



Open and Shut: The Keys



The Special Power and Right of All Christians—The Personal Use of the Keys

“You’ve been a very bad boy. You better go over to the priest for confession.”

I could see my Grandma telling her oldest son that. She was strict and he was a little stinker! It also helped that St. Joseph’s was across the street from their home on Ferry Street. Tellingly, it was the second son who went to Catholic Seminary. Maybe he thought he would be able to hold something over his older brother.

“I’ve learned you have to forgive yourself. No use beating yourself up about anything—life is too short. It got me to where I am and so the real question is, ‘Where do I go from here?’”

I could see how lots of people would like to turn the corner so effortlessly. It’s better than “no-fault” car insurance.

There is a great deal of confusion when it comes to something at the center of our faith—forgiveness. Who can forgive? Who can be forgiven? What does forgiveness even mean? It’s not that difficult. In many ways, it is an open and shut case.

An Upper Room John 20.19-23

What is the context for these verses?

Martin Luther (*Small Catechism, The Keys, First*) says, “The use of the keys is that special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth.”

How does John 20 show Jesus only gave this power to believers?

What is the two-fold power Jesus is giving his believers?

Why do we need the Holy Spirit to use this power correctly?

Why Keys? Matthew 16.13-19

What is the context of these verses?

Who is the “you” Jesus is addressing in verse 15?

Who answers on behalf of the “you”?

What is Peter’s confession?

Jesus engages in a pun. Peter means stone, the confession of Peter, which is the confession of the church, is the cliff, the sort of thing you can carve into. Who is part of this “cliff” and how does John 20 agree with our answer?



Now, what is the weapon this cliff will have that will batter down the gates of hell itself?

What does it mean to “bind”?

What does it mean to “loose”?

How valid is this earthly declaration of forgiveness or non-forgiveness?

Who Has the Keys?

The Roman Catholic Church maintains Jesus has given the power to forgive or not forgive sins only to Peter, the first Pope, and all his successors and to whomever they choose to delegate that power to. Hence, only a priest can forgive sins. How does John 20 contradict that idea? How can Matthew 16 be harmoniously interpreted in light of John 20?

Let's say, however, my Grandma wanted to dig in her heels. "Only a priest can forgive sins." I can talk about John 20 till I am blue in the face. She's never heard the priest preach on that and is dubious. She is definitely leaning towards the declarations of the Church through the Pope. How might her first "Pope" convince her?

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2.9

On the other hand, I had a person vehemently object to me proclaiming the absolution during the service. He said, "Only God can forgive sins." If you notice, I now emphasize, "as a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins." But I didn't back down. Jesus faced the same criticism.

Read Matthew 9.1-8

Jesus saw the paralytic's greatest need was to hear that his sins were forgiven. So he said, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." What was the reaction among Jesus' enemies?

Humanly speaking, what was easier, to say your sins were forgiven or to say, "Get up and walk?"

In reality, which one was easier?

How does Jesus prove he has the authority to forgive sins on earth?

How did the crowd interpret this miracle?

How did that answer my "friend" objecting to me forgiving sins in the middle of a sermon?

Do you think my uncle would go to the priest for confession every time my Grandma told him to? What does limiting the power of the personal use of the Keys do to people?