

The Purity and Peace of the Church
March 8, 2020
Matthew 18:15-35 (Pew Bible, 823-824)

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 8, 2020.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:15–35).¹

In becoming a member of this congregation, you must assent to the following questions:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

The Purity and Peace of the Church
March 8, 2020
Matthew 18:15-35 (Pew Bible, 823-824)

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?²

The succinctly crafted questions are straight forward and help define the essence of what it means to profess faith in Christ, live for Christ, and live as the church of Christ. As much as I like each of these questions, I wonder sometimes if we really understand the fifth question.

What does it mean to *study* the church's purity and peace? To study something is to learn about something, engaging the mind in learning about a subject. But to study purity and peace in the church is more than an academic pursuit; it is actively engaging in it, as it is revealed in Scripture and to pursue it, both personally and corporately.

As Christians, we are to "Put to death . . . what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). We are to love the things of God not of this world, "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" (1 John 2:16). And, we are to desire the same thing for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Similarly, so far as it depends on you and me, we are to live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:18). And specifically, within the church, we are to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, to which indeed we were called in one body (Col. 3:15). In summary, as Hebrews puts it, we are to "strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

Let us then ask the practical question: How do we strive for peace and holiness? How do we study the purity and peace of the church? Let us consider our passage today, in which sin and conflict is presumed. Although not a comprehensive passage on the purity and peace of the church, Jesus gives us practical guidelines and perspective for our *study*. And, what we see first is that how we deal with sin between us is a form of *protecting* the purity and peace.

Protecting the Purity and Peace

If you ever find the perfect church, please don't join it: You'll ruin it! The truth is that this side of glory, there is no perfect church because the church universally and locally is made up of sinners, like you and me. Jesus knows this and knows that sin and conflict are inevitable. (As I say in pre-marital counseling, it's not a matter of if you will fight in your marriage, but when you fight, will you fight fairly?) Likewise, it is not a matter of if your brother or sister *will* sin against you, but when they do what do you do? Note that Jesus' instruction deals with both purity (dealing with sin) and peace (restoration rather than conflict).

² The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America, 57-5.

The Purity and Peace of the Church
March 8, 2020
Matthew 18:15-35 (Pew Bible, 823-824)

In receiving this teaching let's make sure we understand what Jesus is not saying. Jesus is not talking about someone hurting your feelings, or annoying you, or a lack of etiquette.³ You may not like the way I say or do things but that doesn't mean I'm sinning against you. What Jesus is talking about *is* undeniably sin, and it's against you. Whether public or private, it's personal.

So, what do you do? "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." It's personal, so deal with it personally. There is no need to broadcast it to the world. Proverbs says, "Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another's secret, lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end" (Prov. 25:9-10).

Unfortunately, contrary to Jesus' instruction, it is more typical to share your brother's and sister's sins with the world, especially if they have sinned against *you*. This leads to nothing but conflict and is anything but protecting the peace and purity of the church. In contrast, having been on both sides of fault, I can say from personal experience that there is nothing sweeter than restored fellowship between a brother or sister through forgiveness.

Whether or not your brother or sister repents is up to them, but forgiveness is up to you. How many of us harbor sin against us whether our brother or sister repents or not? How often do we condition our forgiveness upon the words or actions of another, as if forgiveness is reciprocal?

You can almost hear that mindset in Peter's question, can't you? "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Like personal fouls in a basketball game, we like to keep count of sins against us. Yet, Jesus says that it's way beyond seven times; try seventy-seven times, meaning what? Stop counting. Jesus says, as Luke records it, "if [your brother] sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying 'I repent,' you must forgive him.

If this is the case, then forgiveness is an essential aspect of our study of the purity and peace of the church.

Forgiving for Purity and Peace

While in the kingdom of this world the vindication of vengeance prevails, in the kingdom of heaven forgiveness prevails. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven. If there is anything telling of our kingdom status, it is this: forgiveness. Jesus provides a parable to teach this truth.

An indebted servant is brought before the king, owing the king 10,000 talents, which is equivalent to roughly \$6 billion dollars. The point, of course, is not the math but the magnitude of the debt. It was a debt that could not be repaid in a lifetime. The king required that the man, his wife, and his children be sold into slavery, and all his possessions sold to pay against the debt. The shortfall would be huge. Pleading for mercy, the servant offers the laughable: an attempt to pay back the debt.

³ Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 2:150.

The Purity and Peace of the Church
March 8, 2020
Matthew 18:15-35 (Pew Bible, 823-824)

Yet, this is our default reaction, whether known or acknowledged or not. Our sin debt against a holy God is insurmountable, and yet we propose the laughable: a payment plan of works. The reality is that even if you never sinned another day in your life, and did every good deed imaginable, you are eternally bankrupt before a holy God.

Note carefully what the king does for the servant in the parable: he “released him and forgave him the debt.” The parable could end here, a metaphor of the gospel! We are sinners by nature, thought, word, and deed and have been forgiven our insurmountable sin debt by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. This is the theme of our assembled worship as a gospel-centered church. But the parable doesn’t end here.

As citizens of the kingdom of heaven we live temporarily in the kingdom of this world, and we who celebrate the gospel of Jesus Christ and the eternal forgiveness we have received can act as if we do not know the gospel at all. Like the servant, how many of us demand of our fellow-sinners: “Pay what you owe”? How many of us, who have been forgiven of much, have imprisoned others in a dungeon of our unforgiveness, standing guard over the sins that others have committed against us? Jesus says that an unforgiving heart is telling. Such a merciless heart of unforgiveness may actually reveal that you are not in the kingdom of heaven at all but headed toward that bastion of unforgiveness, hell.

Let this be simultaneously a warning for conviction and an encouragement to forgive, and purity and peace in the church often begins with individual forgiveness. And with forgiveness comes a joy unexplainable. Unshackled from keeping count and carrying debt, you will enjoy freedom by forgiving. For some, you may never know this joy until you forgive those who never apologized and those who never said they were sorry. And you can hold on and wait for those wrongs to be righted and be miserable. Or you can choose to forgive, and when you do, the joy of forgiveness is your reward.

May our forgiveness then not be in response to the sins of others but to the forgiveness of God. And as we who are forgiven forgive, we mature collectively as a church.

Maturing in Purity and Peace

How then do we, who have been forgiven an insurmountable debt, deal with sin in the church? Does forgiveness mean ignoring sin? Does forgiveness mean there is no need for repentance? What do you do if your brother or sister sins against you and will not repent? Jesus describes a three-stage process for dealing with sin in the church: The first stage, as we have seen, is private. If someone sins against you, go and talk to them privately, work it out, seek restoration. But what if they do not repent?

The second stage involves two or three others. In context, these are those who have witnessed the sin. If there are no witnesses, the two or three may be leaders or elders in the church assisting in restoration. But what if they still do not repent?

The Purity and Peace of the Church
March 8, 2020
Matthew 18:15-35 (Pew Bible, 823-824)

The third stage involves how the church acts corporately, typically through its elders, confronting the unrepentant sinner. In humility, the maturing church moves cautiously seeking to encourage restoration. But what if they do not repent? Then they are removed from membership and considered an unbeliever in need of the gospel.

Does this mean we don't forgive? No! But it does mean that the church must act. For, Christ has given spiritual authority to the church to bind and loose, forbidding and permitting entry into the kingdom of heaven.

In an age which has a low view of the church, this may sound startling. Yet, it is to the church that Christ has given his commission, commands, and keys. It is in and through the church that God matures, his children with his promises and presence. He hears us in our petitions and he sustains us in our pleadings. For, the purity and peace of his church is a rich blessing bestowed upon his faithful children.

We assent to study the purity and peace of the church, as recipients of God's grace. Just as we love because he first loved us, we forgive because we have been forgiven. And, in our study we are not alone, for he promises his presence, as we gather in his name.