

### **The Responsibilities of the Church: Fellowship, Part 3**

Selected Scriptures

90-140

And now as we come to our time in the Word of God this morning, a little bit of an abbreviated time, but we want to look back to the theme of fellowship which we introduced last time. Just to give a little bit of a setting, we've been doing a series now for months on the anatomy of the church. The Bible talks about the church like a body with Christ as the head and the body functioning together in the analogy of a human body and how it operates.

We've taken that biblical analogy and sort of extended it a little bit and we've decided to divide down the functioning of the body into several sub-categories and we talked first of all about the skeleton; those are the things we believe. Those are the doctrines, the foundational doctrines of our faith. Then we talked about internal organs as a body has internal organs that carry its life so the church has spiritual attitudes that carry its life. You need sound doctrine, foundational truth, and you also need the right spiritual attitudes and we went through all of those.

And now we come to the muscles of the body and that's the body in motion or the body functioning or the body in operation, the body in action. What is it that the church does? What do we actually engage in based on our strong foundation of sound doctrine and commitment to those things which are non-negotiable and firmly founded in the word of God and based upon the operation of spiritual attitudes that carry our life? What do we do? And we're looking at those things that are the functions of the church.

We're going to look at a number of them as we go, preaching, teaching, praying, evangelizing, and so forth. But we started off with fellowship. Fellowship. Nothing is more definitive of the character of the body than the broad category of fellowship. Somebody might suggest well shouldn't we have started with teaching or preaching? But in fact teaching and preaching is simply a function within the fellowship; a very very important function by the way, but a function none the less within the broad category of the body ministering to itself in fellowship.

Now fellowship simply is this, a mutual ministry of people serving one another in love; a mutual ministry of people serving one another in love. You could translate the word *koinonea* in the Greek language which is translated fellowship, partnership, companionship, sharing. It has to do with all of those things. The church then is a fellowship. It is a fellowship. It is a ministry of people serving one another in love.

In 1 Romans, and maybe that's a good place to start this morning as we reintroduce the theme of fellowship. Paul writing to the Romans sort of set fellowship in its proper place in his opening part of this great epistle. He says in verse ten that he is always in his prayers making request, and what is his request? He says, "I am praying in all my prayers to be able, by the will of God, to come to you." I want to come and be with you, that's my prayer. And here's why, verse 11, "I long to see you in order

that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established." He's saying I want to minister to you. I want to minister to you; I want to bring you some spiritual reality in ministry. That is, verse 12, "That I may be encouraged together with you while among you each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine." And there's the mutuality, I want to come, I want to be with you. I want to bring you some spiritual gift and encourage and to build you up and establish you. At the same time I want to be encouraged by you as mutually back and forth we minister to each other through the strength of our faith. That's fellowship. I want to be with you for spiritual reasons that are mutual so that I can minister to you and you can minister to me. And that is fellowship. That's what it is; it's all about mutual ministry. Christianity is not something you watch; it's not simply a spectator activity. This service in the morning does not define all of Christianity; it is a component of that. Sitting there, looking up here, listening to what I say, worshipping the Lord collectively, that's a very important part, but that does not fulfill the full range of fellowship responsibility which is when you turn around instead of facing me, face each other, and mutually minister to one another in love.

This of course is crucial as we talk about last time. We even posed the question what does this fellowship mean to you? How important is it? How precious is it to you? Those are questions you really need to ask because this is at the very heart of the definition of the church.

Now I gave you three points last time, I said we're going to work our way through a few to define what we mean by fellowship. Number one was the basis of fellowship. Very important discussion we held on that, if you weren't here get the tape because it is important. The basis of fellowship is salvation. Anybody who's saved is in the fellowship. We saw that from 1 John 1, our fellowship is with the father and with his son Jesus Christ and John says, "We preach to you the Gospel in order that you might come in to the fellowship."

The fellowship is simply common shared life and ministry among people who know God through Jesus Christ. And whether our theology differs or whether our approach to church differs, whether our style of worship differs, whether our race or culture differs, whether our social status differs or not; the fellowship is made up of people who know Christ. People who have come into the salvation that Jesus provided through his death and resurrection.

All of us are the fellowship. We make up the fellowship. We share the common life of Christ within us. We commonly share the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and we're on the same narrow road headed to the same destination, eternal glory in heaven in the presence of God. So all who believe, all who are saved are in the fellowship. And we talked about how we can know when a person is saved; we looked at some of the criteria there.

But we're responsible then for mutual ministry to everybody in the fellowship. You have to make some tough decisions; you don't want to get yourself in a compromising situation. You don't want to get yourself into some kind of mutual involvement in ministry that is going to compromise you or is going to somehow elevate error so you have to make some very careful choices, but as far as mutual ministry, we are responsible to minister to all those the Lord allows us opportunity to in the fellowship.

Alright, secondly the nature of fellowship. The basis is salvation, the nature is sharing. Sharing. That is to say it is nothing more than a mutual ministry. It is nothing more than carrying on mutually with each other. Whether we look at the early church as we did last time in 2 Acts and they were together constantly, every day breaking bread, having fellowship, sharing in prayer and in the Apostle's

doctrine. There was just mutual life on a spiritual level, and that's what fellowship is. It's living life on a spiritual level and mutually ministering to one another.

Thirdly we talked about the symbol and if we continue our little S's here, it would be supper, the Lord's Supper. The symbol of our fellowship is the table, the Lord's Table. The basis salvation, the nature sharing, the symbol is the supper. The Lord's Supper, when we come to the communion table is it not the fellowship of the body of Christ, is it not the fellowship of the blood of Christ? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, "The symbol of our fellowship, the thing that portrays our common ground is when we come to the Lord's Table. There we are all sinners; all at the foot of the same cross, needing the same forgiveness based on the same sacrifice and that celebrates and symbolizes our mutuality and our commonality."

Now we come fourthly for this morning to the danger to our fellowship which is sin; the danger to our fellowship which is sin and it's not hard to figure that out. And I realize that's a very broad category, but it needs to be broad because we need to allow it to be as all encompassing as it is. Any kind of sin, any kind of sin has a negative impact on the fellowship. It is a danger to the fellowship.

Now I'm not talking about the issue of forgiveness, obviously Christian sins are forgiven, 1 Ephesians 7, "In Christ we have the forgiveness of sins." 8 Romans, "No one's ever going to be able to condemn us or lay any sin to our charge because our sins are all covered. He is the propitiation or the covering, the atonement, the satisfaction of the justice of God for our sins." That is a settled issue.

While sin is not an eternal matter any more for us, that is settled, it is still an invasion into the fellowship. Just like sin brings chastening from God it brings devastation in the fellowship.

Now I know we usually think about sin only in so far as it affects us individually. We tend to focus on that. We realize that when we sin it has tremendous implications for us, and it does. When you sin and you don't deal with that sin, you don't repent of that sin, it's going to render your peace and joy in the Lord out of the picture. It's going to just take it and remove it because you're not going to be able to enjoy peace and joy. You're going to have guilt and shame and fears and doubts when you continue in patterns of sin.

When you sin it's going to render you less than useful in the processes of ministry in the kingdom and less than effective in evangelism. It's going to cause God to have to move in another direction and use other agencies to accomplish his purposes because of the sin in your life. Pride, lust, materialism, every category of sin, whatever it might be has devastating impact on your life. It cuts you off from the loving blessing of God which he pours out on those who are obedient, it changes blessing into chastening and so forth and so on.

We need though however to get beyond that because there's more to sin than what it does to you; that's really another subject for another time. What I'm concerned about in this discussion is what sin does to everybody else around you. What sin does to the fellowship?

When you come to 18 Matthew, a very familiar text, and we're going to go there in a few minutes, not quite yet. I just want to refer to a part that we won't look at this morning, but you remember in 18 Matthew verses 15 and following there's a whole discussion there about what you do when you find

somebody in the fellowship who sins. 18 Matthew, very important instruction says this, "If somebody's in sin, go to him. If he doesn't repent take two or three. If he doesn't repent tell a whole church to go and if he still doesn't repent, put him out. Treat him like a tax gatherer and like a gentile, like and outcast." Why? Because sin left to exist in the church has a devastating effect. By analogy it is like cancer in the body and there's really only one thing to do with it and that is to get rid of it because it has a malignant effect. It is like leaven, you put a little bit into a loaf of bread and it leavens the whole loaf.

In 1 Corinthians 5 you have the very same instruction. In 1 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul says, "If you have some so-called brother or sister in your congregation who is engaged in a pattern of sin you need to put that person out of the congregation, turn them over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. Turn them over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh even though their souls will be saved if they're Christians they need to have the devastating impact of the chastening of God upon them. But get them out of the church," and then he says, "Because a little leaven leavens the whole lump."

The impact and the influence of that iniquity has a devastating effect upon the life of the church. Where you have sin in the church you have the shattering of the unity of the church. You have the restriction of the ministry of the church. You have the, somehow hindering of the power of the church. You have the confusion of the purpose of the church. This is very serious.

It's always amazing to me that people in the church, particularly in the modern times in which we live in which marketing seems to be the strategy for everything spiritual as well as everything carnal, the idea is if you want to really be effective in the ministry and effective in evangelism and effective in witnessing in the world, the key is to get a good strategy.

The truth of the matter is if you want to be effective in reaching the world, the key is purity. If churches would spend as much time working on the purity of the congregation as they do on some pattern of strategy, they would find themselves much more effective. It is the holiness that makes the difference. It's by our love that men know we're his disciples. It's by our virtue. It's as we are holy as He is holy as we let the light shine purely and clearly men see our good works and do what? Glorify our father who is in heaven as the German philosopher \_\_\_\_\_ said years ago, "You show a redeemed life I might be inclined to believe in your redeemer."

The question of purity is at the heart of what the church is in its own joy, it's own blessing as well as it's ministry to one another and to it's impact evangelistically on the world around it. So we have to deal with the sin in the church because sin has such a debilitating impact on the congregation itself. It's so serious.

Go back to 1 Corinthians 11 really where we left off last time talking about the symbol of our fellowship which is the supper, the Lord's Supper. Now talking about the danger to the fellowship which is sin, look at chapter 11 this time rather than chapter ten where we were on the last point. Chapter 11 in verse 27, very important portion of Scripture still discussing the Lord's Table here; verse 27 says, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." Now God will determine what that guilt means and what retribution or chastening is required for that guilt, but the point that is made in verse 27 is when you come to the Lord's Table you cannot come in an unworthy manner. What would make you unworthy? Having sin in your life, unconfessed, unrepented sin.

So verse 28 says, "Examine yourself," everybody needs to do that, "and then eat of the bread and drink of the cup." And what are you looking for in that examination? What is that examination endeavoring to locate? Any sin in your life; and you deal with that and then you come. Why? Verse 29, "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself. If he does not judge the body rightly and for this reason many among you are weak and sick and a number sleep." Some of the Corinthians had died because they had come to the Lord's Table with sin in their life. It doesn't mean that you have to be perfect, it just means that you have to be willing to let go of that. You come with a heart of confession and repentance. And they were not doing that and because of that God was chastening them with weakness, sickness or disease, and death. Serious chastening.

In some cases you see it's better to take a sinning person to heaven for the sake of the purity of the church. 1 John 5 says, "There's the sin of the death." No sense in praying for that, the Lord's just going to take the person out because they're too devastating for the church to bear the influence of their iniquity.

I wonder how often that goes on and people don't even recognize it. I wonder how many people die in the life of the church and people don't even realize it's the chastening of God. He may use this disease or that disease or an accident or whatever it might be, but it would be only for heaven to know that but certainly for us to wonder. And particularly in churches where sin is never really dealt with; how many of the people who die in those churches are dying because the Lord is endeavoring to remove those who have such devastating influence?

And yet we know in His grace he doesn't do that in every case, but it's that serious. So verse 29 is the key I want you to look at. The problem here is if you eat and drink with sin in your life, you come to the Lord's Table and you're not really confessing, you're not really repentant, you're holding onto sin, you're not judging the body rightly. What does that mean? That refers to the church. The point is this; you need to be shut out from the symbol of fellowship because you have shut yourself out from the reality of fellowship. You can't come to the Lord's Table which is the symbol, you don't belong there because you have shut yourself out from the reality of true fellowship by your sin, you have no part in the symbol either.

That's reasonable. Until you deal with the reality of your condition before God, you can't engage in the symbol, and the problem is you're not discerning the body. You don't understand the church. Body meaning the church, the unity of the church. You don't understand how your sin defiles the whole. It's much more than what it does to you, it's how it cripples you in regard to the rest of the church if the church is a body, and it is, and is to be fully functioning then you can't have one diseased part of the body without having it affect all the rest.

And it can be something seemingly insignificant. You take a human body and just create a problem in one area and the whole body suffers, is that not true? So if you really understand the body and you understand the unity of the body and you understand your obligation for mutual ministry and love in the power of the spirit of God and you understand the necessity of influencing people purely, then you're going to understand that your sin defiles the fellowship and you're going to deal with that sin.

To partake worthily you must understand the body, the church, and you must deal with sin. Sin is a grave danger to the church. A grave danger.

Now to address that I want to take you to 18 Matthew, and obviously there's so much in this chapter, and look we're already almost out of time, I have hardly been talking two minutes. Now as we come to 18 Matthew just a little bit of background, very briefly, the disciples are in Capernaum which is a little lake edge village on the north of the Sea of Galilee which is really the Lake of Chenetherith, and that's the town where Peter lived and some Bible students believe that they were actually in Peter's house and that Jesus picked up a little baby and that baby was maybe one of the relatives of Peter.

So Jesus is in a hours in Capernaum, maybe Peter's house, and he's sitting there with a little baby on his lap and he uses the baby as an illustration to teach about what it is like to be a believer. We are children, we are babies as it were, and he says first of all in verse three that when you come into the kingdom you have to come in like a child. What does that mean? That means dependent, humble, and having achieved nothing. Children have no credentials. They have no list of achievements. They offer nothing. They are utterly dependent, they can do nothing, they can't function, they can't fix anything, clean anything, do anything, they just are served all the time. They are humble, they have no record of achievements or accomplishments, and you come in naked and needy. That's how you enter the kingdom, like a little baby. "You," verse four, "humble yourself and then you come into the kingdom."

Now, now that we're in the kingdom he wants to talk about how we live as children in the kingdom and the principal that I want to address first of all, there is a principal and it's in verse five. Now we're all children, we're all in the kingdom. We've all come in with no credentials and no accomplishments. We've all come in humbly and needy and by the grace of God we've been accepted as his children and he now cares for us.

Now, verse five, here's the principal, here's the principal of fellowship. I can't tell you any other place in Scripture where the principal of fellowship is better articulated than right here. Here it is, "Whoever receives one such child literally because they belong to me, they bear my name receives," whom? "Me." So the issue here is that in the fellowship since every other Christian in the fellowship is inseparably identified in Christ since Christ lives in them, since they are one with Christ, since the life they live they live by the faith of the son of God who loved them and gave himself for them; since they belong to him and have been adopted into the family of God and are Christ's own beloved and he dwells in them, how you treat them is exactly how you treat him. Now that is the substantial basis of understand fellowship. We treat every other believer appropriately as one who is inseparably linked to Christ. One who belongs to him who is God's own precious child.

Back in 10 Matthew there is an additional insight into this identification. In 10 Matthew 40 Jesus said, "He who receives you," speaking to his disciples, "receives me," same idea, "and he who receives me receives Him who sent me." You can't divorce another believer from Christ and you can't divorce another believer from God himself.

So what is received mean? It means to embrace. It means to open up your arms with a view toward meeting every need. That's the idea. Whatever that need of that individual might be. You embrace that. You receive them. Not because of anything about them personally. Not because of their personality or their social status or whatever it is but because they bear my name. Every Christian come then, and in that Christian comes Christ and we open our arms as we would to the Lord himself if we were called upon to meet a need that he had because there is a need in the life of one who is very precious to him.

Look at 25 Matthew for a moment; verse 34 at the judgment to come, the judgment of the nations. The king in verse 34 will say to those on his right, "Come you are blessed in my father and here at the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Okay, there's a kingdom coming and he says to these people who are the believers, "Come into the kingdom. You're welcome to the kingdom." Verse 35, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I was naked, you clothed me. I was sick, you visited me. I was in prison, you came to me." Now there's an obvious question coming out of this, "Then the righteous will answer him saying Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and invite you in or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and come to you? And the king will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine even the least of them, you,' what? "Did it to me." You can't separate God's people from him. You can't separate Christ's own from him.

So the principal here of fellowship is treat one another as Christ should be treated, and if He came with a need how would you respond? That's the principal.

Now in verses six and seven we have the peril here. And now we get into the issue of sin. We move from the receiving to the peril. Verse six, "Whoever causes one of these little ones," what little ones? Babies? No, little ones who believe in me, believers. "You cause anyone of these who believe in me to stumble." What does that mean? To trip, to fall into sin, obviously, to stumble into sin. "If you are the reason for their sin, you've put the stumbling block, it is better, or literally in the Greek, is it to your advantage that a heavy millstone be hung around your neck and you be drowned in the depth of the sea." That was a gentile form of execution, the Jews hated it. It was the most terrifying death to a Jew to think about drowning with a heavy stone around your neck and being thrown off the edge of the boat. "It would be to your advantage though," he says. "It would be to your advantage." Now how could it be to your advantage to have that happen? I'll tell you why.

It is more advantageous to be in heaven than to be on earth being chastened for sin. Right? I mean it's more advantageous to be in heaven if you're on earth being blessed. It's much more advantageous to be in heaven than if you're on earth being chastened. Now that is the grace of God mingled with the protection of his church. In order to protect the church, he'll get you out of here. At the same time that's a frightening verse. I want to go to heaven, but I'm not sure I want to go there that way. In fact I'm sure I don't want to go there that way.

So while there was a certain terrifying reality in the anticipation of this prospect, in the end it was better for that person to go to heaven and go to the blessing of heaven than to endure the chastening on earth and it was certainly better for the church because you don't need somebody who goes around putting stumbling blocks in front of believers.

So the principal in verse five is treat each other as you would treat Christ and the peril here is don't cause another believer to stumble into sin. Better that you should have a huge, crushing stone that crushed out grain tied around your neck and you are thrown into the bottom of the sea.

Now the question comes at this point, how do you do this? I mean how do you cause other Christians to stumble? I want to give you four ways you do that. Four ways I'd do that if I do that:

number one, by direct temptation. By direct solicitation to someone to do evil. You literally lead someone into sin. You are the direct tool of their temptation. Genesis 3:6 that was what Eve was she was an absolutely direct tool of temptation in the case of her husband Adam. What did she do? She went to Adam and she said, "I ate this fruit and this is the deal, and you eat." And he did. She was directly soliciting him to do evil.

You have another illustration, there are many of them, but you have another one, 32 Exodus. In 32 Exodus you have Aaron and Moses confronts Aaron after he's, you know, did the whole thing with the golden calf, and led the people in idolatry and he says to him, "Why did you lead Israel into sin? Why were you the direct instrument of temptation to lead them into sin?" And then I wish I had the time to develop this, but I don't, there is a record and of course as you know I've been studying through the Old Testament now for a year and a half and there are some familiar stories to me that have become much more familiar in the intensity of this study. One of them that stands out is the story of Jeroboam. David you remember followed Saul as the second king in the nation of Israel and then David's son Solomon reigned after him and from the human viewpoint it was an amazing king and that he oversaw as the Queen of Sheba came to attest, but the seeds of terrible destruction were built into Solomon's life because of his many wives and his many foreign alliances and his sin and all of that. And when Solomon completed his reign as the third of the king's of Israel, the kingdom split and it split into the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom and the southern kingdom was Judah and it involved the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin and then the ten northern tribes constituted the kingdom that became know as Israel. Reoboam became king of the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom king was a man named Jeroboam, and Jeroboam was afraid. When Jeroboam got into his kingdom he had a problem so in 1 James 12 Jeroboam looked at the situation, he said, "Look this is not good because the place of worship is in Judah. Jerusalem was in Judah." It was in the territory of Benjamin actually but it was encompassed in the kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom, so he said if all of my people from Israel trek down there all the time, Reoboam is going to win their hearts and their affection and what's going to happen is he's going to conquer me or there's going to be just victory in the cold war and he's going to wind up being the king and I'm going to lose my power.

So in order to try to stop that from happening, up in the North in Ephriam, the area of Ephriam, he decided to build two golden calves, can you imagine that? So he established idolatry in Israel from which Israel never recovered. And he was the first king to establish that idolatry and listen to this, every single king from then on in Israel followed in the same path and there was never one single good king in the northern kingdom clear to the end in 722 when the Assyrians came and took them away into captivity from which they never returned.

So he sewed the seed of the total demise of the northern kingdom in the very first years of its existence. And it says in the book of 1 Kings, "Jeroboam, the son of Nebat who led Israel to sin." And then every time it mentions him, you go into chapter 15 of 1 Kings and verse 30 and 34. You go into chapter 16; it's in verse two, 19, 26. You go to chapter 18, it's twice there. You go to chapter 21 it's there, chapter 22 it's there. You flip over into 2 Kings it's in chapter three, ten, 13, 14, 15, 23, every time it mentions the name of Jeroboam it says, "Jeroboam, the son of Nebat who made Israel sin." It's like it was his last name.

He made Israel sin, and when you read through all of that and it says about King Asa, he did what Jeroboam did, the son of Nebat who made Israel sin. And then it says about Jehoram he did what Jeroboam did, the son of Nebat who made Israel sin. And then Jehu did what Jeroboam, the son of

Nebat who made Israel sin did. And every time it talks about him it has that whole litany. There's a message there, God takes so seriously someone who leads people directly into iniquity. Don't be the cause of tempting someone to sin, whatever that might be.

You can do it by teaching lies about God as a teacher. You can do it by compromising someone sexually. You can do it in business relationships. You can try to find somebody who will join in your lie or your bitterness, I mean, there are a lot ways to do it.

Secondly, you can cause people to stumble and you'd be better off dead than to do that, but you can cause people to stumble not only by direct solicitation to do sin, but by indirect temptation. You can be an indirect source, but how do you do that? Well, by provoking them. Sometimes you're very pious in doing it. You can provoke people. You who are married know how to provoke your spouse, you know the hot buttons. You know exactly what they are. You're just like your mother, that's usually one. I should have know better when I married you; I saw what your mother was like, why did I do this? Now that may sound like a pious statement, but you know that will frustrate somebody, upset them.

Parents can do that. It says in Ephesians 6:4 parents do not provoke your children to what? To anger. How do you provoke a child to anger? You can do it by being pious. You can do it by being so pharisaical and legalistic that they get completely frustrated with that. You can do it by overprotection. You can do it by pushing them into levels of achievement that are unrealistic. You can do it by discouraging them, never encouraging them, and building them up. You can do it by failing to sacrifice lovingly for them. You can do it by failing to allow them to make some mistakes and learn from them. You can do it by neglect. You can do it by bitter words. You can do it by physical harm. I mean there are lots of ways in which you can be the indirect cause of someone's sin.

There's a third category in which we can cause people to stumble and that is by setting a sinful example. By setting a sinful example. People are watching your life and it's very important the kind of example you set. When you sin you don't necessarily sin alone. There are attitudes that you convey, there are words that you say, gossip, slander, lies, bitterness, things you do. People watch, see those things. Your sinful behavior gets passed on. You become by your sin the excuse for somebody else's or the justification for somebody else's.

It's absolutely to set a high standard as an example. Your anger, your bitterness, your laziness, your lack of love for God, your unfaithfulness, your indifference to the lost, your indifference to the church, your worldliness, your materialism, your whatever sets a pattern for others to follow. It's certainly true at home, certainly true in a circle of friends and acquaintances. You can cause people to stumble, to fall into sin. You can cause them to be offended. You can cause them to be made weak, literally begin to go backwards in their spiritual progress because they see the sin in your own life.

In 14 Romans this is a topic that dominates that chapter. 14 Romans 13 says this, "Don't put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way." Then it goes on to talk about even things that aren't in themselves sin, but might offend him maybe he's come out of a pagan background and there are certain parts of his pagan background that sort of catapult him into sin. When he thinks about them they regurgitate all those old thoughts. You know they used to eat that food that was offered to the idols and then they came to know the Lord and they were severed from the idol temple and all that terrible wicked stuff that went on in those idolatrous temples was so heinous to them they would see

a Christian eat food that was offered to idols that he bought in the butcher shop from the back of the pagan temple and if you made them eat that it would so offend them and so wound their conscience and grieve them that it might even conjure up all the old memories of idolatry and paganism and all the old orgies that went with it. You'd literally send them spinning and spiraling into some offense and weakness that would cause them to go backwards in their spiritual life so you had to be very careful. "Don't destroy the kingdom for food and drink", Paul says.

Even those gray area things that in themselves are not wrong. People often ask me about that, you know, do I drink alcoholic beverages? And my answer is no, for a number of reasons. One I can find stuff that tastes better and two I can find stuff that quenches my thirst. Why do I need to drink that stuff? As soon as I drink that I become a standard by which somebody else justifies that and that perhaps in their case leads then into iniquity. I don't want to be responsible for that, so that's a liberty I choose not to exercise.

There are things in life that we say no to even though in themselves they might not be wrong, and maybe you can handle some things that other people can't, but you want to be sure that you're not the cause of someone's sin by setting a sinful example. Don't you think for a minute that somehow you can live in a pattern of sin and not affect somebody else with that pattern? It is a contagious disease. You know I think about so often, you would like to be able to say, "Well, I live a holy life and I live a pure life simply and only out of my love for God." That's true. You'd like to be able to say that and that is a component and that's a very strong component, but it is also true that I want to live a holy and a godly life not only because of my love for God, but because I really don't want to be responsible for somebody else's messed up life. I have enough to account for for my own life, I don't want to be the cause of someone else's iniquity by setting a sinful example. and so whether it's before my dear wife or before my children or those who know me best, I want to be sure that my life is everything that is should be to honor the Lord so that there is no example established that somebody else might follow and follow into sin and chastening and then my guilt would be compounded as well.

In Galatians 5:13 Paul says, "You were called to freedom, brother, and don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." That's fellowship. You're going to set aside certain freedoms, certain liberties, the right to do certain things. You're going to set those aside because you certainly don't want to do anything but love another brother and you don't want to exercise a freedom for the indulgence of your own joy with utter disregard to another believer who might be offended by it.

Then one last point and we'll wrap this up, we can lead people into sin by direct solicitation of temptation, indirect solicitation by knowing the ways in which we can exacerbate them and create their anger and hostility and thirdly by setting a sinful example that others see and emulate. Fourthly and this is the omission part of this little list, you can cause someone to stumble by failing to stimulate them to righteousness. It might not be anything you do but it might be what you don't do. You can't approach people indifferently. You have to take upon yourself what Hebrews 10:24 talks about "stimulating one another to love and good works."

You have to teach and hold up and admonish and instruct and exhort to a righteous standard. It might be that you haven't set a sinful example, but it might well be that you haven't aggressively endeavored to help someone grow in righteousness. You might say, "Well I've never led my wife or my children into a pattern of sin. I've never really tried to, I certainly don't think I'm a direct solicitor to

evil and I've tried to avoid indirectly exacerbating them so that the sin because of my indirect involvement. I've tried to set a good example." But the question still remains, are you the source of righteous stimulation?

That's still the question. That's still the question. Are you the source of righteous stimulation? It is a deadly serious thing to lead Christians to stumble into sin.

Verse seven, back to Matthew 18 and we'll wrap it up here. "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks." In other words, we expect the world to do that. We expect the world to cause people to stumble. The God of this age, Satan, prince to the power of the air, prince of this world, he's concocted a system to make Christians stumble. "It's inevitable that stumbling blocks come," verse seven, "but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes." Woe, what does that mean? Curse. Curse that man. We expect the world to do this. I picked up a copy of Newsweek magazine and I was reading an article about a new movie about Larry Flynt, Larry Flynt of Hustler fame, a pornographer. And the magazine extolled the virtues of this man as a great champion of free speech and that he was a man who needed to be elevated and exalted by this film because he had preserved one of the great constitutional freedoms of our country; the freedom of speech.

The true definition of the man is in verse seven that I just read to you. "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks. It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes." Newsweek's definition of the man might be that he's a freedom fighter. God's definition of the man is that he's cursed because he's put stumbling blocks that have caused people to fall into gross iniquity.

The principal then is in verse five. "You receive each other as you would receive Christ." The peril is in verse six and seven. "Don't do anything to cause anybody to stumble." The prevention, can I say this in two minutes? The prevention, say I don't want to do this, I don't want to do this, how do I deal with it, verses eight and nine. "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. Throw it from you. It's better for you to enter life crippled or lame than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. Throw it from you, it's better for you to enter life with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into the fiery hell." Now stop right here folks, you have to hear what I say because I don't want you to go and maim yourself.

You say is this to be taken literally? This is hyperbole. This is a statement, probably a statement that, Jesus uses this statement at different occasions that may have been sort of a proverb that developed at that time, but you can't just take it literally. If you have a wicked evil heart and you cut off one hand, your other hand will do the wickedness. And if you have an evil wicked heart and you cut off your feet, you'll get there to your sin in a wheelchair. And if you pluck out your eye, then your imagination will run rampant for what you can't see.

The point here is simply this; this is a hyperbolic way of saying, "Deal with any sin in your life drastically." Take drastic action because of the implications. Take drastic action because of the implications and the implications in this particular context are not to you but to the fellowship. To the fellowship. The proverb is just a proverb, a general proverb that says, "Deal drastically with sin." Jesus by the way used it back in Matthew 5:29-30 there as well. It's like 1 Corinthians 9:27, "I beat my body into subjection." It's metaphoric and it was particularly directed at the world in verse seven, but certainly is relevant to the rest of us. Sin demands drastic action because it is so serious. It leads to hell in the case of unbelievers. It leads to disaster in the fellowship in the case of believers.

So, fellowship comes down at this point to the danger which is sin. This is so serious that we have to take drastic steps to prevent it or be in danger of chastening and even death and the removal of the Lord in some painful way.

This is the danger to the fellowship and you have to understand that you don't exist alone, you're not isolated, you're in the fellowship, and your life has this potential impact. How much better that is should have an impact for righteousness, true? Well I'll leave it at that for this morning. Tonight we're coming back to this subject and we're going to talk tonight not about the danger, but the final point, the responsibility of fellowship. The responsibility. Well actually if I have time I might even throw in one more point, if you're lucky tonight. But certainly we'll talk about the responsibility of fellowship. Let's pray.

Our father we thank you again today for the clarity with which your word speaks because it warns us, it instructs us, it leads us to the path of blessing and usefulness and joy, fruitfulness and glory for your name. Help us to be faithful to walk in that path that you might be honored. Keep us pure, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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