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THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM



by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The central theme of the message of Jesus was the kingdom of heaven. He began His preaching proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The theme of His parables was the kingdom. It is important then to find out what our Lord meant when He spoke about the kingdom of Heaven. The first thing to note is that the word heaven was simply a reverential way of referring to God. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of God. This is clear if you compare together Matthew 19 verses 23 and 24, or if you compare those two verses with their parallels in Mark 10:23 and Luke 18:24. From these passages as well as from others it will be seen that the phrase kingdom of heaven means kingdom of God. It is Matthew who uses the first phrase; the other gospels use the more direct phrase, the kingdom of God.

The second thing to note is the meaning of the word 'kingdom'. In modern English it always refers to a place, that is a territory, but in the Hebrew and the Greek, the languages of the Bible, kingdom

does not mean a place but the activity of kingly rule. We ought not then to identify the kingdom of God with the church.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of Heaven He was referring to God's sovereignty and kingly rule as exercised in the universe. We see then that Jesus took as the subject matter of His teaching the way God rules and governs. This is a theme of great importance, and it has some features about it which are extraordinary to our way of thinking. For example, whoever would have thought that God's kingly rule was exercised through allowing Christ to be crucified at the hands of wicked men. No wonder the disciples were mystified when they first heard that this was God's way of ruling, and yet how wonderfully the event has already justified God's way of ruling through the victory over sin at Calvary; and it will become plainer still in the future when Christ comes in His glory. This will be the final justification and manifestation of God's rule.

Because of its importance and because of its unusual features, we

are not surprised that Jesus should have taken as the chief theme of His ministry the kingly rule of God. Many of His parables illustrate the way God exercises His sovereignty in the world. Thus in Matthew chapter 13 there are several parables which begin "The kingdom of heaven is like", which means "the way that God exercises His sovereignty and governs the world has the following features". Thus Jesus taught that God's way of ruling is like a grain of mustard seed which is hardly noticeable in its beginnings, but grows and grows, till it becomes quite a tree; or again, it is like a net cast into the sea into which good and bad fishes are collected. The separation and assessment only comes at the end.

Not only was the way God exercises His kingly rule the main theme of our Lord's teaching ministry, but it was also the subject of the preaching of the apostles. This is an important although not always noticed point. For example, when St. Paul summed up his three year ministry at Ephesus in Acts 20 verse 25 he described it as "preaching the king-

dom; and in Acts 28:30,31 the same phrase is used to describe his activity at Rome. Now we know that St. Paul was a missionary of the Christian gospel and we know from his letters what the content of his preaching was, namely that Christ died for our sins and rose again the third day (I Cor. 15:1-11). Again St. Paul tells us he preached the Messiah crucified. This message may equally be described as the gospel of the grace of God, as it is described in Acts 20:25, or the gospel of the kingdom, as in the next verse, or it may be called "the things of the kingdom of God" or "the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ" as St. Luke puts the matter in Acts 28:23 and 31. Thus we see that to preach the kingdom is to preach the gospel, because the gospel is the good news about the kingdom of God, that is, about the kingly rule which He exercised pre-eminently when He overcame sin and Satan through the cross of Christ. The gospel of the cross is the gospel of the kingdom; not that Calvary is an isolated event, but rather is the centre of God's sovereign rule. God's kingdom or rule through Christ still continues, as

we read in I Corinthians 15 "Christ must reign till all things are put in subjection under Him". The gospel of God's kingdom not only looks back to Calvary but embraces the present and looks forward to the future coming of Christ when His kingly rule and sovereignty will be complete and manifest to all.

One of the most interesting statements that Jesus made about the kingdom of God was when He said to Peter (who had just acknowledged Christ's Messiahship), "Blessed art thou Simon Bar-Jonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shalt be bound in heaven and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". (Matt. 16: 16-19). What are the keys of God's kingly rule which our Lord here entrusts to Peter? It may be

that Jesus is referring to the preaching of the gospel, for as we have seen, the preaching of the Kingdom and the preaching of the gospel is the same. Certainly Peter took the lead in this; on the day of Pentecost he was the preacher of the first Christian sermon to the Jewish people, and in the house of Cornelius he was also the preacher of the first Christian sermon to the Gentiles. It may well be that the keys of the kingdom refer to this opening of the door of the knowledge of God and of His kingly rule, which Peter was privileged to be the first to preach. We have seen from the New Testament that to preach Christ crucified is to preach the kingdom of God, so that the keys of the kingdom which Peter was given may well refer to this pre-eminence that history shows Peter had in the preaching of the gospel.

However, I think the meaning of the keys of the kingdom in this famous verse is a little more general than a reference to any specific historical incidents in Peter's life. In Luke 11:52 Jesus said that the Jewish students

of the Old Testament had the key of knowledge but which by their erroneous understanding and teaching about the Old Testament they refused to use. In parallel to this, to possess the keys of the kingdom of heaven would mean to possess a knowledge of the principles according to which God exercises His sovereignty and kingly rule. Now it is true that to Peter and to all Christ's disciples was this gracious knowledge given. A short time previously Jesus had said (Matthew 11:25) "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes: yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight". Now in His words to Peter Jesus acknowledged once again that it was His Heavenly Father who had revealed this marvellous knowledge to the apostles. Flesh and blood had not revealed it to Peter but God Himself. So then, the keys of the kingdom would mean the knowledge of the kingdom, that is the knowledge of the mind of God and of the way He exercises His rule. This interpretation of the meaning of the keys of the kingdom

is confirmed by the sentence that follows, where Jesus says "Whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". A man is only able to act in a way which heaven endorses when he has been given a knowledge of the heavenly way of doing things, that is if he has been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Two chapters later in Matthew 18 Jesus repeats the same promise to all the disciples, "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. Here "Binding and loosing" and prayer are associated together in the same promise, namely that on which Christians agree on earth will be ratified in heaven. This is because they act in preaching and prayer in accordance with the mind of God which He has made known to them. He has given them the keys of the kingdom of heaven and so God is able to ratify their message and their prayers.

It is a remarkable and humbling truth that God has revealed to us His mind. In the scripture we have an infallible and inspired word of God permanently recorded, and equally important, we have in the gift of God's Spirit within us a mind able to interpret aright the written scriptures. As St. Paul says in I Corinthians 2:10, God has revealed His hidden ways to us through the Spirit, and in verse 16 St. Paul adds that we know the mind of the Lord, for we have the mind of Christ through His Spirit. To Christians it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

The Roman Catholic church in modern times has made much of our Lord's promise to Peter, in order to support the claim of the pope to exercise jurisdiction over all Christians and to define infallibly Christian doctrine. Quite apart from the fact that it is not possible to establish any relationship between any personal authority that Peter may himself have had and the question of whether he had any successors in this authority, Roman Catholic theology makes two

important mistakes with regard to the meaning of the verse itself. Firstly, it overlooks the fact that in Greek and in Hebrew kingdom means kingly rule, so that the kingdom of heaven is identified with the church as a sphere in which jurisdiction is exercised. But as we have seen, in the Bible kingdom of heaven does not mean a place, but the active rule of God which He exercises on earth, both in the present and in the future. Secondly, Roman Catholic theology takes the word keys to mean authority and jurisdiction, as though Peter were given authority over his fellow Christians, though this is a concept which is not reflected in the New Testament or in the early church.

It is better to take 'keys' to mean knowledge. All Christians have been given a knowledge of the mind of God. St. John says this explicitly in I John 2:20. But we haven't been given authority over one another. St. Paul expressly denies that he has any authority over the faith of his converts (2 Cor.1:24). But we have been

given the keys of the kingdom of heaven, so that we might use this supernatural knowledge for the benefit of our fellows by teaching and exhorting. This is of course particularly the work of the Christian ministry and so Christ's promise is especially applicable to apostles and ministers. But the Christian ministry is also the work of every Christian, for the promise is to all. We have all been given that most remarkable and gracious gift, the knowledge of the mind of God, which He has given to all of us in His word in scripture and through the Holy Spirit who is God Himself, interpreting that word to us, and teaching us its meaning, as we remain within the Christian fellowship, the fellowship of the Spirit. It is our duty to grow in this knowledge by reading the scripture prayerfully, just as it is the duty of the minister to give himself to expounding the scriptures that his hearers may really grow in the knowledge of God.

14 February 1965.