



The Ministry of the Keys

The life of a Christian is one of confidence; confidence that our sins have been paid for; confidence that we have a right relationship with God; confidence that we have a hope and a future in heaven. Another word for that confidence is **faith**.

Having faith doesn't mean we don't struggle with sin. While we live on this earth, we continue to fight against a sinful nature that wants to say "no" to God and "yes" to our sin. Sometimes we fight back against temptation and do what is right. All too often, we lose the fight and do things we know are wrong.

This is why God gave us the Church - the gathering of believers - where together we encourage each other, pray for each other, hold each other accountable, and especially speak the Gospel to one another. This is what the Ministry of the Keys is all about - how God's people come together to proclaim forgiveness to one another, to confess to one another, and at times to speak hard truth to one another out of love.

This lesson will help you understand what the Ministry of the Keys is, how it is used in the Church, how it is a blessing to your life, and how to make the most of it in your life of faith.

Through your learning in this module, you will



- discover how Jesus gave the Church the Ministry of the Keys.
- understand why it is called "the Ministry of the Keys."
- recognize the ways the Church uses Law and Gospel to build up our faith.
- appreciate the value of Confession and Absolution.
- reflect on the importance of fellow Christians speaking Law and Gospel into your life.

A Word to Parents

Dear Parent,

This lesson might be one of the hardest to teach for two reasons:

(1) Even if you grew up in a Lutheran Church and learned this section of the Catechism as a child, it is short and was probably not a major focus of your lessons.

(2) It deals with some of the most difficult aspects of our Christian life as it relates to the Church - being open about our sins, hearing correction from a fellow believer, and giving hard truth when it is needed most. These things bring out strong emotions and might make us uncomfortable at times.

But this lesson is also one of the best, because it gets at the heart of what the Gospel is all about - proclaiming forgiveness to people who need to hear it.

In preparation for this lesson, we encourage you to do the following:

1. Read Psalm 23 and John 10 and reflect on what it means that Jesus is the Good Shepherd.
2. Read Matthew 18:15-20 and John 20:19-23 to see how Jesus gave the Ministry of the Keys.
3. Read through the section on the Keys in Luther's Small Catechism and in Luther's Large Catechism.
4. Pray for wisdom and guidance as you lead your children in a closer walk with Jesus.

A final note: The end of this lesson includes an activity that may be challenging. We ask you to do a private confession with a pastor, staff minister, a small group leader, or trusted Christian friend. Obviously, we cannot force you to complete this activity, nor do we want to. Please view it as an encouragement to take a step of faith and put God's Word into practice. If you do, we will ask you to reflect on that experience with your kids and then share some reflective thoughts here. More on that when you get to the end of this module.

Sinners and Saints

"Simul justus et peccator." If you ever studied Latin, you can probably figure out what that means. If not, it is a phrase Luther used to describe the life of a believer: "At the same time a sinner and a saint." Take a look at this video to get an explanation of what Luther meant by that:

[Go to YouTube and search for What Does "Simul Justus et Peccator" Mean? From Ligonier Ministries. Alternatively, type in the weblink: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xci-kUhXOW8> or use the QR code provided here]

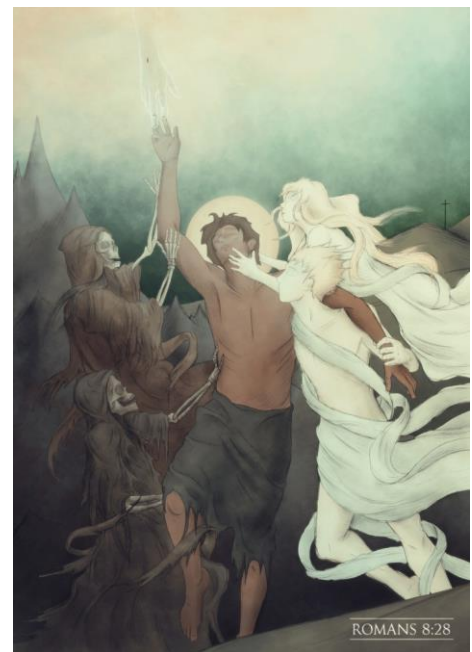


Discuss:

Based on what you heard in the video, explain "simul justus et peccator" in your own words.

Read Romans 7:7-25

- How would you describe, in your own words, the struggle Paul is expressing in this section of Scripture?
- Identify some words and phrases Paul uses that talk about his struggle with his sinful nature.
- What hope does Paul point to as the answer to his struggle with sin?
- If Paul, who did so much work for God's kingdom and wrote more than half the New Testament, still struggled with sin, what does that say about our struggle with sin?

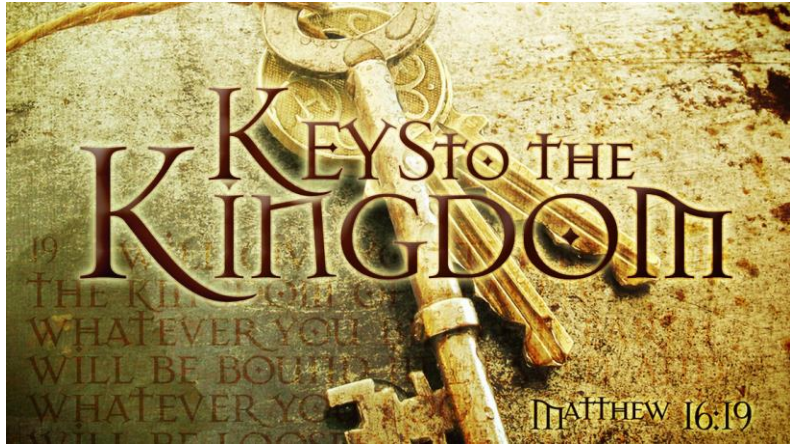


Read Romans 8:1-17

- Paul starts this chapter with a reassurance and an answer to the problem of sin that he talked about in chapter 7. What is the answer to our sin?
- In your own words, explain how the Holy Spirit helps us.
- How do Romans 7 and 8 together help you better understand the concept of "simul justus et peccator?"

What are the Keys?

We need to hear the Gospel message again and again. We are both sinful and justified, so we need to be reminded that we are forgiven, so that we come back to God's Word and walk in the Spirit.



Sometimes, we get caught up in sin and need to be shown

the seriousness of walking away from Jesus. This is why Jesus gave his Church the Keys - to show those who repent that they are forgiven, so that they have strength to do God's Will, and to show those who do not repent that they are in danger.

Read Matthew 16:19-20

- Jesus is speaking figuratively, but he is painting a picture for us. Imagine that the keys he is giving open a set of doors. Where do those doors lead?
- "Bind" and "loose" are a way of saying "lock" and "unlock." What would it mean to lock the door of heaven to someone? What would it mean to unlock it?
- What do you think? Do you think it makes sense for Jesus to tell his disciples to do this? Doesn't this seem like an awful lot of power and authority? How would you have felt if you were one of the first disciples hearing this?

Read John 20:19-23

- Jesus' words here might give us a better idea of what he meant when he told his disciples they were to "bind" and "loose." Which sounds like "forgive" and which sounds like "not forgive?"
- There is no perfect translation for what Jesus says here in the Greek. The closest you could get is, "If you forgive anyone their sins, it is as if it had already been forgiven in heaven." What does this imply about the authority he is giving to his disciples?
- What do you think? When would it be right to forgive someone their sins? When would it be right to *not* forgive them their sins?

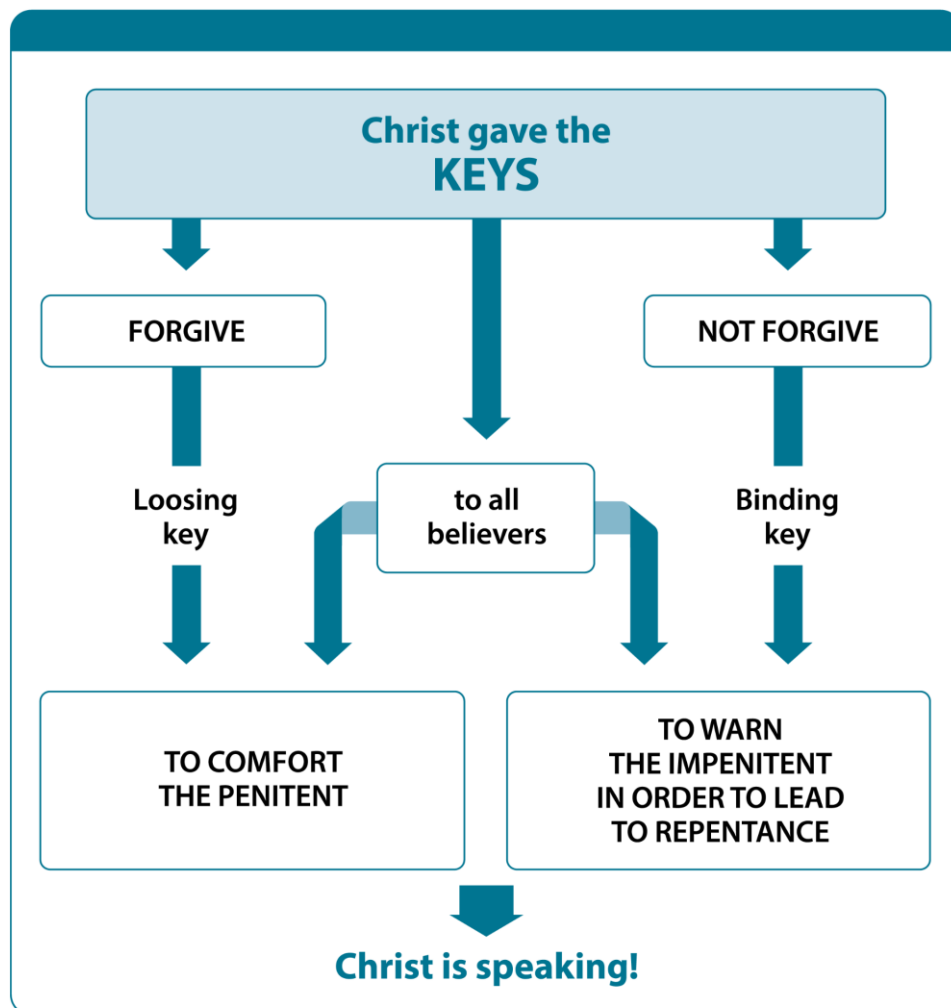
In the Small Catechism, Luther explains the use of the keys this way:

First: What is the use of the keys?

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.

Where is this written?

The holy evangelist John writes in chapter 20, "[Jesus] breathed on [his disciples] and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"



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The Keys in the Church

Jesus gave his first disciples the instructions to use the Keys - to forgive the sins of those who are repentant, and to refuse forgiveness to those who do not repent. But how does that apply in the Church today? Who is allowed to use the Keys?



Read Matthew 28:16-20

We call this passage "the Great Commission," because it is where Jesus gave his first disciples the mission of the Church for all time. He said, "Go and make disciples," and that is what the Church does.

But there's one phrase in particular that tells why everything he taught those first disciples is what he wants for all disciples of all time. Did you catch it?

Jesus said "...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

If Jesus wants new disciples to do everything, he taught the first disciples to do, then what will that include? (Hint: take a look again at the top of this page.)

All disciples for all time

Jesus gave his disciples the instruction to teach new disciples everything - including teaching them to forgive or not forgive sins based on someone's repentance. This is a special assignment from Jesus, and one we take seriously. Let's look at a few different ways the Church carries out this assignment:

- We gather for worship, the pastor or worship leader leads the congregation in a Confession of sins and then speaks an "Absolution." ("Absolution" = "declares the forgiveness of sins.") **Can you think of specific things we say during Confession and Absolution?**
- A small group hears one of their members share about a struggle with sin, and the leader and/or people in the group speak the Gospel and tell that person that God's grace is over them. **Have you ever been a part of a group where this happened?**
- Someone comes to a pastor or staff minister to make a private confession and hears from the minister that their sins are forgiven. **Parents or grandparents, tell your children about a time you have done this.**
- One Christian shares with another Christian that they have sinned, and they remind each other that they are forgiven. **Who is a friend you trust that you could share your sins with?**
- A church member has become caught in sin and a Christian friend confronts them with their sin, showing them what God says about it. **What would you do if a friend came to you and told you they thought you had been caught in sin? What if they were right? How would God ask you to react?**
- A congregation exercises Church discipline with a member who has refused to repent of their sin. **Why is this hard for people to accept? Why is it actually an act of love? (We will explore this topic more on the next page.)**

The Ministry of the Keys is not just the job of the pastors or people who work at Church. Jesus gave the Keys to the Church, and the Church is all of God's people. Every Christian has a right to use the Keys - but we need to know how to use them faithfully. Jesus gave us instructions for that as well! On the next page we will explore some of those instructions. First, take a look at this video for a better understanding of how the Keys work in the Church:



[Type in this video link or use the QR code: <https://vimeo.com/206527152>]

Jesus gave the Keys to the whole Church, and all Christians have a right to use them. But often, Christians rely on pastors to lead their congregation in using the Keys. Luther explains this a little more in his Small Catechism:

Second: How does a Christian congregation use the keys?

A Christian congregation with its called servant of Christ uses the keys in accordance with Christ's command by forgiving those who repent of their sin and are willing to amend, and by excluding from the congregation those who are plainly impenitent that they may repent. I believe that when this is done, it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.

Where is this written?

Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 18, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Special Instructions for Using the Keys

Using the Keys is a big responsibility, and there are times that it is difficult. But Jesus actually gives us special instructions. If we can learn this pattern and keep it in mind, it makes it much easier.



Read Matthew 18:15-20. Jesus talks about the keys again here, but we're going to focus on the step-by-step process he lays out here.

- Jesus says that if a brother or sister sins, then you need to address it. Who is your "brother or sister?" (Hint: Look at Matthew 12:47-49 if you're not sure what else "brother and sister" might mean in Jesus' words.)
- What is the first step Jesus gives for addressing sin with a fellow believer?
- Sometimes you might confront someone about their sin, and they will not listen to you. What does Jesus say is your next step in that situation?
- If you and another Christian go together, talk to your friend about his sin, and he still won't listen, what does Jesus say is the next step?
- Who is "the Church?" Who are some of the leaders you might go to?



Read Matthew 18:21-35

In your own words, how would you explain the point of the parable Jesus tells? Why is it important that we learn how to grant forgiveness?

Jesus gives us a pattern for dealing with our friend's sin:

1. When you know they have sinned, you talk to them personally, one on one.
2. If they don't show repentance, talk to another Christian friend, and go together.
3. If they still won't repent, then go to a Church leader who can help address the issue.

One pastor came up with a simple rhyme to help remember those steps:

***"First you go, then two go.
Still in the lurch? Take it to the church."***

As a family, memorize that rhyme, and keep checking with each other until everyone can recite it.



Sometimes it is necessary for a congregation to practice "Church Discipline" - where an unrepentant person is removed from membership and treated as an unbeliever. Another word for this is "excommunication," and it means that the unrepentant person is no longer welcome to take Communion, serve at Church, or do any of the things a member gets to do. They are still welcome to attend worship - but they do so as someone who needs to take seriously God's warnings and commands.

The thing to remember is that all of this - Jesus' special instructions, church discipline, etc. - are all about love for souls. The goal is to lead someone to see their need for Jesus, to turn to him in repentance, and hear that they are forgiven.

On the next page, we'll explore how you personally benefit from the use of the Keys.

Confession and Absolution

The Ministry of the Keys is about seeing our need for a Savior, and knowing the forgiveness our Savior Jesus has given us. Scripture gives us a plan for how to make the most of the Keys in our personal lives: Confession.



Read Luke 18:9-14

- Who did the Tax Collector confess to in this story?
- What words did he use to confess his sins?
- What does Jesus say about the Tax Collector?

Read 1 John 1:8-9

- What does John say about those who claim they don't need to confess their sins?
- What does John promise us will happen when we confess our sins?

Read James 5:16

- Who does James say we should confess to?
- What should we do for a person who confesses to us?
- Why would someone find it difficult to confess their sins to another Christian?

Luther, in his Small Catechism, encourages Christians to confess their sins. He gives a few simple questions and answers to help us understand what that looks like. While Luther focuses on going to a pastor to confess, it is important to remember that you can confess to any Christian, not just a pastor.

First: What is confession?

Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God himself, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven.

Second: What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer.

But before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.

Third: How can we recognize these sins?

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, employer, or employee? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you hurt anyone by word or deed? Have you been dishonest, careless, wasteful, or done other wrong?

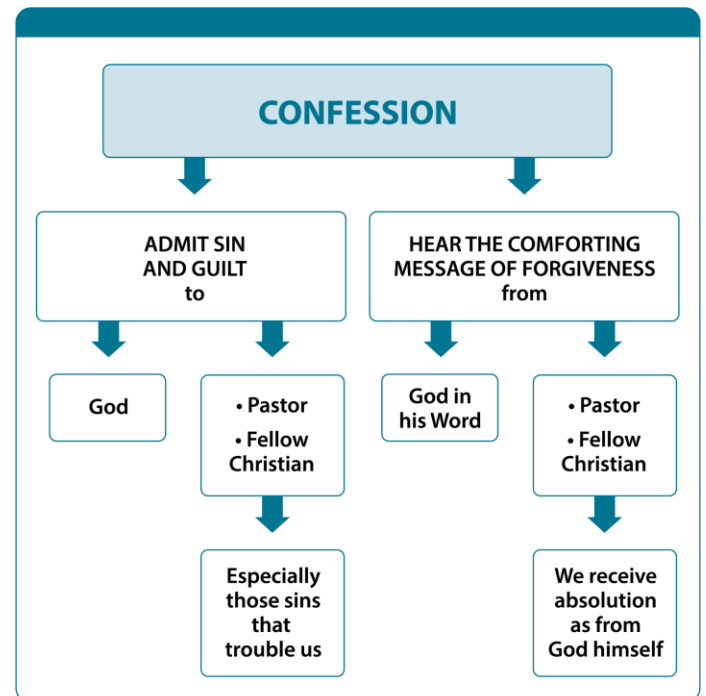
Fourth: How will the pastor assure the penitent sinner of forgiveness?

He will say, "By the authority of Christ, I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Here are some questions you should discuss as a family. Take your time and talk them through completely. Parents, remember that "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). In other words, a calm discussion will lead to more fruit than pushing for a right answer.

Parents, also remember that you are the leader - before expecting your kids to answer, you need to be ready to answer!

- Have you ever felt guilty about something and wished you could talk to someone about it? What stopped you from telling someone?
- Who are some people you know that you could confess your sins to? You might think of people on the ministry staff at church, but you might also think about a relative, a trusted friend, or another authority figure like a teacher or coach. Try to name specific names.
- What are the advantages of going to a pastor or staff minister to confess your sins? What are the advantages of going to a friend instead?
- Think of a time when someone told you that you were forgiven. If you can remember it, it must have been special. What made that time so memorable?
- Imagine you were feeling particularly guilty about something and needed to talk to someone. Make a plan for who you would talk to, how you would arrange to meet, and how you would start the conversation. Keep this plan in mind - it might come in handy!



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You can confess to any Christian, and any Christian can remind you of God's forgiveness. But at St. Mark, we have called pastors and staff ministers for the special purpose of being available to hear your confession and declare God's forgiveness to you. While you don't have to go to one of the members of the pastoral staff, you are always welcome to do so. That's their job! So don't hesitate to contact a member of the pastoral staff any time you are struggling with sin and guilt. They are ready to help!

Memory Work



As a family, work to memorize the following passages and sections of the Catechism:

- [John 20:21-23](#)
- [James 5:16](#)
- [John 8:36](#)

The following Questions in Luther's Small Catechism:

- The Keys
- The Public Use of the Keys
- Confession and Absolution

Review

1. "Simul justus et peccator" means...
 - a. that believers are both righteous before God while still sinners at the same time.
 - b. that fruit and vegetables are better for us than red meat and fatty foods.
 - c. that God still sees us as dirty and wicked and that we have to do something about that.
 - d. that believers used to be sinners but now we don't sin anymore.
2. **True or false?** Even as a believer I will still struggle with sin.
3. **True or false?** I have to do something about my sin before I can have saving faith.
4. **True or false?** Jesus makes me righteous and clean and holy before God, all as a free gift of his grace.
5. The use of the Keys is...
 - a. the special power and right Christ gave to Peter and the Pope to declare who goes to heaven and who doesn't.
 - b. the special power and right Christ gave to the Church to forgive repentant sinners and to not forgive unrepentant sinners.
 - c. the special power and right Christ gave to all Christians to decide who goes to heaven based on how deserving they think a person is.
 - d. the special power and right Christ gave only to the Apostles and to Pastors to proclaim the forgiveness of sins.
6. **True or False?** Jesus gave the Keys to his first disciples, so only they had the right to use the Keys.
7. **True or False?** Since Jesus said to teach new disciples everything, he had commanded his first disciples, all Christians (disciples of Jesus) are to use the Keys just as the first disciples were.
8. Fill in the blanks: Jesus commanded us to forgive the sins of those who _____ and to not forgive those who do not _____.

9. **True or False?** When we forgive a repentant person of their sins, it is just as valid as if Jesus himself said it.
10. Fill in the blanks to complete the rhyme: First _____ go, then _____ go. Still in the _____? Take it to the _____.
11. Church Discipline is...
- a. when the pastor puts people in time out for letting their cell phone go off during the service.
 - b. a rude and judgmental thing for a church to do and evidence that all Christians are hypocrites.
 - c. an act of love in which the congregation treats an unrepentant sinner like an unbeliever, as a way of calling them to repentance.
 - d. an outdated custom that doesn't really work nowadays and shouldn't be done anymore.
12. Confession is...
- a. when a celebrity gets into a taxicab and talks about all the things, they never tell the general public.
 - b. when I confess the sins, I am aware of to a Christian friend, family member, or minister, and hear from them the forgiveness God gives me.
 - c. when I tell someone all the deepest feelings in my heart and get affirmation that everything I feel is good.
 - d. when I go to a booth at the Church and talk to a guy on the other side of a screen and he tells me what to do to make up for my sins.
13. **True or False?** When I'm making a confession to someone like a pastor, I have to make sure to try and confess even things I don't know I did wrong, because if I don't confess them, I can't be forgiven.
14. **True or False?** When I confess to a friend, family member, or minister, I confess the things I am aware of because I need to hear that I have forgiveness for the sins I am aware of and feel guilty about.

15. **True or False?** If I don't feel guilty about a particular sin, then it probably isn't really a sin.
16. If I don't feel guilty about my sins, or I'm not sure what sins I have committed, I can...
- ask my friends if they think I'm a sinner and see what they say.
 - do a Google search for "Am I a sinner?" and see what articles pop up.
 - spend time reminding myself that I'm good enough just the way I am and that it doesn't do me any good to think about my sins.
 - look at what the Ten Commandments say and consider how well I have kept them in my specific place in life.
17. The Gospel message I need to hear when I have confessed my sins is... (pick the best example)
- "In the name of Jesus and by his authority, I forgive you your sins. You are at peace with God."
 - "God doesn't pay attention to sin. He doesn't want you to think of yourself as a sinner. He wants you to think of yourself as a winner."
 - "God loves you and he wants what's best for you, so you need to stop sinning and do better."
 - "God will forgive you, but you need to cooperate with his forgiveness. The first step is to say the Lord's Prayer ten times, then go and help your neighbor."
18. **True or False?** I have to make confession to a pastor if I want to really be forgiven.
19. **True or False?** I can confess my sins to any Christian, but it's best to confess to a pastor if I really want to do it right.
20. **True or False?** I can confess my sins to any Christian. Our pastors and staff ministers have been specially called to be available to hear our confession and speak God's forgiveness to us.
21. **True or False?** I know how to get help if I am feeling guilty about my sins and need to talk about them with someone.

Suggested Activity - Confession

Now that you have an understanding of the Ministry of the Keys and how Confession and Absolution can be a blessing, we want you to take an opportunity to practice. Depending on how often you've done this, it might be the most uncomfortable assignment we've ever given you in this program! But we wouldn't ask you to do it if it wasn't worthwhile!

Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to set up a time to confess to a trusted Christian friend, family member, small group leader, or minister. Certainly, the pastoral staff at church is available to help you with this. It could also be your small group leader, a teacher, a coach, or anyone else you identified in the family discussion on the Confession and Absolution page.

You can confess anything that's been bothering you, big or small, but it is important to be honest and straightforward. If you are going to someone other than a pastor or staff minister, you may choose to use the Guide for Private Confession and Absolution provided at the end of this packet.

Parents, you need to lead the charge in this. If you have never done a personal or private confession, this is your opportunity to learn how. For sure, don't ask your kids to do this before you have done it yourself. As with all activities in this program, the intent is that it is a family program - you are expected to participate. All the more so with this.

Set up a time, meet with someone, make a confession, and hear God's forgiveness.

Once you have completed this experience, write a reflection on what the experience was like, how it felt to be so vulnerable and honest, and how it felt to hear God's forgiveness. Work together as a family to write this reflection.

Wrap-Up

Jesus gave his disciples the Ministry of the Keys, telling them that they have the authority and right to forgive people their sins, to refuse to forgive those who refuse to repent, and to declare to people who repent that the kingdom of heaven is open to them.

Through his Church, Jesus makes disciples and gives them the right and authority to use the Keys. All Christians have this authority and right as part of the Church and servants of Christ. However, the Church calls some to be ministers of the Gospel so that they are always ready to hear confession and proclaim forgiveness. This is a gift from Christ to his Church.

It is a good thing when you regularly confess your sins to another Christian. Don't let embarrassment, shame, or fear keep you from doing so! Make it a regular practice and see how awesome it is to regularly experience the grace of God in hearing a fellow believer say, "On behalf of Jesus, I forgive you!"

Congratulations! You have completed the module on the Ministry of the Keys. If you're following the recommended path, the next module to tackle is the Lord's Prayer. Blessings as you continue to grow closer to Jesus through his Word!

Review answer key

1. "Simul justus et peccator" means...
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21. **True or False?** I know how to get help if I am feeling guilty about my sins and need to talk about them with someone.

Guide for Private Confession and Absolution



"Confess your sins to one another, and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

James 5:16



This guide is designed for any Christian to do with another believer who wishes to make a private confession. The term "Confessor" is an older term referring to one who hears confession from another. Often older guides like this would use the term "Penitent" for the person doing the confessing. "Penitent" is another way to say "repentant," or "one who is repenting." This guide will use the terms Confessor and Penitent.

The Confessor should be a mature Christian who is able to patiently listen, confidently speak the Gospel, and faithfully pray for the one who is making confession. This guide is an opportunity to use the Ministry of the Keys, which Jesus gave when he said to his disciples in Matthew 16, "I give to you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," and in John 20, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven, and if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." This is a special power and right, and one to be used with thanks and grace.

The Confessor begins with prayer. The following responsive prayer may be used, or another prayer that invites God's presence and guidance may be used instead.

Confessor: We begin in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Penitent: Amen.

Confessor: We come into God's presence confident of his grace, thankful for his love, and eager to be reminded of his forgiveness. Lord, we ask that your Holy Spirit would be here, to open our hearts, to give us your wisdom and strength, and to lead us to speak truth.

Penitent: Open my heart to see my need for you and open my words to be honest with myself and with you.

Both: Amen.

A passage from Scripture may be read at this point, or the Confessor may immediately turn to the following invitation to confession.

Confessor: Christ our Lord says through the Apostle John that if we claim we have no sin, the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1). Therefore, before God who searches the heart, do you confess that you are a sinner and that you need his forgiveness?

Penitent: I am, and I do.

Confessor: Do you have specific sins that you wish to confess right now?

Penitent: *(confesses any specific sins known and felt)*

Confessor: God our Father has been merciful to us and has sent his only Son Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. By his death on the cross, he has paid the penalty for your sins and earned forgiveness, life, and salvation for you. Do you believe this?

Penitent: I do.

Confessor: Jesus says to his servants, "If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven." As a servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins, including those you have just confessed, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Penitent: Thanks be to God. Amen.



The Confessor may offer a specific prayer at this point, asking for God to strengthen the Penitent for godly living and putting off sin. They conclude together with the Lord's Prayer.

Both: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

Your kingdom come, you will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,

Now and forever. Amen.

Confessor: Go with God's blessing and be at peace. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace. Amen.