

The key to the kingdom

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] I haven't changed it on there. I've actually intended to change the title slightly and not to say the keys of the kingdom but the key to the kingdom which is what I put on the other side.

But I think there's actually only one key that is referred to when we looked at it. But anyway, it doesn't matter too much. What I have put on the slide there are the final words of the Old Testament from the prophet Malachi which says, See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.

So as I say, that is the last few words of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi. And it may seem a bit puzzling to us until we remember what the name Elijah means.

It means, of course, Yahweh is God. And I don't think it means literally a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah. That there will be one who will come and remind the people of who their God, who their Lord is.

That, of course, is precisely what Elijah did, wasn't it, on Mount Carmel, was it? When he attacked the prophets of Baal and said, Who is the Lord?

[1 : 31] The Lord is God. And that, of course, is what his name means. So it was a very appropriate message for him. But how did that happen? How did that work out when the Lord Jesus came to his people?

Did he turn the hearts of the children to their fathers? Or did that second and last clause come into play? Did he come and strike the land with a curse?

We've looked at Jesus' final words to his friends. As I said, we looked at some of them with Phil over the last few weeks. But what were his final words to his opponents?

Matthew 23 appears to be among the last of his public pronouncements. Although there is a similar list of woes, which appear to have been as an earlier occasion, recorded in Luke 11.

And in many ways, these woes sum up interactions and arguments that had happened throughout Jesus' ministry. And I'm going to look at them that way. That's how we're going to spend some time looking at them.

[2 : 39] To trace the threads of them as how, where Jesus got these things from, almost as it were. So as I say, instead of my usual practice of explaining the scripture in larger passages, we're going to focus down for these next four weeks just on this single chapter.

And in particular, the woes of verses 13 to 30. But we need to look at verses 1 to 12 first, which has seemed to have been addressed more to the disciples.

But not entirely, because I've listened to the teachers of the law. And certainly verses 1 to 12 provide the context for these woes and an introduction to them.

So let's look at these first 12 verses first. And so we can see, can't we, from verse 2, that what Jesus is talking about here is the matter of spiritual authority.

But in a sense, the crucial verse here is really verse 3. Where Jesus says, do what the teachers say, for they sit in the seat of Moses, only don't do what they do.

[3 : 53] And I think anyone who stands on this platform to declare the words of God, needs to consider this verse very carefully.

In a sense, this is kind of, if you like, the flip side of what Chris was bringing to us this morning. When, what are the qualifications for a spiritual leader, a spiritual teacher?

But of course, when you remember that these things have to be carried out perfectly, and indeed, as the whole passage, the point of this passage Matthew 23 is about, they have to affect not just outward behaviour, but the heart.

Then, one may say, well, nobody qualifies at all. Well, anyone who stands in a mega church and addresses a congregation of thousands has to think about this verse very carefully. Anyone who is in a mud hut in the rainforest and addresses 12 villagers must face up to this charge also. Anyone who stands here needs to consider this.

[5 : 12] Because surely, ultimately, in a sense, none of us practice what we preach. We certainly don't practice it perfectly. And each one of us, really, who stands and proclaims the word of God, is open to this charge.

We adorn the gospel of Christ as best we can, of course, and as Chris was reminding us this morning, it's very important that any teacher or elder does that.

But in the last analysis, all of us are unprofitable servants. And Isaiah was well aware of the issue. So Isaiah 6, verse 5, I haven't changed the slide.

Isaiah 6, verse 5, says the following. Again, it's a woe. Woe to me, I cried. I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips.

And I live among a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. And Isaiah was going to be commissioned to be a prophet, indeed one of the greatest of the prophets in many ways.

[6 : 21] But he understood the problem. He said, How can I speak the words of God? I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.

And so it is true, in a sense, that every preacher of the gospel, to some extent, is in the business of saying, Do as I say, don't do as I do. By grace we are what we are, but none of us are what we should be.

In fact, in all of history, there's only been one teacher of whom this charge was not true. And that teacher was the one who was speaking these words.

It is only really Jesus who can say honestly that he did everything the Father wanted perfectly.

But that makes the preaching the gospel a problem, doesn't it? It was a problem for Isaiah, and in a sense it's a problem for every preacher and teacher.

[7 : 28] And I think we need to look at verses 8 to 12 to answer the question, how can us, each of us, who is a man of unclean lips, how can any of us proclaim the gospel in any sense?

The scripture, so what are we to make of these verses 8 to 12? The scripture does talk about other teachers, doesn't it? In fact, Jesus goes on to say, I will send you prophets and teachers.

Teaching is one of the gifts of the Spirit. And in fact, Paul, on at least one occasion, talks about his spiritual children. So what are we to make of these verses 8 to 12 when Jesus says, actually there's only one teacher?

I think the point Jesus is making here is that it is the source of fatherhood and the origin of instruction that is at issue here.

Ultimately, we have only one teacher, Christ himself. To use the modern phrase, we ought to say that I can stand up here and address you because as far as I can, through the Spirit, I'm channeling Jesus, as we might say.

[8 : 49] What the Pharisees should have been doing, of course, was channeling Moses. But they weren't. And that's the nature of Christ's charge.

And Christ reminds us, doesn't he, that all his people are in the same position. We're all disciples. We're all brothers and sisters. None of us is a teacher in that sense.

Because there is only one teacher, Christ himself. And if any of us stand up here and say, thus says the Lord, then we can only do so as far as we are bringing the teacher, the words of the teacher and the teaching of Christ himself.

Jesus says that the teachers and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses. In a sense, they did have a spiritual authority, or at least they should have done. But in practice, they were claiming an authority, weren't they, that even Moses didn't aspire to.

They're making themselves, in fact, the arbiters of spiritual truth. And this is what, really is what the rest of these woes are about. Jesus tells us that they were laying intolerable burdens on their disciples while they were desiring honour and even worship and praise for themselves.

[10 : 20] They were putting themselves above the people of God. They were denying that charge of Isaiah, that they were men of unclean lips and they dwelt among a people of unclean lips.

people of God's and that really is the basis of Jesus' charge against them. But it also, if we remember that there is one teacher, there is one teacher who could honestly say that he practised

what he preached.

He perfectly did all that the Father wanted him to do. And as far as we bring to you his teaching, then it is possible to stand up here and say, thus says the Lord.

And we should say, of course, that not all the Pharisees were guilty of this. We know that some of them, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, seem to have got the point. But as a group, these things appear to have been true.

And Jesus addresses them as a group. And so, if we do indeed plan to sit in the seat of Moses and proclaim spiritual truth, then we actually only have two alternatives.

[11 : 40] Either we decide both others and ourselves by pretending that we do practice what we preach perfectly and speak on our own authority with our own message, or we acknowledge that charge and say there is only one teacher, the Christ.

none of us is fit to authenticate our message. We can only pass on what we have heard and admit it applies to just as much to the preacher as to the hearer.

One preacher, in a slightly quaint view, but he made the point, he said, if I stand with my hand like this pointing at you, I've got three fingers pointing back at me. And I think that perhaps makes the point in a slightly quaint way.

There is only one teacher. Each of us must echo Paul's words that Chris quoted this morning. Paul said he was the chief of sinners, that great preacher, that great apostle.

That was his judgment on himself, I am the chief of sinners, and we all have to make that same judgment. And that's the sense in which we're all brothers. You notice that Isaiah did identify himself with the people.

[12 : 49] Presumably, in fact, he wasn't particularly a man of unclean lips, but he identified with his people and said, I'm no different from those people you're telling me to speak to.

So we're all in the same situation. But I said there are two alternatives, two options, and what's the other one?

And the other one I suggest to you is a kind of do-it-yourself gospel. And this is what the Pharisees seem to have been doing. There's always a strong temptation for spiritual leaders to slip into some other option, to start thinking that we have some authority or message of our own.

That is always a temptation. And it's a subtle temptation. I don't think the Pharisees were explicitly claiming they had the right to overrule Moses.

I don't think they were claiming that. In fact, they were claiming that their authority was Moses. But what they were doing was making the message of Moses actually mean something different.

[14 : 07] And therefore they had usurped Moses' place for themselves, possibly without even realising that they were doing so. them. And so Jesus calls them hypocrites.

He calls them hypocrites six times. What does this word mean? Well, the literal meaning of the Greek word is an actor, or more precisely, because that was the way the Greeks did it, it means somebody who holds a mask in front of his face to adopt a character.

they put on a show for those around them as Jesus tells us in verses five to seven. He said it's all done for show. But the worst thing in one sense, even worse than the fact that they deceived others, was that they appear to have deceived themselves.

That surely is the greatest strategy of hypocrisy, not that we might deceive others. But that we might deceive ourselves. We might come to believe in the character we're playing.

And we might think it really applies to us. And I'd suggest to you that that's why what Jesus declares here is not a curse, but a woe.

[15 : 29] Malachi said he would, the Lord would come and curse the land if they would not repent. But what Jesus actually says here is a worm.

He's asking the question, who will save these teachers from themselves? A woe is not the same thing as a curse. A woe is a lamentation, a cry of mourning.

It's one of these words actually where the meaning of the word is its sound. Woe. woe. It's a breathed lamentation, a spoken lamentation, isn't it?

A spoken sigh. And that's actually true of the corresponding Greek and Hebrew words also. They are words whose sound is their meaning, a cry, a lamentation, and I guess that's why the translators have stuck to this slightly old fashioned sounding word to us, woe, because it is the best translation into English.

It's a word that is its own meaning as it were. It's a cry of lamentation. And a woe is a cry of mourning, of grief, even of despair.

[16:49] A woe is not a curse, but it's often the result of a curse. And in fact there is a sense in which all woes in this world of woes are the result of the curse which expelled mankind from paradise.

But nonetheless what Jesus speaks is a woe, not a curse explicitly, at least not at this stage.

Perhaps you could construe his last words as a curse, but not at this stage.

Jesus' words are actually tinged with compassion, aren't they? Even as he calls the Pharisees vipers, murderers of the prophets, we find a longing that they might yet change.

He's saying this in a sense, not to condemn them, but to give them a final warning, to invite them to change. And so he concludes his talk with these words, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

That was the Pharisees' problem, they were not willing to repent, instead they believed their own lie. So, let's move on and start to look at these woes in a bit more detail and draw out what exactly the challenges were that Jesus had against the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

[18:26] So how many woes are there? If you have an authorised version or a New King James version, you will realise you have an extra one in verse 14, but that doesn't seem to be in most of the Greek texts, so we'll not deal with that one.

Even the English standard version, the more literal and more conservative translation, doesn't include verse 14. So the heading of your chapter there says there are seven woes.

Actually, I'd like to suggest to you there are actually only six. Because although the word woe occurs seven times in this chapter, the whole phrase, woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, actually occurs six times.

So I'm going to suggest that perhaps there are actually six woes, it would be a more suitable number, a human number, an incomplete number. other. And if you read the woes of Luke 11, which are not quite the same and they're in a different order, but there are definitely six of those. But if you think there are seven, that's okay too. I'm not going to argue over it. But I'm going to break up the text the way I've showed it there on the screen.

[20:05] So I'd suggest that the woes break up in this way. First of all, the first two, and those are the ones we're going to look at this evening, are addressed to the access, who has right of access to the kingdom of heaven.

And then the third one is about the heart of the law of Moses. And it's bracketed by this charge that those who should have been teachers of the laws of Moses were actually blind guides.

We'll move on and look at that next week. And then woes four and five, Jesus goes on to explore the nature of hypocrisy in more detail.

And that's what verse 25 and verse 27 are about. But he does mention this issue of blindness again in between in verse 26. And then the last woe is those who make tombs for the righteous.

verses 29 to 31. And that leads Jesus on to the conclusion of his talk where he addresses the issue of what happens to prophets or what will happen to prophets and of course particularly what will happen to Jesus himself.

[21:25] and eventually to what will happen to the city of Jerusalem. So that's the way I'm going to break up the text. And so we'll look this evening at these first two woes, these two woes that address the issue of access to the kingdom of heaven.

And as you can see the first woe in verse 13 addresses the question of who controls access to the kingdom.

So I should read it out. Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces you yourself do not enter nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Since they possessed the law of Moses the Pharisees and the teachers of the law should indeed have been the gatekeepers of the kingdom. The law of Moses did indeed have provision for excluding unsuitable people and certain people who were barred from the temple and from the worship for one reason or another.

But Jesus charges that the border guards are corrupt. They're not admitting those that should be allowed in. And that raises the question of the authority who has authority to control access to the

kingdom.

[23 : 07] kingdom. And when you ask the question that way then in a sense there's only one answer isn't there? Who controls entry to the kingdom?

Well the king does. And as usual as I say Isaiah gets straight to the heart of it. Isaiah 22 verse 22 says the following. Isaiah 22 22 says I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David. What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open. Well who's the his in this verse?

Well actually if you look it's a government official by the name of Eliakim. And at first it seems that he might be the son of promise the one who is given the key of David.

But actually if you read on you find in verse 25 in that day declares the Lord Almighty the peg driven into the firm place that's Eliakim will give way.

[24 : 16] It will be sheared off and will fall and the load hanging on it will be cut down. The Lord has spoken. So Eliakim was just a picture of Christ and indeed the Pharisees and teachers of the law understood this very well.

This was the accepted interpretation of this passage. In Isaiah's time the true heir of David the one who truly holds the key is still to come.

Actually this idea of David's key occurs only here in the Old Testament only in this one verse in Isaiah yet it captures the idea that it is the king who controls access to the kingdom.

Who is the rightful king and who are the honest border guards? Well the first question is answered in Revelation 3 chapter 7 where we read this.

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write these are the words of him who is holy and true who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut.

[25 : 24] What he shuts no one can open. Well who is speaking there? Who is the one who holds the key of David? Well it is the Lord Jesus himself. As you will see if you look at the passage where it occurs.

It is the Lord Jesus the Christ who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut. And what he shuts no one can open. In fact it is worth looking at Luke's version of this woe in Luke 11 chapter verse 52 which reads the following Woe to you experts in the law because you have taken away the key to knowledge.

You yourselves have not entered and you have hindered those who were entering. What they had taken away was the key to the gospel itself and were barring people from entering by not giving them the knowledge that they needed.

So it is the Lord Jesus himself who holds the key of David who controls access to the kingdom. But who does he entrust as it were this key to?

Who are the border guards? Who holds the border post? Not to those corrupt officials. In fact Matthew has already answered that question earlier in his gospel.

[26 : 58] In Matthew 16 verses 18 to 19 Jesus said this to the disciples and particularly to Peter. And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. What are we to make of this? Surely it is to the church that the key is entrusted as it were. It is the church to whom the invitation into the kingdom is granted and it is the church in a sense that opens the door.

Jesus said what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. But provided of course it adheres to the authority of Christ and his apostles.

That's the rock that Jesus was talking about the confession that Jesus is the Christ. If we pretend to be Peter then we usurp Christ's authority just as much as Peter himself did soon after that declaration in fact.

[28 : 19] And having been said you are Peter on this rock I will build my church Jesus a few verses later says to Peter get behind me Satan you're speaking the things of men not of God.

And the Pharisees had usurped the authority of Moses the key to the kingdom is the key of knowledge and specifically what knowledge is it it's the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ the knowledge of his death and resurrection!

citizenship in the second woe again perhaps I should read it out I got the verse wrong on the slide there sorry it's verse 15 woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you travel

over land and sea to win a single convert and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are notice the word son in that verse the rules of the citizenship of the kingdom of heaven are actually quite strict and what is the rule the rule is that you must either be a natural child of a family of citizens or you must be an adopted child that being the case it's very important to know who your father is and that leads us on to the idea of the fatherhood of

God because that is what Jesus is implicitly saying that the Pharisees are not acknowledged he says you are not children of the heavenly father you are sons of hell and so I'd like to explore this idea of fatherhood a little more and actually the remarkable thing is that this idea of the fatherhood of God isn't really there in the Old Testament there are many references to the God of your father but few to in fact I don't know of any to God himself as father in fact in some ways this is more a Greek idea than a Hebrew one that some of the Greek philosophers talked about the fatherhood of God but they meant of course just as creator but Jesus brings far more to this concept of the fatherhood of

God than Plato did or Socrates in fact the fatherhood of God is absolutely central to Jesus whole theology and in fact I don't know whether you've ever looked at it this way what are the earliest recorded words we have of Jesus well they were words he spoke at the age of twelve Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem with his family as a Jewish boy would when he reached the age of twelve gone up to the temple with his family and then they set off home but then they discovered he was missing you'll find it's all recorded in Luke chapter two and they went back to the city to look for him and where did they find him they eventually found him in the temple and understandably they remonstrated with him but what did he reply he replied

[32 : 36] Luke 2 verse 49 why are you searching for me he asked didn't you know that I had to be in my father's house what a remarkable statement that is it was his father and mother who were apparently who were looking for him where was his father's house and place of business was a carpenter's shop in Nazareth and that was as far as Mary and Joseph were concerned was where he ought to have been on his way to but Jesus had a different father in mind and this father had a different place of business this father's place of business was the temple in Jerusalem and so that is why Jesus was there and that is why he said to Mary and Joseph where did you expect to find me I'm not lost I'm precisely where I should be in my father's house and then if you read the next verse he does actually then go back with

Mary and Joseph to Nazareth and it says he was obedient to them or was subject to them and I think was acknowledging that they did have a right over his life as parents but that that first remarkable verse that we have the first words we have recorded of Jesus was that I must be in my father's house and this issue of fatherhood parenthood who are your parents was a constant source of friction wasn't it between Jesus and the Jewish leaders John the Baptist in fact had given the first warning in Luke chapter 3 verse 8 we read the following produce fruit in keeping with repentance this is John the Baptist speaking produce fruit in keeping with repentance do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father for I tell you that out of these stones

God can raise up children for Abraham and throughout the gospels this discussion of fatherhood crops up and time prohibits us really from following through all the references the times when Jesus talks of saying Abba father and so on and talks about the fatherhood of God but I just like to read one slightly longer passage of scripture if you turn with me to John chapter 8 which you'll find on page 1074 so John chapter 8 starting at verse 31 to the Jews who had believed him Jesus said if you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free they answered him we are

Abraham's descendants who had never been slaves of anyone how can you say that we shall be set free Jesus replied I tell you the truth everyone who sins is a slave to sin now a slave has no permanent place in the family but a son belongs to it forever so if the son sets you free you will be free indeed I know you are Abraham's descendants yet you're ready to kill me because you have no room for my word I am telling you what I have seen in the father's presence and you do what you have heard from your father Abraham is our father they answered if you were Abraham's children said Jesus then you would do the things Abraham did as it is you're determined to kill me a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God Abraham did not do such things you are doing the things your own father does we are not illegitimate children they protested the only father we have is

God himself notice they've changed their tune there not Abraham but God Jesus said to them if God were your father you would love me for I came from God and now I'm here I have not come on my own but he sent me why is my language not clear to you because you are unable to hear what I say you belong to your father the devil and you want to carry out your father's desire he was a murderer from the beginning not holding to the truth for there is no truth in him when he lies he speaks his native language for he is a liar and the father of lies Jesus criticism of the Pharisees was not lack of zeal he said they would traverse land and sea to make one convert but those converts were denied issue denied entry into the kingdom of heaven we can see this in modern terms can't we the

[38 : 13] Pharisees claimed to be offering citizenship! But that claim was spurious because they weren't even really citizens themselves they had the wrong parentage so they're people traffickers aren't they slavers offering what they could not provide here's a tip if someone offers you citizenship of a different country be very careful be very cautious does he or she have the right to offer that because we see examples in our own land don't we of people who have not taken that advice have been offered citizenship in this land when they got here found that they're actually slaves people who have not able to give them what they offered and if that's true of citizenship of this country then it's far more true of the citizenship of heaven it is

Jesus who makes us free indeed beware of the people traffickers the slavers well as I say we could spend hours looking at this topic but let's cut a long discussion short because the point of all this is that in fact there is only one natural son of the kingdom and that natural son is Jesus himself but Jesus does offer adoption into his family but he warns us doesn't he think before you take up that offer are you prepared to acknowledge him as king and as teacher as well as brother and what's more the adoption process itself is pretty radical in fact Jesus describes it as a new birth you need to be reborn as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven John chapter 3 verses 5 to 7 very well known words of course but it reads the following

Jesus answered I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit flesh gives birth to flesh but the spirit gives birth to spirit you should not be surprised by saying you must be born again and what's he talking about there he's talking about entry into the kingdom if you look at the context and he's talking to a Pharisee about it as well as it happens who your father is matters there is only one natural son of the father but we can be born again by the spirit we can be adopted sons of the kingdom and so what's the message of this whether we're Jew or Gentile our natural parentage won't do for us we might claim to be descendants of Abraham but that won't do only a spiritual birth can make us a spiritual citizen and that might be a rather frightening thought if that were all that Jesus had to say on the subject but it isn't is it he said this all that the father gives me will come to me through spiritual birth but whoever comes to me I will never drive away there is free entry offered into the kingdom of heaven you only have to apply to the king the one who holds the key of David and you only have to acknowledge the rulership of that king and Jesus said if you come to me on that basis I will not drive you away Jesus is the one who has opened the door that no one can shut no one can bar us from coming into the kingdom through the Lord Jesus Christ so let's sing again before we turn to our time of prayer we'll sing this closing hymn ending Thank you.