

VIDEO SERMON SERIES

Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism

by Rev. Bartel Elshout

Sermon #39, Lord's Day 31

The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

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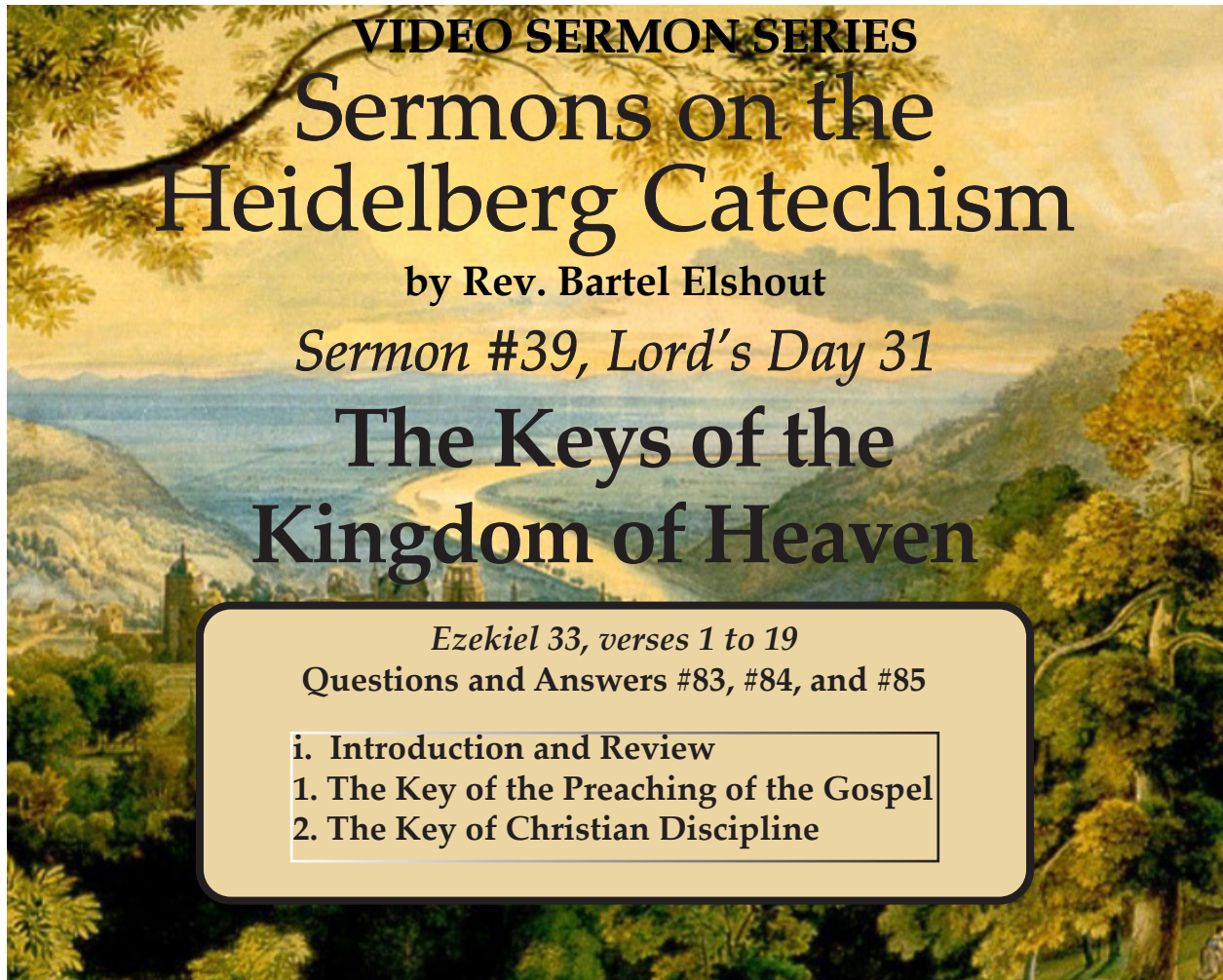
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Sermon #39, Lord's Day 31

**The Keys of the
Kingdom of Heaven**

Ezekiel 33, verses 1 to 19

Questions and Answers #83, #84, and #85

i. Introduction and Review

- 1. The Key of the Preaching of the Gospel**
- 2. The Key of Christian Discipline**

Introduction and Review

Beloved congregation, two weeks ago, we addressed the important Question, *For whom is the Lord's Supper instituted?* And we had this remarkably clear and plain Answer given to us in Question and Answer #81 of the Catechism. But there was also Question #82, and the Question is, *Are they...to be admitted to this supper, who, by confession and life, declare themselves unbelieving and ungodly?* The Answer was, *No; for by this, the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation;*—and then, this important sentence—*therefore it is the duty of the Christian church, according to the appointment of Christ and His apostles, to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven till they show amendment of life.*

And so, the point of this Question and Answer is that the Lord's Supper is sacred. It is a Holy Supper, and the church has a responsibility to protect that Table, to protect the sanctity of that Table. And therefore, those, who by life and confession, show the very opposite, who show by their life and confession that ultimately, they are unbelieving and ungodly, must be barred from that table, lest the Table be defiled. And so, in that context, it mentioned *the keys of the kingdom of heaven.* And of course, the Catechism didn't just coin an expression here, but this comes directly from the Word of God. Because it is Christ, who, in Matthew 16, specifically spoke to Peter, and through Peter, to his entire church, that he would give unto them the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 16, verse 19: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and

whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” And so, Christ was communicating to Peter, and ultimately, to his entire church, that he entrusts us with the solemn responsibility to open his kingdom and to close his kingdom, and that he gives us keys by which to do that.

And boys and girls, you’ll all understand the purpose of a key. It’s a key that opens the door into your home. And it is that key which can close that door, to protect your home, to make sure that nobody comes in your home that doesn’t belong in your home. So keys play an important role. It’s rather obvious that, when Christ used this language, that he was referring to an Old Testament event that we find in Isaiah 22. If you would, turn there with me for a moment, because that’s where we read about a key, and that’s where we read language very similar to what Christ uses here in Matthew 16, verse 19. Isaiah 22, (verse 20): “And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah.” In the verses before that, you will read about a Shebna, a Shebna who was a treasurer of the house of David (verse 15). And to this Shebna, the key of the house of David had been entrusted, and that was an enormous responsible task. When a king would entrust to a man the keys to his palace, into his kingdom, that man had a great responsibility to protect the dwelling of the king, to protect his house, to protect his kingdom. And this Shebna had been unfaithful, and now the key is going to be taken from him, and we read here that it will be given to Eliakim: “And I will clothe him”—verse 21—“with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah.” And here it comes, “And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so that he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.” And then, remarkably, in Revelation 3, verses 7 and 8, when Christ is addressing the churches in Asia Minor, he uses that exact same language. In Revelation 3, verse 7 and 8, we read as follows: “And to the angel of the church 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.”

Now this is the focus of the sermon this morning, as the Catechism, in Lord’s Day 31, the final Lord’s Day of the section that deals with deliverance, addresses the subject of *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, entrusted by Christ to his church. So let’s go to Lord’s Day 31; let’s read it in its entirety.

Question #83: *What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?*

The Answer is: *The preaching of the holy gospel, and Christian discipline, or excommunication out of the Christian church; by these two, the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.*

Question #84: *How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the holy gospel?*

Answer: *Thus: when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer; that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ’s merits; and on the contrary, when it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted;—in the original text, it actually says, “as long as they do not repent”—according to which testimony of the gospel, God will judge them both in this and in the life to come.*

Question #85: *How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline?*

The Answer: *Thus: when according to the command of Christ, those, who under the name of Christians, maintain doctrines or practices inconsistent therewith, and will not, after having*

been often brotherly admonished, renounce their errors and wicked course of life, are complained of to the church or to those who are thereunto appointed by the church; and if they despise their admonition, are by them forbidden the use of the sacraments; whereby they are excluded from the Christian church and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ; and when they promise and show real amendment, are again received as members of Christ and His church.

And so, *The Keys of God's Kingdom*, and boys and girls, this should not be difficult, the points are very simple—two keys. Remember that, and maybe your moms and dads can go over that with you at home. Two keys: the key of the gospel, *The Key of the Preaching of the Gospel*. So, as I stand before you today, I will be using that key. And secondly, *The Key of Christian Discipline*. And perhaps you noticed it as we read the Answer, is that when the Catechism talks about the key of the gospel, it talks about it positively—a key that opens and shuts. But when it talks about the key of discipline—a key that shuts and opens. And I'll explain in a moment why that is. So the two keys of the kingdom of heaven entrusted to the church. And the Puritans were fond of saying that we must see to it that we never allow those keys to grow rusty. Those keys have to be used faithfully; those keys have to be used consistently.

So the Question is asked, in #83, what are then these keys?—*the preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline*. And remarkably, they are called “the keys of God's kingdom”. Let me just briefly focus on that for a moment. So what do we mean by “the kingdom of God”? What do we mean by “the kingdom of heaven”? We need to understand that, when we talk about the kingdom of heaven, we cannot put an equal sign as with the church, as if they are one and the same. They belong together, but they're not the same. The kingdom of heaven is much larger than that. The church is the gateway into that kingdom. It is through the church that we become citizens of that kingdom. And what that phrase really emphasizes is that God's overarching goal in saving sinners, is to bring them into his kingdom.

Now, what is a kingdom? We don't live in a kingdom. In England, they still have a kingdom. In former days, there were many kingdoms. A kingdom would be a well-defined area with well-defined boundaries, in which the king would be acknowledged by the people who dwelt in that region as their sovereign; a region in which the citizens would honor that king; a region in which the citizens would obey the laws of that king. And that's the analogy that the Bible uses about God's kingdom. So God's overarching goal is to establish his kingdom here again upon earth. Before Adam and Eve sinned, the kingdom of heaven was upon earth. But when they sinned, God withdrew that kingdom from the earth. And yet, immediately he unveils the way in which he is going to reestablish that kingdom upon earth. That's why, when Jesus began his ministry, he said, “The kingdom of heaven is [now] at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

And so, it is by means of the ministry of the church, and through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, that sinners are transformed into citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And what characterizes the citizens of God's kingdom is that they love the king of that kingdom; that they desire to be subjects to that king. Psalm 110 says that God will have a willing people in the day of his power (verse 3).

And so, the church is the gateway into that kingdom. And the members of the church are the soldiers of that kingdom. The church of Jesus Christ is what we call “his militia”, his spiritual soldiers who engage in a holy warfare in the midst of this world. Because we need to realize that that kingdom is in a very hostile environment. And ever since the fall of man, ever since God announced that there would be warfare between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, ever since that day, Satan, the great deceiver, whom Jesus called “the prince of this world,” has done everything in his power to eliminate that kingdom from the face of the earth. So, in that sense,

God's kingdom here on earth is in a very hostile environment.

And that's why God has entrusted to his servants, the office-bearers, the sacred responsibility to protect his kingdom, to be on guard against the ever, ever present danger, the reality that Satan will do everything he can to make sure that the gates of hell *will* ultimately prevail against the kingdom of heaven. And that's why we have such a solemn responsibility to make sure that we, through the ministry entrusted to us, that we engage faithfully in the task of using those keys correctly, lest through our negligence, lest through our failure, the church becomes corrupted, and ultimately, we would allow the kingdom of this world invade the church of Jesus Christ, and thereby, corrupt her, and ultimately destroy her.

So, first of all, then, *The Key of the Kingdom of the Gospel*. And it's so remarkable that it says here that *the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and it is shut against unbelievers*. And so, here, the Catechism uses the biblical distinction—the distinction that we need to emphasize, the distinction that we find all through the Old Testament. We are rather accustomed, also in our tradition, to distinguish between converted and unconverted people. And in itself, there's nothing wrong with that distinction. But I think it's, the biblical emphasis, the emphasis of our Confessions, and the emphasis of this Lord's Day is the distinction between believers and unbelievers. Because that's how God views us; that's how God views us today. And God knows with absolute perfection who among us are believers, and who are still unbelievers. Because, you see, that phraseology puts the right focus on this entire situation. Because our ultimate state, by nature, is that we are unbelievers. To be an unbeliever means that we do not believe what God has said. To be an unbeliever means that we set aside his Word. Worse than that, to be an unbeliever means that we treat God as a liar. That's why unbelief is so profoundly offensive. That's why it provokes God to the very core of his being. As I've said here before, our unconverted state, to be an unconverted person simply means that I'm still an unbeliever. And because I'm an unbeliever, that means I still manage to ignore what God is saying. To be an unbeliever, it means that, ultimately, I refuse to heed his Word. I refuse to turn to him. That's why we should be careful to not say too quickly, "I'm unconverted," because when you say that, you are indicting yourself. You are saying, "I still manage, stubbornly, to ignore what God is saying, stubbornly to ignore his Word."

And as you now, the language of Scripture is clear on this. Matthew 16, verse 16: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; and he that believeth not shall be damned"—so the clear distinction between believing and not believing. John 3, verse 18: "He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." And then John 3:36, the powerful conclusion of the ministry of John the Baptist, the bottom line of his ministry: "He that believeth on the Son have everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

And so, that is the calling of the church. The calling of the church is to make sure that that distinction remains very clear; that that distinction is maintained in a biblical way. And we are to use the keys of God's kingdom to open the door to believers, and to close the door to unbelievers. Now, as you have seen, of course, two keys are mentioned. And so, the first key, namely, the key of the preaching of the gospel, deals with the heart of the Christian. And so, that's done through the preaching. The preaching of God's Word is aimed at your and my heart. That's why we are called to preach faithfully, to discriminate in our preaching who are believers, who are unbelievers. So that key is aimed at the heart of the Christian.

But if that key fails to do its work, and if there are those who profess the name of Christ, and yet, by their life, demonstrate the contrary, and who are guilty of offensive behavior that is causing

offense in the church of Christ, either by what they falsely teach, or by their ungodly life, then we must deal, we must use the second key of God's kingdom. So, if the first key fails, we have to use the second key. Now, when it comes to the heart of men, obviously, we cannot judge the heart of man. I cannot judge your heart; you cannot judge me heart. What the church can do, and must do, is judge you by your walk. And so, when that second key is used, the focus is on the walk of that individual. And if that walk contradicts what he professes, then the church must shut the kingdom of heaven to that person, and not open it again until he shows evidence of genuine repentance.

And so, these keys have to function in tandem. They must both be used faithfully, including the key of discipline. I've expressed that to all of my elders throughout my ministry, that we must never hesitate to use the keys that Christ has literally put in our hands, including the key of Christian discipline.

So, then let's focus on,

1. The Key of the Preaching of the Gospel

And the language of Answer #84 is so beautiful, so profound, so crystal clear, *Thus*. What does it mean? What does it mean when the preaching of the gospel, what does it mean when we open the kingdom of God, when we set before the congregation that wide open door of the gospel? *Thus: when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ's merits.*

Do you notice again how the Catechism here captures the essential truths of the gospel, of the glad tidings of the gospel, the essential truth that when a poor and needy sinner puts his trust in Christ, that God grants to that sinner the full and free pardon of every sin. And the language here is very clear, that this is not merely the privilege of some believers. No, we are to proclaim that his is the privilege of all believers. It is to be *declared and publicly testified to all and every believer*. It has to be testified to young believers. It has to be testified to older believers. It has to be testified to struggling believers. It has to be testified to assured believers. But to all and every believer that whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by true faith, whenever they embrace that promise that is set forth in the preaching of the gospel, whenever we embrace that by faith, that we have to assure you that that simple act of faith secures for you the forgiveness of sins—not just once, but over and over again. Of course, there is that initial moment in the life of a sinner, when, for the very first time we put our trust in Christ; when, for the very first time we touch the hem of his garment; that very first exercise of faith, as feeble as it may be, that already secures the full and free pardon of all of our sins.

But believers need to hear the promise of the gospel over and over again, because sin remains a painful reality in the life of the believer until our dying day. And so, that's why we need to come to God's house Lord's Day after Lord's Day. That's why we need to hear the gospel over and over again. That's why it has to be preached to us over and over again, that we must give heed to the loving invitation of the Savior, who says to us again and again, "Come unto me. Come unto me without hesitation. Come unto me at once. Come unto me, the willing, able, and suitable Savior, and I will in no wise cast you out." And so, we need to preach, we need to preach the promise of the gospel. That's my calling to unpack that promise in every conceivable way, to make sure that you understand the very essence of that promise, the content of that promise, and to, time and again, reassure the people of God, to reassure believers that this is real, that his promise is real.

And why is it that we have to repeat that over and over again? It's because the gospel runs directly contrary to our natural way of thinking. Time and again, we have to be corrected. Time

and again, we need to be redirected to look at Christ. Time and again, we need to be encouraged to trust in him, to rest in him, and his finished work. And it's crystal clear from the language of the Catechism that they understood that God wants his children to know this. He wants his children to be assured of this. He wants them to understand that he is a God ready to forgive seventy times seven times. He wants his children to live in the joy of that salvation. And that's why we have a sacred calling to bring God's Word faithfully, to make sure that we open that door widely; that we proclaim to any sinner in the congregation; that if you, no matter how you have sinned, no matter how long you have resisted God, no matter how deep you have sunk, that if you believe in this Christ, he will not cast you out, but you too will obtain the pardon of sins. And in that since, in Christ, the door of the kingdom is wide open. A door that no man can shut.

And of course, the basis for it all is the merits of Christ; foundational statement, *for the sake of Christ's merits*. Because Christ has done it all. That's why Paul could say so boldly, in Romans 8, "If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, [would] he not with him...give us all things?" (verses 31–32). That's the gospel, you see. That's the gospel we are called to proclaim.

However, there's a negative side. In the faithful preaching of the gospel, we also have to shut the door, we have to shut the door to unbelievers. *On the contrary, when it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent*. So, it's talking about presumptive believers, who presume to be believers, who want to be viewed as believers, but who don't live like believers, who do not sincerely repent; in whose life there is not a sincere turning away from sin. We must declare to them, again, as commanded by Christ, *that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted*. The Dutch rendering of the Catechism says that the wrath of God rests on them, and that they are subject to eternal condemnation as long as they are unconverted. And again, I think the Dutch rendering is more correct, more in line with the German original, "As long as they do not repent." Because that language puts the responsibility squarely on the unbeliever—"as long as they do not repent."

And what a sacred responsibility that is for a preacher of the gospel, is that, at the appropriate time, we must also speak about the wrath of God. We must emphasize to the unbeliever, as long as you continue in your sin; as long as you turn a deaf ear to God; as long as you ignore him; as long as you reject his Son, you are exposed to the wrath of God. The wrath of God abides on you, we read in John 3, verse 36. Congregation, that's a very serious thing. And that's why the passage in Ezekiel 33 is so important. God said to Ezekiel, You must warn them in my name. You must warn the unrepentant, you must warn the unbeliever, that my wrath abides on them. Congregation, I cannot think of anything worse imaginable than to have God's wrath abide on you. And if you still are an unbeliever, that simply means that the sword of justice hangs right above your head, and at any moment, that sword can do its work and cut you off out of the land of the living. That's why God said to Ezekiel, If you see the sword coming, and you warn the people, and they ignore you, their blood will be upon their own head. But if you see the sword coming, and you do not warn them in my name, they will die in their sins, but I will require their blood from your hands (Ezekiel 3:18–19). That's what makes our task, as ministers of the gospel, so very, very serious. To be able to say with the Apostle Paul to the Ephesian elders, in Acts 20, "I am free from the blood of all men" (verse 26). You may know that, at times, that weighs me down greatly. I ask myself, Am I faithfully divining the Word of truth? Am I faithfully using the key of God's kingdom in opening and in shutting it?

So I ask you, even at this moment, does the gospel include you? or does it exclude you tonight? Does it open the door for you? or does it shut the door for you? Oh, to fall into the hands of the

living God is a very serious thing. The Bible calls it a “fearful thing” (Hebrews 10:31). We receive some glimpses in the Word about what that will be when Christ will come again glory.

So when, *according to which testimony of the gospel*,—the Catechism says—*God will judge them both in this and in the life to come*. Notice what it says here, not just according to the law, but *according to which testimony of the gospel*. You see, we’re talking about living under the gospel, living under the preaching of that gospel, to be in the house of God, where that kingdom is opened and shut, where that key is used. Turn with me to John 12, a very important passage in this connection. I’ve quoted it before, but I want to do it again. John 12, verses 47 and 48, that underscores what the Catechism is saying here. Here, Christ says, verse 47: “And if any man hear my words”—as you are now today, right now—“and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” And here’s comes the phrase: “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.” Here we have the very essence of unbelief—“He that rejecteth me.” That’s it. In the gospel, Christ is preached to us; Christ is set before us; Christ is offered to us in the gospel, without money and without price. And Christ is saying, “If you reject me, if you reject me, in that day, you will be judged by the very word that I have spoken; the very gospel in which an open door was set before you; the very gospel in which I proffered peace and pardon; that very gospel will then condemn you.” God forbid that that will be true for any of us.

Turn with me to 2 Thessalonians 1, verses 8 and 9, another very solemn passage. And there, the Apostle says, about Christ, “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God,”—and here comes the damning phrase—“and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This deals, once and for all, with the whole notion that when I’m unconverted, I am ultimately a helpless creature. No, we are not. We are, by nature, unbelievers. That means we disobey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. “He that believeth not,” in John 3—actually, in Greek, it says, “He that refuses to be persuaded.” That’s our sin. By nature, we refuse to be persuaded. “Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1, verse 9).

2. The Key of Christian Discipline

Now, we need to move on to the second key of the kingdom. How is the kingdom shut and opened?—the reverse. So the key of the gospel, in the first place it’s designed to open, and it will shut. But its focus is positive. But the key of discipline is negative. Its primary goal is to shut, and to open again, if there is genuine repentance. Thus, so when the first key fails, and the preaching of the gospel fails to have its desired effects: (Question #85) *Thus: when according to the command of Christ, those, who under the name of Christians, maintain doctrines or practices inconsistent therewith.*

So, it simply means that if somebody would openly and publicly contradict the Word of God, and begin to teach things that are clearly, clearly contrary to Scripture, and thereby causing offense, posing a danger to the congregation, then, the watchmen of Zion, the elders and deacons, the office-bearers have the duty to deal with this public sin. In one of my congregations, I had a man who openly began to propose the idea that, as Christians, we’re no longer bound by the 4th Commandment, so that, as Christians, it’s perfectly all right to work on Sunday; we’re not guilty of transgressing the 4th Commandment. And he began to very, very openly and publicly began to proclaim this heresy in the midst of my congregation. We had to deal with it. Fortunately, we were able to reason with this man, and he repented, and that was the end of the story.

But then, of course, there is also sinful life practices. Now, I know we are all sinners, but we’re

talking about sin that causes public offense; sins whereby the name of God is publicly dishonored in the midst of the congregation. And if we then don't use the key of discipline, we are allowing that sin actually to fester in the congregation, like a cancer. You know the well-known saying that one rotten apple spoils the barrel. So if we're going to save the barrel, we have to remove the rotten apple.

Boys and girls, you know the story of Achan. The sin of one man brought God's judgment upon the entire congregation, and God's favor did not return until Achan was removed (Joshua chapter 7). And so, when there is public sin, when there is public transgression, then we, as office-bearers, we are obligated with a solemn and sacred obligation to use the second key of the kingdom, the key of discipline. Now, it needs to be understood, however, that this key is not what I call a judicial key. In other words, the purpose of this key is not to punish. But the real purpose of this key is ultimately the salvation of the one upon whom we are using that key. And so, the whole purpose of Christian discipline, is not to get rid of people, but ultimately to preserve the sinner who is gone astray. So, the purpose of Christian discipline, the purpose of that second key of the kingdom is what we call *remedial*, or *medicinal*. The goal is to bring healing and to bring restoration. And thanks be to God, that there are those cases where it had the desired effect.

I know of a case of a man that I know well, who was very guilty of grievous public sin, and as a result, the church had to use what is called "the extreme remedy." They had to excommunicate him. And you know, God used that for the salvation of that man. Amazingly, he never stopped coming to church. It took several years, and during that period, God worked powerfully in the heart of that man, and the transformation was so obvious, and was so remarkable, that the church was able to embrace him with both arms, and bring him back into the flock, and to reinstate him. That's why it's called "the extreme remedy."

I've also had the sad experience once in the ministry, where we had to excommunicate a man after much brotherly admonishment, after many tears shed, after much pleading with the individual to break with sin, and it was all to no avail. We finally, finally had to proceed with excommunicating him from the church. It's like removing cancerous growth from the body, lest that cancer infect the entire body. That's why, when people have cancer, often radical surgery has to be done. Entire limbs have to be removed, because the goal is to preserve the body. That's the purpose of church discipline. We have a responsibility as office-bearers to make sure that we do not allow the cancer of sin to invade the entire body.

But it should always be done as an exercise of love. In other words, especially when it comes to church discipline, an older minister years ago said to me once, he said, "In church life, we're never in a hurry." And that means that when we exercise that key, we have to do it with love, and with patience, with brotherly admonition, with weeping, with tears, trying to persuade the sinner to break with that particular sin.

But you know, congregation, it's not only the responsibility of us as office-bearers, ultimately, it is the responsibility of the entire congregation. We all have what we call "the office of all believers." And that's where Matthew 18 comes into the picture. You well know that passage in Matthew 18, where Christ says, "Moreover,"—turn there with me, let's read that passage together, verses 15 through 17. "Moreover," Christ says, "if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church."

Congregation, this simple prescription of Christ is so often violated. So Christ is saying, when your brother has trespassed against you, rather than talking about him, you are to talk to him, but

you are to talk to him with your hand in your own bosom. You are to talk to him as a fellow sinner in a spirit of love and humility, and your goal is to gain that brother. If that fails, out of love, you bring with you two or three witnesses. If that fails, you then finally bring it to the attention of the church, to the office-bearers. And congregation, if this were observed more faithfully, what a blessing that would have been throughout church history. But this gets transgressed so often and so very, very frequently.

And so, here, this passage really puts to the test how much we love our fellow brothers and sisters in the church. And of course, there is another passage, in Galatians 6, that governs the manner in which we are to approach such a person. Let's go there for a moment, Galatians 6, verse 1. There we read God's Word as follows: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness;"—and here comes the key phrase—"considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." So, "considering thyself," that means you are to approach a brother or sister in the spirit of humility, always remembering who you are and remain in yourself. That's what I meant when I said, you go there with your hand in your very own bosom. *And if they despise their admonition, then they are by them*—by the office-bearers, they are *forbidden the use of the sacraments*. "But if [they] neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (Matthew 18:17).

And so, in our Church Order, we have an orderly procedure in which this happens. We basically have three steps. The first step is that it is announced to the congregation, a brother or sister is living in sin—no name is mentioned—and the congregation is admonished to pray for the individual, pray for the repentance of that person. If that fails, after many brotherly admonitions, follows the second step. Now the name is mentioned, not to satisfy your curiosity, but now to pray for this person by name, and as an exercise of brotherly love, to approach that person in love—now we know who it is—and try to persuade that person to break with that particular sin. If that fails, then would come the final remedy, the extreme remedy, where someone is excommunicated from the church, excluded from the church, and thus, it says here, *by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ*. And this is very scriptural; 2 Thessalonians 3, verse 14: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed."

But also, in reverse, is, "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23). So what this is simply emphasizing is, this is serious business. So when we use the key of discipline, that's what John 20 is saying, when we are shutting that door in God's name, to protect his church, to protect his kingdom, we are excluding that person from the kingdom of heaven. That does not mean that the way back is not always open, but what that does mean is that if the excommunicated person perseveres in his sin, and dies in his sin, that person will be lost. Because the refusal to repent would only demonstrate that there was no real grace within that person in the very first place. That's why, when we had to excommunicate someone in my first congregation, the sad part of it is that, to my knowledge, that man has never repented of that public transgression.

The other example I used, to the joy of the congregation, it was very evident that God used that extreme remedy to bring the sinner back to himself. And so, it says, *And when they promise and show real amendment, are again received as members of Christ and His church*. Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 2, verses 6 to 8, as we wrap this up. And there, we read: "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many"—this remedial punishment, like the punishment of a father of his children. "So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore"—and here comes the bottom line—"Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him." And

that's how it is, of course, that even if we have to use the extreme remedy, we will continue to love that sinner, we will continue to pray for that sinner, longing for the return of that sinner.

And so, we have considered the two keys of God's kingdom: the key of the gospel that opens and shuts; the key of discipline that shuts and opens. Congregation, may God give us the grace to use those keys faithfully. Pray for us, as your office-bearers, as the watchmen on the walls of Zion, that we will use those keys faithfully, that we will not allow those keys to grow rusty. And what an extraordinary blessing it is that until this day, we have not yet had to use the key of discipline. It is our hope and prayer that it may continue to be so. Because again, if we fail to use those keys, we are disobedient to the command of Christ. That's why the Answer of the Catechism emphasizes both times that it is Christ who has commanded the use of those keys. And so, may God bless us as a congregation, and may the faithful use of those keys result in the coming of God's kingdom, even by means of our congregation. Amen.

Let's pray.

Our faithful God and Father, we thank thee for the time we could be in thy house today, and to hear what thy Word has to say about those two essential keys given by Christ to his church. And Lord, we pray fervently that also we, as a congregation, may be committed to the faithful use of those keys. And enable me, as thy servant, to use the key of the gospel to open and shut; to open it to believers, to shut it to unbelievers; but also, as elders, we would not hesitate to use the key of discipline, should that prove to be necessary. And so, Lord, bless us, and go with us as we go homeward, and bring us here again in this evening hour. And forgive all that was done and said in us, both hearing and in speaking, we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.