

# Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

## THE KEY TO THE KEYS

Matthew 18:15-20

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

---

## DIAGNOSIS: My Great Deception (A Monologue)

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Anything We Ask*  
What a great God, to give us “anything” we ask! Says so, right in verse 19, which is in plainer language than verse 18 (which is for theologians). Yes, God must really love us to give us such a sweeping promise! And I’m going to hold him to it. Of

course, I need good health; a fine spouse and children; enough money to go around, and around, and around one more time; and if I'm so inclined maybe I'll ask for a commanding respect from others, or maybe a bit of political power, for the common good, with proper humility, of course. And oh, yes, I almost forgot: world peace. All we need to do is "ask" (see 7:7-8). God loves us, his children, that's for sure.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Power of Prayer***

I know, it seems a bit magical. But God promised, right? Even some medical scientists are now convinced of the power of prayer. So it must be true. Call it magic if you want; but I'll call it "faith." The more I believe, the stronger my faith will be, and the more God will reward me for believing. God himself said so! I know that there may be a glitch or two: I need the agreement of one other person (v.19); but no big deal, I can convince anyone to go along with me. Theologians may point out that verse 18 makes a critical distinction between earth and heaven, and that verse 19 places a condition on what we ask for; but all that's too subtle for me. Heaven is right here on earth, because Jesus is right here "among" us. Says so in verse 20. And, after all, doesn't Jesus want what is best for us? Hang the theologians and their distinctions. I'll put my "faith" in the power of prayer.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Liar, Liar, Pants On Fire***

It worked for a while, or so it seemed. My faith was strong, I landed a good job, I married well, I contributed time and money to mission-work for the less fortunate. I was blessed. But now that seems like long ago. My job took me away from house and home, my spouse burned out on me, and a civil war destroyed our church's mission in East Africa. I wonder if God has heard my prayers lately, or if he ever did. The world's problems seem to

overshadow everything: Global Terrorism, Global Warming, AIDS, Avian Flu, Energy Crisis, Wars and Rumors of Wars, and on and on. Maybe I've been a fool all along, or maybe God is a big fat liar (if there even is a God). All I know is that I'm not getting what I asked for. So I'm not happy any more. And if I don't get what I pray for, then world peace is unattainable, and death eventually overtakes all life on earth. I don't know about heaven, but hell is right here on earth. Prayer, whatever else it may be, is not magical anymore. And God, if he really exists, is either capricious or dead-set against me. I can only suppose that Jesus (wherever he is) doesn't care about me either. Maybe I just don't believe strongly enough. Who can tell? Or am I just a damned fool? One thing is crystal clear: I'm stuck in a circle of self-deception and there is no way out.

*[Comment: God knows full well what is needed to sustain life, and, though we may ask, no amount of prayer will make these needs any more clear to God (see 6:8, 25-32). They are readily available through earthly means; that is, through family, government, and religious community. Neither magic nor faith is required to receive these earthly gifts. But we keep on trying, and keep on failing to meet our responsibilities inherent in these gifts. Our accountability to one another is an endless litany of failure. But Jesus' presence among those who are gathered in his name (v. 20) addresses a different problem altogether. Not our problem with each other, but our problem with God. We simply cannot prevent ourselves from elevating God's earthly gifts into gods themselves, and we devise all manner of means to secure them for ourselves for as long as possible. To our dying breath, our self-imagined gods prove to be every bit as mortal as we are. We are thus stuck in a great circle of self-deception, unable to "return thanks to God" for all his gifts (Rom. 1-2), unable to obey the first commandment, unable to trust him or to believe any of his promises. For this*

*(sin) God holds us all responsible, visiting his wrath upon us even now, which culminates in death. Our problem with sin is thus our problem with God himself.]*

## **PROGNOSIS: God's Great Gift**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : The Far Greater Gift**

In order to solve our problem with God, God took upon himself our sin and our death-sentence (just as if it were his own), and bestowed upon us his own righteousness (just as if it were our own). God accomplished this act of mercy, this gift to the world, in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (Rom. 3; 2 Cor. 5). There is no basis in human reason for God to have done this, to have become "Jesus" for us. Nonetheless, Jesus is God's merciful gift to us, the assurance that our sins are forgiven because of him. When, therefore, we gather together "in his name," Jesus is "there" among us (v. 20), promising us that our sins are indeed forgiven.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : The Key to the Keys**

Theologians will point out that not every gathering is "in Jesus' name," but only those gatherings that receive God's promise of the forgiveness of sins as true. This receiving is the key to properly distinguish God's earthly gifts (family, government, religious community) from God's heavenly or spiritual gift (faith in Christ, the Church). Apart from Christ, verse 19 (along with the rest of Scripture) is always made to serve sin and our inward-looking self-deceptions. Thus, "anything" (v. 19) refers specifically to "binding and loosing" (v. 18) "in my name" (v. 20); and "in my name" refers to the work of Christ, namely, the forgiveness of sins. In summary: The Office of the Keys (v. 18; c. f. 16:19) is the primary function of the Church, without which the Church cannot exist; but the

Keys of the Kingdom of God have no power whatsoever in regard to God's earthly gifts.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Forgiving One Another***

Verses 15-17 are an extension of the Keys into the life of the Church; but they can also be the occasion for a whole lot of mischief. The Church (on earth) recognizes that she is still beset by sin, and in constant need of forgiveness. The extension of the Office of the Keys to "sins" between Church members is appropriate only "in Jesus' name." There is no other standard by which sins (of any stripe) are retained or forgiven. And that is a very high standard indeed (6:14-15; 7:1-5; 18:5-7, 21-22)! Whatever method the Church uses for self-discipline, verses 15-17 being but one possibility, her binding and loosing can have no impact unless there is a clear connection to the gospel, that is, to faith in Christ. Only when the gospel is at stake should the Keys be invoked. Excluded, then, are all trivial matters (which are most matters that people get upset about). The Keys do not define one's own little fiefdom, even if it is the biggest church in the world. The Office of the Keys bespeak the outermost limits of the Kingdom of God.