

Dt. 21:18-21 (WCF 30:1-2) “Officers with Keys”

For the Children: Sometimes police-officers have to arrest someone who is doing wrong, put them in a cell, and use their keys to lock the door. Elders are also “officers” in the church. They are not police officers, who cruise around looking for wrong-doing. They do not actually lock people up in a cell. But they do use invisible “keys” to declare someone in or out of God’s Kingdom. These “keys” are the elders’ judgements that certain persons are refusing to repent of their sins; or, that a guilty sinner has repented and is forgiven by the Lord. The Lord listens to the true judgements of His elders, because He gave them this job of judging. We should all support the elders as they do this difficult work! **Questions:** When did the Lord first give elders the job of judging His people? How can elders judge sinners when they themselves are sinners? What part does the congregation play in church discipline?

Introduction:

First Point: Discipline Starts with Witnesses

- **Instruction and Admonition:** In the early stages of dealing with the sin of a covenant-member, those who are not elders are often involved. In the case of a rebellious child, the parents are often the witnesses. In the text, the son has been instructed, warned, exhorted and disciplined for his sins. He still refuses to listen to his parents or obey. He is “stubborn and rebellious.” He refuses to repent. He is a “glutton and a drunkard” – a by-word for someone who was worthless and incorrigible. He dishonours his parents (against the 5th commandment). He dishonours the Name of the Lord. He is a danger to others in Israel
- **Brought to the Elders:** The parents are commanded to seize this son and bring him before the elders for judgement. They are not to keep the problem “in-house.” The parents must act as witnesses. Mt. 18:15-17 similarly requires witnesses. They also bring matters to the elders only when there is a refusal to repent. This must be done even when it involves loved ones

Second Point: Discipline Is Judged by Elders

- **Judgement at the Gate:** The city-gate was the place where the elders sat in judgement. The parents were to bring their unrepentant son there to be judged by the elders. The elders would try the case and order the penalty for the guilty party – death by stoning in this case. That may seem harsh to us today, but it was necessary in the OT to show the importance of obeying God’s Law, accepting His authority, and not leading others astray in Israel. Today we have more time for repentance – since execution is replaced by excommunication. This is due to the outpouring of grace at Christ’s coming. See Jn. 8, 1 Cor. 5. Even so, excommunication is no light matter – it leads to hell if the sinner does not repent
- **From Moses to Paul:** Dt. 21 is not an isolated case. God commissioned elders to judge His people from early on (Ex, 18:17f). See also Dt. 22:18. In Mt. 18 the elders play the same part of judging on behalf of the church, in the Lord’s Name and authority
- **The Keys of the Kingdom:** For He has given them the “keys of the Kingdom” (Mt. 16:19) – based on the keys held by the steward of David’s House (Is. 22:22). The keys were to lock/unlock, open/close access to the king. Similarly Christ has appointed elders to open/shut the Kingdom of God, by judging that accused sinners are either still bound by their sins, or free of them. The Lord listens to this judgement

Third Point: Discipline Involves the Whole Congregation

- **All the Men of the City:** The penalty was to be carried out by all the men of the city (v. 21) – including the witnesses (Dt. 17:7). See also Dt. 22:21. Mt. 18:17 also includes the church in the process – “tell it to the church”
- **For the Good of the Congregation:** For excommunication is from the congregation and for the congregation. Fellowship is ended and contact restricted (Mt. 18). The evil leaven is removed from the church for its own welfare (Dt. 21:5, 17;7, 12, 22;21; 1 Cor. 5:13, 1 Cor. 11:31-32). Therefore the church should support the discipline of the elders – as even parents had to do in Dt. 21

Conclusion: