

Lord's Day 31  
**16 May 2010**

Beloved, by the exercise of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the elders not only supervise the Lord's table so that only who are worthy come to the table, but also the elders open and shut the kingdom of heaven. They open the kingdom of God to believers and shut the kingdom to unbelievers. The subject of the keys of the kingdom or Christian discipline is indeed an important subject. We live in a day where if a practices discipline, she would the odd one out amongst the thousands of es. And as a result, everyone can enter and anyone can make his exit from the according to his own pleasure and the preaching is corrupted and the holy sacrament profaned. The vow to submit to Christian discipline is broken. How often those who profess to be the people of God show a sad ignorance when they profanely withdraw themselves from that discipline when it is exercised.

Today, in this sermon we consider the following question: what are the keys of the kingdom of heaven? Who holds the key? How is this key exercised today? How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the use of these keys. What is the grand purpose of the exercise of these keys? And we derive our answers from the teaching found in Lord's Day 31, Questions and Answers 83 to 85.

The theme is the keys that open the kingdom of heaven. First, we notice the one office of the keys of the kingdom. Secondly, the opening and shutting of the kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel and finally, the opening and shutting the kingdom through discipline.

The one office that of the keys of the kingdom.

Who holds the key of the kingdom of heaven? Christ alone holds the keys. Scriptures teaches in Revelation 1.18, where Christ says, "I am he that liveth, and was dead, behold I am alive forever more, amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. In Revelation 3.7, "and to the angel of the in Philadelphia write: these things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth". From these two verses, we learnt that Christ is the only one who holds the key of the kingdom of heaven. He not only has the power and authority to open and shut that kingdom but also no one is able to resist Him. Christ by the use of the keys binds and loses. This office of binding and loosing is found in Matthew 16.19, "whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". The relative pronoun "whatsoever" does not refer to persons but to things, so Christ is not speaking of binding or losing of persons. Instead, the word "whatsoever", according to John 20.23 refers to sin. "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained". And so, by the use of the keys of the kingdom, sins are remitted or forgiven and by the use of the keys of the kingdom, sins are retained or not forgiven. Christ gives these keys to Peter in Matthew 16.19, "And I (Jesus) will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven". And so

Christ exercises these keys to the kingdom through the apostles, because Peter represents the apostles. From Matthew 16.18, the church is considered from the viewpoint of a building, a fortress, and a city with gates. That city of the church is built upon a rock and that rock is Christ. We know this from the confession of Peter when he says, "thou art Christ, the son of the living God". And Christ builds his church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophet, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, from Eph. 2.20. Christ exercises the keys not only through the apostles but also only through the church. This is taught in Matthew 18, 17, 18, when he says, "and if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee a heathen man and a publican". And the final command, "tell it to the church" cannot refer to the apostle, for they are not the church, neither can it refer to the successor but it means the whole body of believers, where it is locally manifested in the instituted congregation, through the minister and elders. Therefore, Christ exercises the keys of the kingdom through the church. What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are the preaching of the gospel and discipline and Christ gives these keys to the instituted church. Concerning the key of preaching of the gospel, Christ gives this key to the minister who has the office of preaching the gospel. Or to put in another way, Christ exercises the keys of preaching the gospel through the minister of God. How does Christ exercise the key in the preaching of the gospel? When the minister preaches the gospel according to the Word of God, Christ himself speaks! And when Christ speaks, Christ is opening and shutting the kingdom of heaven in the pulpit. In the preaching you hear Christ calling those who are labour and are heavy-laden and he alone will give you rest. He calls us to rest our souls in Christ where he will remove the burden and guilt of our sins. And it is by the preaching of the word of the gospel that the second key of discipline is exercised. Christ gave the key of discipline to the body of elders called the consistory. The subject of this Lord's Day is not mutual discipline where members exercise towards one another in love, where when your brother sins against you, you go and tell him his fault behind you and him alone, according to Matthew 18.15. Rather the subject of this Lord's day is formal or ecclesiastical discipline as exercised by the elders of the church.

And concerning the key of preaching of the gospel, how do you know that the kingdom of heaven is open to you? If the preaching of the gospel is piously received, you will know that you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. You believe the word of the gospel with all your heart, and that you are polluted by your sins: every thought, word, and deed are filled with blood because you have offended the holy God. And you realise that this corruption goes even deeper. It comes from your heart and so your heart is like the fountain which is already corrupted by a corrupt source and what comes out of it is filthy. And so, you cry out to God, "Why am I so filthy?" And the gospel reveals that you are a child of Adam and you will all the sins of Adam. And to whom can you turn for help? Ah, the blessed gospel reveals that God promises that whosoever believes in Christ, all his sins will be forgiven him and that God will no longer remember his sins and he has removed it as far as it is from the west. And God does that on the basis of the work of the cross. On the death

of the cross, Christ was our sin-bearer. He became sin for us so that we can be forgiven for all our sins, the punishment and the curse that is due unto us. And by his death, Christ also appeased the wrath of God upon our sins and therefore Christ is the satisfaction of our sins. And we receive this gospel by faith: wholehearted belief in the Word of God and therefore, I am assured that I am the true citizen of the kingdom of heaven and this kingdom is opened unto me.

Because it is Christ who speaks through the preaching and it is through him that the Word is effectual to the opening and closing of the kingdom of heaven. What is preaching? Firstly, preaching is the authoritative declaration of the promised with authority. Christ is always principally the preacher and he alone speaks with authority. This authority has been delegated to the through the apostle. To preach is to speak as a herald, as a representative of the king. Therefore, the preacher must deliver Christ's message and he must be faithful to it. He must declare with authority and say, "Thus saith the Lord. And the congregation is obligated to hear and do the Word that is preached. Secondly, preaching is the word of power and therefore, efficacious. Christ is given all power in heaven and on earth according to Matthew 28.18 and therefore, through the preaching, Christ gathers his church to speak unto his people with salvation.

He is to preach the promise of the gospel, which is in one word: Christ and all his riches of salvation and blessing. It is the promise that God will raise up a Savior out of the seed of David; that this seed shall bear the sins of His people: that God will raise Him from the dead and give him glory, exalt him on the throne of his father David, and give him the ends of the earth for his possession. And this promise implies, firstly, the assurance of righteousness, sonship, sanctification and of eternal life. And we are given the incorruptible inheritance that fades not away. Secondly, that Christ and all the elect shall be heirs of the world and inherit the new and heavenly kingdom, and dwell in God's eternal tabernacle forever. And finally, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to Christ and to them who are His people. And it is through this Spirit that all the blessings of Christ are realised upon the . In the preaching, Christ commands all men to confess their sins and repent from them. And to these alone is the promise of the gospel given the forgiveness of sins, which is the principal blessing.

And how do you know that the kingdom of heaven is closed to you? The kingdom of heaven is shut to you if you do not sincerely repent from your sins. This is the case because God is a holy God, and every sin committed by men must be severely judged by God. And therefore, the wrath of God rests upon you. And whatever you do has the stench of God's terrible judgment upon it. And hell is an open mouth waiting for you to enter in at the time of your death. And from the teaching of the opening and closing of the kingdom, there is an important teaching that we must never forget. There is always a two-fold effect to the preaching of the gospel. Unto the Jews the gospel is a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness but unto us it is the power of God. The preaching of the gospel is a savour of life unto life and a savour of death unto death. The preaching of the Word gives life to some and hardens the hearts of

others. The important thing is when you embrace this gospel the kingdom of heaven is opened to you and when you reject it the kingdom of heaven is closed to you.

Concerning discipline, how is the kingdom of heaven open and shut? Do you love one another enough to confront your brother or sister who have sinned against you? Why not? First, love for God and in turn love for your brethren will cause you to approach him. Approach him in order to save your brother, as in Matt. 18.15, I Cor. 5.5. But you do not stop there, if he is stubborn over his sin and will not repent, then love demands that you bring another brother as a witness. Remember that you do not approach him out of a proud heart that you will never fall into that sin but you come with meekness because you too can fall into the same sin, as in Gal. 6.1-2. And if he still does not repent, then you tell the church (Mat. 18.17), not to any member of the church but to the elders of the church who are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the whole church. And if he still does not repent, then through the declaration of the elders, he will be a heathen man. Secondly, notice that the only sin that is censurable is the sin of impenitence – the repeated refusal to repent. This is clear in Matthew 18, when this brother refuses to confess and repent of his sin after several brotherly admonitions. No particular sin is mentioned, not drunkenness, adultery or murder. We dare not classify sins into gross and minor. Our catechism says that those who hold doctrines and practices which are not consistent with the Word of God are objects of discipline. With these, the elders are called to labour. Their aim is to secure his repentance through admonitions based on God's Word and not based upon their own opinions. When he is put on discipline, he is barred from the table of the Lord. Out of love for the sinner who has committed the private sin, on the first step of discipline, only his sin is mentioned. And if he still persists, then his name and sin will be mentioned to the congregation. This is the second step of discipline. And if he yet persists, a date will be fixed for his excommunication and on that day he will be excommunicated. The consequence of such an excommunication is that he is cut off from the local and the universal church of God, from all fellowship with Christ and from all spiritual blessings and benefits which God promised to bestow upon the church. And therefore, he is on his way to hell, except he repents. But, there is still hope for him for he may yet repent, by the grace of God. He confesses his sins to the elders and his confession and repented life are accepted by the elders, then the church at the worship service will declare to him restored to the fellowship of God.

What is the purpose of discipline? First, it is for the wellbeing of the church. If Christian discipline is neglected then, the covenant of God is profaned and the wrath of God is kindled against the church. Secondly, for the salvation of its members. It is a solemn warning to believers in the church who are walking in sin, that if they do not repent, they too will be excommunicated and therefore, they are to take heed to the admonition. And believers are admonished to be diligent to love holy lives and obey the Word of God from their hearts. Finally, the chief purpose is always for the glory of God. The church in the world is a manifestation of God in Christ. It must show forth his glorious virtues. And therefore, it has the calling to be holy, even as he is holy. But this does not mean that there are no sins or sinners in the church visible to the world. And it

is for the glory of God that all those who do not lead such a life of repentance and sanctification are excluded from the kingdom. And it is also the glory of God that all members of the church are characterised by sorrow after God, repentance from sin, crucify the flesh and strive to walk after sanctification of life. Amen.