

**Introduction:** We ended last week's notes by learning how God judges sin, and how He forgives sinners. But let's return to this question to begin today: 'How does God's forgiving grace actually work?' How is He able to “loose” us of our sins, pay out debt of guilt and open up to us the riches of His Kingdom for our full enjoyment? Many do not experience what forgiveness actually is. Let us, then, treasure it all the more in this week's Bible notes.

**Mon/Tues: read Matthew 16:19; 18:18-19 & John 20:22-23.** One of the most striking facts about how biblical forgiveness works, is that it is central to the church's proclamation of Good News. In other words, it is through the preaching of the Word of God, written by the Apostles and proclaimed in the ministry of the Word in every true church, that forgiveness is first announced and then believed.

For example, consider how Jesus speaks to Peter after his monumental confession of Christ's Divine Messiahship, promising him the authority to 'open and close' the doors of the Kingdom of God, based on the binding and loosing of sins which Peter would accomplish as an Apostle. Jesus puts it this way, in addressing Peter in Matthew 16:19 (KJV):

*“And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”*

Nor is Peter the only Apostle to be given such authority. In Matthew 18:18, all the Apostles have bestowed on them by their Lord the “keys of the Kingdom” in terms of binding and loosing:

*“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”*

But you may ask, what does this 'binding and loosing' actually mean? Well, “loosing and binding” is a way of speaking of which we will speak further tomorrow. But for today, let us give thanks that the “Keys of the Kingdom” actually do work! By receiving the proclamation of the Good News of forgiveness of sins and believing it, we actually are given entrance into the gate of eternal life!

Meditate and Pray: Let us resolve to “love God's Kingdom” because of the Keys of the Gospel - by which the door to eternal life in that Kingdom, is opened to us. Use the words of hymn # 353 in our Red Trinity Hymnal, which celebrates the fact that God's Kingdom on earth is now His church!

*1 I love Thy kingdom, Lord,  
The house of Thine abode,  
The church our blessed Redeemer saved  
With His own precious blood.*

*2 I love Thy church, O God.  
Her walls before Thee stand,  
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,  
And written on Thy hand.*

*3 If e'er to bless Thy sons  
My voice or hands deny,  
These hands let useful skills forsake,  
This voice in silence die.*

*4 Should I with scoffers join  
Her altars to abuse?  
No! Better far my tongue were dumb,  
My hand its skill should lose.*

*5 For her my tears shall fall  
For her my prayers ascend,  
To her my cares and toils be given  
Till toils and cares shall end.*

**Weds/Thurs: Matthew 18:18-22, Hebrews 10:16-18 & John 20:22-23.** Focusing on the meaning of “binding and loosing” and what these verbs mean when Jesus uses them about forgiveness, we focus on how a discussion about forgiveness follows immediately after in Matthew 18:21-22.

When Peter hears Jesus speak about the Apostolic authority to “bind and loose”, in Matthew 18:18, his mind immediately associates such language with forgiveness. Just as Jesus urged His disciples to *repeatedly go in restorative love* to a sinning brother in Matthew 18:15-17, so Jesus promises in verse 18 that such efforts will be effective – either to the “loosing” of this brother's sins, and his restoration to the body of believers, or his being “bound over” in sin, and closed out from the Kingdom, as the doors of church discipline shut upon the unrepentant brother.

Peter then immediately responds in verse 21 with a question about forgiveness, (namely), “What about in the case of a brother who comes back in repentance, but who falls repeatedly back into sin? Should he be forgiven, (that is, “loosed” of his burden of guilt), every time he comes back confessing his sin?” Or should we only forgive seven times, and after that “bind him over” to his sin as a total loss? That is the force of Peter's question, and the amazing scope of Jesus' response in verse 22 takes our breath away, when He says, we should forgive “seven times seventy”!

But it all comes back to the idea that by the *Word* of the Gospel, in which God promises to “forgive our sins and remember them no more” (Hebrews 10:17), there is a real “loosing” of burdens, and a deliverance from the bondage of guilt into the freedom of forgiveness! As Jesus promises His disciples in John 20:23, they really will be instruments of Divine forgiveness as they write and proclaim the Gospel of free grace! Whatsoever sins they remit by their preaching, will indeed be forgiven in Heaven! The “Key” of Gospel preaching really does work, through the Holy Spirit, breathed upon His church, by the Lord Jesus (John 20:22)!

Meditate and Pray: Let us give thanks that the preaching of the Gospel in our day has the same saving power. Oh, may God bring many more under the sound of its preaching, unto their conversion!

**Friday: read Matthew 18:18-22.** Peter's bewilderment in verse 21 at the idea of having to forgive struggling sinners, (who repeatedly come back in repentance), is in part explained by the fact that He had much to learn about the *power of preaching*: both to effect forgiveness and to change hearts! But, thankfully, he would learn of the inward, transforming power of the Gospel of forgiveness on the Day of Pentecost, when the Lord would greatly use him in declaring forgiveness to some of the very Jews who had crucified his Lord! The result of such preaching would be transformed lives, as well as an experience of forgiveness! In short, “people who are forgiven much” (as Luke 7:47 puts it), are expected to “love much” in terms of lives transformed by holy gratitude for the forgiving grace of God!

Nevertheless, we must admit our struggles here. If we are honest we must confess that *we do not change as we ought as believers*. We find ourselves struggling all our lives long with the same issues of pride, anger, bitterness and all sorts of other sins, many times invisible to others but all too real in the war which goes on in our hearts! Is it really possible for us to come back repeatedly to our Lord Jesus in confession of sin and to find Him constantly ready to forgive and restore us? Yes it is! Read how the Heidelberg Catechism celebrates such, “seven times seventy” grace in Q & A 84 below, noting the part which I have high-lighted especially:

**Q 84: “HOW DOES PREACHING THE GOSPEL OPEN AND CLOSE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?”**

*A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to each and every believer that, **as often as he accepts the gospel promise in true faith,** God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives all his sins.*

*“The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the anger of God and eternal condemnation rest on them.” (Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 84)*

Meditate and Pray: So then, what is our conclusion? While it is sadly true that the unbeliever finds, because of his repeated refusal of Gospel grace, that the door of the Kingdom will be finally shut upon him - as believers we ought to rejoice every time we find God's grace to abound over our sin!

**Sat/Sun: read Matthew 6:9-13 and Matthew 18:21-35.** Our last word on the theme of forgiveness must be on the tragic reality of relationships broken by a refusal to grant our debtors forgiveness. In short, our refusal to “loose” one under the weight of an offense inflicted against us, is to withhold as graceless misers the very grace God has shown towards us. We assume God will be expansively patient and compassionate towards us in our repeated sins, yet find that our hearts have not been changed as they should be in our attitudes towards those who sin against us.

Yet, consider the importance of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer – where we not only ask God to “forgive us our debts”, but also affirm that we will also, “forgive our debtors”. Jesus clearly links the two – not as if we could ever *earn forgiveness from God* by the 'good work' of forgiving others – but because the apprehension of the truth of forgiveness in our minds is **always** to lead to a change of heart that loves others, even when they hurt us with their sin. Gospel belief that *we* are forgiven is “from the heart” (Romans 6:17), and leads to our forgiving *others* from that same heart, (Matthew 18:35)!

This is what makes the wicked, ungrateful and unforgiving servant in Jesus' parable in Matthew 18 so terrible. He falls on the ground in Matthew 18:26, begging forgiveness. He receives it from the 'king' in the parable, who literally “looses” him in verse 27 from his huge debt! How terrible, then, to read in Matthew 18:28ff, that when this forgiven servant finds one who owes him just a small debt, he cannot show the same mercy which he has just experienced. There is a complete disconnect for this condemned hypocrite between his own need for massive forgiveness and forgiveness applied to others in Christ-like love – even though his own sin is actually much worse than the sin he refuses to forgive. The end result, of course, is that Jesus pronounces a verdict in Matthew 18:32-35 that the unforgiving servant has in reality never experienced real grace. He has refused to believe and receive it in his heart, and therefore will be shut out from the realm of forgiveness in the Kingdom of God.

Meditate and Pray: Let us end this week with humble prayer that we would learn to treasure this blessed grace and precious gift of forgiveness as we ought:

*“Yes, Lord, help us to fear a love of sin and its deceiving power. But help us never fear the guilt of sin, as if our transgressions are too heinous for you to forgive. Thank you that there is abundant blood, shed by your Son, to cover the guilt of our sins. Help us never to listen to the Devil, who would lie and tell us that our guilt has forever barred the way back to you. Help us to know that you save, “the chief of sinners”, like Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, so that we might always have a solid hope that you can forgive our sins too. Most of all, help us never to think that some get to Heaven by their holiness – only Jesus did that! Give us joy in knowing that there are now saints in Heaven saved only by their partaking of your forgiving grace. What a day that will be when we magnify the Lord together, for this forgiving grace! Amen.”*