

THE CHURCH'S KEYS TO HEAVEN



Christ empowers His people.

IT MAY SOUND STRANGE to some when the pastor pronounces the absolution on Sunday morning, saying, "...I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." A casual observer might ask, "What gives *him* the right to forgive sins? Only God can do that!" And it's true that the Lord Jesus alone has earned the forgiveness which each of us needs. But Christ bestowed a unique authority upon His believers when He gave them the power to proclaim God's forgiveness - or lack of it - in God's name. We call this power "the Ministry of the Keys." What is the nature of these keys? What do they open? Who may use them? These are topics we will discuss in this lesson.

ICON KEY

-  Introduction
-  Important point
-  For further reading

What the Keys are *not*

1. Read carefully the account in Matthew 16:13-19, the passage in which this unique authority was first given. First of all, according to verse 13, *to whom was Jesus speaking on this occasion?*

2. In verse 18 Jesus says, "...*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church.*" For many centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has used this passage to claim that Peter was the first Pope, and that the Christian Church is founded on the papal succession, since the name "Peter" and the word "rock" are similar in the Greek language. But the clear rules of Greek grammar reveal that "rock" simply cannot refer back to Peter. Then to what *does* it refer? Look back at the whole section, and answer: *what is the "rock" upon which Jesus said He would build His church?*

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The Ministry of the Keys do *not* establish a "papal succession." They were not given exclusively to Peter, but rather to all who share Peter's good confession: that Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, they were given *to all believers!*

3. Read again the first part of verse 19. *What does Jesus call the power to forgive sins or not forgive sins?*

4. Look up John 20:2-23. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples behind locked doors. *What assignment did Jesus repeat to His disciples (and all believers)?*

5. Refer to I Peter 2:9. *What does Peter call the believers? What is the job of believers?*

6. Read Matthew 18:15-18. *What authority does Jesus give to His followers on earth - the disciples?*

7. Read I Corinthians 5:1-13. Here is an example of how the Church - the believers - were to carry out their assignment to "retain" (bind, not forgive) the terrible sin in which one of their members was living. *According to verse 4, in whose name and by whose authority were the assembled believers carrying out their duty?*

8. *According to verse 5, what was the assembled Church of believers to do with the man?*

9. *According to the last part of verse 5, what was the final PURPOSE for the drastic action of the congregation?*

10. *What does Paul tell the assembled Christians to do in v. 13?*

11. Now move to *Second* Corinthians 2:5-11. This account may well be the conclusion to that same story. *How is the Church of believers is to treat a person who returns with a repentant heart?*

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12. Look up 2 Timothy 4:2. *What is one way in which the Church administers the Keys?*

13. Preaching the Gospel of forgiveness through Christ - that is the way to open the doors of heaven for poor sinners! Normally, a congregation asks one person - the pastor - to carry out the public administration of the keys. Look up Titus 1:7-9. *What sort of qualities should this person have?*

14. Read Acts 20:28, Paul's parting words to the elders of the congregation at Ephesus. *How did the Apostle say they were to carry out the administration of the keys?*

15. Read Acts 1:15-26. This is an account of how the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem replaced Judas after he had taken his own life. Especially from verses 20-26, *what was the process they used to call a servant for the church?*



This is a process which is remarkably similar to the one we use when calling a new pastor to one of our congregations. You may wish to discuss the doctrine of the divine call with your pastor.

16. Every Christian has the right to administer the means of grace - to forgive or retain sins in the name of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the Gospel, even to baptize and administer the Lord's Supper. Under normal circumstances, however we call a pastor to carry out most of these functions in a public way in the congregation. Look up I Corinthians 14:40. *What simple rule governs how our public worship services should be conducted?*

17. Mission work is important for every Christian, and for every body of Christians. *What assignment does Christ give us in Mark 16:15?*

18. *Answer the same question from Matthew 28:18-20:*

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19. Look up Matthew 26:27-28, and II Corinthians 2:6-10. *What is another way in which the Church uses the keys to open the kingdom of heaven for poor sinners?*

20. Again, we need to bear in mind that *all* believers are missionaries. *How does II Corinthians 5:20 refer to us Christians? What does that mean for your life?*

21. Read the words of John the Baptist, Matthew 3:8. *How does a believer SHOW that he has the key to heaven's doors already here on this earth?*

22. Look up John 5:1-14. Again, *how does a redeemed child of God SHOW that the doors of heaven have been opened to him (esp. from verse 14)?*



Additional Bible Readings

Consult I Peter, chapters 1-5, I John chapters 1-2, Psalm 51.