

DEVOTIONAL AID FOR 7 DECEMBER 2020 – 13 DECEMBER 2020



**UPPER
HUNTER**
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dear church family,

“The Keys of the Kingdom” might sound like something that comes out in Indiana Jones movies. But Jesus mentioned it first in Matthew 16:19: “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.” Kevin DeYoung helps us to see that this imagery is connected to another biblical imagery about the kingdom of heaven: Entrance to the kingdom of heaven is through the narrow door (Luke 13:24).¹

But what are the keys of the kingdom that opens and closes the door? The Heidelberg Catechism mentions two keys: preaching of the gospel and the Christian (church) discipline. How so?

By preaching the gospel, we are telling people God’s promise of forgiveness to all who repent and trust Jesus. The gospel of Jesus tells us that, no matter what one has done, no matter what background, God would forgive all their sins if they trust and submit to Jesus. This is the gospel opening the gates of heaven to all people. Yet, the same gospel also proclaims that all who do not come to Jesus, all who do not submit to Jesus as their king will face God’s judgment. This is the gospel closing the gates of heaven to all who are unrepentant and unbelieving. Our hope and aim in preaching the gospel is, of course, for people to receive the gospel, repent and believe, and enter the kingdom of heaven. However, we must also remember that every time we preach this gospel, we are also declaring that there will be consequences in rejecting the gospel. Without repentance and faith, they will face God’s judgment.

Likewise, the Christian discipline is to exclude those unrepentant and unbelieving from the Christian fellowship. This is not a call to exclude our non-Christian friends and neighbours from visiting our churches. Rather, this is aimed at self-professing Christians whose beliefs and actions do not match the gospel. For example, when someone – let’s call him Bob – claims to be a Christian but he does not believe Jesus was both truly man and truly God, the church must help him to understand and believe the real Jesus. If Bob accepts the church’s teaching, then all is well. But if he persists in his wrong beliefs after patient and careful teaching has been given, then the church must conclude that that Bob is not a Christian, despite what he says about himself. Similarly, if Bob’s conduct is not in line with Christ’s teaching and example, the church must help him. If he continues to reject Christ’s teaching on morality and Christian character, the church must conclude that Bob isn’t a Christian, or at least put him outside our fellowship to make him realise how serious his offences are. It is important to note that this isn’t about someone “struggling with sin”. If someone is fighting a sin, trying his hardest to avoid the sin, although he falls into it time to time, that is different. That’s a real Christian engaged in a spiritual battle. The fact that he is struggling is most likely an indication that there is a real spiritual life in him. But a spiritually dead will not struggle. He will accept sin as normal, even using the gospel as a cover for his wrong doings: “All my sins are forgiven, so I don’t need to worry about my sins, neither do you!” In this case, the church must discipline the man by excluding him from the Christian fellowship. Yet, our hope and aim for that person is the same. We hope and pray that the person will realise the seriousness of his error and return to Jesus and be restored to our fellowship as well.

I’ve written briefly above on a difficult topic. Nevertheless, I hope and pray that you may find this clarifying and helpful.

Yours in Christ,

Timothy Lee

<https://www.upperhunterpc.com>

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM²

Lord’s Day 31

¹ Kevin DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot*, p151.

² The text of the Catechism is usually from <https://threeforms.org/heidelberg-catechism/>, but time to time, for the sake of clarity, I have also adopted the translation used in *The Good News We Almost Forgot* by Kevin DeYoung.

Q83) What are the keys of the kingdom?

A) The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

Q84) How does preaching the gospel open and close the kingdom of heaven?

A) According to the command of Christ: The kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to all believers, each and every one, that, as often as they accept the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives all their sins. The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them. God's judgment, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.

Q85) How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by Christian discipline?

A) According to the command of Christ: Those who, though called Christians, profess unchristian teachings or live unchristian lives, and after repeated and loving counsel refuse to abandon their errors and wickedness, and after being reported to the church, that is to its officers, fail to respond also to their admonition—such persons the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from them, and God Himself excludes them from the kingdom of Christ. Such persons, when promising and demonstrating genuine reform, are received again as members of Christ and of His church.

MATTHEW 18:15-20

Matt 18:15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Space fails me to explain this famous yet often misunderstood (or ignored?) passage in full. Let me be brief here. Jesus is teaching His disciples what to do when someone sins privately against another within the church. In such a situation, one is to confront the offender privately first, and if unresolved, one should involve a couple of other people as witnesses. If the offender is still unrepentant, one is to bring the case to the whole church. The church, at this point, acts as Jesus's representative with His delegated authority, and is to treat the offender as a non-Christian. And to assure us of such an authority given to any church, Jesus says, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” This often quoted verse is not so much about giving us comfort of knowing Jesus is with us on Sunday morning, but rather, it is about the seriousness of falling under the judgment of the church because Jesus is acting through the church.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:11-13

11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Here we read some strong words from Paul. A couple of things to note here. 1) The list of sins in verse 11 is not to be taken as exhaustive. Church discipline is not restricted to the cases involving sins listed here. 2) Again in verse 11, Paul says, “anyone who bears the name of brother”. This is important. It means the discipline Paul's talking about applies to those who say they are Christians. It applies to men and women who say they believe in Jesus. Church discipline is for those who claim to be Christians. Like children under loving parents, we should expect discipline within the household. We do not discipline someone else's children, but we do our own. Not for a simple mistake, not for ignorance, but for unrepentant and persistent rebellion, we discipline out of love.