

Congregation, this evening I want to speak to you about the subject of keys. We live in a world that is full of keys and all sorts of keys. We have house keys. We have car keys. We have keys to get into this place of worship. We have key cards that give access to our banking finances. We have key chains. We have keys that unlock computer programs. Well this evening I want to tell you about the keys of the kingdom of heaven. These keys do what no other key can do. They give access to the kingdom of God. Or if you will, they open or close entry into heaven.

Now we speak about the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" for those words come from Mat 16:19 where Jesus gives this key to Peter right after he confessed Jesus as the Messiah. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." It also occurs elsewhere. In Mat 18:19-20; Jesus entrusts this power to the church and in John 20:23 he gives the apostles the authority to forgive and to withhold forgiveness. The power of the keys is to make authoritative declarations on earth that hold true for the judgment halls of heaven.

The keys are entrusted to the church that God is building on the cornerstone, Jesus Christ. Initially the Apostles were the first to be built on the cornerstone. They were the foundation. Now the Apostles are no longer with us, yet the church still has the keys. So that leaves us with a question, "What are these keys and what do they give us access to?" If you are a Christian today, then you are part of the church of Jesus Christ and are in the kingdom.

So the first key to be in the kingdom in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So that means, because of God's gracious work, you have come to recognize that before a holy God you are a sinner, and that the Lord Jesus Christ and his completed work at Calvary, have given you the assurance your sins are forgiven and you have eternal life. So the gospel of Jesus Christ believed is one of the keys that opens or closes entry into the kingdom, or if you like eternity. Sadly, some people will not believe in Jesus Christ for their forgiveness and without that there is no eternal life of glory and bliss in heaven. Hence the gospel key has also closed the door. In this sense, the gospel is like a double-edged sword. It can save but it can also cause people to not believe (Heb 4:12).

Now the kingdom of God began when its King, Jesus Christ came as a suffering servant and crucified criminal. And we enter God's kingdom while we are on earth, not merely when we depart this life. Matter of fact, if you do not enter while you are on earth then you will never enter after you depart. For the Bible calls on people to repent and believe now! Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts! Scripture doesn't teach about a second opportunity in purgatory, nor does the Bible teach reincarnation. The Bible teaches that we enter into the kingdom of God (heaven) this side of the grave by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So when the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen is preached or taught or spoken about and believed, that is a key that gives entrance to the kingdom of God. And you will not find that anywhere except in God's holy Word. You won't find it in the Book of Mormon, nor the Quran, nor the Watch Tower, or some other feel good theology book, nor in some mysterious Da Vinci code that some person has found elsewhere. In fact, no human being or the office they hold has the key or the power to open or close the kingdom. The key and power is in the preaching of the gospel.

So when someone comes running and says they have the key to eternal life, don't believe them - they don't; unless they coming preaching Jesus Christ crucified and risen. I emphasize this for nearly every year a new cult, extremist group, or sometimes TV evangelist claiming that it has the key to eternal life. Don't be deceived! Hold onto the Word of God! Both the Old and New Testaments speak about the good news of Jesus Christ and that He paid for our sin through his own death, and that He rose from the dead and lives victoriously at God's right hand so that we are now right with God! And God's desire is for sinners to repent and believe in His Son and be saved! That's why we hold onto God's Word and make sure it is proclaimed faithfully.

That is also why Paul told Timothy, "Guard the good deposit." (2 Tim 1:14) The good deposit is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ." For "the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." (Rom 1:16). It is the preaching of the gospel that gives access to the kingdom of God. Paul had the same thing in mind in Romans 10:14; "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" People everywhere will be judged by their response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, then the kingdom of God has been opened to you and you are in.

If you don't believe the gospel, then the key closes the door to the kingdom. The key for forgiveness, entry into the kingdom, eternal life is not based on what you may or may not have done for the powerless masses. It is not based on whether you come to worship twice, or whether you were baptized as an infant or an adult or whether you did profession of faith. The key is whether you have Jesus as Saviour and Lord of your life, and that you are fair dinkum about that and not just paying lip service! That you have believed God's Word preached and taught and spoken about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sadly, this message is not life for everyone. Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:18; **"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God!"** The cross and what Jesus did there wasn't what the Jews wanted, nor what the Greeks desired (1 Cor 1:22). It's probably not what most people in this country want to hear. Nonetheless, the cross and what Jesus accomplished there is one of the keys and the gospel calls, invites and demands that people enter.

So let us not be wishy-washy about this saving message. It's the difference between life and death! Some preachers will tell you that so long as you love God and love people then rest doesn't matter. Others never speak about sin anymore or the need for repentance. That is not the gospel. For others the gospel has become like a fishing net in which everyone is caught and no one ever drops out. That is a false gospel and very unkind. It leaves people thinking they are safe in the kingdom, when in actual fact they are on a slippery slide to eternal punishment. People must be confronted with the call the gospel makes. People need to repent from their wicked ways, and if they don't then they will perish. People need to be told plainly that Jesus died for their sin to make them right with God! And that's not bad news, that's good news.

Now much of the onus is on the preacher and his elders to make sure the whole of God's will is proclaimed. And if it isn't then they will be held to account for the blood of perishing sinners. Paul, when he was leaving the Ephesian elders could say, **"Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God"** (Acts 20:26). So that's the first key. God's word, the gospel.

The second key for entry into the Kingdom is church discipline. Now really, the preaching of the gospel and church discipline are the one thing for discipline is the gospel applied. In fact, church discipline starts with self-discipline. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out! Oh not literally, but do what you need to do so that you do not deliberately keep on sinning. So there is first an individual responsibility!

We also have a corporate responsibility. We are one body, and Christ is the head. If your brother (or sister) sins against you, go and show him his fault. That's the first thing. But be careful, examine the Scriptures and make sure they have sinned against you and it's not some hurt pride or personal bias you may have. If they keep on sinning tell the church (Mat 18). In other words, quietly speak to one or two of the elders and then together carefully examine the Scriptures to make sure what you are alleging as sinful is indeed contrary to God's word.

And after much prayer and seeking the counsel of wise Christians and the wider counsel, the elder will lovingly and gently approach this person and hopefully open the Scriptures with that person and together pray that they may be less sinful, and if there is a need to repent, change their ways. The goal of church discipline is to lovingly restore the relationship between God and this person, between Jesus Christ and this person. If the vertical relationship with God is OK, then the rest will generally fall into place.

However, when the relationship with the loving heavenly Father is not OK, it's then that we often see people stubbornly refusing to be reconciled to each other and to Jesus and the final step of church discipline is enacted. Now of course the implementation of church discipline is far more difficult than often meets the eye. Some people say the elders are far too slow, especially when sin is blatantly obvious. Others will say that Session is far too quick, for they don't see it as quite so serious.

Dear people, we are mindful of the parable of the unmerciful servant that immediately follows in Mat 18. May we not be like that! Interestingly, in today's modern church, church discipline often loses its desired effect. In the early church, when a person was cut off from the fellowship they were convinced that he or she was no longer under God's grace and handed over to Satan (1 Cor 5:1-5), for they had nowhere else to go. In today's world people often jump to another denomination who are perhaps not too concerned about past sins. Nonetheless, we should not neglect discipline. Only churches in which people don't really believe that Christ saves us from everlasting damnation neglect discipline.

Churches who take the gospel seriously don't allow each other to live and die quietly in sin. Christians who really love each other will have the courage to warn each other in love against the fires of hell. People who really care wouldn't

mind dragging one another into the kingdom, if that were possible. When the leadership of a church considers the steps of discipline, they do not do that lightly. And may I add it is a sure sign of love. Their desire, our desire is that the person or persons will repent and return to live in full obedience to God's gospel. And when that happens, there is much rejoicing. Not only here on earth and but also within Session, and certainly in heaven.

Lk 15:7; reminds us that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. So there are two keys for entry into the kingdom of God (heaven if you will.) They are the preaching of the gospel and church discipline.

Congregation, please pray for preachers that they may preach the gospel with absolute clarity. And this is the good news. "God so loved this world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Secondly, pray for sessions and elders who have to faithfully administer church discipline. Pray that we may be bold and courageous, yet merciful, not allowing anyone to live and die in their sin! Amen.