

## Original Meaning?

In searching for the original meaning of the phrase ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven’, it is hard to feel sure that one is doing so with eyes undazzled by the glare of an ecclesiastical controversy that after 400 years is still ablaze. But the safest guide to an unbiased exegesis would seem to be the simple maxim that the probable interpretation of any saying in the Synoptic Gospels will be one which starts by studying first the linguistic usage in other passages of the same Gospels. At any rate, if we merely set side by side Matt. xxiii. 13 and its parallel, Luke xi. 52, there emerges a simple and obvious meaning of the phrase. The scribes (or lawyers) and Pharisees are denounced, in Matthew’s version,

...because ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter.

in Luke’s version:

...for ye took away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.

Here the *key* to the kingdom of heaven is evidently the *knowledge* which makes entrance to the kingdom possible. To Peter, then, is given that *true insight into the nature of the righteousness* taught by Christ—a righteousness that will ‘exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees’—which is the indispensable qualification of one who is ‘to bind and to loose’...

(Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church: Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry* (Lectures Delivered on the Hewett Foundation), New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929, 62-63; Excerpt from Chapter II, *The Apostles and the Churches*, text slightly modified)