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Using the Authority of the Kingdom

by Dan Trygg

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ I also say to you that you are (a) Peter (Gk., *m., Petros, a stone*), and upon this rock (Gk., *f., petra, bedrock*) I will build My church (Gk. - *ekklesia*); and Hades’ gates will not stand against it. ¹⁹ I will give to you (sing.) the keys of the kingdom of the heavens; and what (thing) if ever you might bind (it) on the earth, it will be having-been-bound in the heavens; and what (thing) if ever you might loose (it) on the earth it will be having-been-loosed in the heavens.’” Matt. 16:15-19

We have been discussing the nature and purpose of the church, the *ekklesia* or "called-out-gatherings" of believers in Jesus. This passage in Matt. 16 is the first occurrence of the term in the NT. Although the actual term is only recorded as being uttered by Jesus on two occasions in the Gospels, here and in Matt. 18:17, the significance of what He introduced was not lost on the disciples. They clearly understood this to be a watershed concept. The issue revolved around the belief that Jesus was the Messianic King, as Peter confessed in vs. 16. *This* is what would separate this new movement from traditional Jewish synagogues. The purpose of the *ekklesia* was entirely different from that of the synagogue. Ultimately, it was the people within the synagogue system who drove believers in Jesus from their midst. Jesus Himself predicted that this would happen (Jn. 16:2). The synagogue system had been created to preserve Jewish culture, traditions and faith. They were of the "occupy until He comes" mentality, waiting for God to re-establish Israel as an independent nation under a Davidic King.

When the Messiah that they had been waiting for actually showed up, however, they did not recognize Him, and they could not adjust to the changes He was instituting. Their perspective was much too small. He had not come to establish an earthly domain over the local real estate. **He had come to begin an offensive that would assault the spiritual powers that ruled the entire globe.** He was a heaven-sent King, who had come to break the back of Satan's power, and to raise up a congregation (*ekklesia*) of followers who would actively be involved in confronting and tearing down the strongholds of enemy dominion and influence. He had come to raise up an army to extend the dominion of the kingdom of the heavens to the farthest reaches of planet earth, and to remove whatever opposition might stand in its way.

Peter was the first one to clearly confess Jesus as the Messianic King. Jesus referred to the confession which he had made as the bedrock upon which would build His congregation of followers. Peter was a stone, the first to be set in place in that foundation next to Him, the cornerstone (Matt. 22:42-44). As the first one to make such a profession of faith and allegiance, **Jesus promised to give him the keys of the kingdom of the heavens.** This word picture has been variously interpreted to mean many different things, many of which are not at all indicated by this or any other related contexts. **Following are some observations from the text:**

First, the word is plural. There are more than one key. We are not told how many, just that there are "keys" of the kingdom of the heavens which Jesus is giving to Peter at this moment.

Second, they are the keys "of the kingdom of the heavens". There are two very different ways of perceiving this statement. **Either: (a.) They are keys for gaining entrance to the kingdom of the heavens.** Much of the discussion in theology throughout church history has revolved around this understanding. In this scenario, Peter is given the keys of entrance into the gates of heaven, and he has the authority to let others enter. The Roman Catholic notion of the primacy of the Pope is tied to this idea, as well as the notion that the church has the power to forgive sins and allow people to come into heaven, as well as the authority to excommunicate those who do not agree with official doctrine, and close the way into heaven against them. Others have followed along these lines of interpretation by seeing that Peter had the primary place among the apostles, and that he was given the privilege of "opening the door of faith" to Jews, the Samaritans and the Gentiles. One problem with this teaching of the primacy of Peter, and concerning the keys being for entrance into heaven, is that in Matt. 18:18, the function of "binding and loosing" is extended to *all* the apostles, though there is nothing specifically said about "keys". **Or, (b.) They are the keys that belong to the kingdom of the heavens which are used for other purposes.** The question we must ask is, "Are there clues in the passage that tell us what the keys are for?"

Third, in this context, Jesus links these keys to the activities of "binding" and "loosing". In 20 of the 22 verses where the verb "to bind" occurs in the Gospels, it is used literally of binding, tying, or shackling

someone or something with a cord, rope, or chain to confine, imprison or hold captive (Matt. 12:29; 13:30; 14:3; 21:2; 22:13; 27:2; Mk. 3:27; 5:3,4; 6:17 11:2,4; 15:1,7; Lk. 13:16; 19:30; Jn. 11:44; 18:12,24; 19:40). In the remaining 21 occurrences of the word in the NT (Acts 9:2,14,21; 12:6; 21:11,13,33; 22:5,29; 24:7; Col. 4:3; II Tim. 2:9; Rev. 9:14; 20:2), there are only 4 times where the context is not literally about binding with chains, ropes, or some other measure to imprison or confine. In total, there are only six contexts where the word usage is metaphoric, or in any way unclear (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; Acts 20:22; Rom. 7:2; I Cor. 7:27,39). With this kind of consistent word usage, I think we can safely say that "the keys of the kingdom" are for binding or imprisoning something. The word for "loose" has a similar pattern of usage, only there is a bit broader usage of the metaphoric. In the Synoptic Gospels, it is mostly used of releasing something by untying it (Matt. 21:2; Mk. 1:7; 7:35; 11:2,4,5; Lk. 3:16; 13:15,16; 19:30,31,33; cf. Jn. 1:27; 11:44). Once in Matthew, and several times in John, it is used metaphorically of "breaking" or "destroying" something, such as the Law, or the Scripture (Matt. 5:19; Jn. 2:19; 5:18; 7:23; 10:35). This metaphorical use is more prevalent throughout the remainder of the NT (Acts 2:21; 13:43; 27:41; I Cor. 7:27; Eph. 2:14; II Pet. 3:10,11,12; I Jn. 3:8; Rev. 1:5), though the literal usage occurs as well (Acts 7:33; 13:25; 22:30; Rev. 5:2; 9:14,15; 20:3,10). Of real significance here is the usage of loosing in I Jn. 3:8, "The one doing the sin is out from the devil, because the devil sins from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God appeared, in order that He might destroy/loose the works of the devil." In I John 3, it is sin that is being described. In Lk. 13:11-16, it was a spiritual bondage that was manifested in a physical affliction that was "loosed". In Mk. 7:32-35 it was a physical affliction, a "bond of his tongue", that was "loosed".

Fourth, the usage of the word picture of a "key" would draw the image of binding and loosing to things that had locks, e.g., shackles, chains, prison doors, etc. These would be the most difficult of bonds to remove. The very purpose of locks is to make it more difficult to move past the barrier to which the lock is affixed. **To be given "keys" to remove such bonds means that one has authority, not just brute force, on his or her side.** The "keys of the kingdom" seem capable of releasing whatever locks Satan has construed, in order to release his captives, while at the same time putting the enemy's minions into chains or prisons from which they do not have the ability to escape.

How does this interpretation fit with the context? In the immediate context, Jesus described the church as a gathered army assaulting the gates of hades (lit., "the unseen"). If, in the course of a siege, the assaulting army could come up to the gates and insert a key that opened the city, then almost all resistance is compromised, and the city will quickly be overrun by the advancing forces. In Rev. 1:18, **Jesus Himself says that He has the keys of death and of hades.** If, at every attempt to hide within the city, the advancing troops could simply insert a key to gain entrance to every hiding place, the enemy would have no choice but to flee, or be taken captive. Now, it begins to make sense why there must be "keys", not just one key to fit all locks. **There are different kinds of locks. But the "key ring" of the kingdom of the heavens includes the appropriate keys to open every kind of lock in order to release people from every kind of bondage.**

But Jesus said that **the keys were not only for loosing, but also for binding.** How does that fit? In Matt. 12:29, the first occurrence of the word "to bind" in this Gospel, Jesus said, "...how is anyone able to enter into the house of the strongman and plunder his goods, if ever he might not first bind the strongman? At that time, indeed, he will thoroughly plunder his house." What this is indicating is that **there is a need to bind or "take captive" the spiritual forces who may be at work in the lives of people, before we can effectively clean house or release things that had been held captive by him.** Note, however, that according to Matt. 16:19, which is extended in Matt. 18:18 and 28:18-20 to all believers, we now have the authority and power to "bind", i.e., to take captive and hold prisoner the forces of the enemy, so that we might "loose" those who have been held in bondage under their domination, and we might "unlock" whatever bonds, chains, or imprisoning doorways that have blocked their freedom and held them captive.

Fifth, by giving the keys of the kingdom of the heavens to men, Jesus is making us partners in the work. From the word picture, we can assume that Jesus point was to make us aware that He expects us to be active participants in this process of "binding" and "loosing". **We must learn to use the keys effectively, if we are to accomplish the work that Jesus intends for us to do.**

Finally, notice that we are to do work on the earth that affects things in the heavenly realm. It is important to see that this includes not only things that are far away, but things that are supernatural. In other words, **God has made us real players, real combatants, in a spiritual war.** Our earthly actions have impact on a spiritual plane that we cannot see directly.