

Q83: What is the Office of the Keys?

A83: The preaching of the Holy Gospel and Christian discipline; by these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.[1]

1. Matt. 16:18-19; 18:18; John 20:23; Luke 24:46-47; I Cor. 1:23-24

I read the account from 1 Samuel because I wanted to use Eli, the high priest, for an illustration for the necessity for discipline in the house of the Lord. The things of the Old Testament are written for our admonition and instruction on how we are to behave in the temple of the Lord, the church, the pillar and ground of the truth.

The high priest, Eli, during the days of Samuel's youth, was a good and kindly man, as far as the account goes. Nothing is laid to his account of wickedness or cruelty. He had two sons, however, who were of different character from their father, as often happens. Hophni and Phinehas were wicked before the Lord and God had many things against them. First of all, they committed fornication with the women who served the tabernacle. It was a clear case of abuse, for the sons of the priests had great power over these women. It was extreme wickedness for Hophni and Phinehas to use their office of priest to intimidate the women who served the Lord in the Tabernacle.

The other example given of the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas was this. They refused to abide by the law with regard to their portion of the sacrifices, but would take it by force from the people before it was sacrificed properly, according to the law. The people knew this, but if they complained it was to no avail, for Hophni and Phinehas were bullies and threatened those who complained. Of this, the bible says, as we read, “The sin of the young men was very great before the Lord: for men abhorred the offering of the Lord.” It is a very great sin for powerful men to attempt to tailor the doctrine and the practice of the church to meet their own sinful desires and rebellions, and God will not look kindly upon it.

The fault of Eli, their father was this: It is very probable that Eli had taught his sons the way of the Lord. After all, he was chosen by God to be the mentor of Samuel the prophet, who grew up in the house of Eli the Priest. But Eli was the High Priest, and it was his responsibility to see that the sacrifice of the Lord was done in a proper way and that people did not abhor the offering of the Lord. Hophni and Phinehas made the offering of God to stink before the people, so that people were reluctant to go up to the house of the Lord.

Eli remonstrated with his sons. “Why do you do such things?” But a mild rebuke from the old man was not sufficient. Eli had the responsibility to put an end to the abuses, even to remove his sons from office, or to have them put to death, for their offenses were capital offenses under the law. So the Lord said to Eli, “Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation: and honorest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people?” Eli was benefitting from the tyranny of his sons. The prophet who said these things to Eli also said that God would cut off the house of Eli forever, and remove the priesthood from his house because of these things. The prophecy began to come to pass when Hophni and Phinehas were slain in war with the Philistines. In hearing of their deaths, Eli fell backward off his bench, broke his neck, and died. The curse continued on the house of Eli when Doeg the Edomite murdered the priests who had given aid to David when he fled from Saul, and was completed when Solomon removed Abiathar, the last of Eli's line from the priesthood because of his collaboration with David's son Adonijah to seize the throne of Solomon. It is a horrible thing to defile the worship of the Lord, and its effect may be seen for many generations.

God had called Israel to be a holy people unto Himself. He had said in His law:

15 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor. 16 Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbor: I am the LORD. 17 Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him. 18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD. –Lev. 19

They were not to do like the heathen nations round about them. God gave them laws and commandments and ordinances that they were to keep faithfully until the coming of Christ, who would bring in everlasting righteousness, and establish the church of all people and nations who would be a light to the world and declare the truth of God. They were to love their neighbor as themselves. Their courts were to be honest, not giving favor to the rich or to the poor. They were not to

run around as gossips, carrying tales about each other. They were not to bear witness against the blood of their neighbor. They were not to seek revenge, nor to bear grudges against each other. All of this was forbidden

There was a personal responsibility for this that rested not only on the officers, but on every individual: vs. 17: “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him.”

But how does this square with peace in the community of faith? If everybody begins to pick at each other, and determine to straighten everybody out for perceived fault in them, how does this promote love and peace among the people of God?

Jesus gives us the answer, I believe, in Matthew 18. He is not giving us a new law, but putting legs under the old law. What do you do when you perceive sin in your neighbor? Jesus tells us: Matt. 18:15-35 Let me summarize:

1. You consider yourself.
 - a. Galatians 6:1-3. You are first of all to consider that there may be a beam in your own eye. You need to see clearly to correct your brother.
 - b. “Ye which are spiritual,” walking in the spirit, not in the flesh.
 - c. Romans 15:14, filled with goodness and knowledge. As a brother, not as an enemy: 2Thess. 3:15.
 - d. We are to both forbear and forgive one another. Every imagined slight or wrong does not need to be addressed.
2. Try to keep the circle as small a possible. Don’t be a tale bearer. Go to him alone. The desire is to gain your brother, not tell him off. Seek him humbly and lovingly. Your concern is for him, not your hurt feelings. You also care about the church and the name of the Lord.
3. If he doesn’t hear, take witnesses. It is now a judicial matter, and you will need witnesses. In the mouth of two or three witnesses, everything is to be established. You are not to be vain in your own imaginations, or conceits. You might be wrong, and you need witnesses to corroborate what you declare.
4. The Ninth Commandments enters into the matter: do not bear false witness. Make sure that what you say is the truth. God puts a great deal of emphasis upon a man’s good name and reputation. Be very careful to promote one another’s good name.
5. If he doesn’t hear the witnesses, tell the church.
 - a. This assumes that the church has an order in place to hear and resolve complaints. This is beyond the scope of this sermon, but I mention this here. This does not mean that you decide the case for yourself and blab all over town to every member of the church. This is why I am not a Congregationalist where the whole congregation decides such matters; no, Israel had judges appointed and elders who decided cases, and so does the church. To tell the church means to tell the appropriate officers of the church.
 - b. Now, if you have a complaint against someone to lay before the Spiritual Council, let me warn you, that in the RCUS the first question that will be asked of you is this: “Have you followed Matt. 18 to this point, and have you earnestly tried to resolve this matter with your brother?” If you have not, they will not hear your petition.
 - c. In the RCUS, the judicatories are the Spiritual Council, the Classis, the Synod, and someday the General Synod. Decisions in the narrower judicatories may be appealed to the broader ones.
6. It is now out of your hand, and the church will now decide the matter. If he does not hear the church, then he is to be excommunicated and treated as one who is lost, and he becomes an object of evangelism, outside the church, called to repentance.
7. To summarize. Good order requires that every institution have some means of settling disputes and enforcing its covenant. This is not contrary to love, but is the highest form of love. A parent who loves his child, will not just nag him about disobedience, but will take measures to ensure obedience. A state will have a police presence to ensure compliance with the laws, which exist so that citizens can live at peace with each other. Those who attack the laws, attack the peace of the commonwealth, and war upon it. It is the same thing with every institution. If you do not comply with the rules of your bank, you will soon be kicked out of the bank. You can be expelled from school for breaking the rules. You can even test the patience of your family to the point where you will not be permitted to stay at home anymore and I have known such cases.
8. 1 Corinthians gives such a case in the New Testament; Read.
 - a. A terrible crime against nature and the church had been committed.
 - b. It should have brought sorrow to all the church, for if one member suffers they all suffer.
 - c. Paul, the apostles, had authority in his own right to judge the matter, and he did. But the verdict must be carried out by the church.

- d. The guilty must be expelled from the church; delivered over to Satan for chastisement so as to bring repentance so the soul could be saved. What he did was not the action of a Christian.
- e. Care must be had for the whole lump of the church, that it be not leavened with wickedness.
- f. The feast of the Lord must be in sincerity and truth; not in hypocrisy.
- g. We are to have no fellowship with the gross wickedness of the world. The church has been called to render judgment in such matters.
- h. Wicked persons are to be removed from the fellowship of the church.
- i. All of this is to be done in the spirit in which it began: a warm and sincere desire to encourage those overtaken by sin to repent and be restored to fellowship and fruitfulness in the church.
- j. Even if those representing the church are only two or three in number, the church being very small, the proceedings are valid and not to be despised, for the authority of Christ is behind it.

Let us pray.