

# 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

### 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

John 20:22-23

Matthew 16:19

Matthew 18:18

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).

**Discussion Questions:**

- a) Define the Law in your own words, site a passage.
- b) Define the Gospel in your own words, site a passage.
- c) How might the messages become mixed?

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

Matthew 16:19

Matthew 18:18, 20

John 20:21-23

1 Peter 2:9

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

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 information on this aspect of the keys is covered in the catechism section on the public use of the keys (questions 311-318).

### Discussion Questions

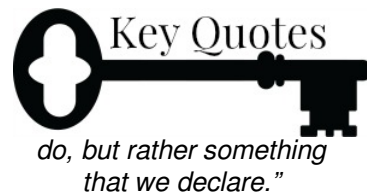
- a) Explain the similarities and differences between how a lay person uses the keys and how a pastor uses the keys.
- b) God's Word says that it is a special power and right, or authority that is given by God himself. Who is it given to and what qualifies them to use it?

### 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).



### Discussion Questions

- a) 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.
- b) What are your responsibilities and boundaries in helping a fellow Christian fight temptation?

#### 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 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.



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

#### 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.

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

Matthew 18:18

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.

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.

## 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.



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

## 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

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Part 1 Introduction and Key Passages; Catechism Background  
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Part 2 Digging Deeper: The Binding Key and the Loosing Key

## Opening Prayer

### Review the concepts from Lesson 1

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?

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

Matthew 18:15, 17

1 Corinthians 5:5

Matthew 18:18

Galatians 6:1

John 8:24

The purpose of the binding key is:

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

Luke 18:10-14

Matthew 18:15-18

John 20:23

Hebrews 10:26

We use the binding key when we:

## 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).

### Discussion Questions

- a) Discuss Dr. Becker's emphasis on contrition. Use your own words to explain it.
- b) What if it is not clear to us whether the person is sincere about their repentance?

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.

Read 1 John 1:8, 10

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).

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



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

Luke 14:26

Luke 12:52-53

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

### **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 and 1 Timothy 1:5

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 and Titus 3:9

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

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

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

Psalm 51:8,9

2 Corinthians 2:7

The purpose of the loosing key is:

### **2. How do we use the loosing key?**

1 John 1:9

Luke 18:13, 14

Acts 3:19

John 20:23

We use the loosing key when we:

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 quotes, 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).

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).

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

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

### **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**

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