

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

In a previous sermon we saw that the elders of the church are responsible for the oversight of the Lord's Supper. But oversight by the elders also extends to the other sacrament, baptism, as well as professions of faith and the church's worship services. In fact, all what the church does comes under the oversight of the elders. It includes the ministry of the Word at weddings and funerals, what Bible translation to use, which songs we sing in worship and what kind of teaching materials are used in the church. Elders are also charged by God to watch over the members as to how they live their daily Christian lives. The doctrine and life of all church members fall under the oversight of the elders. And that includes the office-bearers themselves. They also have to supervise each other. So none of us as church members have a free hand to do whatever we like in the church or outside the church. What you and I do in our private lives is of equal interest to the Lord as to what we do in our church activities. And the Lord has delegated that concern to the elders of His church.

To some church members this is all a bit over the top. Must the elders concern themselves with everything that goes on in the church? As well as with the way I live as a Christian at work and what I do by way of entertainment? Does that kind of supervision not suffocate the life of the church?

What we are now dealing with is discipline in the church. Discipline is not something about which a church can make up its own mind. The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church and He has commanded the church to maintain discipline. All our official Forms in the Book of Forms [the Green Book], and the Church Order, is an attempt by the church to obey the Lord's command to have discipline in the church. Church members may challenge the way the church carries out its discipline. But we cannot demand or expect that there be no supervision and discipline.

Now where in the Bible does our Lord say that the church must have discipline? Well, our Lord spoke about the keys of the kingdom. When we are clear in our minds what the Lord meant by that, then we will also know what the church has to do with regard to discipline.

We are dealing then with **THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM** and:

1. To whom did Christ entrust the keys?

As we all know the function of a key is to open and shut, or more specifically, to unlock and to lock. The keys the Lord Jesus talks about are the keys of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is not something future only. It is here already. It came with Jesus when He came to earth. He preached the good news of the kingdom to sinners and we enter His kingdom when we follow Jesus and confess Him as our King. When that is true of us then we also enjoy the power, peace and grace of Jesus' reign over us.

However, the kingdom of God on earth has not yet reached its full glory because the prince of darkness is still around. The devil and his followers are trying to stop Jesus' kingdom from winning the spiritual battle. This battle will go on until Jesus comes again when He will destroy the devil for good and heaven will come on earth. That's the time when the kingdom of God will reach its full potential.

Jesus spoke of "keys". Plural. From the teaching of Scripture the Catechism has concluded that there is not just one key - discipline, but that there is also a second key - the preaching of the gospel. There is actually no difference between the two keys. When the church truly preaches and lives the gospel then it will also maintain discipline.

To live the gospel is to do what Jesus said and part of His teaching is to love and admonish one another, so that in God's church we do God's will. When the church, therefore, practices supervision over its members in doctrine and life, then she is trying to obey the Lord of the church. The one key, church discipline, is merely an extension of the other key, preaching the gospel. This means, therefore, that whenever some activity in the church, or a member's doctrine or life, contradicts the gospel of Christ then the church is duty bound to exercise its supervision over that activity and that church member and bring it all back in harmony with the gospel.

Now the Lord Jesus said to Peter the disciple, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."* [Matt.16:19a]. Jesus further said to Peter, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* [vs.19b]. So in effect, Peter, with the keys of the kingdom, could make statements on earth that hold true in heaven. *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* Now are we to understand here that the Lord Jesus passed on this authority and power to just one apostle only? Just to Peter?

When we look at the rest of the New Testament it becomes clear that the apostle Peter did not alone have this authority and power. In fact, after Jesus had said this to Peter there were times when Peter made some bad mistakes. Remember, how as a disciple he denied Christ and then later as an apostle how in the Christian church in Galatia he made a serious error in his teaching, for which the apostle Paul disciplined him. From this it is obvious that Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom to Peter did not make Peter infallible.

Yet Peter did say true things in his two letters which we have in the New Testament. They would have to be true because God's Spirit inspired Peter to write what God wanted written. But even before Peter wrote his letters, as an apostle he said things that held true in heaven. One such instance is the healing of the cripple near the temple. Peter said to him, *"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk"* [Acts 3:6]. God in heaven agreed with what Peter said because the man was instantly healed. And we also have in the book of Acts Peter's preaching and it was not just his words or his opinion but the Word of God.

The New Testament also contains the letters of other apostles, like James, John, and Paul and what they said and wrote is also part of God's Word. What, then, are we to make of Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom to Peter? Well, shortly after Jesus spoke to Peter, He made a similar statement to all the apostles. In Matthew 18 Jesus is clearly speaking to all the disciples when He said, *"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* [vs.18]. Now that's exactly the same as what Jesus said to Peter back in chapter 16. Furthermore, Jesus again repeated this to all the disciples shortly after His resurrection, *"Receive the Holy Spirit", He said, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."* [Jn.20: 22,23].

It is quite wrong, therefore, to believe that Jesus gave authority and power to just Peter. These were given to all the apostles. It is also wrong to teach that when Peter died he passed on this authority and power to a successor and this successor to his successor, and so on, right up to the present pope. There is not one shred of evidence in the New Testament the support apostolic succession. It's a false teaching.

But it's not only the Roman Catholic Church that is wrong here. The same error is there when people say that the Lord Jesus gave them a prophecy or a vision and believe these to have approval and authority of heaven. One must challenge these people and ask if the statements they make on earth, and claiming them as coming from God, are additions to what is in the Bible. And if this is so, if their visions and prophecies go further than what the Bible says, then they should be told that they are arrogant, false teachers. For God has given His final revelation in Jesus Christ and it is all there in the Bible.

Even the office-bearers in the church can make similar errors when they assume that Christ has given them in their person His authority and power because they are a deacon, elder or minister, and for that reason think they should be respected and obeyed.

The Lord did not give Peter, or the pope, or some individuals, or church leaders, power and authority to make individual statements on earth that hold true for heaven as well. No one in their own person can open or shut God's kingdom.

The fact of the matter is that Christ never gave away to someone else His power and authority. When He gave the keys of the kingdom to the disciples it did not mean that Jesus no longer had them. After what He had said to Peter and the other disciples, Jesus very much continued to be the Lord of the church. He has never relinquished any of the authority and power that His heavenly Father had given Him. And the Father in giving Jesus authority and power did not cease having authority and power Himself. What the Father did to Christ and what Christ did to the apostles is to entrust them with authority and power. It is in His Father's Name and on His behalf that Jesus preached the gospel and disciplined those He taught. And it is in Jesus' Name and on His behalf that the apostles did the same things as their Lord.

When they did not do it, as was the case with the apostle Peter when he gave false teaching in the church of Galatia, then their statements on earth no longer held true in heaven. It is the same with elders and ministers today. When the minister preaches the true Word of God, it is only then that we can say that God speaks through Him. So when church leaders bring a gospel different to Jesus' gospel then immediately they have lost the authority and power of Jesus. The Lord's authority and power are not attached to office-bearers as persons but to Jesus' gospel, which they are to proclaim. The Lord Jesus has entrusted the keys of the kingdom only to those who bring His gospel and exercising His kind of discipline. The Lord never gave away these keys.

Whilst Jesus was on earth, He choose twelve apostles, thirteen if you include the apostle Paul. He taught them the secrets of the kingdom. They were constantly at His side observing what He did. After Jesus' Ascension they were empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to continue Jesus' teaching and discipline in His church. Or to put that in another way, the ascended Jesus continued to use the keys of the kingdom from heaven through His apostles on earth.

When the apostles died, Jesus never replaced any of them. That's why there is no apostolic succession. The unique qualification of an apostle was being an eye and ear witness of what Jesus said and did. After Jesus' Ascension, no one could be a new apostle because of the very fact that Jesus was no longer around to be seen and heard. The apostle Paul was the only exception. Whatever the pope claims to be is from man, it is not from God.

So who then today has the keys of the kingdom when Jesus and the apostles are no longer with us on earth? Well, Jesus still has the keys but He now works through the Scriptures. And God has given the Scriptures to the church. When the church preaches and lives Jesus' gospel, then the kingdom of heaven continues to open and shut.

2. How should the church use the keys?

An example of how this opening and shutting is done can be seen in the proclamation of grace that is usually given in the morning worship service. Sadly, some churches don't do this any more but in the Reformation tradition it has always been regarded as an essential part of the liturgy of the church. After the prayer for forgiveness a small portion from Scripture is read that clearly speaks of the grace of God in Christ to repentant sinners. The minister should make it clear when the proclamation of grace is given. He can say: "Let us now hear the proclamation of grace or the assurance of pardon." Repentant sinners need to hear that the kingdom is still open to them. The minister may even say: "To all those who refuse to repent and continue on in sin, I declare that the anger of God will remain on them. But to those who humble themselves and repent of their sin, I declare to them the love and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ." Such a statement is true to Jesus' gospel and it holds true in heaven. It is as though it comes from God Himself. It is opening and shutting the kingdom with the gospel key.

The ministry of the gospel can be considered faithful when this key is used regularly. The minister is to do it in his preaching, elders and deacons are to do it in their home visits, and those who teach the youth. But not only they, all the members of the church ought to do it to each other. The gospel key must also be there in evangelism and witnessing. The preaching and teaching of the gospel must regularly touch on the holiness of God and His judgment on sinners, and on the love of God through Jesus Christ to those sinners who repent and believe. It is the opening and shutting of the kingdom, just as Jesus did it.

It makes preaching of or witnessing to the gospel of Christ a wonderful task. We may actually say to sinners that as often as they repent and believe in Jesus that the blessings of the kingdom of heaven are on them. It's what Jesus would have said with the approval of His heavenly Father.

And God then judges people by their response to this gospel. And we the church must also make that clear. We must also say to sinners that for as long as they harden their hearts and keep on coming up with all kinds of excuses for not obeying God that they will perish. Jesus Himself made those statements with the authority of His Father. If we don't say this then we will be held accountable for sinners who perish. The Scripture passage from Ezekiel 33 that was read earlier about the watchman on the wall made that very clear.

To warn sinners of God's wrath without driving them away can only be done in love. When we shake our fist at sinners and harshly tell them hell is waiting for them, how will they ever hear that God has pity on sinners and wants to forgive them in Christ? The Lord Jesus shows us that He could be extremely gentle with the most hardened sinners. In fact, the nature of the sin made no difference to the opening of the kingdom as long as there is repentance. The adulterer or the murderer is given the same gracious invitation to enter the kingdom as was Nicodemus, a good Pharisee. No sin, no matter how terrible, has ever kept Jesus from preaching forgiveness. It's the unwillingness to repent and believe, and hypocrisy, that made Jesus speak of judgment.

And we must also learn from Jesus, and be guided by His Spirit, when to keep on preaching forgiveness and grace and when to stop. When to speak of judgment and when not to. But no one must be left in doubt when the door into the kingdom is either open or shut. People must clearly know where they are, in or out. It is not our task to say to people that they are in the kingdom or out of it. We must simply say that for as often as you repent and believe God forgives. And for as long as you don't repent and believe, God's anger and punishment remains on you.

There is also the discipline key. It has basically the same function. Probably the most important thing we need to remember is that the church must not discipline those who sin. Admonish, yes. But not formal discipline. As a matter of fact, to be a member of the church you even have to admit that you're a sinner. And the church's task is to help its members to fight and overcome sin. Not so long ago a minister of a church was interviewed on talkback radio about child abuse in the church. Both interviewer and minister agreed that the church must deal with the sin of child abuse in the church. Then the interviewer asked if the church will exclude from its membership all those who are known as child abusers. The minister very correctly said no to that. He said that the church was made up of all kinds of sinners and the task of the church is to help them repent and believe in Christ for forgiveness and fight sin.

Discipline is used for those who refuse to repent, who keep on defying the call to faith, who make a habit of not making good their vows to God, and who stop coming to church to worship God and hear the gospel. But even when the discipline key is used to close the door to God's kingdom, then the church must go on appealing to those unwilling to repent to return to God and to call on God for His help and mercy. For then the door of the kingdom will be gladly opened again. The discipline key is not to get rid of stubborn sinners but to save them from God's judgment.

And please note also this. Discipline is not something only the elders of the church do. The best discipline takes place at home when parents lovingly warn their children who are on the wrong path. Discipline also takes place when one Christian speaks to another who has sinned, in order to win them back to God. If there is a persistent refusal to listen, only then inform the elders. In Matthew 18 Jesus told us to do it like this because He wants those who love the gospel to not allow others to live and die quietly in sin. If you Christianly love your brother and sister in the church then you will ask for strength and courage to lovingly warn them about God's judgment.

Of course, the best way to avoid discipline, either by fellow believers or by the elders, is to constantly exercise self-discipline. That's where all discipline starts, with self. You discipline yourself when you listen and respond to God's Word rebuking you. You humble yourself before God and repent. You stop doing what the Lord says is wrong.

Finally, if someone were to say that the church does not use the discipline key as much as it did in the past, then we would have to agree. Not that frequent use of formal discipline makes for a better church. But in the days when most people in a village or town were Christian and there was only one Roman Catholic and one Protestant church, then public discipline and possible excommunication were feared much more than today. Back then church members were more careful not to commit a public sin. Sinners could not afford to be cut off from the church and to have the kingdom of heaven pronounced closed to them. It harmed your social standing in the Christian community. So there was a greater willingness to not commit public sins and to repent if one did do them.

But today's society is hardly Christian and the new tolerance has taken away the stigma of being under the discipline of the church. Not many stubborn sinners remain in their church long enough for discipline to run its course and bring about repentance. They simply resign or go to another church

There may be no solution to this kind of situation. But that does not mean that we should concern ourselves less with the discipline key. The elders have still the responsibility to begin formal discipline with church members who stubbornly keep on disobeying the Lord of the church. And we as church members can do a lot before the elders have to consider formal discipline. It is self-discipline first. And then also, with the love of Christ in our heart, go to our fellow brother or sister who has left the Christian way, and seek their spiritual wellbeing. It may turn out the way Jesus said, "*If he [or she] listens to you, you have won your brother [or sister] over.*" [Mt. 18:15]. Amen.

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