

### ***The Keys to the Kingdom***

In the name of him who has the keys to set his people free, dear friends in Christ: Keys are remarkable little tools. There's not much to them: just a little piece of stamped metal with some grooves cut into them. And they aren't very versatile. You can't use them for a wide variety of purposes like you can with some tools. But when you're dealing with a lock, only the key will do. Keys grant access. They give you the ability to do things you couldn't do otherwise. You'd have a hard time driving home this morning without your car keys. Keys also represent authority and trust. If a shopkeeper gives the keys to his business to an employee, it's because he trusts that worker and he's giving him power and authority to operate the business when he, the owner, isn't around.

And not all keys are little pieces of metal you can slip onto a keychain. The passwords you use for your Email account and your online banking are keys of sorts. They let you in and hopefully keep others locked out. Likewise if something is written in code, you need the key to the cipher to decode what it says. Without the key, you'll never understand what's written.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel, right after Peter confesses on behalf of all the disciples that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus tells the group of them, "I'm going to give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven." He said it in future tense. He didn't give his trainees the keys then. The time wasn't right and they weren't ready. But in today's Gospel we see the fulfillment of this promise. We see Jesus handing over the keys to the kingdom of heaven to his apostles. So, what these keys are and how are they to be used?

It's the evening of the day of Jesus' resurrection. If we piece together what we're told in all the Gospels, we know that at this point Jesus has already appeared to Mary Magdalene and to Peter. He also spent the entire afternoon with the two Emmaus disciples, walking with them and talking on the way. They didn't know it was Jesus while they were on the road; but later at supper with him, he revealed himself to them when he blessed and broke the bread. The moment they recognized him he vanished from their sight. They were so thrilled at seeing Jesus that they hurried back to Jerusalem that same evening, and they were admitted to the locked room where the rest of the disciples (save Thomas) were gathered.

So at this point they all *know* that Jesus has risen from the dead. Yet we're told that they were behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. That is to say, they knew *that* Jesus had risen; but they didn't yet know what it meant. Well, the two Emmaus disciples knew. Jesus spent the afternoon explaining it all to them. As he spoke to them he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. He showed them how the whole Bible was about himself; how it was all about God becoming a man, the Christ, who would give himself as the sacrifice of atonement to pay the penalty of the sin of the world. He showed them from the Scriptures that they previously did not and could not understand that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, to die, and to rise again on the third day, and then enter into his glory – and how this message of forgiveness, life, and salvation through faith in him was to be proclaimed in all the world. In other words, he gave them the key to Bible's cipher. The two Emmaus disciples were about to explain all this to the others; but the moment they told about how Jesus revealed himself to them at supper in the breaking of the bread – that's when Jesus appears in the locked room standing in the midst of them.

At first they were terrified. Luke records that some of them thought he was a ghost. So if they were already afraid on account of their enemies, now they are even more so. But to their troubled hearts Jesus immediately speaks peace. He shows them the wounds in his hands and side to demonstrate that yes, it's me, in the same body that was crucified and is now raised from the dead. And as they're just beginning to come to grips with whom and what they're seeing and hearing, again Jesus speaks his word of peace to them. We need to understand that this is so much more than Jesus wishing them well. His word of peace actually creates in them the peace he's talking about. His word of peace spoken from his crucified and risen body is what creates peace for them because it's in his body that the peace of God for sinful humans was achieved. All that God held against us, whatever sins and acts of rebellion we committed that offend him – all of that was laid upon Jesus. On the cross he bore the punishment for us all. He did this precisely so that we could enjoy the peace of God that comes through faith in him. And the disciples did. We're told that they were filled with joy upon seeing Jesus and receiving his declaration of peace.

But that's not the end of the story. Indeed, for the disciples it was only the beginning; because as I alluded to earlier with the illustration of a shopkeeper, Jesus now hands over the keys to them. There are actually two keys. The first is the Holy Spirit, and with him the ability to understand the Holy Scriptures. That's what Jesus was doing with the Emmaus disciples all afternoon. He wasn't just explaining things to them. Through his words he was also delivering to them the Holy Spirit who always accompanies the words of Jesus. It's by the Spirit that Jesus opened their minds to understand and believe in him.

So now Jesus – by his Word – gives the Spirit to the whole group of them. “He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.” This is the first key. It's the key to understand what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all about. It's the key to believe and trust in what Jesus accomplished and so live in his peace. And it's the key to opening the entire Scripture, which can only be understood in light of the person and work of Jesus the Savior. Without this key the Bible is a closed book. It might as well be written in secret code. It cannot be properly understood apart from the knowledge of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Having turned over that key to his disciples, Jesus immediately gives them the other. He says, “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” This is the key to loose people from their sins or, alternately, to bind people to their sins if they refuse to acknowledge their sins or repent of them. The basic idea is this: because of our sin all human kind is locked up. We are bound to our sins. We are chained to them. By our natural powers, there's no escape from them. These sins eventually lead to death – another form of prison from which there's no escape. Its walls are the tomb. And unless we are delivered and set free, sin and death lead to the ultimate prison: eternal confinement in hell.

You know, it's odd: we normally think of “the keys of the kingdom” as the means by which the gates of heaven are opened; but that's not right. The truth is that when the heavenly Jerusalem is described in Scripture, its gates are said to be perpetually open. They never close. It's sin, death, and hell that keep people shut up and locked in. They are the gates of the enemy. The second key that Jesus gives his disciples is the key to free people from the enemy. They are given the authority to proclaim Christ's forgiveness to those who acknowledge their sins and repent of them. And when this forgiveness is proclaimed, sin, death, and hell all lose their power to hold their prisoners. They must release the captives and let them go.

It's vital that we see this authority – this key – is given by Jesus to the men he sent out to proclaim his truth. That is to say he entrusts this key to certain persons to exercise on his behalf. Initially it was given to the Apostles of Jesus. In our day it's given to the pastors of the churches. But the point is that Jesus entrusts the keys to *someone* who is to be responsible for them and their proper use. He puts his authority to release people from sin into the hands – and more importantly into the mouth – of men he's called to that task. First and foremost, this is because faith comes by *hearing* the Word of God. It's one thing to repent of sin and pray for forgiveness believing that you have it, and quite another to actually hear the word of God's forgiveness spoken authoritatively by a man Christ has called expressly for that purpose. The latter gives far more assurance. This is why Christ appoints men and makes them pastors, so that they can give this peace and assurance to the people whom they serve as under-shepherds for Jesus.

And there's another reason Jesus gives these keys to certain people to exercise for him: it's to deliver his word of judgment to those who won't acknowledge their sins or repent of them. You see, the same authority by which a pastor declares to you God's forgiveness in Christ compels him to declare to you that if you won't admit that what you're doing which God says is sin is indeed sin that needs to be turned from, or if you do recognize that it's sin and yet you refuse to repent – either way – then the pastor is to use the key to bind you to your sins and tell you that there is no forgiveness for you. As long as you do not repent you are in grave peril of losing your immortal soul. That may sound harsh; but it's absolutely necessary. A doctor who knows his patient has a deadly but treatable disease isn't doing that person a favor by saying, "Why, you're fit as a fiddle. Everything's all right." No. A good doctor tells the patient what's killing him so he can get the proper treatment and live. If he did less, he'd be guilty of gross malpractice. He'd be killing his patients. The same is true of a pastor. The difference is that a doctor who fails to inform a patient of an unpleasant truth might cause that person to die prematurely. A pastor who fails in this part of his calling might cause a soul to be lost eternally.

Lest anyone think I'm going too far in this, I'll remind you that all of this is explained in our Catechism. Please turn with me in your hymnal to page 326. We'll do a little review here. I'll read the questions and you give the responses.

What is Confession? *Confession has two parts. First that we confess our sins, and second that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.*

What sins should we confess? *Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.*

Which are these? *Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?*

What is the Office of the Keys? *The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to his Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.*

Where is this written? *This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord 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."*

What do you believe according to these words? *I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.*

These then are the keys to the kingdom which Christ has given to his Church. They've been given to us in view of Christ's death for our sin and his resurrection to life. The first key is the Holy Spirit who opens our minds to understand the truth of the Gospel and the entire Scripture. The second key is the authority to forgive and, when necessary, to retain sin. May the risen Lord Jesus who has entrusted these keys to us give us also the grace, the wisdom, and the will to use them for the good of all people and the salvation of their souls. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***