the keys. The universal priesthood includes, but is not limited to, sharing Law and Gospel with others; "Believers carry out that priesthood privately in their daily lives with fellow Christians and with all people" (Gurgel, p. 205).*

Discussion Questions

- a) Explain the similarities and differences between how a lay person uses the keys and how a pastor uses the keys.

Answer: *Both carry the weight and authority of the Word of God. As individuals we represent Christ as we talk to others. When a pastor or elder uses the keys, they are serving as a formal representative of the Church as well as representing Christ.*

- b) God's Word says that it is a special power and right, or authority that is given by God himself. Who is it given to and what qualifies them to use it?

Answer: *The use of the keys is given only to believers of the Christian church but it is given to all believers (the priesthood of all believers). The keys are also given to some who have a divine call through the church and they are called to use the keys in a more public, formal way according to the call. However it is imperative that we understand that ALL believers have a call from the Lord to share the Word of God in Law and Gospel whenever possible. They are qualified because Christ has called them to faith not because they are righteous or pious; nor is a theological degree required. While knowledge of the Scriptures is always a blessing, we are not expected to have a certain amount of knowledge before we share the Word. Think of a small child who understands right and wrong, or who openly shares the love of Jesus and the truth that He died to forgive sins. This is the truth we are called to share.*

3. The binding key, also referred to as the retention of sins or withholding forgiveness:

This key is the announcement that if someone is impenitent, their sins will not be forgiven.

What does “impenitent” mean? Prof. Lyle Lange explains that “If people are not sorry that they have grieved God with their lives, if they defend their sins and intend to continue in them, they are impenitent sinners” (p.567). So the binding key is not a judgment of hearts using unseen actions and unspoken words. It is an announcement that follows the response of someone who has been shown his sin. What is the response of the sinner? Pride? Excuses? Indifference? “The retaining of sins is the natural result and ongoing condition of impenitence. It is not something we do to him, but rather something that we declare” (Festerling, p. 6). “To retain sins, therefore, simply means to declare for a certain fact...that the impenitent cannot and shall not have forgiveness as long as he does not repent” (Koehler, p. 260).



“It is not something we do, but rather something that we declare.”

Leader’s Note: *The binding key is the message of the Law, namely, that you are a sinner. The Greek word “krateoo” which is translated to “retain” means “to hold on tightly to.” The perfect tense used in the verb “they are retained” is also quite significant and indicates an act which when completed continues in effect (Kuske p. 6). The clear implication is that if a person dies in those sins, God will not change His mind or overlook those sins, they will be retained to the sinner’s eternal damnation. However it is not implied that the sin can never be forgiven; only that those who remain in unbelief forfeit the forgiveness which Jesus won for all.*

Discussion Questions

- The Bible says we are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:6,14). Talk about how you would respond to someone who feels they are trapped in a particular sin.
- What are your responsibilities and boundaries in helping a fellow Christian fight temptation?

Answers: *It is important that believers understand they have a responsibility to share God’s Word with others and to warn those in danger, but that truth also needs to be balanced. We are called to speak, help and encourage but then we trust the Holy Spirit. We carry a burden for the lost but we don’t carry that burden without Christ. It is not up to us to change hearts, the Holy Spirit does that.*

4. The loosing key, also referred to as the remission or forgiveness of sins:

This key is the announcement that if someone repents and believes that Christ died to pay for their sins, they will be forgiven.

This is the glorious gem of the Christian faith that we treasure so deeply and share so joyfully! Dr. Becker quotes Luther to help us understand the purpose of the loosing key, “The intention of the key which looses is to make us believe its consolation and promise, and so learn to love God and receive a joyful, confident, and peaceful heart” (p. 4). When the loosing key is used, “the burden of sins is removed. The



“The sinner is relieved of the entire weight of his guilt and shame”

sinner is relieved of the entire weight of his guilt and shame" (Gawrisch, p. 5). While we hope to see fruits in keeping with repentance (Mt. 3:8, Lk 3:8) we do not wait to proclaim forgiveness but announce it freely and immediately as Christ did to the thief on the cross.

Leader's Note: *The loosing key is the message of the gospel, specifically, that Christ died to forgive sins. To "forgive" is the Greek word, "aphhieemi," which means "to send away, to dismiss" (Kuske p. 6). This same thought is reflected in Psalm 103:12 when God speaks of our sins being as far away as "the east is from the west."*

Discussion Question

- a) The Apostle Paul says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me?" Use his answer (or another favorite passage) to talk about how you would answer to someone who has fallen into despair over sin.

Answer: *Answers will vary*

5. The certainty of the keys stands on the truth of God's Word in heaven and on earth.

Matthew 18:18

... will be bound in heaven or loosed in heaven

Listen to the Holmen Christian Standard Bible translation of Matthew 18:18, "*I assure you: Whatever you bind on earth is already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is already loosed in heaven.*"

The passive tone of this translation helps clarify the message and identify the catalyst. What is bound in heaven is not your personal judgment or assessment of someone's heart and actions. It isn't your judgment or decision that sets the heavens in motion to lock or unlock the gate. The message of Law or Gospel that we speak stands in the courts of heaven itself because it is the unchanging Word of God. The Law condemns sinners and the Gospel frees them; this truth will stand for time and eternity. Festerling writes, "The Ministry of the Keys is the authority to announce that what has been worked by either the Law or the Gospel is a condition that prevails before the very throne of God in heaven!" (p. 6). The truth stands whether we speak it or not, but God has called us to speak it (see Ezekiel 33:6)!



The power of the keys is the power of the Word.

Koehler settles any concerns about an errant judgment when he writes, "Whenever the Church errs in its judgment, forgiving sins to an impenitent, and retaining sins to a penitent sinner, then such action is not valid. The penitent sinner will receive forgiveness in spite of what the Church has said, and the impenitent sinner will not have forgiveness, even though the Church has thrice absolved him" (p. 261).

The power of the keys is the power of the Word. The Word alone changes hearts to convict people of their sin and reveal the mystery of the Gospel. It is not in man's sinful nature to repent, it is a change of heart worked by God Himself. We share the Word, entrusting the outcome to the Holy Spirit, while announcing with certainty the truth He has given us to proclaim.

Leaders Note: *It may feel scary to think that we are going to proclaim something that will be "bound" in heaven but the keys are a proclamation of God's Word. The words we speak are as valid as if Christ himself spoke them, and they stand before the judgment throne of God not because our own judgment and words are powerful or inerrant but because we are speaking the words of God.*

Leader's Note (continued): We may also feel pressure in this situation as if the effectiveness depended on us. Satan whispers that we will fumble over our words or cannot convince someone that they should repent. Remember the work of the Holy Spirit is to convert hearts and the promise of God is that His Word will not return empty! Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is calling and sanctifying the Christian church on earth? Do you believe that the Word of God is the power, the dynamite of salvation? Then trust them to do their work.

Consider the Sacraments and ministry work in general. Where does their effectiveness come from? Is the Lord's Supper more effective if the pastor who serves it is dynamic and Christ-like? Does baptism work differently if a weak believer does it in an emergency out of fear? Discuss the comfort and confidence that comes from knowing that the power is the Word of God and the human vessel through which it comes cannot add any power or effectiveness to the message.

Leader's Note: This gives us comfort as we receive the Word and Sacraments! We take our eyes off the human vessel and look to the Lord who is the true giver of the gift. It gives us confidence that our efforts and abilities are not the catalyst that makes Kingdom work effective.

Definition Summary

As a summary, consider Luther's statement: "In short, the two keys advance and foster the gospel by simply proclaiming these two things: repentance and forgiveness. For what is it to loose if not to announce the forgiveness of sins before God? And what is it to bind, except to withdraw the gospel and to declare the retention of sins?" (LW 40, 28).

It is clear that we cannot look into hearts and judge someone's faith, but God is calling us to proclaim His Law and Gospel with clarity and certainty. We know that God has bound Himself to His Word, so when He says that the Law condemns and the Gospel gives forgiveness we can bind ourselves and others to that truth and announce it with confidence.

Review

Go back to the very first part of this study when you wrote down your questions or thoughts that seemed important to you at the time. Share some of those thoughts, explaining how this study has confirmed what you knew or added to what you didn't know. If you had a question about the keys, share it with the group to see if you can answer it. Save questions about applying the keys, there will be time for that later.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, it is nothing short of amazing and humbling to look at your Word and be reminded that we are sinners blessed with forgiveness and grace. As we are reminded of the terror of your condemning law we flee for refuge to your precious gospel and find comfort and confidence in the cross of Christ. Refreshed and forgiven, we long to serve you and share the message that we ourselves have received, Christ died for sinners. Let those words flow freely from our lips and be reflected in our lives so that others may know of your grace. Use what we have learned here to make us brighter lights with a clearer message always holding out hope, the glorious light of your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.



"The keys advance the Gospel by proclaiming repentance and forgiveness."

Ministry of the Keys

Part 2

Part 1 Introduction and Key Passages; Catechism Background
Basic Definitions and Understanding (addresses Catechism Questions 304-310)

Part 2 Digging Deeper: The Binding Key and the Loosing Key

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, in your grace and love you have given us your Word as a light for our path, to guide us in our journey of life. But your Word gives us more than just direction, it gives us life itself. Your Word is the power and strength of the Church on earth, and it is ours as well. Thank you for this priceless gift, lead us to treasure it above all things. Make us diligent students and eager learners that we may grow in grace and wisdom. Open our hearts to understand your teaching about the keys that we may faithfully serve you with our gifts and the power of your almighty Word. Bless our study that all we say and learn is in keeping with your truth; let our hearts and words bring you glory and build our fellowship. In Jesus name, Amen.

Review the concepts from Lesson 1 (*refer to Part 1 for answers if needed*)

1. What are the keys and who are they given to?
2. Explain the general concept of the binding key and the loosing key.
3. Why is the use of the keys certain?

Digging Deeper: The Binding Key

1. Why do we use the binding key?

Review these passages and discuss the purpose of using the binding key, or the proclamation of the law:

Matthew 18:15, 17

If your brothers sins against you, go, 2 or 3, church

1 Corinthians 5:5

Hand this man over to Satan so his sinful nature is destroyed

Matthew 18:18

Bind on earth, bound in heaven, loose on earth, loosed in heaven

Galatians 6:1

Someone caught in sin restored gently

John 8:24

You will die in your sins if you don't believe in Christ

The purpose of the binding key is:

Answer: *God wants us to use the binding key and proclamation of the law in love to lead sinners to repentance. Note that in the Matthew passage the context is a (Christian) brother who sins against you, suggesting a personal situation that might arise between two people. In John 20, which was reviewed*

earlier, the keys were given to the leaders of the church, showing they are also used by the spiritual leaders in a congregation. It is a key to be used by individual believers and congregations for the same purpose - to lead sinners to repentance.

Festerling makes an important note regarding the motivation behind the binding key when he writes about Question 308 in the catechism. "That question asks: 'Why does God want us to use the binding Key? God wants us to use the binding Key to try to lead the impenitent sinner to repent by announcing God's terrible judgment on him.' What is being advocated here? Concern!" (p. 6).

2. How do we use the binding key?

1 John 1:8, 10	<i>If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves, word has no place</i>
Luke 18:10-14	<i>Pharisee prayed self-righteously and was not forgiven</i>
Matthew 18:15-18	<i>Go to your brother, if he refuses, treat him as a pagan</i>
John 20:23	<i>If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven</i>
Hebrews 10:26	<i>If you keep sinning there is no sacrifice for sin</i>

We use the binding key when we:

Answer: *When we use the binding key, we refuse forgiveness to an impenitent person as long as he does not repent. We warn them that on the basis of Scripture they have lost the benefit of their forgiveness because they are impenitent. This pronouncement is not a withholding of our personal forgiveness, but the forgiveness of God. The message is not, "I'm still mad at you because you're not sorry" nor is it "If you keep doing that I can't be your friend." This is a much more serious proclamation, "If [you] deliberately keep on sinning after [you] have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10:26).*

3. Using the binding key

Listen to these beautiful comments by Dr. Becker that address the importance of contrition:

Contrition...is important and necessary. It is not necessary to make us worthy of forgiveness nor to make God love us. But it is necessary to make us realize how much we need the forgiveness offered to us in the Gospel. It is necessary to make us desire and yearn for the forgiveness won and merited for us by the work of Christ. The man who does not realize that he is a sinner and who does not understand that by his sin he has deserved the eternal damnation of God, cannot know how important it is for him to find a Savior" (p. 5).

Leader's Note: *Becker describes repentance and contrition: "Repentance literally is a change of mind. Contrition may be defined as a change of mind about sin. The sinner, as sinner, always sees sin as something attractive, as something that will bring him profit of some kind, as Eve saw that the tree was a tree to be desired to make one wise. The contrite sinner, however, has had a change of mind about sin. What he once saw as a source of pleasure or profit, he now sees as a source of punishment and grief and loss, as something by which he has brought the judgment of eternal separation from God down on his own head." (p. 5)*

Discussion Questions

- a) Discuss Dr. Becker's emphasis on contrition. Use your own words to explain it.

Answer: *Answers will vary*

- b) What if it is not clear to us whether the person is sincere about their repentance?

Answer: *refer to the passage and comments below to guide the discussion.*

The Concordia Self-Study Bible has a note on Matthew 16:19 that may help. It says, "Not the authority to determine but to announce guilt or innocence." Just listen to what they say and speak the Word of God.

1 John 1:8, 10

If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves, truth not in us

Gawrisch said, "The binding and loosing is to be carried out with respect to men's works, with respect to their words and deeds. In binding and loosing we dare not presume to judge a person's heart. Only God can discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. Only God knows whether faith is present in the heart or not. See 1 Sam. 16:7" (p. 5).

Leader's Note: *We may wonder if this person is sincere in their repentance or whether their sin has separated them from God and destroyed their faith. Is there still a sacrifice for their sins? Has their heart been hardened? This not the determination or declaration God is calling us to make with the keys. Our purpose is to declare that no one is forgiven without repentance. We cannot deny our sin and still cling to the forgiveness won for us by Christ- and that is what we can say with certainty. Listen to what the person says.*

- c) What human reason or emotions might interfere if we take our eyes off the truth of the law?

Answer: *We may be drawn to allow excuses for sin rather than repentance. Perhaps someone is really unhappy in their marriage, so they are leaving their spouse for someone who is loving and attentive. They have a right to be happy, don't they? Financial hardship or work pressures can leave some people with the feeling that they must sin to get out of their situation. Let the law be the law. You may be compassionate and understanding, but you may not weaken the law with excuses or compromises.*

- d) Discuss how the following passages apply when we are using the binding key

Luke 14:26 *if anyone does not hate his father and mother he cannot be my disciple*

Luke 12:52-53

father against son, mother against daughter

Answer: *Recognize that your sinful flesh could appeal to the relationship you have with this person. Can you say such a thing to your sister? What will happen at Christmas if you speak to her this way? What about the co-worker you share an office with every day? Christ addresses this very temptation of putting our relationship with a person before the truth of God's Word! Why such strong language? Because the temptation is great! We love our friends and family but God would call us to love Him more. Even more, what is the greatest demonstration of love – allowing them to continue in sin and suffer hell or risk the relationship for the sake of their eternal salvation?*

- e) How might Satan use your personal guilt in this situation?

Answer: *This may also be difficult if you yourself are caught up in sin. Of course we always want to apply the Law (and Gospel!) to ourselves first. Remember the point is not that you are always obeying the law, but that you are trying to lead a sinner to repentance. It does not disqualify you to speak to them (or who could speak?!?). You are not approaching them in a spirit of self-righteousness, but as a humble, fellow-sinner who has received forgiveness through Christ. Consider using a common confession of sins from our Lutheran liturgy or a phrase from a hymn verse as a start to a discussion about repentance.*

- f) If personal guilt is one extreme that tempts us to keep quiet, what cautions might we need in the other extreme of using the binding key?

Answer: *Self-righteous piety! Nothing will put up defensive walls like aloof accusations or an indignant tone! Remember your purpose and your motive. This isn't an effort to chase after someone's petty sins to make us feel holy. It is only the grace of God that has kept YOU from a life of sin. None of us will ever be able to live the holy life Christ has called us to without falling. There is no place for pride or piety.*

Nor do we use the binding key as a moral club or threat to enforce behavior. Don't let your concern turn into mere frustration or annoyance with someone's choices. The purpose and concern is Christian love for a soul who is in danger of damnation. This is not about changing outward behavior to conform to appropriate standards; it is always about concern for their souls. (Isaiah 29:13; Colossians 2:23)

- g) Congregations use the binding key through their pastor and elders or council. How might an individual also use the binding key with that same person in a way that would be helpful?

Answer: *If elders or a council are working with their pastor to deal with an impenitent sinner, they will likely make visits to talk to this person. This is an appropriate use of the keys. However, if that person is your friend, you also have an opportunity to reach them informally because of your friendship. What a blessing that would be to the pastor and congregation if you also spoke the same message in love! It may be for that very reason that the Lord put you in that relationship. The message may be received better if it comes from a friend but even if it is not, you have reinforced the truth spoken by other Christians.*

General encouragement in sharing the binding key

As the Lord allows you to be in such a situation, you may imagine tense and unpleasant possibilities in anticipation of the conversation. It is also likely that your heart will race and you will feel a strong sense of emotion. During times like this there are a few key thoughts that might help; discuss each of these passages and how they would apply to such a conversation.

- 1) Ephesians 4:15
1 Timothy 1:5

*Speaking the truth in love
The goal of this command is love*

Remember that your goal is to help someone who is in danger of losing their faith. Pray that God would calm your heart and focus your thoughts on Christ's love for this person and how you can reflect that love. It is love for Christ and our neighbor that compels us to speak. Tender hearts may

need just a gentle reminder; others may need the full terror of the law to see the consequence of their sin but the goal is always the same, to lead hearts to repentance by speaking the truth with a motive of love.

- 2) 1 Peter 3:15b
Titus 3:9

*Do this with gentleness and respect
Don't argue about the law*

If you are feeling emotional it may be difficult to convey gentleness and respect. Make sure that your tone matches your intention. If you speak accusingly or with an argumentative tone, you will likely get a wall of defense, and an argument! You don't have anything to prove, nor do you have an argument to win. Stay calm and speak the truth of God's Word. Let the Holy Spirit do his work of changing hearts.

- 3) Proverbs 18:17

...Until another comes forward and presents his case

Many times the best way to start this conversation is to simply say, "Hey, how is this situation going?" Perhaps you can express, "I've been concerned about...is everything okay?" Or, "It seems like there might be a problem with...what's going on with that?" An open ended question like that has two strong benefits: Firstly, you might learn something about the situation that you were unaware of which could influence the conversation (i.e. it isn't true or there is another side of the story). Secondly, it allows for the person to respond honestly (without defenses) about what is going on and how they feel about it. Wouldn't it be perfect if they said, "I'm so glad you asked about that, I've really been struggling and need some encouragement"?

Unfortunately, there are certainly times that require a more direct, confrontational setting. Hopefully there would be several gentle conversations before it gets to a serious situation. If the situation does become more difficult, it is a good time to remember Matthew 18 and bring others into the situation.

Application Questions

Take this time to talk about situations where you would apply this teaching. You may share situations that you are facing but be respectful and motivated by love in your conversation. There are not always easy answers because sin has destroyed God's design. We study the principle so we can make wise decisions in application. Don't focus on the details of the solution but rather focus on how we apply the principle.

Digging Deeper: The Loosing Key

1) Why do we use the loosing key?

Review the following passages and discuss the purpose of using the loosing key, or the proclamation of the gospel:

Psalm 38:3-7, 18, 21, 22

My guilt has overwhelmed me... burden too heavy to bear

Psalm 51:8,9

Let the bones you have crushed rejoice

2 Corinthians 2:7

Overwhelmed by excessive sorrow, reaffirm your love for him

The purpose of the loosing key is:

Answer: God wants us to use the loosing key to comfort the penitent sinner by announcing God's forgiveness to him.

2) How do we use the loosing key?

1 John 1:9

Luke 18:13, 14

Acts 3:19

John 20:23

If we confess, he is faithful and just

Tax collector beat his breast and confessed his sin with humility

Repent and turn that your sins may be forgiven

If you forgive, the sins are forgiven

We use the loosing key when we:

Answer: We use it when we share the truth that Christ died for sinners. He has paid the price for all sins and His grace and forgiveness are free.

God wants us to use the loosing key to announce forgiveness to a penitent sinner. Remember that at times emotions are slow to catch up with the immediate cleansing of Christ's forgiveness. Sinners may continue to feel remorse over a poor decision or because people were hurt by their actions. We sometimes wish that we could do something to atone for our sin but the truth and beauty of the Gospel is that we cannot. Depending on the severity of the sin, there may be natural consequences of someone's actions but that does not mean the forgiveness is not complete or that it needs to be earned in any way. God can use consequences to teach us (and others) about the destruction of sin. We all need a healthy and frequent application of the Gospel to fight off Satan's accusations. Remind one another often of the complete forgiveness we have in Christ!

3) Using the loosing key

Sharing the Gospel is a simple joy. You don't need to embellish it and you cannot explain the mystery of God's love. Let the Gospel be the Gospel; Christ died for sinners.

Discussion Questions

a) Discuss the following, explaining the importance of the Christ-centered Gospel:

"In applying the keys, therefore, we must always take care that [others] are not taught to look into their own hearts to find there the ground of certainty concerning forgiveness, life, and salvation. The certainty which is truly Christian faith must always rest only and alone on the words and promises of God." (Becker, p. 6)

"God does not forgive men because they are sorry for their sins or because they believe. Nothing on our part is necessary to move God to forgive us. He has already done that long ago, long before we were born, before we were sorry, before we believed, as Luther says, before we ever thought of this. And in applying the keys we must be careful not to leave the impression that by his penitence or by his faith the sinner somehow has earned God's forgiveness, or had at least made it possible for God to forgive him." (Becker, p.5).

Answer: *The confidence of salvation does not come from the sincerity of someone's faith; it comes from the object of their faith - what Christ has done.*

- b) It may be helpful to understand the importance of objective justification as you're sharing the Gospel. Why? What is that? Glad you asked!

"The forgiveness of sins is not a potential fact that becomes a reality only when it is proclaimed in the Gospel and accepted by faith. This ought to be crystal clear ... [Christ's] resurrection was the solemn, formal declaration of God that all the sins for which He had suffered and died had been fully ... atoned for, that the debt which mankind had owed to God was fully paid by the holy life and innocent death of God's own Son, that God's wrath was appeased and that His justice was satisfied" (Becker, p. 3).

Answer: *guide the discussion to a clear understanding of objective justification*

- c) How does that help you in sharing the Gospel?

Answer: *It reminds you that you are not working to get a reaction; the truth of the message is not lost if a person doesn't respond. It stands firm. Don't allow yourself to question whether a person is sufficiently sorry or wonder if their sin can be forgiven. God made the decision to accept Christ's sacrifice, the decision was His. Just speak the truth and allow the Holy Spirit to work.*

Prof. Rich Gurgel encourages a gospel predominance when he says, "We will always want to accept everyone's confession of Christ as sincere unless he or she proves it is insincere by open and continued impenitence. 'The Lord knows those who are his' (2 Timothy 2:19)" (p. 186).

If a church member responds to discipline and returns to the congregation, our attitude and affirmation of grace is important as we encourage one another and practice forgiveness. But if we were hurt by this person, or if we aren't ready to forgive it may be hard for us to welcome them back. There are many beautiful stories of repentance and restoration – it is an incredible blessing to see it and be a part of God's forgiveness in the body of Christ. But Satan will do everything he can to keep it from happening.

- d) Discuss how the Word of God can help us with sinful attitudes towards others in such a situation.

Answer: *Be in the Word so your faith is strengthened. Be reminded of specks and planks or the workers in the vineyard who all received the same wage. Humility is a gift to pray for and a beautiful adornment for the Christian life.*

- e) How would you use this key as an individual in your family, neighborhood, or workplace?

Answer: *We will encourage those around us with the truth that they are forgiven in Christ! As spouses and parents we want to speak those words to one another daily! We can talk about the forgiveness of Christ to friends who are hurting and lost people who are looking for peace. This should be a long list!*

Application Questions

Take this time to talk about situations where you would apply this teaching. You may share situations that you are facing but be respectful and motivated by love in your conversation. It is much easier to share the Gospel!

Closing Thoughts

The Ministry of the Keys can seem like an obscure, intimidating teaching that we'd rather just avoid. However, a study of Scripture shows it to be a blessing from God that keeps His people in faith by connecting them to His Word, and is a responsibility of all believers who know firsthand the certainty of His forgiveness.

The simplicity of the keys is that it is the announcement or proclamation of what God's Word says; and the power of the keys is the Almighty Lord who speaks through the Scriptures. We need not fear using the keys but pray for the love and wisdom to use them to the best of our ability. May we ever be students of Scripture who are motivated by the Gospel and equipped with the wisdom of His Word.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, it is nothing short of amazing and humbling to look at your Word and be reminded that we are sinners blessed with forgiveness and grace. As we are reminded of the terror of your condemning law we flee for refuge to your precious gospel and find comfort and confidence in the cross of Christ. Refreshed and forgiven, we long to serve you and share the message that we ourselves have received, Christ died for sinners. Let those words flow freely from our lips and be reflected in our lives so that others may know of your grace. Use what we have learned here to make us brighter lights with a clearer message always holding out hope, the glorious light of your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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