

Session 7: Whose Sins You Forgive

A Kingdom of Priests: Priesthood in the New Covenant

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

Last week the Twelve received the offering. Tonight, Easter evening, they receive the absolution. From John 20:19 to 23 the group discovers a commissioning ("as the Father has sent me, even so I send you"), a creation echo they find themselves (God breathing into men, Genesis 2:7), and a transfer of authority whose words resist every attempt to shrink them: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Around it: the keys of Matthew 16 with their Old Testament background in Isaiah 22 (a steward's office in David's house), the crowd of Matthew 9 glorifying God for giving such authority "to men," and Paul naming his work "the ministry of reconciliation." The aim: by night's end the group can say from the text why the Church believes Christ truly shares his power to forgive, and can say honestly what developed later and what did not.

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism teaches that only God forgives sins, and that Jesus, the Son of Man, exercises this divine power on earth and wills his Church to continue his work of healing and forgiveness, imparting to the apostles his own power to forgive sins (CCC 1441 to 1442). Christ willed that his whole Church be a sign and instrument of the forgiveness won by his blood, and he entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry (CCC 1442, 1461). The Catechism is also candid that the concrete discipline of the sacrament changed over the centuries while the fundamental structure remained (CCC 1447); that candor is a gift to tonight's honesty, and you will use it.

What You Need to Know

Set the scene with care: Easter evening, doors locked, fear inside. The risen Christ stands among them: "Peace be with you." Then the sending: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." Weigh that sentence before moving on; the apostles' mission is patterned on the Son's own mission, and the Son was sent, among other things, to forgive sins. Then the gesture: "he breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit." The verb for breathed (*emphysao*) is rare and loaded; the group will hunt its ancestry themselves and land in Genesis 2:7, God breathing life into the man of dust. John, whose Gospel opened with "In the beginning," is showing a new creation beginning: as God's breath once made living men, Christ's breath now makes life-giving ministers. Then the words themselves: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Two-sided: forgive or retain. A power exercised case by case, which is why the Church understands this authority as ordinarily exercised by hearing the case (with narrow exceptions, such as general absolution in grave necessity); you cannot ordinarily bind or loose what you refuse to know.

Matthew supplies the office's furniture. In Matthew 16:18 to 19, Simon becomes Rock and receives "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," with binding and loosing ratified in heaven; Matthew 18:18 extends binding and loosing to the apostles together, in the context of sin and the church. The keys are not decoration: their Old Testament background, which the group discovers live, is Isaiah 22:20 to 22, where God deposes one royal steward and installs Eliakim over the house of David: "I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." The key marks a real OFFICE in the king's house: a steward with delegated authority, and, crucially for Session 10, an office that

outlives its holder and is refilled. In the Church's long-standing reading, Jesus, Son of David, is staffing his house.

Mark 2 arms the steelman and then defuses it. When Jesus tells the paralytic "your sins are forgiven," the scribes reason: "It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Their premise is true, and the Church affirms it (CCC 1441): only God forgives sins. Jesus answers not by denying the premise but by demonstrating that "the Son of MAN has authority ON EARTH to forgive sins," and heals the man to prove it. Then Matthew's version adds the detail that should raise every eyebrow in the room, and the group finds it live: the crowds "glorified God, who had given such authority TO MEN" (Matthew 9:8). Plural. Catholic readers have long heard in that plural an authority that would not terminate in Jesus' own hands; the verse invites the reading even if, alone, it does not compel it. Add Paul: God "gave US the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:18 to 20); and James, who sends the sick to the elders of the church for anointing and prayer (5:14 to 15) and, alongside, tells believers to confess their sins (5:16). Ministry of reconciliation, entrusted to men, exercised through office: the pattern is native to the New Testament, not medieval.

Now the honesty, and lead with it before anyone can spring it on you: private confession as your group knows it (the box, the screen, frequent devotional confession) is not described in the New Testament, and the Church does not claim it is. The early centuries knew severe, often once-in-a-lifetime public penance for grave sins; the private, repeatable form spread later, carried notably by Irish monastic practice, and the Catechism says all of this out loud (CCC 1447), calling the fundamental structure (contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution through the Church's ministry) the constant beneath the changing discipline. The claim the study defends tonight is the apostolic AUTHORITY (John 20:23, Matthew 16 and 18, 2 Corinthians 5), not the antiquity of the furniture. Distinguishing those two claims honestly is the difference between apologetics that survives contact and apologetics that gets ambushed by its first church-history fact.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Two live discoveries carry the roots tonight: Genesis 2:7 behind the Easter breath (creation and new creation; the study began in Eden, and tonight Eden's breath returns), and Isaiah 22:20 to 22 behind the keys (a transferable stewardship in David's house). Thread B surfaces inside John 17:12 if you want it: "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name... I have guarded them": the shamar work, done by Christ, about to be delegated to shepherds.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Chrysostom

Returning to the book that opened our study: Chrysostom marvels at John 20:23 and teaches, in substance, that God has given to priests an authority he gave neither to angels nor to archangels, for to none of them was it said, whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven; what priests carry out below, God ratifies above. For Chrysostom this is not clerical pride but holy terror: he wrote *On the Priesthood* largely to explain why the office frightened him. (Faithfully summarized.)

On the Priesthood, Book 3

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Ambrose of Milan

St. Ambrose, writing *On Penance* against a rigorist sect that denied the Church could absolve grave sinners, teaches in substance: the Church does not presume this power, she obeys it; Christ said "whose sins you forgive," and it would be strange obedience to refuse a gift the Lord commanded to be exercised.

Why, he presses, would Christ grant a power he intended no one to use? (A summary of his argument.)

On Penance

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"When Peter baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes; when Paul baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes; even when Judas baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes." (A close paraphrase of his teaching.) Augustine's famous principle, preached on John's Gospel, is the deep answer to "why confess to a man": in the sacraments the minister's hands move, but the power is never his. The priest in the confessional is an instrument; the forgiving is Christ's. Which is also why the minister's personal unworthiness, a scandal Augustine knew well, cannot poison the gift.

Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 6

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1441 to 1442: only God forgives sins; the Son of Man exercises this divine authority on earth and imparts it to men to exercise in his name.
- CCC 1444 to 1445: the office of binding and loosing given to Peter and to the college of apostles; reconciliation with the Church inseparable from reconciliation with God.
- CCC 1461: because Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to his apostles, bishops and priests continue to exercise it.
- CCC 1447: the honest paragraph; the concrete form of the sacrament varied greatly over the centuries while its fundamental structure remained. Read it yourself before the session.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- THREAD A (resolved): the standing image may echo naturally ("the priest at the altar, the priest in the confessional: same gift, same night-and-day pair of Easter and Holy Thursday"). Do not force it.
- THREAD B (serve and guard): John 17:12, Christ kept and guarded his own; tonight he begins delegating the keeping. One sentence, well placed.
- THREAD C (the firstborn): resting.
- THREAD D (kingdom of priests): the authority tonight is given to the apostles specifically; next week the pendulum swings to the whole priestly people, and the study needs both swings at full arc. Do not blend them tonight.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers Genesis 2:7 behind the Easter breath and articulates the new-creation stakes.
2. The group states why "forgive... retain" implies case-by-case judgment rather than blanket announcement.
3. The group discovers Isaiah 22 behind the keys and can describe the steward's office in their own words.
4. The "only God can forgive" steelman is built at full strength, its true premise affirmed, and answered from Mark 2 and Matthew 9:8.
5. The development of the sacrament's form is stated honestly, by you, before anyone else raises it, with CCC 1447 on the table.

Timed Plan (90 minutes)

- 0:00 Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- 0:05 Win questions (10 min)
- 0:15 Build I: Easter evening, John 20 and the breath discovery (25 min)
- 0:40 Build II: The keys and the steward, Matthew 16 and Isaiah 22 (15 min)
- 0:55 Build III: Only God can forgive, the steelman (20 min)
- 1:15 Build IV: The honesty minute, development of the form (5 min)
- 1:20 Send (5 min)
- 1:25 Live It, memory verse, closing prayer (5 min)

Pre-chosen cuts for a 75-minute room: drop the Dig Deeper and fold Build II to Isaiah 22:22 plus Matthew 16:19 read back to back with a single question. Never cut the honesty minute; it is five minutes that buys the whole night its credibility.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Risen Lord, you walked through locked doors and your first word was peace. Walk into whatever is locked in us tonight. Breathe on us as you breathed on them, and teach us what you were giving. Amen.

Win

1. What is the hardest part of apologizing: saying it, meaning it, or believing you are actually forgiven afterward? Why that part?
2. Has anyone ever said words out loud to you ("I forgive you," "we are okay," "it is over") that changed something no amount of silent knowing had changed? What did the OUT LOUD do?

Build I: Easter Evening

Read John 20:19 to 23 aloud, slowly, twice.

Q1. Take verse 21 first: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." What was the Father's sending of the Son FOR? So what is being said about the apostles' mission?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The Son was sent to reveal the Father, to seek and save the lost, to give his life, and, as the whole Gospel insists, to take away sin ("Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," John 1:29). The apostles' mission is patterned on his own: not a new mission, but his mission, extended through sent men. Whatever verse 23 gives, verse 21 has already framed it as continuation, not innovation.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "Verse 22 says he BREATHED on them. That gesture has an ancestry; God has breathed on a human being before, at one very particular moment. Find it, in the Bible's first two chapters." (They will land at Genesis 2:7. Read it aloud when found.)

Q2. Set Genesis 2:7 next to John 20:22. What happened when God breathed the first time? What is John telling us is happening now?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The first breath made dust into a living man; creation. John, whose Gospel deliberately opens with "In the beginning," shows the risen Christ, on the evening of the first day of the new week, breathing on men: new creation is beginning, and as God's breath once made living men, Christ's breath now makes life-giving ministers, carriers of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins. Our study began with a man placed in a garden to serve and guard; the new Adam is now breathing that vocation, transformed, into his apostles.

Q3. Now verse 23 itself. It has two sides: forgive, and retain. Why does the second side matter? What does a two-sided authority require that a one-sided announcement would not?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"If you forgive the sins of any... if you retain the sins of any": this is discretion, exercised case by case. A blanket announcement ("God forgives whoever believes!") has no second side; there is nothing to retain, and the retaining clause becomes dead words. But forgive-or-retain requires knowing the case: hearing the sin, weighing the sorrow. From this two-sidedness the Church has understood that the gift ordinarily implies a ministry in which sins are actually told to the men who must forgive or retain them. The word "confession" is not in the verse; the logic of confession is.

Build II: The Keys and the Steward

Read Matthew 16:18 to 19 aloud.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "Keys, opening and shutting, over a kingdom: this is furniture from an Old Testament office. In Isaiah 22:15 to 22, God fires one royal official and hires another. Find verse 22 especially: what is placed on the new man's shoulder, over whose house, with what powers?"

Q4. Describe the office in Isaiah 22 in your own words. Then: what is Jesus, Son of David, doing when he hands Simon "the keys of the kingdom"?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Isaiah 22: the steward of the royal palace, an office "over the house" of the king. Shebna is deposed; Eliakim is installed; "the key of the house of David" goes on his shoulder; "he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." A real office, with delegated royal authority, and, notice for later, an office that survives its holders: it passed from Shebna to Eliakim and could pass again. In the Church's long-standing reading of this background, Jesus, the Son of David, is staffing his royal house: Peter receives the steward's keys, with binding and loosing ratified in heaven; and in Matthew 18:18 the binding-and-loosing authority extends to the apostles together, spoken precisely in the context of dealing with sin. Delegated authority in the king's house is not a rival to the king; it is how a king runs a kingdom.

DIG DEEPER

John 17:12, the night before: "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name... I have guarded them." The keeping-and-guarding of Eden, done perfectly at last by Christ over his little flock, and about to be handed to shepherds ("Feed my sheep," John 21). The guard-thread of this study is quietly becoming the pastoral office.

Build III: Only God Can Forgive

STEELMAN: BUILD IT UP. Full strength: "Your friend says: Mark 2:7, the scribes were RIGHT about the principle: who can forgive sins but God alone? Forgiveness of sin is God's prerogative, full stop. So John 20:23 must mean the apostles were commissioned to PREACH forgiveness, to announce the terms: believe, and God forgives you. Read it that way, or read retain as the church declaring sins retained in unbelief, or as church discipline, and everything fits without a man in a box saying I absolve you, words no sinful man has any business saying to another. And notice: my reading honors God MORE than yours."

Q5. First, what is TRUE in that objection? Then read Mark 2:5 to 12 carefully, and find the detail Matthew adds in his version at Matthew 9:8. What do you find?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

True, and the Church teaches it in exactly those words: only God forgives sins (CCC 1441). Any account in which the priest forgives by his own power is not the Catholic account. Grant the premise completely.

But watch what Jesus does with the scribes' premise: he does not correct it; he demonstrates something they thought impossible: "that you may know that the Son of MAN has authority ON EARTH to forgive sins," and heals the paralytic as proof. God's prerogative, exercised on earth through the incarnate one. Then Matthew's telling adds the thunderclap: the crowds "glorified God, who had given such authority TO MEN." Plural. Catholic readers from early times have heard in Matthew's plural an authority that would not terminate in Jesus' hands; the verse invites that reading, and John 20 supplies what it lacks alone. Add Paul: God "gave US the ministry of reconciliation... we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:18 to 20); an ambassador speaks with his sovereign's authority, not his own. Add the two-sided grammar of John 20:23, and be fair to the stronger Protestant readings, which give "retain" real work: declaring sins retained in unbelief, or exercising church discipline. Credit them, then notice what they concede: the verse confers a discriminating authority exercised toward particular people, which is the Catholic premise. The remaining debate is whether that authority is declarative only or judicial and sacramental; and forgive-or-retain, spoken with Christ's own breath, reads most naturally as effective rather than merely descriptive. The Catholic reading is not that men replace God as forgiver; it is that God forgives THROUGH men he breathed on for the purpose: Christ's own principle, Christ's own breath, Christ's own words. As Augustine taught about baptism: when Peter baptizes, Christ baptizes; the hands are the instrument, the power is the Lord's.

Build IV: The Honesty Minute

Say this yourself, unprompted: "Before anyone asks: the confessional box, the screen, Saturday afternoon lines, frequent devotional confession, none of that is in the New Testament, and the Church does not claim it is. The early centuries knew severe public penance, often once in a lifetime, for grave sins; the private repeatable form your grandparents knew spread centuries later, carried notably by Irish monks. The Catechism itself lays out this development in paragraph 1447 and calls the underlying structure, sorrow, confession, satisfaction, and absolution through the Church's ministry, the constant beneath the changing discipline. What tonight defended from Scripture is the apostolic AUTHORITY, not the furniture. The furniture is the Church exercising, in different centuries in different ways, a gift given on Easter evening. Keep those two claims distinct and you will never be ambushed by a church history fact again."

Send

1. Christ's first gift to a room full of men who had abandoned him was peace, and his second was the power to give peace to others. Who needs to hear real, out-loud forgiveness from you this week, not vague warmth, but words?
2. If the words "I absolve you" are Christ keeping his Easter promise through a man he sent, what has been keeping you from hearing them lately, and what would it take to go?

Live It This Week

- Go to confession this week if you are able, and listen to the words of absolution as what tonight showed them to be: Easter evening, still happening. If it has been years, say exactly that to the priest; it is his favorite sentence to hear.
- Speak one out-loud forgiveness this week to someone who needs the words, not the vibe.

- Pray John 20:21 to 23 once each day, slowly, and each time thank Christ by name for one person through whom his forgiveness has reached you.

Memory Verse

"Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

John 20:21 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, on the evening of your resurrection you gave peace, breath, and the forgiveness of sins into human hands. Thank you for refusing to keep your mercy at a distance. Give us the humility to receive it the way you chose to give it, and the courage to carry it out loud into every room we enter. Amen.

Leader Reference Card: Session 7

Every passage used tonight, in order:

- John 20:19 to 23 (Build I, read aloud twice; memory verse source at 20:21)
- John 1:29 (Build I, leader reference)
- Genesis 2:7 (Build I, live discovery)
- Matthew 16:18 to 19 (Build II, read aloud)
- Isaiah 22:15 to 22 (Build II, live discovery)
- Matthew 18:18 (Build II, in the ANSWER)
- John 17:12 (Dig Deeper)
- Mark 2:5 to 12 (Build III, read aloud)
- Matthew 9:8 (Build III, live discovery detail)
- 2 Corinthians 5:18 to 20 (Build III, in the ANSWER)
- James 5:14 to 16 (leader reference)