

In the 1870s, my great-great-great grandfather was a pastor to Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin. A controversy arose at that time among some of the other Norwegian Lutheran churches and pastors. This was a controversy over the issue of confession and absolution. Some were teaching that you can't be certain of the words of absolution. Before we address this error, let's first review what we believe, teach, and confess about the Office of the Keys and the practice of confession and absolution.

As we learn in our Small Catechism, the Office of the Keys is that special church power, which Christ has given to his Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners and to retain the sins of unrepentant sinners as long as they do not repent. Where is this written? The holy Evangelist St. John writes in chapter 20 of his Gospel account, "Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"

Here, our Lord Jesus Christ has given to his Church his Holy Spirit and the power to forgive and retain sins. As he says in Matthew 18, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you set free on earth will be free in heaven." What should we believe according to these words? We should believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us according to Christ's command, specifically when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and also when they forgive those repent of their sins and desire to do better, then this is as valid and certain even in heaven as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us himself.

This is why we practice confession and absolution. We can do this corporately as we do every Sunday at the beginning of the service. We can also do this privately when you confess to your pastor the sins that are bothering your conscience. In either case, confession embraces two parts. First, it is that we confess our sins. Second, it is that we receive absolution, that is forgiveness, from the pastor as from Christ himself, not doubting but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven. Regardless of how much detail you go into, the absolution does not depend on how thoroughly you have confessed your sins. It is a free gift, which Christ has given to his Church through his Holy Spirit. Your repentance is therefore not only the fact that you feel bad about your sins. It also includes faith that God forgives you for Jesus' sake.

Now, here is what the controversy was all about back in the 1870s. There were two professors among the Norwegian Lutherans who said that a pastor cannot confidently speak the words of absolution to you, because he can't see your faith. They argued that, since only you and God know whether you truly believe, no one else can tell you that your sins are forgiven. Instead, the pastor, or whoever is giving the absolution, can only give this conditional statement that if you truly believe then your sins are forgiven.

These professors did not like the kind of absolution that we heard this morning. The absolution we heard this morning is simply a response to your confession. There is no condition attached to it that you are forgiven if you truly believe it. Instead, the pastor simply announces the grace of

God to you and declares in the stead and by the command of Christ, “I forgive you of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” It’s true that I cannot look into your heart. It’s true that I can’t see your faith. Only God can see what is truly in your heart. I can only hear your confession and then respond “upon this your confession.”

But I don’t need to see your faith to be able to pronounce to you the forgiveness of sins. Because the forgiveness of sins doesn’t depend on your faith. The forgiveness of sins, rather, depends on Christ’s work of atonement and his sure words of promise. The risen Christ showed his wounded hands and side to his disciples, because he had already taken the sin of the world on himself. He had made full atonement. He declared peace to his disciples, because he has already made peace with God by the blood of his cross. Now, risen from the dead, he gives his Holy Spirit with this promise of the forgiveness of sins.

This is therefore what we base the absolution on. It is based on Christ’s command and promise. Absolution is another word for “loosen” or “set free.” To absolve is to set free. It is to loosen the shackles of sin, which would otherwise bind your conscience and drag you to hell.

These professors taught that you we cannot pronounce the absolution in this way. They said that a minister cannot absolve a sinner with certainty, since he doesn’t know the sinner’s faith. But their teaching revealed a false understanding of faith. You see, faith does not forgive us of our sins because of some quality it has in itself. Faith doesn’t save us because it meets some sort of condition. Faith doesn’t add anything to what Christ has already accomplished and declares freely in his gospel. No, faith simply receives and lays hold of the free gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation won for all sinners by Jesus Christ and proclaimed in his promise of grace. This is how faith saves. This is why God counts faith as righteousness. God counts faith as righteousness for believing in him who declares the ungodly to be righteous (Rom 4:5). It is by trusting what is already true. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them (2 Cor 5:19). Christ has made peace by the blood of his cross (Col 1:20). All sins have been laid on him, and all sinners have been absolved in him (2 Cor 5:14).

As surely as the law condemns all people and holds all people under sin, even more surely does the gospel declare God’s mercy in Jesus Christ to all. As St. Paul says, “God has put all people in a prison of disobedience in order to be merciful to all” (Rom 11:32). And in another place: “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24). And in another place, he says: “When one man disobeyed, the many were made sinners. So when One obeyed, the many will be made righteous. The Law came to multiply sin, but where there was much sin, God’s grace was so much greater” (Rom 5:19-20).

To be sure, faith alone is what lays hold of this promise. If you don’t believe the promise, then you are condemned, because you are calling God a liar. But if we teach that faith is what completes the transaction, as if God has not forgiven you until the moment you believe, then faith can’t stand on a firm foundation. Faith always has something it believes in. Faith looks to

Jesus Christ alone who did for all the world atone. Faith points to the blood of Christ, which marks our door and declares peace with God. Faith comes from and abides in the Word of Christ, which declares the full and free forgiveness of sins. Faith doesn't hold onto something that is potentially true if only the proper conditions are met. No, faith holds onto the testimony that the Father has made about his Son by raising him from the dead. He is the one who has overcome the world. This is why our faith overcomes the world, because faith simply rests in him, his work, and his promise.

Now, it's certainly good to say that if you believe then your sins are forgiven. One of our forms of absolution says this very thing: "To them that believe on His name He hath given the power to become sons of God and hath promised them His Holy Spirit. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Grant this, Lord, unto us all. Amen." That is a perfectly fine pronouncement of the absolution. But notice what comes before it. "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us and hath sent His only Son to die for us and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins."

So even before we hear the words about believing, we first hear what God has already done in his Son. He has had mercy upon us. He has given his Son to die for us. For his sake, he already forgives us of our sins. This is objectively true. That means that it is true even before you believe it. God has reconciled you to himself. And he declares it still today by his Spirit and Word, which he has given to his church.

God's declaration of grace does not depend on our faith. It's the other way around. Our faith depends on God's declaration of grace. Our faith depends on the forgiveness gained by Christ and given in his Word. We can therefore have certainty that we have this peace and forgiveness from Christ. We have such assurance by the power of the Holy Spirit. He therefore gives us the certainty that we are indeed God's children. In other words, he gives us faith.

Of course, Jesus also tells his disciples that if they do not forgive sins, then they are not forgiven. He says that if they retain sins, then they are retained. Here he is describing the key that locks the doors of heaven to those who refuse to repent of their sins. But he is not denying that he has also purchased these unrepentant sinners. He has purchased all sinners. He forgave those who never believed in him. But by refusing to repent of their sins and remaining in their unbelief, they call God a liar. This is why Jesus gives his authority to withhold forgiveness from them. Not because he didn't win it for them. Not because he didn't reconcile all sinners to God. But because their unrepentance prevents them from embracing and trusting in his promise. So don't pronounce forgiveness to those who refuse to repent of their sins. Don't cast pearls before swine. This will only confirm them in their unbelief as they continue to trample on Christ and his Word. Then they will never repent, and the wrath of God will remain on them forever.

Jesus gives his church this power and calls his ministers to this Office. He gives a stewardship of his Word. He gives the responsibility to apply his Word to people. But he doesn't give us the ability to read hearts. We can only take people on their public confession and life. If someone is

secretly hiding the fact that he doesn't believe and that he isn't sorry for his sins, then we can't know that unless God brings it to light. So what if someone doesn't believe the absolution? What if someone hears, "Your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake," yet he cares nothing of it, ignores it, or even mocks it in his heart? Does that make God's Word false? Is God lying? Of course not! God remains faithful and true even if everyone is a liar. Those who don't believe make God out to be a liar, but God's testimony about his Son remains true. As surely as Christ is risen from the dead, he has made peace with God for all sinners.

You should take comfort in this, especially when you feel the burden and deceit of unbelief in your own sinful flesh. When your heart condemns you, God is greater than your heart. When you testify that you are a poor, miserable sinner, God's testimony is greater, because it is the truth he told about his Son. He was handed over into death for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Rom 4:25). If you believe this, then you have this testimony in yourself.

Thomas couldn't see the faith of his fellow apostles. He therefore refused to believe their report. He wanted to see Jesus for himself. And he did see Jesus. Our Lord showed Thomas his pierced hands and side. But this was not so much for Thomas's sake. It was for our sake. It was so that we would believe this witness God has given of his Son. Blessed are you who believe this witness, even though you can't see it.

Don't give up if you find that your faith is weak and your heart is burdened with sin. Listen to the testimony God has given of his Son. It was true even before you believed it. As Christ entered through the locked doors, his Word still penetrates the sinful heart. He who is Lord and God over all gives to your small faith the victory over sin, death, and hell. Because God cannot lie. The risen Christ declares peace to you. He gives you his Holy Spirit, and he forgives you. You can therefore have certainty that you have life in his name. Amen.