

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Third Sunday after Easter, May 7, 2017

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 331:1-6, 149:3, 320, 324, 331:7-8.

Lessons: Psalm 32, Acts 10:23-43, Matthew 18:1-20.

Sermon Text: 1 Peter 2: 9-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In our review of the chief teachings of the small catechism, today we are talking about keys. These keys are the keys to open heaven or to close heaven. Heaven is opened by forgiving sins, and it is closed by retaining sins. This is a special power or authority that Christ gave to his church on earth and to no one else. Today please pay attention to

THE USE OR THE MINISTRY OF THE KEYS

- 1. This special authority was given only to the church.**
- 2. The use of this authority.**

The three paragraphs on the Office of the Keys and the Ministry were not written by Luther, but were added to the Catechism about 1560. They are not found in our historical Lutheran Confessions, and they are not found in some Lutheran catechisms. However, we keep and teach them because they set forth true and important doctrines of the Bible.

The Word of God is the sole authority in the church. As a result, we speak of ***“the ministry of the Word”***. Acts 6:4 (NIV) The church is not to use the power of the sword. The church has no secular power, but by instruction and persuasion it seeks to win men for Christ. The very concept of “ministry” is one of serving.

Because this power is exercised through the Word, its extent and its limit is determined by the Word of God. We are to teach everything that Christ has commanded and only what he has commanded.

In the ministry of the keys, or “the use of the keys”, as it is also called, we speak of the Power of the Word, which Christ gave to his church on earth.

Many memorized words very similar to these: What is the use of the keys? 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 refuse forgiveness to the impenitent as long as they do not repent. Where is this written? The holy evangelist John writes in chapter 20, “[Jesus] breathed on [his disciples] and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”

This is called a special power and right, or in some catechisms, it is called a “peculiar” power because it is a power given only to the church. This power and right belongs to no one else but to the church. It does not belong to the state and is different from any other power on earth. Jesus gave this power to Peter as the spokesman of all disciples when he said: ***“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.”*** Matt. 16:19 (NIV) This power was not given to Peter alone nor only to the Apostles and the ordained clergy, but to all true believers, to all who have received the Holy Ghost and are God's ***“royal priesthood”***. As Christians gather together, each congregation has this power.

The purpose for which God gave us this power is to make men wise unto salvation, and to train them in holiness of life. The business of the church is to make all nations disciples of Christ, and teach and, by the

power of the Gospel, motivate them to obey everything that Christ has commanded. This is done by preaching the Gospel, administering the Sacraments, by forgiving and retaining sins, and by leading a godly life.

This power or authority is called the Office of the Keys because it opens heaven by forgiving sins, or closes heaven by retaining sins, that is, by binding them on the manifestly impenitent sinner.

Think about keys and what they do. In my hand I hold 'my' keys. They include keys to my house, to my cars, and a key to Christ Our Redeemer church and a key to Faith church. No one else has the authority to use all of these keys. Others have the authority to use some of these keys, but I am the only one who has the power to use all of these keys. And each of these keys opens and closes, that is, unlocks and locks. The authority or power we are talking about today belongs to believers and only to believers.

And the two uses of these keys? To forgive sins and to retain sins.

So whose sins are to be remitted or forgiven? The sins of the penitent sinners are to be forgiven. "Remitting" or "remission" are synonyms for "forgiving". Peter exhorted the people on Pentecost: ***"Repent ye, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out."*** Acts 3:19 (KJV)

A congregation may not use this great power, by which heaven is opened or closed to a person, indiscriminately or arbitrarily, nor may it be influenced by the fear and the favor of men, but must administer it strictly according to Christ's instruction.

The sins of penitent sinners are to be forgiven and the sins of the impenitent are to be retained.

So who are penitent sinners? Penitent sinners are sinners who are sincerely sorry for their sins – this we call contrition – and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. They make every effort to amend or change their sinful ways and follow the will of God with the help of God and by the grace of God. In the New Testament we read: ***"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."*** Acts 16:31 (KJV) We read in the Psalm: ***"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."*** Ps. 51:17 (KJV) The necessary fruit of true repentance is a truly Christian life. ***"Bring forth, therefore, fruits meet for repentance."*** Matt. 3:8 (KJV) We read in Galatians: ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires."*** Galatians 5:22-24 (NIV)

Then we must ask whose sins are to be retained? When someone's sins are retained, they are not forgiven, they are bound on that person, they are kept. We repeat: the sins of the impenitent sinners, that is, of those who are not sorry for their sins and do not believe in Jesus Christ, are to be retained as long as they do not repent.

And this leads us to a discussion of the public use of the keys, what has also been called the office of the ministry. Our catechism tells us: How does a Christian congregation use the keys? A Christian congregation with its called servant of Christ uses the keys in accordance with Christ's command by forgiving those who repent of their sin and are willing to amend, and by excluding from the congregation those who are plainly impenitent that they may repent. I believe that when this is done, it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself. Where is this written? Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 18, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The catechism then asks: What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us according to his divine command (especially when they exclude manifestly impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and, again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend), this is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.

According to God's will the Christian congregation chooses and calls men as ministers, who in the name of Christ and in the name of the congregation publicly perform the functions of the Office of the Keys. The minister does not act in this matter independently of the congregation, but he is acting in the name of the congregation. While each true believer in Christ is a royal priest in his own right, and should, therefore, by word and deed ***"show forth the praises"*** of God, he will seek the fellowship of those who hold the same faith as he, and join a Christian congregation in order that together with others he may do what the Lord commanded all of them to do.

Since all members of a congregation have the same right and duty, no one may take it upon himself to act in the name of all others, but he must be called or commissioned by them to preach, or teach, or perform duties on behalf of the congregation. In our day, God does not call these men directly, as he called the Apostles and the Prophets of old, but the Christians, to whom the Office of the Keys was given, choose and call the man who in their name, publicly, is to perform the duties of a minister. And when such a person has accepted this call, he is to be regarded as "the minister of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God", whom God himself has made "overseer" over that flock, and who, under God in the name of the Christians who called him, performs the functions of the Office of the Keys. It is the call and the acceptance of this call that makes a man the minister of a congregation, not ordination and installation, which are not divinely commanded. Scripture clearly teaches that a congregation or a church body may not call into this office anyone whom it pleases, no false teacher, no manifest sinner, but only such as are fit for this office. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus give such qualifications, which should be the subject of another sermon. Scripture is also clear that women are not to be called into the office of a pastor.

In the performance of their official duties pastors must strictly adhere to the Word of God, preaching the pure doctrines of the Gospel and administering the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. Thereby they offer and convey to us what God himself promises and offers in these means of grace, and therefore it is as valid, it has divine force and authority, and is certain, sure, reliable, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself. The power and reliability of what a minister does is not dependent upon his personal faith and piety, but solely upon this that it is done according to the Word of God.

The excluding of someone from the Christian congregation is called excommunication. Our gospel lesson from Matthew 18 is the chief location in Scripture and lays out the three phases or "steps" of church discipline. You heard: ***"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'*** ***If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*** Matthew 18:15-17 (NIV)

This is retaining someone's sins, of binding them upon the person. This means that the congregation follows the word of God in excluding a manifestly, openly impenitent sinner from the Christian congregation. This is done by a unanimous vote of the voters of a congregation. This will exclude the excommunicated sinner from the rights and privileges of a Christian. Such a one cannot receive the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper as long as he does not repent. But such a one should be admonished to hear the Word of God and to come to church. Such action of the congregation is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, acted himself. Christ tells us: ***"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*** Matthew 18:18 (NIV)

But we must also explain the purpose of ex-communication. It is intended, not for the eternal ruin of the excommunicated, but for the salvation of his soul. He is to see the greatness of his sin and is to repent. And then when the excommunicated person shows himself penitent, if he confesses his sin and promises to amend, to change, the congregation should receive him again as a brother. We should not act like the older brother of the prodigal son who refused to acknowledge his brother's repentance. Instead we should rejoice, just as the angels rejoice over one sinner that repents. We should rejoice, and confirm our love to the one who was lost, and is found again. We should not exalt ourselves above him, thinking that such things could never happen to us, but rather be warned ***"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"*** 1 Corinthians 10:12 (NIV)

So as we remember the keys which open or close heaven, may we daily and always repent and bring forth fruits of repentance so that these keys always open heaven for us. Amen.