

## **Six Chief Parts Of Luther's Small Catechism. The Office Of The Keys**

Text: John 20:23

Suggested Hymns:

325, 176, 311, 327, 193RS308

- 1) God Works Repentance
- 2) Absolution Is the Work of God
- 3) Absolution Is Gospel
- 4) Confession Should Be Voluntary
- 5) Confession Has Several Forms
- 6) Confession Between Neighbours
- 7) Confession and Discipline

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 20:23, <sup>23</sup> ***“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The fifth chief part of *Luther's Small Catechism*, the Office of the Keys, as we know it, did not appear in Luther's first workings of the Catechism. It first appeared as an appendage to the Catechism along with Prayers and the Table of Duties. This in no way minimises its importance in Christian piety.

We must remember that Luther was striving to stress the essentials of Christianity. For him these were the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and Prayer. You will recall why Luther considered these basic.

In the Ten Commandments, man learns what kind of life God requires of him but how he fails to produce the holiness that God expects. In the Apostles' Creed, man learns how God offers this life to him by grace and that a man can live this life by faith. In the Lord's Prayer, one learns how God Himself is the source of strength for this life.

Luther added the sacraments to the Catechism as additional expressions of the Gospel and resources for the Christian faith. The addition of Luther's insights into the nature of confession and absolution is one more of his great contributions to evangelical theology and practice. This is what we are considering today. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. God Works Repentance**

Essential to a proper understanding of confession and absolution is that we understand how God works true repentance in our hearts. So much of what we call sorrow and grief over sin is not true repentance. Most of us can recall that as youngsters we were forced to say that we were sorry for something. At the time we may have said that we were sorry, only because we experienced that kind of duress. Yet we were not truly sorry and perhaps even angry that we were forced into such a confession.

Nor is it true repentance when one is only sorry that he was caught in his sin. Most sorrow over sin fits into that category. True repentance does not even occur simply because one experiences anxiety for his sin, although that may well be the occasion for the beginning of repentance.

God works repentance in the heart of man when God arouses the conscience of man through the power of His Law. One conscience may be more acute than another. One person may feel the terror of the Law more severely than another.

But true repentance is worked in the heart of man when he realises that he has sinned against God and that there is no help for himself, within himself or in another. True repentance occurs when God brings us to the point of acknowledging there is no good within us. God performs this work in us that we might acknowledge our need for Him to help us.

### **2. Absolution Is the Work of God**

Although God works repentance in our hearts through the Law this does not mean that the absolution, or forgiveness, depends on how deeply we feel or express this repentance. That is an easy mistake for us to make.

We are greatly tempted to think that we cannot receive the forgiveness of God unless we have the proper or intense feeling that will win God's approval or sympathy. Luther himself learned the failure of that notion. His own severe conscience felt the crunch of God's law, but he discovered that he could in no way enumerate or account for all of his sins.

The acute consciousness about his sin gave him no comfort that he had made a good confession before God. He also realised that no matter how exacting he was in his confession, he could never be sure that he was confessing his most grievous sins.

The sins of pride, doubt, unbelief and many other sins of the heart are the ones we are most likely to overlook. In fact, we are usually oblivious to these sins because we have rationalised that we have a right to feel as we do.

Thus absolution could in no way be dependent on the fact that we have made a good confession or that we have somehow made ourselves worthy before God through the fullness of our confession.

Absolution is dependent on the state of God's heart. He absolves us not because we are worthy confessants, but He absolves us because of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God has laid bare His heart. By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, God had made it clear that He is willing to lay aside our sin and grant us a new life in Him.

### **3. Absolution Is Gospel**

Thus while repentance is the work of God through His Law, absolution is the work of God through His Gospel. The forgiveness of sins which we receive in holy absolution is no different from the

forgiveness of sins which we receive in Holy Baptism. Absolution is of one piece with our baptism.

What God does through absolution is to assure us that the new life which He gave us at Holy Baptism is preserved and protected. Absolution is the reassurance that God has not forgotten us in His mercy. There is no sin, no matter how great, (except the sin of unbelief, of course) that He cannot forgive in order to preserve for us that new life He gave us at baptism.

In the same way absolution is linked to the preaching of the Gospel. When we hear from the pulpit that Christ has died for our sins and that we are forgiven by God's mercy in Christ, that is an absolution which is proclaimed for all people who are repentant before God.

The function of preaching is to proclaim Law and Gospel so that we can recognise our sin, repent, and hear the forgiveness of God proclaimed to us as His absolution for us.

So we shall also see the same kind of relationship with the Sacrament of the Altar. In the Lord's Supper, we will see how God in a dramatic way feeds the new life He gave us at baptism with the same forgiveness of sins won for us by the death and resurrection of His Son our Lord.

#### **4. Confession Should Be Voluntary**

Because of Luther's evangelical understanding of confession and absolution, he was thoroughly convinced that confession should not be an obligation or duty demanded by the church. To force people to confession was an invention of the church that violated a wholesome approach to Law and Gospel.

Such management of the souls of men either overburdened the conscience of the sinner, or led the self-righteous into the stiffening of their pride. Luther believed that God Himself convicts the sinner, and he also observed that even the world sat in judgment of man regularly.

Employer accused employee and vice versa. Husband failed wife, and vice versa. Parents mistreated their children, and vice versa. Everywhere one looks at human relations there are sins galore. Luther fully expected that there never would be a lack of people who needed to make confession. Out of their own needs and their own willingness Christians could be expected to run to the pastors or ministers to make confession.

However, the focus of confession as Luther saw it should be on the absolution. In a form for private confession, Luther allows that the confessant may announce the specific sin or sins that trouble him, or he may simply confess that he is a troubled sinner in need of absolution.

In either event one is to concentrate on the mercies of God as announced in the absolution. The penitent person who confesses his sins under the force of the Law are by God's grace permitted to turn to Him for forgiveness. Absolution then becomes the occasion for faith and trust in the Gospel.

### **5. Confession Has Several Forms**

As Luther freed the sacraments from the clerical power of the church, he did the same for confession and absolution. The power of the keys, he explained, is the unique power which God has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of the penitent and to retain the sins of the impenitent.

This power did not reside in the clergy only. It is a power conferred on all Christians. To exercise this power Christians were able to go directly to God Himself for the forgiveness of sins.

In the Lord's Prayer, as we have already noted, our Lord Himself gives us the right to ask our heavenly Father to forgive us our trespasses. Luther says that this is a baptism which God has hung around our neck so that we will not forget this great privilege.

In the Christian congregation we also confess together as brothers and sisters in Christ our general confession in which we plead guilty of all our

sins. Together we acknowledge our sinful state and jointly pray for the forgiveness of God. The pastor or minister in the name of Jesus Christ forgives all sins to the entire congregation.

In private we may run to the pastor and confess our sins with the assurance that in the same way he pronounces forgiveness to the entire congregation he is able to do so for us individually. He does so with the same authority, says Luther, as if our dear Lord Jesus Christ were dealing with us Himself. We may be so assured, because it is the Gospel of God.

### **6. Confession Between Neighbours**

When the sinner runs to the pastor in private for absolution, he is not only assured the forgiveness of sins, but the confidentiality of that act. The pastor is committed to keep the matter in secret.

Luther, however, saw that it was not necessary to tell everything to the church. Certainly it is a most wholesome practice if a Christian who has wronged his brother would go and confess his sin and beg his forgiveness.

When the Christian brother who has been wronged grants forgiveness, then the matter is over. The forgiveness of a Christian brother is no less valid than when our Lord Himself pronounces forgiveness.

This, too, we learned from our Lord's prayer. Luther spoke a great deal about the mutual consolation of the brethren. This consolation takes place between any two Christians who are willing to announce the forgiveness of God as it is needed. If a wife consoles her husband who is troubled or disturbed by his sin, or a father forgives a son the wrong he has done, this is also valid. So one could add all the situations in which one Christian neighbour is able to assure the other of God's grace and love.

This is not only possible because of what Christ has done for us, but it is desirable. This is when the church is at its best. When all of us are

doing our utmost at our callings in life, we know that we fall far short of what God requires of us.

How blessed we are when we find Christians at our side, who not only share with us sympathy for our state, but are also able to communicate to us the Gospel of God's forgiveness. Then God's holy work is done. For then, in spite of our sins and our failings, we are made holy by faith.

## **7. Confession and Discipline**

The power which Christ has given to His church on earth is not only to forgive sins but also to retain the sins of those who do not repent. Our Lord Himself has prescribed how one is to deal with one who has sinned against us and has not repented in Matt. 18:15-18.

One should go to his brother and tell the matter privately. If the brother repents, he is gained by your absolution. If he does not, one should take one or two others along. If he repents, he is gained by absolution. If he does not confess, one should take the matter to the church. But if he refuses to listen to the church, then, of course, no forgiveness can be offered.

But even here, care must be exercised that the whole proceeding is designed and carried out to gain the brother in love. The goal of church discipline is always confession and absolution. Grave errors and mistakes have been made when this procedure is not originated in love and concern for a brother.

By the same token, great errors are committed when this procedure is not followed at all and a brother is also permitted to continue in his sin. How much better it is when all of us practice the mutual consolation of the brethren! This is the privilege of heaven itself that our God has committed to us. There is joy in heaven when we practice it faithfully in love.

Scripture tells us in Luke 15:7 that there is *joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*, and in Luke 15:10, we read, <sup>10</sup> *“Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.