

Heavenly Father, You delivered Your Son for our offenses and raised Him for our justification. Grant that we may also trust in the word of forgiveness, which You have given Your pastors to proclaim, that clinging to Your good and gracious promises, we might be brought to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Luther's Small Catechism: with Explanation, CPH, p. 321)

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

In Christ Jesus, who equips His Church with the power of forgiveness, dear fellow redeemed:

We glory as the Church of the Lord Jesus that He has given us the power of the keys. We get to open and close the gates to heaven by the command of our Lord Jesus. But He has not entrusted us with all the keys there are. In Revelation, Jesus declares: "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hell."

In the end, the key holder to hell will turn to the unbelievers and say: "Depart from Me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." It may seem since we have been given the binding key to close the gates of heaven by not forgiving sin, we have the keys to hell. But there is a difference. We especially observe this in the pastoral office which Christ has given the Church publicly to administer the Keys in Her behalf, let us rejoice and understand this blessed truth: **Pastors Are in the Forgiveness not the Condemnation Business.** And hence the Church is also.

# I

If you have entered a prison, having been incarcerated or just visiting, you have heard the unpleasant loud clank of the shutting barred doors behind you. A visitor will hear it a bit differently than a prisoner, but it still has the sound of entrapment. The holder of the keys of hell describes the final scene of the devil and unbelievers being consigned to hell forever this way: "the devil ... was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur ... and ... will be tormented day and

night forever and ever.” “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

The locked doors of the upper room where the disciples were gathered on that first Easter evening, did not keep the Lord from being present among them. He entered with the message of peace. Regardless what was going on outside their locked room among Jesus’ enemies, there was peace with these sinners and their Father in heaven. Jesus’ wounds as the crucified One were the living proof of that peace.

What God had against each of them, was now satisfied, since His Son was named the sinner in their place, died for them, and rose to live. Standing among them was the loud declaration that all their sins were forgiven. They possessed life and were eternally saved.

But this message of peace was not meant for them alone. Jesus would send them out of that locked room to forgive all people their sins. He was sending them out as the Father had sent Him. “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.’” But this was not some *willy-nilly* office and power. Jesus added: “if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” For whom would forgiveness of sins be withheld? – the impenitent, those not sorry for their sin. Take note: now is the time of the Lord’s gracious visitation among us as He comes in Word and Sacrament calling all people to Himself.

Withholding forgiveness is not done in an effort to condemn, but to awaken the impenitent to the seriousness of sin, so that he/she might become penitent and get to hear the word of forgiveness having sins actually forgiven in heaven. Jesus describes this in another place like this: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

## II

The false prophets Jesus warned us about in our Gospel lesson who are wolves dressed up as sheep will come with messages that appear to be forgiving sins, but in truth are words which lead to condemnation. Some false prophets will tell sinners that God overlooks their many sins, calling them only mistakes and bad judgments. Others will even associate such a message with an image of the nice-guy Jesus who accepts a certain level of unrighteousness. Or even others will tell their unsuspecting hearers that they can do the work of overcoming their sins by their own actions. Again they try to tie this message to the image of Jesus as a mere example of holy living. All such declarations eventually lead to eternal condemnation.

Our Lord Jesus established the office of the ministry to open the gates of heaven to sinners through His blood and righteousness. A faithful pastor will certainly point out the severity of sin, but will long to forgive sins as Jesus desires. *“God’s will is that your forgiveness ring in your ear so that you believe and rejoice that the blood of His Son has answered for your every sin, with His perfect obedience even to the point of a bloody death on Golgatha.”*<sup>1</sup>

Do not misunderstand, all Christians have the power of the keys. But when it is done publicly, that is, done on behalf of Christ’s Church, then God calls the one He intends to do this in the many places where His people gather together. It may seem like an unnecessary office, since all Christians have the power of the keys to exercise in his/her personal dealings with neighbor. But understand, this office exists so that there are those who have the primary responsibility of being stewards of the mysteries of God’s means to bestow forgiveness.

When it is everyone’s responsibility, it usually ends up being nobody’s responsibility. God wants you to have a shepherd watching over you making sure that His manifold grace is faithfully poured out for you in abundance. When certain sins haunt us from morning to night, it is good to confess them and hear God’s absolution. Again, while any Christian brother or sister can do this, we know that our pastor will keep such things confidential. It is good to have a faithful steward who gives ongoing professional attention to proclaiming God’s Law and Gospel without mingling them together as does the false prophet. It is good to know that there is someone making sure that the Sacraments of holy Baptism and holy Communion are administered as our Lord instituted them. Guess who desires to destroy all the ways Jesus has promised to be present with His forgiving love among us? The great deceiver, the devil himself, desires to destroy God’s second creation just as he spoiled His first.

The Spirit’s alien work is to condemn and convict. His proper work is to forgive and give life. So when Jesus breathed on His disciples to receive the Holy Spirit, it was this proper work they were called to perform. During those three years with Jesus, the Apostles needed to learn this many times over. Remember they tried to get the little children away from Jesus; they wanted the Syrophoenician woman to be sent away; they questioned Jesus conversing with the Samaritan woman at the well; James and John wanted fire to

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<sup>1</sup> Thank, Praise, Serve, and Obey: Recover the Joys of Piety, by William Chancellor Weedon, CPH 2017, p. 90

consume the Samaritan village which rejected Jesus; Peter struck out at Malchus cutting off his ear. Besides being forgiven themselves for these condemning responses. They needed to be taught the forgiving business to which they were being called, especially now hearing the message: "Peace be with you".

In our sin, we think an office of condemnation is more quickly effective, whereas the fruits of the office of forgiveness are less perceptible and seem to bear fruit slowly if at all. By their fruits, you will know the difference between a faithful and false shepherd. Always expect and even require from your pastor a spirit of ready forgiveness without shirking the responsibility of withholding forgiveness when necessary. By so doing, it will be apparent that your pastor called by God is in the forgiveness business for your eternal welfare and the entire flock over which our gracious Lord has called him to shepherd. Amen.