

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:13-20, Revised Standard Version.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give unto 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." Then he strictly charged his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

I am he that liveth and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore,
 Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

Jesus by his death and resurrection opened certain doors -- the doors of hell and of death -- so that those who were waiting there without hope could in due time come forth to immortal life. By vanquishing the powers of death, he proved his possession of the keys of death and of hell. He has set before all men an open door, which no man can shut; but because of ignorance, pride, sin, or rebellion, men may refuse to go through it. There still need to be keys which will unlock the kingdom to those who now live in sin, in pride, in ignorance, in rebellion. What are the keys of the kingdom? Who has them? And for what are they to be used?

A key is something which unlocks or opens. A key makes available that which is behind the closed, locked door. It will probably help in our understanding of this passage if we remember that in the oriental household with which Jesus and his followers were familiar, the steward or head servant of a household was his master's trusted and authorized personal representative. It was this steward who carried all the keys of the household -- not only the key to the front door, but the keys to all the cupboard pantries, supply rooms, and treasure chests as well. It is significant, I believe, that Jesus did not give to Peter or to anyone else the key (singular) of the kingdom, but the keys, (plural). Too often we assume that there is only one key -- the key to the front door of the kingdom. We shall come nearer to Jesus' true meaning, I believe if we think of him as giving the household keys to the stewards over the household of God.

The possession of these keys does not confer upon those who hold them special privilege, but special and inescapable obligation to see that the resources, the spiritual food and drink, the spiritual treasures, the spiritual opportunities which are so desperately needed by the men and women who are sons and daughters in the household of God, should be made available freely to them. He who bears the keys has authority, but he has no claim to special privilege. He used the keys not to keep the resources of the kingdom away from those who need them, but to match those resources against human need, at whatever cost to his own convenience.

Peter was not the only one to possess the keys of the kingdom. The 16th chapter of Matthew gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, and power to bind and loose on earth; the 18th chapter and the 18th verse give that same power to all the apostles. "Bind" and "Loose" in the vernacular of the rabbis meant to "forbid," or to "allow." There are several examples in the New Testament of how the apostles and others rendered decisions forbidding or allowing certain things in the church, using their keys to open or shut the doors involved in each case.

The keys of the kingdom are keys of authority, of priesthood. Not everyone has authority to open the door of the kingdom, or to open the doors to the resources within the kingdom. The 19th chapter of Acts, verses 1 through 7, gives the story of how Paul in his travels came upon certain converts in Ephesus for whom someone had tried to open the door of the kingdom. Paul inquired of them as to whether they had received the life of the kingdom -- the Holy Ghost. They replied, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost." Someone had pretended to open the door for them and had failed. Since the one who had previously baptized them had no authority, that ordinance had not unlocked for them the door which gave them access to this special gift of the Holy Spirit as an abiding Comforter. Those who sought the kingdom were not being properly ministered to or fed from the storehouse of the kingdom. Paul therefore found it necessary to baptize them again with authority, and to lay hands on them. Then the door was opened. The keys of his authority prevailed, and these Ephesians converts received the Holy Ghost.

No man can come into the kingdom loaded down with sins. His sins must be cancelled out, forgiven. How are sins forgiven? The atonement of Jesus of course makes such forgiveness possible, but that forgiveness is not available to the man who continues in stubborn and wilful rebellion. Peter was offering to use the keys of the kingdom in behalf of the men of Jerusalem when he exhorted them on the day of Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." He was offering remission and forgiveness of sins, by the grace of God, on conditions of repentance, restitution and reconciliation, and obedience to the ordinances of baptism and the laying on of hands. Jesus had said that men must be born again -- born of water and of the Spirit -- or they could not see the kingdom. Authority from God was and is essential if these ordinances are to be binding upon God, and efficacious for those seeking entrance to the kingdom. Only priesthood authority can open the door of forgiveness of sins, can open the door of the kingdom, can make available all the gifts and blessings and facilities for spiritual growth and nourishment which the kingdom affords.

In the free and easy atmosphere of Protestantism, it has become popular to believe that priesthood authority is unimportant, non-essential, or even non-existent. It is often taught that all one has to do to obtain full forgiveness of sin is to confess the name of Jesus. If anyone who took a notion could walk into the kingdom of heaven on any terms he chose, why did Jesus say to Peter: "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"? Why did he extend this authority in Matthew 18:18 to all the apostles? Why did he say to the disciples, according to John 20:23, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained"? These verses seem to us to indicate that priesthood authority is necessary to open the doors of forgiveness. Priesthood authority bears the keys of the kingdom.

Another key to the kingdom is the key of knowledge. When certain men have knowledge which will open doors of opportunity to others, but refuse to use that key, they are most reprehensible. The Scribes and Pharisees had such knowledge -- at least in part. They were the guardians and interpreters of the Scriptures; they had certain keys to the resources and riches of the kingdom. But in condemning them Jesus said: "Woe unto you scribes, and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in." "Woe unto you lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering ye hindered."

The apostles, and even lesser ministers, by authority of their priesthood, had the keys which opened the door to the kingdom to peoples and nations. Ananias, who was not an apostle, opened the door of the kingdom to Saul, or Paul. (Acts 9:10-22) Paul opened the door of the kingdom to a deputy named Sergius Paulus and his friend Elymas, the sorcerer. Sergius believed and entered the open door; Elymas scoffed and remained outside. (Acts 13:6-12) Acts 14:27 sums up one of Paul's missionary journeys by saying that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

There are many doors of the kingdom which can be opened by men who have the keys of priesthood authority, of wisdom, of knowledge, of skill, of training and preparation. The steward of the household not only has the keys to the front door, but the keys to all the treasures and stores and facilities within the household. The keys of the kingdom are not one, but many. They are in the possession of those who have been called and commissioned as stewards over the house of God. These stewards must be the servants of all, feeding the household of God in meekness, in humility, in self-forgetfulness, and in love.