

The Church and Her Love Part 2

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February 27, 2021

I read a book not too long ago which describes the journey some immigrants take to illegally cross the southern border in search of a better life for their family.

The book was written by a former border patrol agent who had first had accounts of the harrowing experience many people underwent. He described how the drug cartels capitalized on this desire for a better life and accepted money from these individuals to help get them across the border. But the experience in one of these cartel caravans was devastating.

The cartels would never slow down for the weak, be it women or children, often leaving those who were falling behind to die later in the desert on their own. He interviewed one detainee who had his nephew die on his shoulders and the cartel, driven to simply move from point A to point B, refused to even allow him to bury the young boy, casting aside his body to be left for the animals.

We are momentarily pausing from our series in Proverbs to look at what the book of Hebrews has to say about God's people. Interestingly enough, author of Hebrews speaks of the church as a group on a similar quest get to a better place, longing for the promise of a better land. In reflecting on the history of God's people look at what he says: **Hebrews 11:13-16**.

Last week we saw the goal of the church is to together draw near to God through the work of the gospel which makes the many one. But what happens in the church when one of the members of our holy caravan is in need of our assistance?

I wonder how many of us cringe at the heartless stories of the cartels but often treat our own brothers and sisters who are wandering and weak with a similar of callousness? Unconcerned with those who are in need around us as long as we make it to the safely to the end?

Last week we saw how the church is to care for each other through the means of encouragement and stirring up one another in love. But how does the church respond when one of those who shares the same profession of faith has gone past the point of encouragement and is now in need of correction? When as we will see in our text today, a fellow member deliberately and willingly wanders from the pen of Christ?

If we believe that it is only through the veil of Christ's sacrifice on the cross that we can approach God safely, then to be unconcerned with those who willingly abandon that holy mercy is to be heartless towards those dying in your midst.

John Chrysostom who was a pastor a couple hundred years after the New Testament was written said this to his church: **Let us not then be faint-hearted towards one another: for this does not arise from enmity, but from having a small soul.**

In Matthew 18, Jesus is sharing with his disciples what it looks like to care for those in the church, look at the soul he models in **Matthew 18:10-14**.

I'm sure many of us have heard this passage before, but when we hear it we think almost exclusively of its vertical relationship. Jesus is the chief shepherd who pursued the lost. This is certainly a wonderful well of joy for the Christian. In our sins we wandered from God from the moment of our birth, but Christ pursues his sheep.

Yet the primary point of Jesus' parable Jesus shared was not that he pursues straying sheep, but instead it is that since each and every Christian has been pursued by Jesus Christ, Christians are also to pursue the wounded and wandering in their midst.

Because Christ pursued our soul, we have a soul large enough, bold enough, and loving enough to pursue our brothers and sisters who are falling away in sin.

This is what we are going to see today in the book of Hebrews. Our main point today is going to be that **The church cares for itself by loving each other in difficult ways.**

As we journey together as a church to the homeland of glory, God has not only given the church a responsibility for the lives of the lost outside the church, but he has actually given us responsibility and processes in which we care for those who are showing themselves to be lost inside the church.

Last week we saw that the church is to gather together for the sake of encouragement in light of the return of Christ. In other words the gathering of the church is part of God's means to keep his people from sin. In a year where this has been disrupted for various reasons, I remember telling our elders last summer that we should prepare for sins we might find in our own body that manifest themselves in the isolation and darkness this past year has brought.

This has turned out to be the case. Not because I'm a prophet, but because I believe what the Bible says about the importance of the gathered body. But when these things happen, God doesn't leave us without instruction. He tells us how we are to care for those in our midst who are living in sin.

Next week at our members meeting we are going to have a members only portion at the conclusion of our meeting where we go public with what has been going on privately for a long time now in an area called church discipline.

This is something our church has never done publicly yet for both good and bad reasons, but in God's providence to be a faithful church, and for our members to faithfully execute the covenant they made with this individual, they are being asked to exercise love in a sober way.

Because this is new for most of us we are going to look at three things as it relates to this kind of love. First we are going to see **The Loving Heart of Church Discipline**, then we are going to see **The Loving How of Church Discipline**, and lastly we are going to see **The Loving Hope of Church Discipline**.

So what I want to do first is to read the whole of our passage today, and I'm going to start actually with the few verses from last week and I want you to begin to listen for our first point today: **The Loving Heart of Church Discipline**.

Here we see the author pleading for the very heart of those who are in need of correction with firmness but also in loving hope. Let's read together: **Hebrews 10:24-39**.

I hope you heard the pleading heart of God for the sinning member in this passage. But what we want to do while we are here is point out two points of emphasis from this text. First we are going to see the **Heart of the Sinning Member** and secondly we see the **Heart of Loving Correction**.

First in the heart of the sinning member we see the nature of this sin. Who is it that despite their confession of faith, now is proclaimed to be an adversary of God, liable to fury, vengeance and God's just punishment?

Well first we see that the author of Hebrews is not talking about someone who is knowingly a non-believer. This is someone who we saw in verse 32 was enlightened with the confession of the gospel, someone who is throwing away their confidence they once had before God, someone who was at times numbered among the brothers and even suffered for the gospel.

This passage is written to someone who is a professing fellow believer.

Yet, does this mean believers who sin are immediately under this dreadful fate? No.

In fact in 1 John the apostle John says that if there is a Christian who thinks he does have sin he's a liar!

Instead look at how the author of Hebrews describes the heart of this individual: **Hebrews 10:26**.

So note three things here. 1. This person is going on sinning. The Greek here expresses a sort of active and ongoing issue, not a past rare occurrence. 2. This person is going on sinning deliberately, or more literally willingly. There is a desire for this particular sin. In other words it is not viewed with grief but instead with glory by the sinner. And lastly, 3. This person is doing so with the presumption that something apart from Christ's sacrifice on the cross will atone for and remove their sins.

In other words this person is a self-professed believer who is living in active, unrepentant sin without desire to stop and who thinks that they might still faithfully follow Jesus with this left unaddressed.

Perhaps they think that if they keep coming to church it offsets what they are doing wrong. Or if they keep reading their Bible, or if they get baptized it will level the scales and they'll come out ok. But the point here that the author is making is that there is nothing apart from Christ's sacrifice for sins which give you salvation. And how do we respond to this sacrifice? How is all the work of Jesus imputed to the wretched sinner?

Look at Jesus' own words in **Mark 1:15**.

The way in which we find a sacrifice which saves is to repent. That is a positional word which means not just an apology, but a turn from sin. Saving faith is a positional about face which runs to Jesus.

There was an early heretic in church history named Novatus who condemned anyone to hell who at one point was baptized and confessed faith, but who for a season fell away into significant sin. He did more than cast doubt on the unrepentant sinner, but he said that there is no way back for the sinner.

This is the opposite of the gospel! The gospel accounts for our sin and passages like this give us confidence there is a way back. There is no danger for the sinner who comes to Christ, instead there is

full assurance that if you come with faith and repentance that he is abundantly sufficient for you! There is a sacrifice costly enough for your sins, a King loving enough to wash you pure if only you return to him with repentance.

The gospel is not for those who never wander, the gospel is for those who always return.

As scandalous as it is to think that Jesus accepts us back after we have sinned it is far more scandalous to think that God would turn away the contrite sinner from his mercy. For the gospel is for the sinner. The Son of God came not for the healthy but for the sick.

If there is person in here who thinks they have run too far off or gone too far in here is the hope of the gospel that Jesus takes all who come to him with faith and repentance! If that is your fear lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees by coming to the storehouse of mercy held out for you in the gospel!

But, the author of Hebrews is not speaking to the sinner who thinks they need mercy, instead it's the one who thinks they need no mercy. It is one who refuses to return.

The heart of the sinner in this passage is the one who refuses to come back to Jesus with repentance and instead of drawing nearer to God with the church, he is moving nearer to sin in isolation.

But this is also where we see the ***Heart of Loving Correction***.

Why do we speak up in this instance? Because this person is a dead man walking. Note the contrast painted in **Hebrews 10:22, 10:26-27**.

The joy of the Christian is that we get to move towards God with full assurance because of Christ's sacrifice, but when we begin to live outside of his sacrifice we should have no assurance of mercy, but instead the loving friend says that you are assured of your own judgment.

Life hangs in the balance. The gospel is not another worldview, the gospel is life and death.

The author of Hebrews lovingly wants to show this individual that he is in danger of the fire of hell. He alludes to the passage in Deuteronomy which talks about how if someone in Israel began worshipping another God and causing others to do the same, and if that was corroborated by two or three witnesses, that person was to be put to death.

Here, the author says that for a self-professed believer to continually live in sin the witnesses which stand against you are not only those in the church, but also the Triune God himself. You have trampled the work of Jesus Christ, you have made a mockery of the Covenant of the Father, and you have outraged the Holy Spirit.

The result of such a hardened heart is that you are about to fall into the hands of a living God who judges justly.

Why might we go to our sinning brother or sister and preach to them this harsh reality of judgement? Because we love them and want them to see the danger they are in. We refuse to let them walk off into the wilderness without first warning them of the danger they are in.

And when the church begins to pursue brothers and sisters who are falling away, we begin the process of biblical church discipline.

Immediately after Jesus shares the parable of the shepherd leaving to find the one, Jesus begins teaching the longest and clearest passage on church discipline in all of scripture. How do we love those who are falling away? By loving them how Jesus called us to love them. How do we keep others from repeating the same sins? By loving them how Jesus called us to love them.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God and it is a merciful thing to fall into the hands of a biblical church who wants to love you as Jesus commanded.

Here is where we begin to see our second point today: **The Loving How of Church Discipline.**

Look at what the author of Hebrews does after he warns this unrepentant individual of his sins: **Hebrews 10:32-36.**

What do we do even as we warn those of the danger of sin? We plead with them to come back into repentance. This why we recommend members by saying: “Upon this credible profession of faith and visible fruit in their life we recommend them for membership.” We eagerly remind them of the hope we shared with them in the gospel. We lovingly say: do not throw away your confidence!

Part of our membership covenant which members recite to each other before each member meeting is the commitment to lovingly pursue faithful discipline in the lives of each other in instances of unrepentant sin.

The church needs to know what this looks like because the church actually has a responsibility to participate in it.

John Bunyan said it this way in his poetic theology of the church:

**If [hospitable]; I must myself concern
With my dear brother, as I do discern
Him tempted, or a wandering from the way;
Else as I should, I do not watch and pray.
Pray then, and watch, be yourself no drowsy sleeper,
Grudge, nor refuse, to be your brother's keeper,
Do you see your brother's graces at an ebb?
Is his heel taken in the spider's web?
Pray for your brother; if that will not do,
[Go] to him, warn him of this present woe.**

Where does Bunyan get this sense of hospitable responsibility? Matthew 18.

Again right after the call to pursue the one over the 99, look at how Jesus outlines this: **Matthew 18:15-20.**

So here we see four steps of church discipline, two private and two public, and each step is meant to discern if there is an unrepentant heart like the one Hebrews is describing.

The first step shows that many of us have already been pursued in church discipline! The first step is that you are approached by an individual who you sinned against! These conversations are not usually easy but what a grace to have a church who wants to pursue the health of each other in such loving and difficult ways!

In my experience this is where 90% of church discipline cases resolve! The person generally realizes their sin, is aided by their brother and repents and asks for forgiveness.

But there are sometimes where this first private meeting doesn't produce repentance. That can be for two reasons, maybe the person who approached the accused sinner was themselves sinning, or perhaps even misunderstood the scenario.

In that event when they move to the next step and bring another believer with them, that other believer might say, "I don't actually think this person sinned against you, can I maybe help you see it another way."

Or perhaps it was actually sin and the brother refuses to repent, now you and a fellow member get to go and say: "We really think this is serious, if this is really what happened, if this is really how you're choosing to live we want to help you!"

This is where an additional majority of discipline cases end, here in the confines of a loving but small group of brothers and sisters in Christ.

But if at this point the issue remains unresolved, the Lord Jesus has us bring this issue to you, to the whole church. This third step is what will happen at our member meeting on Sunday. The goal of this is not to create a peep show, or a spectacle, and if you are a member who worries they might respond that way, the elders will ask you to excuse yourself from this portion of the meeting.

Instead this is shared so that the church might hear the charge, and plead for the person's repentance.

None of this happens fast. In fact this issue we will see on Sunday is five years in the making. Five years of steps one and two being done. But now God would ask the members to join in making a weighty appeal to this person. This would mean that those who have a relationship with him plead personally with him to repent, and those who don't know him as well pray continually for his soul.

And what happens next? More time is given.

Time to see if this person does indeed listen to the church. Even if there are glimpses of grace the church would choose to celebrate and possibly delay any future action.

But if after a sufficient time has passed, the church is called to make a judgment, this is the fourth step. If this person continues to show a lack of repentance, Jesus has so chosen to equip the local church to remove this person from membership and let him be treated as a non-believer.

Look again at how this is said: **Matthew 18:17-20**. God works in this motion by the church. Look at what Paul says about this judgment after they disciplined a sinning brother in Corinth: **1 Corinthians 5:12-13**. Paul actually makes an astounding claim that God is responsible for those outside the church, but we as the body have the responsibility to deal with and to actually judge those who are part of the church.

We know that Jesus has a parable warning of judgments which come too quick, but at the end of that parable Jesus prescribes judgement. He says after you've dealt with your own sin, then you can see clearly and then deal with the sin in your brother's life.

We also see in 2 Corinthians 2 that this judgement is not something a single man is called to make, it is a judgment the church makes as a majority.

What is this judgment? It is both weighty and yet not final. Why? Because the church cannot save anyone and the church cannot ultimately condemn anyone.

But look at what Jesus says in **Matthew 10:28**. Church discipline is something God gives to the church and something God uses to save sinners and protect his people. But the church cannot save and the church cannot condemn, only God can do that.

But the shadow of church discipline is meant to represent the substance of God's discipline. As we've been working through the book of Proverbs we've learned that Proverbs is wisdom before-hand, advice before you need it. Church discipline is meant to provide you godly fear beforehand.

The goal is that this judgment of man and the horizontal fear that it produces might wake you up to the reality of the fear your soul is in before God himself.

And what happens if we get to this fourth stage of discipline and we as the church body say: "Dear brother, we believe you to no longer be a genuine believer and you stand in danger of judgment"?

We treat him with a distinct evangelism. We don't shun him, but when we are with him there should be a sense of difference, that things are not as they were, that we want him to come back, that his soul is in danger, and yet we will faithfully continue to love him by preaching the gospel to him.

This is where we see our last point today: **The Loving Hope of Church Discipline**.

Look at how Hebrews shows this: **Hebrews 10:35-39**.

We do this so that the person who stands in sin might return to the life of faith. That they might endure and receive the reward of what is promised.

There is a wonderful thing that happened through church discipline in the letters to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians there was a man living in open unrepentant sexual sin, the church went to the fourth step of discipline and put him out from among them. But at some point, this man repented and look at what Paul says: **2 Corinthians 2:6-8!**

Yes there are some who will be put out of the church and who only God will know and see the future of. But dear church we do this process precisely because we trust that God works in this way to save. We do

this process because we love our brothers and sisters and want to see them restored into the fellowship of the saints through repentance.

I've talked to two people in the past year. One was an individual who was disciplined at a church. They said that the experience was one of the most painful they've ever been through, and yet it was one of the places where God showed his loving kindness through the church, and the individual repented.

The other was a friend who when in college his church put out one of his peers, and a decade later she came back, repented and was restored.

We lovingly pursue this discipline because we want so desperately to share in the joy of the gospel.

We also know that we want others to pursue us in this way if this were us. We want to be loved like this even if it is painful. We want to be loved like this because we want to be those who receive the great reward of the gospel by enduring to the end in our faith.

Life as a believer is hard, the Devil wages war against your soul, but the church is here to love you in midst of it with the same gospel which saves us. With souls expanded by the love of the good shepherd we become under-shepherds who pursue each other with biblical love.

And here is this hope in Hebrews, hope for the hurting, hope for the doubting, and hope for the sinning: Yet a little while, and the coming one will not delay, but my righteous ones shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Brothers and sisters the love of the church is a love designed to keep us in the lane of faith and obedience when life is wonderful, and faith and repentance when life is difficult. And as we help each other do this we are reminded that God's church will endure, the straying sheep will come back who are truly God's sheep and we will find in that day the wonderful pleasure of God.

I want to leave us with this pastoral word from John Calvin as a practical point of application for all of us: **Now let it be noticed that this truth belongs also to us, for we, whom God has favored with the light of the Gospel, ought to acknowledge that we have been called in order that we may advance more and more in our obedience to God, and strive constantly to draw nearer to him. This is the real preservation of the soul.**