

Small Group Guide: The Keys to the Kingdom

Opening Prayer

Begin your group time by asking God to open hearts to receive His message of forgiveness and to give courage to use the keys He's given us.

Icebreaker

Share about a time you lost your keys (car, house, etc.). How did it feel to be locked out of something important to you? How did it feel when you finally got back in?

Key Scripture Passages

John 20:21-23 - Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives them authority to forgive **Matthew 16:13-19** - Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven **John 21** - Jesus restores Peter after his denial

Core Message Summary

Jesus gave His disciples—and us—the "keys to the kingdom of heaven." These keys aren't about getting into a physical place; they're about accessing and sharing

God's heart of **forgiveness**. The gospel's core message isn't morality policing or judgment—it's reconciliation through forgiveness. When we forgive others, we unlock hearts for the kingdom. When we withhold forgiveness, we lock people out.

Discussion Questions

Understanding the Message

- 1. What stood out most to you from this sermon?**
Was there a particular phrase, story, or scripture that resonated with you?
- 2. How does viewing forgiveness as "the key to the kingdom" change your understanding of the gospel?** How is this different from viewing the gospel primarily through the lens of morality or behavior?
- 3. Read John 20:21-23.** Why do you think Jesus breathed on the disciples? What's the connection to Genesis 2:7 when God breathed life into Adam?
- 4. In Matthew 16:19, Jesus tells Peter "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."** What does this mean in practical terms for our lives today?

Going Deeper

5. **Peter denied Jesus three times, yet Jesus restored him three times (John 21).** Why was forgiveness essential before Peter could "feed His sheep"? What does this teach us about our own need for forgiveness before we can minister to others?
6. **The sermon mentioned that the church has often become the "morality police" rather than agents of forgiveness.** Have you experienced or witnessed this? How does judgment differ from sharing the gospel of forgiveness?
7. **Jesus said in Matthew 25 that the sheep fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the sick—but they didn't even realize they were serving Him.** How does this relate to using the "keys" unconsciously versus trying to earn salvation through works?
8. **The story was shared about a church that stopped using its front door for 100 years because the lock was rusty.** What "doors" might we have stopped opening in our own lives or communities because we've forgotten to use the key of forgiveness?

Personal Reflection

9. **Is there someone in your life who needs you to unlock the door of forgiveness for them?** Someone who has hurt you, disappointed you, or let you down? What's keeping that door locked?

10. **Are you locked up in your own guilt or shame about something?** Have you received Jesus' breath of new life and forgiveness? What would it look like to truly accept that forgiveness?
 11. **Think about the people in the recovery center mentioned in the sermon—people going home to those they've hurt.** Do you know someone trying to rebuild their life who needs the key of forgiveness from you or others?
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Key Takeaways

- ✓ **The gospel's core is forgiveness, not morality policing**
- ✓ **Jesus gave us the keys to the kingdom—the authority to forgive and unlock hearts**
- ✓ **When we judge instead of forgive, we stand in the way of God's grace**
- ✓ **Forgiveness isn't earned—it's purely God's grace given to us**
- ✓ **We must receive forgiveness ourselves before we can authentically share it**

✓ **Every person we encounter needs the key of forgiveness—including us**

✓ **The church is not a building but living stones carrying keys to unlock hearts**

Practical Application

This Week's Challenge:

Option 1: Unlock a Door Identify one person you need to forgive (or ask forgiveness from). Take a concrete step this week—make a call, send a message, have a conversation. Use your key.

Option 2: Carry the Reminder Find a physical key (or use one you already have) and carry it with you this week as a reminder that you carry the keys to the kingdom. When someone asks about it, share what it represents.

Option 3: Stop Judging, Start Loving Pay attention this week to when you're tempted to judge someone (in person, online, in your thoughts). Each time, consciously choose to see them as a child of God who needs a key instead. Pray for them instead of judging them.

Option 4: Receive the Key If you're locked up in your own guilt and shame, spend time this week receiving

Jesus' forgiveness. Journal about what's keeping you locked up, then write out John 20:21-23 and receive His breath of new life.

Group Activity (Optional)

The Key Exchange:

- Give each group member a key (you can get inexpensive keys at a hardware store)
 - Have each person share one way they want to use their "key" this week
 - Pray over each person and their specific commitment
 - Check in next week on how it went
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Closing Questions

- 1. What is one thing you're taking away from today's discussion?**
 - 2. How can we pray for you this week?** (Especially regarding forgiveness—giving or receiving it)
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Closing Prayer

Pray together, asking God to:

- Help us receive His forgiveness fully
 - Give us courage to forgive those who've hurt us
 - Show us who needs the key of forgiveness from us
 - Keep us from being the morality police and make us agents of reconciliation
 - Help us use our keys daily to unlock hearts for the kingdom
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Before Next Week

- Read Matthew 25:31-46 (the sheep and the goats)
 - Reflect on: "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, or in prison?"
 - Journal about one time you used your key this week
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Leader Notes

- Be prepared for emotional responses—forgiveness is deeply personal
- Have tissues available
- Don't force anyone to share if they're not ready
- Consider having resources available for those dealing with deep hurt or trauma
- Remember: you're facilitating, not preaching—let the Holy Spirit work

- Follow up individually with anyone who shares something heavy

"The cross has nothing to do with what you can do. Has nothing to do with what you deserve. The cross is surely and purely the grace of God given to you. And you cannot earn that. All you have to do is embrace that." - Charles Stanley