

The Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 16:15-19, Trinity Sunday VII

July 30, 2006

Beloved of the Lord....When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, he was speaking for all disciples of Christ. The faith which God had instilled in Peter's heart is the same faith all true disciples of the Lord today. You are His disciple, you are the disciples of Christ, if you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah sent by God to redeem all sinners from sin.

Believing and confessing the name of Jesus, you know Him to be God's own Son. Therefore Jesus IS God. "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love." I Jn. 4:15-16

Because God is love, because the Living God sent His Son to die upon the cross for our salvation, the Church of God is built upon the Rock of Christ Jesus. All who belong to this Church of God make the same confession which Peter did, namely that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. To this Invisible Church God has given the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." Not only do these keys open up the door of heaven to you, but these keys also enable you to open up the door of heaven for others. Truly, God has given to you, the individual believer, the keys of the kingdom of heaven! This literally mean you have the power and authority from God to forgive the sins of men, or to not forgive the sins of men. You the believer have power from God to open and close the doors of heaven!

But perhaps this sounds impossible! Perhaps we say, "Open and close the doors of heaven? I can't do that! I am not God!" While it is true that only God can open and close the doors of heaven, and only God can forgive and not forgive sins, God does use people to relay His message. Jesus says to Peter and all believers, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Wherever God has worked the faith of Christ into the heart, He likewise gives the power and authority to speak for Him, to open and close the doors of heaven, to forgive and not forgive the sins of men. We call this God-given power the Office of the Keys. This is "the peculiar church power which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of the penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent." And so if you the believer know someone who is sorry for their sins and has repented to you of their sin, you can speak for Jesus Christ and say to them, "Do not worry my friend, Jesus Christ forgives you of all your sins." You can even tell them, "I forgive you of all your sins, in the name of Jesus Christ." By doing this we open up the doors of heaven before them. At that moment in which we absolve them, God is absolving through us! By the same token if we know someone who is impenitent, and if they have not listened to our admonition and they refuse to repent, we can

tell them, "Because you refuse to repent of your sins, you do not have forgiveness from God. Heaven is closed to you."

I. The Keys are given to all individuals in the Church. To better understand this, consider the song, "Pennies from heaven." The words go like this, "Every time it rains, It rains pennies from heaven, Don't you know each cloud contains, Pennies from heaven. You'll find your fortune's falling, All over the town, Be sure that your umbrella is upside down." Let us picture then the forgiveness of sins as pennies from heaven. Each penny represents forgiveness from God in heaven. One penny alone provides forgiveness for all your sins. Thus you are rich even if you have only one penny! To hold your umbrella upside-down and catch those pennies is to by faith receive the forgiveness of sins purchased by Christ Jesus.

These pennies also represent the keys to the kingdom of heaven. You possess these pennies, you possess these keys, and by faith in Christ each believer carries these keys wherever they go. These keys open and close the doors of heaven. With these keys comes the power and authority of God. "Christ has given this power to His Church on earth; especially to every local congregation." And so all believers in a congregation, carry the Office of the Keys. Each and every believer in a congregation therefore has the right to teach and even preach to others God's Word. They also have the right to administer the Sacraments. Luther said that "Christ has given to everyone the right and power to weigh and decide, to lecture and preach." And so by way of our spiritual priesthood, because all of us carry these keys with us by faith, pastor and layman alike are equal before the Lord. And neither the pastor nor layman is to be lord over one another. You and I have the same rights before the Lord. Even children hold the Office of the Keys. They too have their pennies. They too have the God-given right to teach and preach the Gospel to others. They only restriction our Lord has placed on the spiritual priesthood is that no one steps upon the rights of another. This is why in a congregational setting, no believer (or priest) can just decide to be the leader of everyone else. While he can indeed volunteer to be a pastor if there is none, he cannot publicly preach or teach the Gospel without a call from God through the congregation. To do so would be to step upon the rights of his fellow Christians.

II. The Office of the Ministry. In this train of thought let us recognize that the Lord has given to His Church another gift besides the Office of the Keys. God has also given to His Church the Office of the Ministry. While all believers hold and have their keys or pennies, while all believers are spiritual priests equal before the Lord, not all priests are pastors. God calls His pastors from the midst of the priests. The Holy Ghost, working by means of a congregation picks and chooses who the pastor will be. A pastor's authority then is derived from both God AND the congregation. Our catechism says, "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."

Pastors then PUBLICLY among fellow Christians teach and preach the Gospel under the authority of Jesus Christ AND the congregation. Thus in the chain of command, at the top there is Christ Jesus our Lord, below Him is the congregation, and below the congregation is the pastor. Pastors are, or at least they should be, servants of the congregation. Jesus said to His own disciples who later would be pastors, "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." Mt. 20:26-27 Pastors then serve their congregation by publicly and privately preaching and teach the Gospel for the edification of the Church.

Not everyone sees it that way of course. Throughout history there have been pastors who have exalted themselves at the expense of the individual Christian. Sometimes pastors, in error, think God has given them all the pennies, and they are to distribute them as they see fit. This is why we must remember that Christ did not give the Office of the Keys to any single person. Jesus did not give the keys to just Peter or just His twelve disciples. Nor does He today give His keys to pastors only, or a synod, or a super-church. Rather the Lord Jesus gave His keys to His Invisible Church, to all believers, to all spiritual priests who stand before Him.

If we return to the picture of pennies from heaven, think of it this way. When a congregation calls a minister, they are calling him to be their public representative. You might say they each give him one of their pennies as a sign and token that he publicly represents them. But when a congregation calls a pastor, they never give him ALL their pennies, but each individual only gives one penny. In this way they give the pastor the right to speak for them, and publicly exercise their keys, but they never surrender or transfer all their rights to him! "When the office of the keys is committed to a pastor, the congregation does not surrender it to him, but always retains it in full." (K. Miller) Indeed though a congregation has a pastor who publicly preaches and teaches on their behalf, they still retain all the power and authority of the Office of the Keys. They still have their pennies. Pastors are not a ruling or superior class of Christians.

Now even though all of this is true, we should be careful not to go to the other extreme. Just because a pastor is a servant of a congregation, just because he is under Christ and under the congregation, this does not mean he is an employee who a congregation can hire or fire. Just as a pastor should not claim too much authority for himself, so a congregation should not claim too much authority, that is over and above what God has given. We should not forget that a pastor has a divine call from God and because of this call his office is sacred. So God commands us to respect his office, and listen to him when he speaks God's Word. We know this because Jesus says to all pastors, "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me." If we despise a pastor who rightly preaches and teaches us God's Word, then we are despising Christ Himself.

III. The gates of hell shall not prevail against God's Church.
We are truly blessed in that our Lord has given so many

good gifts to His Church on earth. He has given to His Church both the Office of the Keys, and the Office of the Ministry. In His Church then we have the blessed Gospel of Jesus Christ, we have the riches of God's forgiveness, and we wish to share these gifts with the world. We would have them have our pennies. We wish to share with them the gift of heaven which has been given unto us.

Let us now take one last look at the words of Jesus in our lesson today. Remember that Jesus said to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." We remember that Peter spoke for all disciples of the Lord when he said of Jesus, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This confession of Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, is the focal point of Jesus' words. Peter's confession of Christ, is the same confession of the True Church, namely that salvation for sinners comes only through Christ. Those who trust in the works and merits of Christ have a sure foundation. Their house of faith is built upon the Rock of Jesus Christ. Truly Christ is the Rock which the gates of hell shall not prevail against. We know Christ is our Rock, for throughout all the Bible Christ is again and again referred to as a Rock upon which true faith rests. In the Old Testament, Jesus was the Rock that followed and protected the wandering children of Israel. The Bible says, "They drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." In the Psalms David again and again referred to Christ as a Rock. Psalm 18:2 "The LORD *is* my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust." Psalm 62:7 "In God *is* my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, *and* my refuge, *is* in God." The Lord Jesus is called our Rock because He is immovable and steadfast. No power on earth or in heaven is able to move Christ away from His resolve to deliver us from sin. No sin, no Satan, no devil, demon, or destroyer can undo what Christ has done! What Christ has done is die on the cross for your sins and mine! He rose again the third day! And so our Lord Jesus is a Rock, a Fortress, a Sure Defense in time of need. You then are bought and purchased from all sin by His holy precious blood. He has made you His own dear child. He has redeemed you from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. You are saved from all your sins. And because Christ Jesus is your Friend, because He is a Friend of Sinners, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you! Not even the devil himself can lay a finger upon you nor claim you as his own when you trust and believe in Christ Jesus.

Therefore cheer up and do not be discouraged. "He will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed." Deut. 31:8 With Christ Jesus that gates of hell will not prevail against you. By Christ Jesus, God has given you the keys to His kingdom. Therefore trust in Him, do not be afraid, and may God grant you peace. Amen.

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