

Student: Session 1, Confession

Focus:

I'm sorry. I was wrong.

We rarely enjoy speaking such words. Nobody likes to be wrong. Nor do we enjoy being told that we are wrong. Even when we know it to be true, admitting that we are wrong, and saying that we are sorry, can be a humbling and often uncomfortable experience.

What excuses do you sometimes give for not admitting a wrong and saying you are sorry?

Inform:

1. The way for Jesus' ministry of forgiveness was prepared by John the Baptist. Read **Matthew 3:1-12**. How would you describe the ministry of John? What was his central message?
2. Read **Matthew 4:17** and **Luke 13:5**. What does Jesus say about repentance? What motivation for repentance is given in these passages?
3. Both John the Baptist and Jesus speak with a sense of urgency. Read **Romans 3:10-20**. Why, according to Paul, is repentance such a pressing need?
4. In light of the above, read **Proverbs 28:13** and **1 John 1:8-9**. What do these passages say about the motivation for confessing one's sin?
5. Compare **Psalms 51:3-5** and **Psalms 19:12**. What type of sin or sins does the psalmist confess and ask to be forgiven?
6. Compare **Psalms 32:5**, **James 5:16**, and **Acts 19:18**. To whom are sins confessed in each instance?

Connect:

Though confessing one's sins can be an uncomfortable experience, God has not intended it to be a burdensome task. Quite the opposite!

1. Rather than being a burden, how might confession provide you with welcome relief?
2. The Divine Service allows for corporate and public confession of sin. Why might this be beneficial, especially in the context of worship?

Vision:

I'm sorry. I was wrong.

We rarely enjoy speaking such words. But God's law acts as a mirror to reflect just how wrong, how sinful, we in fact are. This sinfulness is indeed reason for sorrow and confession. The good news, however, is that God responds to our confessing "I was wrong" by saying clearly and surely: "You are forgiven."

1. In what practical ways can we make repentance and confession a part of our daily lives?
2. How can we daily express our thanks to God for his hearing our confession and forgiving our sin?

Student: Session 2, Absolution

Focus:

Close relationships such as those between a husband and a wife or between parents and children often face seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Personalities conflict, rebellion flares, motives become selfish, feelings are frequently hurt. As witnesses to many of these struggles, marriage and family counselors often note that healthy and lasting relationships are best nourished by learning to practice forgiveness.

Why is forgiveness so essential to a healthy relationship with loved ones?

Inform:

1. Read **Mark 2:1-12**. To whom does the authority to forgive or absolve sin belong? Why is this so?
2. Compare **Psalms 51:1** and **Daniel 9: 17-19**. On what grounds do David and Daniel appeal to God for absolution?
3. Read **Romans 5:6-11**. In what manner has God actually demonstrated his loving mercy? What terms does Paul use to describe the effects this has upon our relationship with God?
4. Read **Romans 4:18-25**. How is the forgiveness won by Christ received by individuals? With what example does Paul explain this?
5. Read **Hebrews 6:13-20**. Using the same example as above, what point does the author here make? For what reason can one be certain of God's forgiveness and absolution?
6. Read **2 Samuel 12:1-13**. What sin had David committed? Does the brevity of his confession and subsequent absolution seem fitting? Why or why not?

Connect:

1. Forgiveness and the means by which it has been won stand at the heart of Christianity. If questioned, how might you explain to someone what it means to be a Christian?
2. Particular sins may often weigh heavily on the conscience. In such instances, how may the above account of David's confession and absolution prove especially comforting?
3. Review the passages cited in questions 2 and 5 above. In the context of our confusing, inconsistent, and often contradictory world, what personal consolation do you find in their descriptions of God?

Vision:

God takes our sin very seriously. We rejoice to be assured, however, that he takes our forgiveness even more seriously. So much so that he would allow his only Son to suffer its consequences so that we might be absolved. It is this forgiveness upon which our intimate relationship with God is founded.

1. In what ways can you continue to strengthen this relationship based upon God's forgiveness?
2. As one who has been forgiven, how can the power of forgiveness also affect your relationships with others?

Student: Session 3, Office of the Keys

Focus:

We've all done it. We've frantically patted our pockets or rummaged through our purse in search of a lost wallet. We've paced back and forth, wondering where we could have set our eyeglasses. We've turned the house upside down, looking for misplaced car keys. Few things are more frustrating than being unable to find something when needed. Especially if it is used or needed frequently.

What is your reaction when you finally locate something important, which had been misplaced? What do you do to help prevent losing or misplacing those things you use or need often?

Inform:

1. Read **Matthew 16:13-19**. What gift does Jesus here say that he will give? For what purpose is this gift given?
2. Compare the above passage with **Matthew 18:15-18** and **John 20:21-23**. To whom does Jesus give this gift?
3. Though the Keys have been given to the whole Christian church, their public use has been entrusted to specific individuals. Read **1 Corinthians 4:1**. About whom is Paul talking? What does he call such individuals? With what are they entrusted?
4. Read **Ephesians 3:2-12**. Paul speaks a great deal about "the mystery." To what does he refer?
5. Compare **Colossians 2:2-3** and **1 Timothy 3:16**. What is the great "mystery" about which Paul speaks in these verses? How does it relate to that discussed in the above passage?
6. Read **Luke 10:16**. What does Jesus say about those who speak for him and in his name? How does this relate to the Keys given to the church?

Connect:

1. The complaint is often heard that Christians presume to "speak for God." Do Christians in fact speak for God? In what sense do you believe this to be true or false?
2. Christ has given his Keys to the church as a gift. Having received such a gift, what should be our attitude and response?
3. What personal comfort do you take in knowing that "whatever is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven"?

Vision:

Forgiveness is a gift of which we always have need. So that we might never be confused or in doubt about where to find this gift, Christ assures us that he has located it in a specific place. We can be certain that Christ's own absolution is found in the church, in the Office of the Keys.

1. Knowing that Christ has located the Keys in his church, what practical advice would you give to a person (even yourself!) who sometimes questions whether he or she is truly forgiven?
2. The "stewards of the mysteries of God" perform a needful but often thankless task. What can you do to encourage those who exercise the Keys in and for the church?

Student: Session 4, Individual Confession and Absolution

Focus:

Courtrooms, especially those on the big screen, are often the scene of high drama. Crucial evidence is weighed, emotional testimony is heard, passionate arguments are presented. Over a stirring soundtrack the tension builds to a climactic conclusion: a verdict is announced by those vested with the authority to do so. Only then does the tension finally dissolve in audible sighs, cheers, and tears of joy.

Why do you suppose audiences so frequently find this kind of courtroom drama appealing? Why, in real life, is the judge's vocation given such honor and respect?

Inform:

1. Though we are assured that God himself hears our confession and absolves us, Scripture also exhorts Christians to practice confession of another sort. Read **Matthew 18:15** and **James 5:16**. How would you describe the confession that is discussed in these passages? To whom are Christians encouraged to confess?
2. Scripture also provides examples of this type of confession and absolution. Read **2 Samuel 12:1-14** and **Luke 15:17-21**. Who confesses in these passages? To whom do they confess? Who announces their absolution?
3. Read **Romans 7:15-25**. What is Paul's complaint? What is it that causes Paul to speak this way?
4. Certainty of forgiveness is only received from God's word. **Psalm 119** can be read as a devotion concerning God's word. Read verses 25, 28, 41-42, and 49-50. What do these verses say about the word and its benefits?
5. Faith in God's forgiveness is faith in his word and promise. Compare **Isaiah 55:11** and **Romans 10:13-17**. From where does this faith come? By what means is it received?
6. Those who have been called and sent to proclaim God's word of forgiveness are given various titles and responsibilities. Compare **Acts 20:28** and **Ephesians 4:11-13**. What titles and responsibilities are such individuals given in these passages? What implications might this have for the pastoral practice of confession and absolution?
7. Compare **1 Timothy 3:1-7** and **Titus 1:7-9**. What qualifications does Paul say an overseer must have? For what reason does he say these qualifications are important?

Connect:

1. What might Paul's complaint in **Romans 7** say about our need for frequent confession and absolution? Conversely, what consolation might you take from reading Paul's confession?
2. Though Scripture nowhere commands private confession to a pastor, what particular benefits might you receive by confessing to, and being absolved by, one who has been called and placed into the office of the ministry?
3. In light of the scriptural qualifications for overseers, what reasons do you have to trust that sins confessed privately to your pastor will remain confidential?

Vision:

To one on trial, few words are as sweet to the ears as "not guilty." With those two words, spoken audibly by a judge or jury, all accusations are swept away. In their place are given joy, relief, and the freedom to begin life anew. Good news indeed!

1. How would you respond to someone who asked to be forgiven for a sin he or she had committed against you? How would you respond to someone asking forgiveness for some sin not committed against you personally?
2. Both the Small Catechism and Lutheran Worship contain short orders for individual confession and absolution. How might you make use of these in your home or congregation?

Leader: Session 1, Confession

Session Objectives:

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the word of God, participants will

1. understand the nature of repentance and confession according to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions;
2. recognize his or her need for frequent confession and absolution;
3. appreciate that God not only hears our confession of sin, but graciously promises to absolve us of our sin.

Opening Worship Suggestions:

Hymn 234 in Lutheran Worship highlights the theme of repentance and confession, while prayerfully asking, for the sake of Jesus, that God be merciful to the sinner. Likewise, the prayer of confession under rubric 2 of the Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution (LW, 308) is well suited for opening worship.

Alternatively, the recital of the invocation, confession, and absolution that opens Divine Service II (LW, 158) may provide a familiar beginning to this session and those following.

Focus:

Read, or ask a participant to read, the Focus. Spend some time discussing why the admission of guilt or wrongdoing is difficult and so often avoided. Many answers may allude to feelings of pride, fear, or shame. Such feelings not only discourage us from admitting our faults to others; they can at times even prevent us from honestly confessing our sin before God.

Have a participant read Genesis 2:25 and Genesis 2:8-11. Briefly discuss the significant fact found here: that feelings of pride, fear, and shame not only prevent us from confessing our sins; they are themselves a result of sin and the sinfulness we have inherited from our first parents.

Inform:

1. John's central message can be summed up with the imperative "Repent!" As the one preparing the way for the Lord, John came preaching repentance (v.3), baptizing for repentance (v.11), and exhorting his audience to produce fruit in keeping with repentance (v.8). Anticipating Jesus' declaration that the Son of Man did "not come to call the righteous, but sinners," the preparatory ministry of John serves to impress upon the people that they are indeed sinners and in need of repentance. Those who do not reject John's message willingly repent and confess their sins (v.6).

In discussing the biblical doctrine of repentance the Lutheran Confessions make special note of John's ministry. "John, who preceded Christ, is called a preacher of repentance -- but for the remission of sins. That is, John was to accuse them and convince them that they were sinners in order that they might know how they stood before God and recognize themselves as lost men. In this way they were to be prepared to receive grace from the Lord and to expect and accept from him the forgiveness of sin" (SA III.III).

In light of the above, repentance for the remission of sins -- or, repentance in its "wide" sense -- is said to consist of two parts. The Augsburg Confession defines these when it declares, "True repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the gospel and absolution" (AC XII). In the same vein the Small

Catechism describes confession: “Confession has two parts. First that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness.”

2. Jesus too begins his ministry with the theme previously proclaimed by John. He urges his hearers to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Even more pointedly, Jesus declares that those who do not repent will perish. Without mincing words Jesus declares that repentance is a matter of life or death, a matter of heaven or hell! Or, put another way, repentance is a matter of law and gospel. Those who refuse to hear the law’s call to repent will suffer the full penalty of the law’s condemnation. Those hearing the call to repent, however, find refuge from its accusation and condemnation in the gospel’s promise of forgiveness.

As law and gospel are to be preached today even as in the early church, so too must the church preach repentance, which encompasses both law and gospel. The Lutheran Confessions point out the continuity between the repentance proclaimed by John, by Christ, and by the church yet today. “This is the repentance which John preaches, which Christ subsequently preaches in the Gospel, and which we also preach” (SA III.III).

3. The opening chapters of Paul’s letter to the church at Rome build one of Scripture’s most damning arguments. Paul’s discussion of man’s sinfulness culminates in chapter three, where he concludes on the basis of many Old Testament passages that, without exception, all people are sinful. “There is no one righteous” (v.10), “all have turned away” (v.12), “there is no one who does good” (v.12). He further explains that we are in no position to change our sinful status. Attempts to “do good” or to follow the law are of no avail. On the contrary, Paul explains the law’s purpose by stating that “through the law we become conscious of sin” (v.20). Why is repentance such a pressing need? Being conscious of the sin that would otherwise eternally separate us from God, and being conscious of the fact that we can do nothing in our own power to escape such sinfulness, we can only repent of it and take refuge in the Lord’s mercy.

4. Though Scripture consistently emphasizes the sinfulness of man and therefore demands repentance, both the Old and New Testaments also assure us that those who confess their sin find mercy. The words of the apostle John, which find familiar expression in the church’s liturgy, are especially comforting: “If we confess our sin, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Though the Lord’s command to repent by itself compels us to confess, it is his comforting promise of forgiveness that provides the most encouraging motivation for admitting our sin. As stated by Luther in the Large Catechism, “We urge you . . . to confess and express your needs, not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you. The word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on.” That is, Christian repentance and confession are motivated by the gospel.

5. The Psalms make clear that man not only commits actual sins, but that he is also burdened with the guilt of original sin. David confesses in Psalm 51 that, being sinful from conception, his sin is always before him. He also acknowledges in Psalm 19 that man’s sinfulness is so great that many faults must remain hidden and indiscernible. That is, they remain hidden to those whose faults they are; God is of course aware of all of our transgressions. This being the case, the Lutheran Confessions reiterate what David came to realize, that true repentance “does not debate what is sin and what is not sin, but lumps everything together and says, ‘we are wholly and altogether sinful’” (SA III.III). Regarding the practical implications of such a realization, the Small Catechism explains that, “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.”

6. The above quote from the Small Catechism distinguishes between confession made before God and before one's pastor. This distinction is not arbitrary. Scripture too notes different forms and forums for the confession of sin. David sings in Psalm 32, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." The apostle James exhorts his readers to "confess your sins to each other." And Luke records that many in the city of Ephesus confessed their sin openly and publicly before the church. God so desires us to confess our sin and to hear his word of forgiveness that he has not limited our opportunities for confession to particular times, places, or people.

Connect:

1. Some feel that confession provides welcome relief for the simple reason that it allows us to "get things off our chest." While this sentiment is understandable, we must also recognize that if our sin is not actually placed on someone else we are not rid of it. The good news of the gospel is that our sin has in fact been placed on someone else; it has been placed on Christ, who conquered it on the cross. As noted above in question four, the most encouraging motivation for confession is the recognition that God promises to not only hear our confession of sin, but to be merciful and forgive our sin. Confession provides welcome relief because with it comes absolution. With this in mind, we can certainly appreciate the words of the Large Catechism: "If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it."

2. As we come to worship we enter the house of the almighty God. As we invoke his name we also realize that we are, on the basis of our own merits, entirely unworthy to stand in his presence, to call on him, or even to offer him our praise. With such a realization comes the desire to confess our sin and hear God's reassuring word of absolution. We desire to hear that he himself does indeed want us, as his forgiven children, to worship in his presence. Especially if the Divine Service is to include the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we will take seriously St. Paul's admonition to examine ourselves before communing (1 Corinthians 11:28). Part of this examination will include recognizing and repenting of our sin.

Vision:

1. In the first of his famous ninety-five theses Martin Luther wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Later, in the Large Catechism, he also wrote concerning private confession before God that, "This kind of confession should and must take place incessantly as long as we live. For this is the essence of a genuinely Christian life, to acknowledge that we are sinners and to pray for grace." Repentance is the life-long task of the Christian. Daily we recognize our sin, confess our sin, and ask God to graciously forgive our sin. Though very few will seek out their pastor each day for confession and absolution, we can cultivate the habit of confession before God as part of private devotion and prayer. One simple way of doing so is by reflecting on the Ten Commandments and their catechetical explanations. Likewise, recitation of the Lord's Prayer includes asking that God "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

2. In its most fundamental form, our thanksgiving for forgiveness takes place in our remembering forgiveness. In our new birth as Christians, in our baptism, God has washed away all guilt and punishment due for our transgressions. That this cleansing baptism takes place with water indicates, in the words of the Small Catechism, "that the old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." As forgiveness in the

name of the Triune God is a forgiveness that covers all sin, the sins of each day, we also daily remember our baptism and daily live our lives in the righteousness and purity which has been granted. For this reason the Small Catechism also encourages Christians to make the sign of the holy cross and say “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” at morning and evening prayer. These words and sign serve to daily remind us of our baptism, in which all of our sin has been absolved, and for which we give humble thanks and praise to our gracious God.

Leader: Session 3, Absolution

Session Objectives:

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the word of God, participants will

1. understand the nature of absolution and the basis upon which it is pronounced;
2. have their faith in the certainty of God’s comforting word strengthened;
3. appreciate the fervent desire the Lord has to comfort his people with words of absolution.

Opening Worship Suggestions:

Hymn 367 in Lutheran Worship wonderfully emphasizes the absolution won by Christ on the cross and freely given to those who sorrow over their sin. Asking that God would continually strengthen and renew our trust in this gracious gift, The Prayer for Steadfast Faith (LW, 125) serves to compliment the hymn’s proclamation of the gospel.

Focus:

Read, or ask a participant to read, the Focus. Spend some time discussing relationships with loved ones. If participants are so inclined, allow them to share instances in which they may have hurt, or been hurt by, those they love. Encourage them to share the role which forgiveness played in overcoming hurt feelings and rebuilding a healthy relationship.

It is not by coincidence that the Old and New Testaments frequently describe God’s relationship with his people in familial terms. The church is called the bride of Christ. God’s love is compared to the selfless love parents have for their children. Sadly, however, Scripture also describes our response to this love as that of unfaithful spouses or selfish and rebellious children. When we, by sinning, damage or reject the relationship God desires to have with us, there is only one remedy. If we are to be returned to a right relationship with the Lord, it can only be on the basis of his absolving us of our sin.

Inform:

1. The teachers of the law were quite right to ask, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” As teachers of the law, they knew what the Old Testament had to say regarding sin and forgiveness. They knew well the words which David addressed to God: “Against you, you only, have I sinned” (Psalm 51:4). Sin is never merely a mistake. Nor is it ever simply a wrong done against one’s neighbor. Sin is, in its essence, rebellion against the almighty God; it is the breaking of his holy and perfect law. As such, absolution must come from the one who has been offended; it must come from God himself.

The teachers’ mistake was not in believing that God alone can forgive sin, but in failing to recognize who it was that stood before them, saying, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” They failed to realize what Jesus was in fact revealing to them, that he is God himself, God incarnate. And as God, he exercises his divine prerogative: “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

2. In this memorable psalm of repentance, David pleads, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion." David approaches God as a sinner. He makes no claims on God; he does not attempt to persuade the Lord of his worthiness. On the contrary, the psalmist appeals to the merciful, loving, and compassionate character of God himself. He asks only that God do what God according to his nature most desires to do -- to absolve his people.

Likewise, Daniel makes his appeal on the basis of God's merciful nature: "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy." The psalmist and the prophet approach God knowing that God desires to forgive, not on the basis of one's merit, but for his own sake. Daniel emphasizes this conviction by repeating the refrain, "For your sake, O Lord" (v.17), "For your sake, O my God" (v.19).

3. God's love and mercy are not abstract attributes. God's love is love in action. It is made manifest in real life. And in real death. Paul dramatically stresses this point in his letter to the Romans. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The magnitude of this divine love is highlighted as Paul explains that very few would give their life even for a righteous or good man. And yet -- mercy of mercies -- God allowed his only Son to die for the ungodly, for those who remained mired in sin.

Just as God's love is demonstrated in real life, so too do the effects of this sacrificial love have implications for the life of God's people. God did not demonstrate his love for sinners so that man might merely see or understand this love. The love made visible on the cross actually affects the relationship between God and his people. With this act of mercy we have been justified, Paul tells us. That is, we have been declared innocent in the sight of God. The sin which had once separated us from the Lord is no longer remembered; it is absolved. Paul goes on to state that with this declaration of innocence we have also been reconciled to God. Though our sinful rebellion had once made us his enemies, the blood of Christ has spared us God's wrath and brought us again into a loving relationship with him. "Therefore, when a man believes that his sins are forgiven because of Christ and that God is reconciled and favorably disposed to him because of Christ, this personal faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and justifies us" (Ap. IV [par.45]).

4. In recalling the story of Abraham, the apostle Paul directs his readers' attention to the all-important words, "it was credited to him." God credited righteousness to Abraham. Why? On what basis? Though Abraham honestly faced the fact that his body was "as good as dead," and that his wife Sarah's womb "was also dead," he believed that God would fulfill his promise to grant them children. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." That is, Abraham had faith; he trusted the word of the Lord. And on the basis of this trust God credited to him righteousness.

But Paul's concern is not only with Abraham. He goes on to proclaim that "The words 'it was credited to him' were not written for him alone, but also for us." On account of our sin, we honestly recognize that, before God, we are "as good as dead." We are deserving of death. But just as God credited righteousness to Abraham on account of his faith in the Lord's promise, so too does he credit righteousness to those who believe the promise given with Christ: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." This is God's gracious promise, that the death and resurrection of Christ took place for our justification, for our forgiveness. Though this death and resurrection occurred long ago, the benefits of that sacrifice are received through faith even today.

The doctrine of justification by faith is the backbone of the Lutheran Confessions and the article on which the Christian church stands and falls. The confessors consistently return to the theme that "Faith alone justifies because we receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit by faith alone"

(Ap. IV [par.86]). Why does faith alone justify? “The forgiveness of sins is a thing promised for Christ’s sake. Therefore it can be accepted only by faith, since a promise can be accepted only on faith” (Ap. IV [par.84]).

5. Abraham has sometimes been called the “father of faith.” His great trust in the Lord is used as an example for many of the authors of the Old and New Testaments. The author of Hebrews reiterates what Paul says about Abraham. But he also further explains the implications of God’s promise to Abraham. He realizes that, even when God himself makes a promise, believing that promise is not always so easy as might be imagined. The Lord himself also realizes this. He has therefore sworn by his promise; he has taken an oath. “The oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.” Since, as the author reminds us, it is impossible for God to lie, all arguments and all doubts may cease. In the face of temptations that would have us question God’s good promise, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

6. The events of 2 Samuel 11-12 form the background against which the penitential Psalm 51 was written. Chapter 11 describes David’s sin of adultery and murder. In chapter 12 David is confronted with his crime by Nathan, a prophet sent by the Lord. Upon realizing the enormity of his sin and hearing the judgment pronounced upon him, David can only respond with the words, “I have sinned against the Lord.” He offers no excuses. He does not attempt to shift the blame. Nor does he qualify his repentance in any way. He simply confesses. And Nathan, in response, simply absolves him. He does not further chastise David for his sin. He does not pry into the motivation behind David’s actions. Nor does he question David’s sincerity. As the Lord’s mouthpiece, Nathan can only say what has been given him to say. He can only announce the judgment of the Lord himself: “The Lord has taken away your sin.”

Connect:

1. A popular bumper sticker explains that “Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.” Though it is easy to dismiss such a slogan as trite, there is much truth to this description of the Christian. Many in our society would call Christians those who attend church, those who do certain good works, or even -- closer to the truth, yet still perhaps placing the emphasis on the wrong party -- those who follow Christ. The Christian certainly will take advantage of every opportunity to worship and to do good works in service to his neighbor. Likewise, the Christian is most definitely one who professes to follow Christ. And yet each of these emphases focus on what man does. To our great relief, however, the Christian faith is first and foremost not about what we do, but about what God has done for us in the person and work of Christ. In contrast to man-centered explanations of what it means to be a Christian, we can rejoice to point to Jesus when asked who we are. As Christians, we are those who have been bought by the blood of Christ; we are those upon whom, in baptism, Christ has put his name. We are those who have been forgiven.

2. Few of us will ever be confronted with the accusation of adultery and murder. But this does not mean that our consciences remains clear. Far from it! In the eyes of God, sin is sin. Whether large or small, it is an act of rebellion against his divine law. And, acting as a mirror to reflect our sinfulness, this law never ceases to accuse us. The circumstances of David’s confession and absolution, however, may provide comfort and consolation when our consciences condemn. No matter how great or how often our sin, it can be absolved. Humbly confessing before those who have been called to speak in the stead and by the command of God, we may trust that they, like Nathan, will confidently and without hesitation announce, “The Lord has taken away your sin.”

3. Times change. Styles change. People change. And not always for the better! In the midst of an ever changing world, Scripture assures us that God does not change. He remains ever merciful, ever

compassionate, and ever willing to forgive. His promises are sure; they do not expire and he does not revoke them. We may always come confidently before him, seeking absolution and requesting forgiveness “for your sake, O Lord.”

Vision:

1. Relationships built on love are strengthened as that love is continually expressed. Our relationship with God is founded on the forgiving love he so dramatically demonstrated on the cross of Calvary. Likewise, this relationship grows, matures, and is strengthened as we continue to hear God speak to us the good news of his forgiveness. We have regular opportunities to hear the gospel through his word spoken in Scripture, through his word placed in the mouth of pastors and confessors, and in his word attached to the physical elements of his holy supper.
2. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray that God would forgive our sins. We also ask that he might daily strengthen us to forgive those who sin against us. In a fallen world, we will not have to look far to see how others have wronged or offended us. Being strengthened by the Holy Spirit, however, we can love our neighbor as God has first loved us. We can strengthen, repair, and renew strained or broken relationships by willingly forgiving, by demonstrating a Christ-like love for, those who have hurt us.

Leader: Session 3, Office of the Keys

Session Objectives:

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the word of God, participants will

1. understand the nature and purpose of the Keys according to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions;
2. recognize that Christ has instituted the Office of the Keys in the church and for the sake of the church;
3. appreciate the office and work of their pastor(s), who have been entrusted with the public use of the Keys.

Opening Worship Suggestions:

Hymn 262 in Lutheran Worship is a song of welcome for those charged with the task of administering the keys of the kingdom and announcing God’s gracious absolution. Petitions for these servants of the church include the Prayer For The Holy Ministry (LW, 124) and the Prayer For Those Who Hold Special Offices In The Church (LW, 131).

Focus:

Read, or ask a participant to read, the Focus. Spend some time discussing examples of important items participants may have lost and then found again. In answering the question of what is done to prevent misplacing important items, participants may explain that they get into the habit of placing objects always in the same place, so that they know exactly where to find them when needed.

The Lord understands the importance of knowing exactly where to find those things most precious to us. As Christians, our most precious possession of all is the forgiveness he provides. And we need it often! To ensure that we might not be left wondering where to find this most precious possession, God assures us that it may always be found in his church, with the keys he has left her.

Inform:

1. Amidst all of the confusion about who Jesus was and what he had come to do, Peter professed his belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That is, he is the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior. Upon hearing this profession, Jesus responds, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." The purpose for which the keys are given, Jesus further explains, is that of binding and loosing. He reiterates this purpose and power of the keys in Matthew 18:18 and, in the more familiar language of John 20:21-23, he explains that this loosing and binding are synonymous with forgiving or not forgiving sins. The clear implication is that entrance into the kingdom of heaven is a matter of one's sins being loosed, that is, forgiven or absolved. For this reason the Lutheran Confessions can speak of absolution and the power of the keys synonymously (SA III.VIII).

2. In Matthew 16, Jesus promised that he would give the keys of the kingdom to Peter. Parallel passages make clear, however, that Jesus gave the keys not to Peter alone. The promise of Matthew 16 -- "I will give" -- is fulfilled in the post-resurrection account of John 20. Here Jesus speaks not only to Peter, but to a room full of disciples. Bestowing on them the Holy Spirit, he declares, "If you [plural] forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven." With this gift of the Spirit, the disciples are empowered to carry out the mandate to announce the forgiveness of sins won by Christ's death and recent resurrection. A more literal translation of verse 23 ("Those whose sins you forgive have already been forgiven.") emphasizes that this forgiveness has already been effected by Christ's atoning work. It is an objective fact, which the disciples are to announce, preach, and proclaim.

The context of Matthew 18 also makes clear that the keys are given not to Peter alone, but as a gift to the church. Jesus here explains to his disciples how sin is to be confronted in the church and by the church. He repeats that which he had earlier stated: "I tell you [plural] the truth, whatever you [plural] bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you [plural] loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It is also noteworthy that, in the four Gospels, only Matthew uses the word "church." More significantly, he does so in only two locations, both of which involve the discussion of the power of the keys to bind and loose sin (16:18, 18:17).

Again speaking synonymously of the power of the keys and absolution, the Lutheran Confessions summarize what is expressed in Matthew and John. The Smalcald Articles clearly state that "The keys are a function and power given to the church by Christ" (SA III.VII). Likewise, Luther writes in his Large Catechism, "By divine ordinance Christ himself has entrusted absolution to his Christian church."

3. The context in which Paul speaks is one of divisions in the church. Members of the Corinthian congregation were divided on issues related to those who served as their pastors (see 1:11-12 and 3:3-5). Some claimed to follow the apostle Paul, who had founded the church at Corinth (see Acts 18:1-11). Others claimed to follow Apollos, Paul's successor there (see Acts 18:24-19:1). Paul condemns such divisions, emphasizing that in their pastoral roles both he and Apollos are to be regarded as "servants of Christ and those entrusted with the secret things of God" or "ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God" (KJV).

The term "steward," as used elsewhere in Scripture, denotes one who acts as a manager or trustee (cf. Luke 12:42, Galatians 4:2). That with which he is entrusted is not his own, but belongs to someone else. Likewise, that with which he is entrusted is not for his use alone, but it is to be administered for the sake of others. The reference to ministers as stewards highlights Paul's claim that the "mysteries" belong to God; the minister of Christ does not act on his own authority or for his own sake, but he acts in behalf of Christ and for the sake of the church.

4. As a steward of God's mysteries, Paul also refers to his task as that of an administrator. For the sake of the church he was to carry out "the administration of this mystery" (v.9), "the administration of God's grace" (v.2). Paul also explains the content of this gracious mystery: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Jesus Christ" (v.6). The mystery with which Paul was entrusted is the gospel itself (cf. Ephesians 6:19). It is the good news of Christ's promise, his grace, and his unsearchable riches, which are for all people.

Regarding the administration of the gospel, the Lutheran Confessions note that this is the essence of the office and power of the keys. "The power of the keys administers and offers the gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the gospel" (Ap. XII). As the gospel is proclaimed not only in absolution, but also in preaching and in the sacraments, the confessions also state, "The power of keys or the power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments" (AC XXVIII).

5. Not only does Paul explain that the mystery of God is the good news of Jesus Christ, but he goes on to state that this mystery is Christ himself. His incarnation, death, and resurrection are the foundation upon which the mystery of forgiveness rests. Jesus is not merely the subject of the good news; he is the good news! When forgiveness is proclaimed, Christ himself is proclaimed, and vice versa. Paul expresses this very thought when he famously declares, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Such is a fitting motto for those entrusted with the mysteries of God and the administration of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

6. Upon appointing and sending out preachers to proclaim the kingdom of God, Jesus assures them that they speak with his authority. "He who listens to you listens to me." In matters pertaining to the kingdom of heaven, the Lord is concerned to remove all doubt and uncertainty. Those whom he has called and sent to speak his word can do so with confidence. Likewise, those who hear the word of God spoken by those called and sent can do so with certainty. To prevent all doubt of the promise and power of the keys, the Lutheran Confessions frequently emphasize the truth found in Luke 10. "It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it [absolution], but it is the word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command" (AC XXV). "We must believe the voice of the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice coming from heaven" (Ap. XII).

Connect:

1. It would certainly be unwise (and untrue!) to state that Christians always and everywhere speak for God. There are many topics on which God has chosen to remain silent. Where God has not clearly revealed his will in Scripture the Christian will not presume to guess his mind or to speak in his stead. But the Lord has clearly and unmistakably revealed his desire for man's forgiveness. In the same manner he has revealed his desire that we proclaim to others the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross. When we do so we need have no doubt that we are speaking for the God who assures us that "He who listens to you listens to me."

2. Whether it be a child's first bicycle or a wife's diamond earrings, it is difficult not to express thanksgiving when receiving good gifts. And those who give such gifts delight to see them used and enjoyed. So it is with the keys. God delights to deliver his forgiveness and we are eager to receive it. Our thanksgiving for such a gracious gift expresses itself in prayer, praise, and -- perhaps most importantly -- in our frequent return to receive again the benefits found in the office of the keys.

3. As with all of God's promises, we can be confident that he does not lie; his promise will be kept. This is particularly comforting when the promise is that of absolution. When we hear the words, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins," we can take comfort knowing that this forgiveness is indeed spoken in Christ's stead and by his command. The pastor does not merely announce that he absolves us; he proclaims that God in heaven has forgiven our sin. Our Lord's own promise assures us that this proclamation is true.

Vision:

1. Almost without fail, biographies of Martin Luther explain that his "road to Reformation" began with the pressing question of how he might find a gracious God. The confessional practice of his day demanded lengthy and explicit enumeration of one's sins. How could he be sure he had not forgotten some? How could he be sure that he was truly sorry for those he had remembered? Luther's study of Scripture eventually led him to the comforting realization that God's forgiveness does not depend on the accuracy of one's memory or a measurable amount of sorrow. It does not depend on anything within us. It is to be found outside of us; it rests solely God's word and God's promise. The fulfillment of that promise is announced in the words of absolution. If and when we are tempted to question our forgiveness, we need not wonder where to go for assurance. We can look for comfort to those in the church who have been charged with the exercise of the keys, those called and placed in office for the very purpose of proclaiming Christ's forgiveness.
2. Preaching, absolution, the distribution of the sacraments -- these expressions of the gospel stand at the heart of the Christian church. Together with them God has also instituted an office for their administration in the church. But the men called into this office remain men. They are subject to the same temptations, frustrations, and shortcomings we all face. We who benefit from the mysteries of which they are stewards can do much to encourage them in their work with simple words of thanks and appreciation. Together with such words of encouragement, prayers for health and faithfulness along with prayers of thanksgiving will almost certainly not be unappreciated.

Leader: Session 4, Individual Confession and Absolution

Session Objectives:

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the word of God, participants will

1. understand Christ's mandate to forgive one another as we have been forgiven;
2. recognize his or her need for frequent confession and absolution;
3. appreciate and be willing to make use of the biblical and confessional practice of private, individual confession and absolution.

Opening Worship Suggestions:

Hymn 330 in Lutheran Worship extols the blessings received in and with the external word of God, which forgives sin, removes guilt, consoles the conscience, and strengthens faith. If participants are willing, the Service of Individual Confession and Absolution (LW, 310-311) may prove particularly appropriate for opening worship. With slight modification of the confessional address under rubric 4, the Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution may also serve well (LW, 308).

Focus:

Read, or ask a participant to read, the Focus. Spend some time discussing particularly memorable courtroom scenes, whether from movies, primetime television, or newscasts. Encourage them to offer suggestions as to why the courtroom holds such fascination for audiences. Is it simply the appeal of well scripted Hollywood fiction, or is there a certain drama inherent in all decisions of guilt and innocence? Perhaps much of the appealing tension -- on the big screen and in real life -- is due to our inability to know, until he himself announces it, what the judge's final verdict will be.

Point out the fact that the Bible makes frequent use of courtroom metaphors as it outlines the divine drama of salvation. Examples include familiar scriptural terms such as law, witness, testimony, righteousness, and justification. In this biblical drama, God himself is of course the judge; his verdict is final. But in the daily drama of our own lives, in our continual struggles with guilt, we need never be anxious about what God's final verdict will be. On the cross, his own Son suffered so that we might be declared "not guilty." And this heavenly judge has authorized and exhorted Christians to announce to one another the good news of this verdict.

Inform:

1. In Matthew, Jesus gives his disciples instructions regarding the proper manner in which the church is to deal with those who have committed known sins. Before all else, one is to be shown his fault "just between the two of you." Likewise, James encourages those burdened with their own transgressions to "confess your sins to each other." Such passages make clear that confession and absolution is not only a private matter between an individual and God, or a public matter as in corporate worship; all Christians are exhorted to confess to one another and to be willing to forgive each other. Citing Matthew 18, the Large Catechism emphasizes the same: "By divine ordinance Christ himself has entrusted absolution to his Christian church and commanded us to absolve one another from sins."

2. The story of Nathan's confrontation of David fittingly illustrates the principle expounded by Jesus in Matthew 18. David, privately confronted with his crimes, confesses to and is absolved by the prophet Nathan. Likewise, the well known parable of Luke 15 depicts the prodigal son confessing his fault to his father. Though the father does not explicitly announce forgiveness, Jesus' explicit mention of his compassion, open arms, and loving kisses leaves little room for doubt as to the father's favorable disposition.

3. Paul's complaint is that of every Christian. Even this great evangelist of the apostolic church and author of nearly half of the New Testament laments that he remains tormented by sin and his inability to control it. He knows God's law and delights in it. He desires to do what is good. But he cannot; rather, he does precisely that which he hates to do. He confesses that he is, in effect, a prisoner of his own sinful nature and trapped in a body of death. In such dire straits he can only confess his great need of rescue.

4. As a pious and well-educated Israelite, the apostle Paul certainly knew the word of God as revealed in the Old Testament. While lamenting his sinful nature he may also have taken some comfort in reading or remembering Psalm 119. Here the psalmist too confesses to being "laid low in the dust" (v.25) and "weary with sorrow" (v.28), asking of God, "preserve my life according to your word" (v.25), "strengthen me according to your word" (v.28). The psalmist's confidence that the Lord will indeed do so is evident as he declares, "My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life" (v.50). With God's word and promise come life, salvation, strength, and hope. It is this promising word in which the psalmist puts his trust (v.42).

5. The author of Psalm 119 had good reason to put his trust in the word of the Lord. It is, as noted elsewhere in Scripture, "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). God's word, similar to that of a

judge in his courtroom, has an active power; it does what it says and accomplishes its purpose. This the Lord himself declares in Isaiah: “[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” What the Lord most ardently desires is the faith and salvation of his people. For this reason he also promises that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:32).

In the New Testament Paul reiterates this promise, but at the same time notes that one cannot call on someone in whom they have not believed. And there can be no believing without first hearing. Nor can there be hearing without preaching, or preaching without those who have been sent to do so. Paul so urgently commends the preaching of the word of Christ because it is only this word from which saving faith comes. For the same reason the Lutheran Confessions uphold the necessity of proclaiming and hearing this external word; “we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external word” (SA III.VIII).

6. In the book of Acts, Paul charges the overseers of the church in Ephesus to keep watch over their flock, acting as shepherds of the church of God. Writing later to the Ephesian church, he also refers to apostles, prophets, evangelists, and those who are pastors and teachers. These, he also notes, have been given this ministry by Christ himself. While the devil and our own sinful nature attempt to distract, tear down, and divide the church of God, pastors and overseers are charged with the task of preparing, building up, and uniting the church in faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Such are the effects of the gospel, the word of absolution they have been called and sent to proclaim.

7. In what are known as the “pastoral epistles,” Paul writes to Timothy and Titus, young pastors who have been sent to proclaim the word of God in their respective churches. In addition to encouraging them to remain faithful ministers of the gospel, he also describes the qualifications for those in their positions. Overseers must be, among other things, blameless and above reproach, self-controlled, disciplined, and gentle. Such qualifications are particularly important for those entrusted with God’s word and work. In the context of hearing confession, it is especially needful that a pastor be self-controlled and disciplined so that he might not presume to speak anything other than that which God, in his word, has given him to speak. Likewise, gentleness will be much appreciated by those seeking comfort and consolation.

Connect:

1. Paul’s great distress serves to confirm the fact that all are sinful and -- to use his own word -- wretched beings. On the one hand, it is perhaps comforting to know that our experiences are not ours alone, that even such devout Christians as the apostle Paul continually struggled with sin. On the other hand, we may be led to ask, “If even Paul was such a great sinner, how much more so must I be?” More important than the sin shared by Paul and all Christians, however, are Christ and his word, the means by which all sin is forgiven. As Christ and his word of forgiveness are most clearly and concisely proclaimed in confession and absolution, Luther was led to write in his Large Catechism that, “He who feels his misery and need will develop such a desire for confession that he will run toward it with joy.” Recognizing the depths of human misery and need, he also went on to warn, “But those who ignore it and do not come of their own accord, we let go their way. However, they ought to know that we do not regard them as Christians.”

2. We’ve all experienced the frustration of being transferred from one telephone extension to another -- and another, and another -- each time being told that the person by whom we could be

helped was just a click away. In an age of increasingly narrow job descriptions it is often difficult to locate the specific person charged with the particular task we need fulfilled.

When that which we need fulfilled so desperately is the promise of God's own forgiveness, it would indeed be taxing if we did not know to whom we could go. We have been assured, however, that Christ himself has called and sent people for this particular purpose. Coming for confession to the pastors placed in our midst, we need have no doubt about their divinely instituted authority to proclaim absolution. This assurance is also highlighted in the Lutheran Confessions, which explain, "People are carefully instructed concerning the consolation of the word of absolution so that they may esteem absolution as a great and precious thing. It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command" (AC XXV).

3. In light of the biblical qualifications for those placed into the pastoral office, we can trust that a pastor will be self-controlled and disciplined, neither intentionally or accidentally revealing to others what has been privately confessed. To be blameless and above reproach certainly implies keeping confidential what has been confessed in confidence.

Vision:

1. Having been forgiven, we will not hesitate to forgive others. To be sure, this is often difficult, especially if a person's sin has directly affected or offended us. In such instances it may be helpful to remember that we do not speak our own words, but we announce what God has already declared to be true. It may occur that we are even sought out to console those who have not sinned against us personally. In these cases it will be our strong desire to assure them, particularly with clear passages of Scripture, that God remembers their sin no more.

2. Few Lutheran congregations today encourage the regular practice of private confession and absolution. This, sadly, is a departure from the encouragement found in the Lutheran Confessions. The article on confession found in the Smalcald Articles opens with this counsel: "Since absolution or the power of the keys, which was instituted by Christ in the Gospel, is a consolation and help against sin and a bad conscience, confession and absolution should by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church" (SA III.VIII). It is further restated in the same article that private absolution "should not be neglected; on the contrary, it should be highly esteemed and valued" (SA III.VIII; see also AC XI).

With the above in mind, we might begin again to take advantage of the orders for confession and absolution found in the church's catechetical and worship material. When in need of consolation, we can ask our pastor to walk through the order of Individual Confession and Absolution found in Lutheran Worship. The brief order found in the Small Catechism may also find appropriate use in the home, where offenses and the need for reconciliation are certainly not absent.