

## JESUS ENTRUSTS US WITH SPECIAL KEYS

Matthew 18:15-18 | Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost | September 7/10, 2017

*Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

### Jesus

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Remember the first time your dad gave you the keys to the car? Remember how excited you were and how grownup you felt? Maybe he just told you to run down to the store for some milk and eggs, or to pick up your sister from practice. Perhaps he let you use the car on prom night. Whatever the reason, it was a thrill to feel those keys in your hand and a privilege to take the car out all by yourself.

Of course, taking the car wasn't just a privilege, but also a responsibility. Your dad expected you to follow some rules. No speeding. No texting. No loud music. No more than one friend in the car, etc., etc. In spite of the rules, it was still exciting to put those keys to use.

In the portion of God's saving Word before us today, we see that our Lord Jesus has entrusted us with another set of keys, not to a car but to a kingdom. Just like driving dad's car, using these keys is a high privilege and serious responsibility. It's not just human lives that are at stake but human souls. **JESUS HAS ENTRUSTED US WITH SPECIAL KEYS.** It is our privilege and responsibility to use these keys to comfort the penitent, and to warn the impenitent. We do this always with one goal in mind: the salvation of precious

souls for whom our Savior shed his priceless blood.

### I. To Comfort the Penitent

The verses leading up to our text make clear that our God **"takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked"** (Ezekiel 33:11) but rather **"wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"** (1 Timothy 2:4). God is serious about this. Jesus warns that anyone who leads a little child astray from faith in him would be better off with a millstone for a necktie. Jesus tells us that our heavenly Father **"is not willing that any of these little ones should perish"** (Matthew 18:14). And then come the words of our text in which Jesus teaches us how to minister to our fellow sinners so that they don't perish.

What Jesus lays out for us here is called the *ministry of the keys*. The binding and loosing that Jesus talks about here is locking and unlocking the gate to the kingdom of heaven. Martin Luther explained: **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.** Right off the bat I want you to note to truths: (1) These keys are all about

forgiveness. (2) These keys are not just given to pastors but to all Christians.

Now unlike the keys to the family car, we're not always so anxious to use these keys. The devil certainly doesn't want us to use them, because if we do people might repent and be saved. The roaring lion who is always prowling around for the next soul to gobble up certainly doesn't want that. And so he uses clever arguments to try to get us to toss these keys in the junk drawer.

- *Why would you want to talk to anyone about their sins? That's none of your business!*
- *Who are you to judge? You're a sinner too. In fact, you've committed the very same sins! Kind of hypocritical of you to point out someone else's sin, isn't it?*
- *So what if that couple is living together? They're not hurting anyone. So what if he drinks too much? It's his life.*
- *Who do you think you are, telling someone that their sins are forgiven or aren't forgiven? Is God on vacation? When did you take over his job?*

You see, the devil would rather that we gossip and slander and cut each other to pieces with our words. He wants us to do anything but share the message of law and gospel with our brothers and sisters. He hates conversations about sin and Savior. And so he'll do anything to keep such talk from happening. Shame on us

for so easily and so often following his diabolical suggestions.

But rather than hang our heads in shame let's lift them up to see our Savior. Jesus was no gossip. He was no slanderer. Our Lord never used his mouth for anything but the good of others. If anybody ever had a reason to use his words to harm, Jesus did. As he hung on the cross suffering for the world's sins he could have had all kinds of nasty things to say to those who crucified him. But he didn't. Just the opposite. As he hung on the cross bleeding and dying for sinners that hate him Jesus prayed: **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"** (Lk 23:34). The same selfless love that moved him to live perfectly in our place, moved him to stay on that cross and earn that forgiveness—for you, for me, for all. For whispered gossip, for slanderous insults, for selfish words, for our cowardly failure to call others to repentance, we are forgiven!

And with our sins forgiven, we are ready to talk to our brothers and sisters about theirs. It helps to remember the goal of such conversations. The goal is not to belittle, embarrass or hurt feelings. Jesus told us the goal: **to win them over**. We want our brothers and sisters to repent: to turn away from the sin that will only harm them and to turn to the Savior who will wrap his loving arms around them and give them peace.

God's Word gives us some guidance for these conversations. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **If someone is caught in a sin,**

**you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently (6:1).** To the Philippians he penned: **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves (2:3).** And so, with humility and gentleness, we talk to our friend about his drinking. We have a conversation with the son who is living with his girlfriend. We sit down with that fellow church member who is struggling with gossip. We talk to them about sin and Savior.

What a joy when they repent! I can tell you as one who has had many such conversations there is nothing more thrilling than saying to a fellow sinner: **“Take heart! Your sins are forgiven”** (Matthew 9:2). Except perhaps hearing a brother or sister in Christ say those same words to you.

## **II. To Warn the Impenitent**

Of course, talking to a brother or sister about sin doesn't always go so smoothly. **“If they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’<sup>17</sup> If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.**

So you talk to your Christian friend about his struggle with alcohol. You go alone and have a private conversation to protect his reputation. You do this several times, but he still refuses to turn from the sin. Jesus tells us how to proceed.

You find two or three other brothers and sisters, men and women your friend knows and respects, and take them along with you. There are a couple of reasons for doing this. First, bringing more people communicates that this is a very serious matter. Second, it stops the person you're dealing with from later saying, “Nobody came and talked to me.” Now you have witnesses that the conversation happened and a record of what was said. Again, this may take more than one attempt. If he repents, rejoice!

But if he still refuses, Jesus gives us another step. It's time to bring the matter before the church. The pastor, elders and leadership need to become involved. Does it surprise you that this comes so late in the process? You should know that if you come to me and say, “So-and-so has fallen into sin,” the first thing I'll ask is, “Did you go and talk to him?” When we become aware of a fellow sinner in trouble, it's our responsibility to talk to him and follow the steps our text. Only much later does the church become involved – hopefully not at all!

So the elders and pastor go and warn the man about his sin and plead with him to repent, again probably more than once, but still he refuses. Now what? Jesus said, **“Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”** Pagans were unbelievers who did not worship the one true God. Tax collectors worked with the Roman government to collect taxes, and gouged their Jewish countrymen in the process. The people viewed them as traitors. Neither were allowed membership in the

synagogue. They were expelled. That's what Jesus is talking about here. If, after repeated conversations, the straying brother stubbornly refuses to repent, it's time for excommunication. Finally, excommunication is just a public recognition of what the sinner has done to himself by his impenitence. He has removed himself from the family of believers. He has cut himself off from God's grace. He has rejected Christ's forgiveness and put himself on the road to hell. There is nothing more heartbreaking.

Some say, "Just leave them alone, and eventually they'll come around." That sounds reasonable, but it's just not what our Savior told us to do. Parents understand that sometimes tough love is necessary. Excommunication is tough love, tough love with a good goal. Again, we want the sinner to turn from the evil, trust in Christ and live.

Imagine that you are walking down the street one day when up ahead you see your good friend Joe. Joe doesn't see or hear you, because he's got his ear buds in and the music turned up loud. Suddenly he steps off the curb, oblivious to the truck bearing down on him. Without thinking you run into traffic and tackle your friend, knocking him out of the path of the oncoming truck. When he gets up his face tells you that he's angry, confused and in pain. He's bleeding and has two broken ribs. But when he sees the truck speeding away he understands what happened. In spite of his injuries and his pain, he looks at you and says: "How can I thank you? You saved my life!" Calling a

fellow sinner to repentance hurts – him and you. But it's worth the effort. More than his life, his immortal soul is at stake.

Lately I've been reading that keys are becoming a thing of the past. You can start your car with the push a button. You can open your front door with a smart phone. I pray that these keys never become a thing of the past. God grant us all the courage and confidence to use the keys he has entrusted to us for the salvation of souls and the glory of his name. Amen.

**S.D.G.**