LD 31 (QA 85); Matthew 18:15-20; I Cor. 5:1-13; The Key of Discipline I. Understanding this Key II. Responding to this Key

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, no one likes to be disciplined. Just the mention of the word- discipline- sends a shiver down our back. Thoughts of sore backsides, revoked privileges and other consequences fill the mind. But the Bible says that discipline is a good and necessary thing! Heb. 12 says that the LORD disciplines the ones He loves. If you had a father that did not care for you- a father who did not rebuke you when you sinned or correct you when you spoke lies- your father did not really love you. In fact, discipline is an act of love! But the fact remains, church discipline has fallen on hard times. Many believe that the church no longer needs this antiquated means of correction. Discipline is seen as a desperate act of few men who are addicted to power. Discipline is the leadership of the church strong arming those who do not agree with them- so it is said. So today there are few churches that have elders who actually practice discipline! But, as you will remember, discipline is one of the Keys of the Kingdom and its presence is one of the Marks of the True Church! So we are not free to discard this key as it has a very important role in the church today. So as we return to LD 31, we see that Jesus Christ has given 2 keys to His church. The preaching of the gospel and church discipline unto repentance. This evening our theme is this: Jesus Christ uses the key of discipline to warn those living in unrepentant sin.

**I. Understanding this Key**

In our first point, as we did las time, we start by defining this key and how it is to function. Let’s start with a definition. Church discipline is the official, loving process of correcting a church member who has fallen into unrepentant sin. The discipline we are considering today is church discipline- not the discipline of the state or in the home- but within the house of God. This is an official work- as it is given to the members of the church and specifically as it is manifested in the later stages by the elders of the church. This discipline is a process. As we read from Matthew 18- it starts with a single member of the church going to another member of the church. One to one- speaking to the one who sinned against you as you show them their sin and seek their repentance. If they refuse to listen to you, you are to take a witness along with you to press the matter. If they refuse to listen to 2 or 3 members, then this matter is to be told to the church leaders. At this point, church discipline becomes an official work of the leadership of the church. The elders will take up this matter and continue to discuss this sin with the hardened sinner. If they still refuse to repent, that member will be removed from the roles of the church. This final step is called excommunication. They are no longer considered a member of the church- and they no longer have access to the rights and privileges of church membership. This final step is sometimes called the extreme remedy- as it is the most pointed and extreme action a church can take against a member. Note that Jesus says in Mt. 18:15- if your brother sins against you. This kind of discipline takes place within the church. So there is a loving connection that is already established. This is one believer speaking to another member of his church. As a fellow member, you know your own sins. You go to this sinning brother with humility- as we all need to repent and believe. This is also a work that Jesus wants to be done. Note that in Matthe 18, the call to mutual accountability comes in the context of Christ’s presence. I am there with you- I am among you! In other words, a church that practices church discipline is a church that Christ promises to be present in! The elders who speak to the sinner- and if needs be- excommunicate this member- are acting as directed by Christ and speaking on behalf of Him as well! We see this process worked out in our reading from I Cor. 5. Here Paul identifies a heinous sin committed by a member of the Corinthian church. A sexual sin and incest- but the sinner was not sorry at all. Instead, this man was boasting in his sin. He was a proud, unrepentant sinner who was living in very public sin. Paul’s solution, throw this man out. Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. Do not associate with him any longer. Judge this member of the church by his works- and if he continues to remain unrepentant- he is to be removed from your congregation. Here again, Paul makes it clear that church discipline applies to the church. Members of the church are to be held accountable. As our QA 85 puts it, if you profess unchristian teaching or live unchristian lives, and if you refuse to repent and abandon your sin, you are to be excluded from the Christian community. Stated another way, the unrepentant sinner is to be excommunicated. To be clear, this is dealing with the inner church action. In I Cor. 5:10 Paul clarifies, I am not talking about the sinners in the world. It is impossible to exclude every unrepentant person from your life. In your business, civic and personal life, you are going to rub shoulders with unrepentant people. People who believe false things and live rebellious lives. That is just the nature of living in this fallen world. But within the church, all who bear the name of brother is to be held to a standard of faith and repentance. Remember this fact- there is really only one sin that leads to excommunication. Although the first step of discipline may have many different grounds, the fact remains that the sin of hard-hearted rebellion remains the grounds of excommunication! Only when a person refuses to repent- to let go of their sin- when they refuse to respond to the church’s admonitions- only then will they be excommunication. So Jesus Christ wants us to know- to remember this. Repentance is a mark of a Christian. If you refuse to repent, you remain in your sins. As Luke 13 puts it- unless you repent, you too will perish! Now there are 3 main reasons why every true church must practice church discipline. Discipline has a 3-fold purpose. First, to warn the sinner that they are in danger. It is like a warning light on the dashboard- check your engine! Something is wrong, if you don’t fix it you will be destroyed! Second, church discipline is a warning for the whole church. Church discipline deters others from following this way of life. Sin is like leaven, Paul says in I Cor. 5:6. Sin spreads and corrupts like yeast- so throw it out before it corrupts the whole thing! And the third and final reason that we must practice church discipline is because God is holy- and His people are to reflect this holiness. For the glory of God, our church must practice discipline! Yes, the goal of discipline is to turn this sinner away from their sins- to snatch them from the fire. But more than that- our Holy God calls for His people to be holy! So church discipline is to purge the poison from the body before the whole thing dies. Or discipline is to cut off the foot infected by gangrene before it spreads to the rest of the body! It is not fun- and no one likes to do it- but for the sake of the rest of the body it must be done!

**II. Responding to this Key**

Now that we understand the purpose and use of this key, in our second point we consider how this key is to be responded to. Remember that keys have a 2fold purpose. To open and close. With the key of preaching last time, we saw that the gospel declared that the way to heaven is open for all who repent and believe. This message is declared to all and freely shared. But the closing aspect is also declared- if you do not repent and believe, you remain in your sins and in line for destruction. So preaching opens and then closes. Church discipline, however, starts with a closing function. First, people are excluded by discipline if they refuse to repent. So QA 85 would have us imagine a member of the local church who after repeated, loving admonition, refuses to give up the sin. Like a pig, going back again and again to the mud without any sorrow. The process of Matthew 18 reaches the final step and the member is excommunicated. Now why is excommunication such a big deal? Well, when a member is excluded from the local church they no longer have access to the rights and privileges of the local church. They no longer are welcomed to participate in the sacraments- the sign and seal of the covenant is withheld because they are not behaving like a member of the covenant. Added to that, they are excluded from God’s people with the added warning- whatever is bound on earth has been bound in heaven. The declaration of the church- you are no longer a member here- is an echo of a declaration made in heaven. You have no right of access there! In other words, Jesus uses the church to make known on earth what is true in heaven. If you refuse to repent and believe, you are outside of Christ and have no entrance into the kingdom above! This really is a loving act of Jesus- He does not want church members to be surprised on the last day! Let it be known- if you love sin more than me, you will not be welcomed into my midst. My church on earth will press this point- for the sake of clarity- I will tell you through the voice of the local elders. You are not a member of church- as long as you continue to refuse to abandon your evil ways- God has excluded you from the kingdom of Christ as QA 85 puts it. This is an act of love! For example, is it loving to tell your neighbor that his house is on fire? Is it more loving to respect your neighbor’s need for sleep – or for you to shout out and warn him of the impending doom?! Well, it is clearly more loving to say- Get Up! Get Out! Your house is on fire! Do not stay where you are! Flee the coming wrath! So it is that Jesus through discipline warns the sinner to repent! But praise God, that is not the end of the matter. Although the way is shut, it can be opened again! If the Holy Spirit softens the heart of the sinner. If he responds to this discipline appropriate. As QA 85 concludes, if he promises and demonstrates genuine reform, he can be welcomed back into the church again! The straying sheep can be brought back into the fold and received again as a member of Christ and His people again. We find an example of this in II Cor. 2. Read II Cor. 2:5-11. Note that this repentant sinner is to be forgiven and comforted. The love of Christ and His church reaffirmed to him! The warning has done its job- the Spirit has done His work- and the hard heart has been softened! The fact is, church discipline does work! As it was with preaching, no one can be disciplined without being changed! Some are hardened in their rebellion, while others are softened- but the heat of discipline must be applied! So the church holds no grudges- we welcome back the obstinate now humbled sinner. Comforting this one as well as we receive them again.

To conclude, church discipline is not for the faint of heart. It is often met with anger- who are you to point out my sins! It is dismissed in many churches- who needs this antiquated work of the elders. It is despised in the world- you are abusing others if you tell them they are not welcomed! How dare you tell someone that their lives are not conforming to God’s Word! How dare you point out the sins of others! Who do you think you are? But regardless, the true church has and will practice church discipline unto repentance. Jesus Christ uses the key of discipline to warn those living in unrepentant sin. Remember, God’s people must be holy because our God is holy! Christians are not perfect, but they are committed to the pursuit and progress towards perfection! Sanctification is not just a good idea, it is the mark of the Spirit’s presence within! So may the church see and use the Keys of the Kingdom properly- as gifts that reveal the heart of the King.