

Resoundingly a common concern I've heard is that, "If I confess my sins to the pastor, he will think less of me." That is a lie of Satan. Quite frankly and personally, the opposite is true. I respect the person more, MUCH more. I understand anthropology. We confess it every Sunday. "I'm a poor, miserable sinner." Do you think there is any sin in the world that someone could confess that would surprise me? It's the person that tries to convince everyone else that they are *not* a poor, miserable, sinner that I don't trust. I believe the words we all say every week. We are all poor, miserable sinners. The distinction that matters is who is repentant of it and who isn't. That's Jesus' point in our Gospel reading: the one who is sorrowful of their sinful state gets forgiveness; the one who isn't doesn't.

To be clear, being poor, miserable sinners doesn't excuse our sins. God's expectations remain. The standard you should set for your pastor is that he demonstrates to you how to live a life of repentance. It's also important that he stay above reproach, not committing irreversible, public sins such as adultery, divorce, murder, fraud, etc. 1 Timothy 3:1-4 gives the list of things you should expect of your pastor: **"Sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well"** (1 Tim 3:2-4), etc. Is the pastor going to be perfect in these areas? Of course not, but he needs to be working on perfecting them while living in repentance, just as is expected of you according to your Christian duties. These are all listed in the Table of Duties in the Catechism, by the way.

Here's the second one on the list for what the laity owe their pastor. **Galatians 6:6-7, "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."** Ask yourself, have you shared with your pastor all your good things, your good news, for example? I remember when I first got to Zion, Pastor Kudart warned me that the pastor is oftentimes the last person to find out things. According to the Bible this should never be this way! If a woman gets pregnant, who is the first to know besides her husband? Her mom and dad. Your pastor is your spiritual father according to the 4th Commandment! Let him know – share your good news because he cares! If you don't, why would you expect him to care? You reap what you sow as Paul writes!

All this instruction on this Office of the Keys Sunday keeps going back to one "key" thing – pun intended: the forgiveness of sins. Repent when you sin, and by faith receive absolution. Whenever we doubt God's Word or the truthfulness of God's Word, we are guilty of Thomas' sin in our Gospel reading. But Thomas repented, and Thomas made a bold confession: **"My Lord and my God"** (Jn 20:28). We can make the same confession, too. He is our Lord, our God, our Redeemer, our Savior!

When the pastor says, "In the stead and by the command of Christ, I forgive you all your sins" it's as if Christ Himself has said it to you. This is true whether it's done publicly as in here in the Divine Service, or in private absolution. Jesus says to the seventy-two pastors He sends out in **Luke 10:16, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me."** The pastor has been called by Christ through the Church to speak His Word; to be the literal voice of Jesus in your life. The one who hears the words of the pastor who preaches and teaches faithfully hears the words of Christ as if Christ Himself spoke them. Who doesn't want to hear the voice of their Shepherd? This is an article of faith. It cannot be proven to you other than by what Christ has said. It must be believed by faith alone. You can reject it and therefore reject Christ and He who sent Him. Or you can trust it, receive Christ, and receive all Christ's gifts that He freely gives!

Know this: there is nothing more that I want to do, or any pastor ought to want to do, than to forgive sins; to lead you to Christ to give you Christ. This is why we offer the Sacrament every Lord's Day. This is why we follow the historic liturgy of the Church. This is why we have set aside office hours for private absolution. The pastoral office is God's gift to you! As Paul says in **Ephesians 4:11-12, "He gave... (the office of) shepherds and pastors to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ."** When the Christian stands firm on the article of the forgiveness of sins, he or she is liberated to serve their neighbor in gladness, doing the works God has given them to do, which will demonstrate the love of Christ and edify His church! The Office of the Keys and the Pastoral Office are God's loving gifts to the Church!

Forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins. We have an abundance of spiritual riches! For where there is forgiveness of sins, there *is* also life and salvation. We confess that in the Small Catechism

under Part II of the Sacrament of the Altar. We don't just confess this with our lips; we believe it in our hearts, because Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen.