

The Scriptural Basis for Penance

Note: This short article arose from a Men of St. Joseph discussion on May 18, 2010. The discussion came from the verse to be read on Sunday, May 21, 2010. It involves the sacrament of Penance. There are two parts, first, the Scriptural References for Penance and Reconciliation with Commentary, and second, What we say in Mass about forgiveness.

Part 1: Scriptural References for Penance and Reconciliation

The original two scriptural verses that caused so much discussion at our MOSJ meeting was [John 20:22](#) "*And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."*

The Council of Trent in 1551 defined that this power to forgive sins is exercised in the sacrament of penance. Besides this verse, there are several other closely related verses that refer to the idea of Penance.

[Matthew 16:19](#) *I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

The keys to the kingdom of heaven: the image of the keys is probably drawn from [Isaiah 22:15-25](#) where Eliakim, who succeeds Shebna as master of the palace, is given "the key of the house of David," which he authoritatively "opens" and "shuts" ([Isaiah 22:22](#)).

Whatever you bind . . . loosed in heaven: there are many instances in rabbinic literature of the binding-loosing imagery. One rabbinic meaning is the giving of authoritative teaching, and the lifting or imposing of the ban of excommunication.

The Council of Trent documents refer to a hierarchy of clergy. Thus, if a parish priest does not feel comfortable with forgiving a truly grievous sin, he could refer the matter to a Monsignor, or to a bishop ... The Council's documents also make an exception to the hierarchy if the penitent is in a near death state.

It is disputed whether the image of the keys and that of binding and loosing are different metaphors meaning the same thing. In any case, the promise of the keys is given to Peter alone.

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[Matthew 18:18](#) *Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

In Matthew 16:19, only Peter is given the power of binding and loosing. But in this verse (Matt 18:18), all the disciples are given the power of binding and loosing, but the context of that verse suggests that there the power of excommunication alone is intended. That the keys are those to the kingdom of heaven and that Peter's exercise of authority in the church on earth will be confirmed in heaven show an intimate connection between, but not an identification of, the church and the kingdom of heaven.

This verse is practically identical with [Matthew 16:19b](#) and many scholars understand it as granting to all the disciples what was previously given to Peter alone.

In [James 5:13 - 16](#) and [James 5:19 - 20](#), the ideas of confessing your sins to one another and praying for the sick among us are given. Here are the verses.

13 Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise.

14 Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint (him) with oil in the name of the Lord,

15 and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful.

19 My brothers, if anyone among you should stray from the truth and someone bring him back,

20 he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

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In case of sickness a Christian should ask for the presbyters of the church, i.e., those who have authority in the church (cf Acts 15:2,22-23; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5).

They are to pray over the person and anoint with oil; oil was used for medicinal purposes in the ancient world (see Isaiah 1:6; Luke 10:34).

In Mark 6:13, the Twelve anoint the sick with oil on their missionary journey. In the name of the Lord: by the power of Jesus Christ.

When a Christian is instrumental in the conversion of a sinner, the result is forgiveness of sins and a reinstatement of the sinner to the life of grace. The results of the prayer and anointing are physical health and forgiveness of sins.

Part 2: What we say in Mass about Penance and Confessing our Sins

In our regular Sunday Masses, we follow James' lead when we say the following in our profession of faith, in the Gloria, and in the Lord's Prayer.

I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault; therefore I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, and all the Angels and Saints, and you my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son, Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, You take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; you take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer;

And in the Our Father, we say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." When you carefully read the Our Father, you realize that "as we forgive those who trespass against us" is the only thing we are asked by our Lord to do in that prayer. I am sure the Lord did not make a mistake here; He meant it.

Any objective study of Biblical phrases and Catholic traditions will find that Catholics take the need for forgiveness seriously. The Council of Trent's documents elaborate on the need and justification for Penance. Jesus gave Peter and the Apostles, and by the long, unbroken line of apostolic succession, today's priests and bishops, the power to forgive sins for faithful Christians.