

The Responsibilities of the Church: Fellowship, Part 4

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-141

As we come back to our study of fellowship tonight and wrap that particular muscle up, for those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, we're talking about the body of Christ. We're doing a series on the church as the body of Christ and as we know a body has muscles and muscles create the action of the body, they put the body in motion and so we're talking about the action of the church, what the church does. We're not talking about its theology so much, although it has certainly theological implications as to what to we do. We're not talking about spiritual attitudes precisely. We're talking about the function of the church, what the church does. What does a church do? I know that people see a church sitting on a corner, they see a building, they maybe see people coming and going. That doesn't really answer the question; what does a church do?

Well first of all a church functions. It goes into action in fellowship. That word simply means companionship or partnership and has to do with a mutual ministry of people serving each other in love. That's what a church does. Fellowship means partnership. It means that we engage mutually in ministering to each other in love for the purpose of spiritual edification, a building each other up spiritually. Making each other more strong spiritually. Making each other more Christ like, that's fellowship.

We talked about the basis of fellowship being salvation, that is everybody who's saved is in the fellowship and a part of the fellowship. We said the nature of fellowship was sharing, that is that we mutually share with one another on the level of spiritual need. Thirdly, the symbol of fellowship was the supper, the Lord's Supper. We talked about that and reaffirmed it again this morning. And then also this morning we came to a fourth point about the fellowship of the church and that is the danger to fellowship which is sin. And we talked about how sin devastates the fellowship. And remember that in Matthew chapter 18 we looked at how it is that we must be careful never to cause another believer to fall into sin, and we have to be careful according to 1 Corinthians 11 to examine our own lives and not allow our own lives to fall into sin because in so doing we misunderstand the body or we fail to discern the body or that is to say the impact of our sin on the lives of others. The danger to fellowship indeed is sin, and that behooves us to be very careful as to how we live our lives and deal with the sin in our lives in such a way as to set it apart and to confess it and to repent of it and to shun it.

And we ended up at that point, if you go back to Matthew chapter 18 let's sort of end that message again this morning with a comment or two.

You remember that at the very end of our discussion this morning, we said the way you deal with sin is to treat it drastically and we used that proverb in verses eight and nine of Matthew 18, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off, throw it from you," and so forth.

We have a principal operating here in verse five we receive one another as if we were receiving Christ. There is a peril involved if you cause another believer to stumble it would be better for you to be drowned in the depths of the sea than to be the source of the stumbling of another believer. Verse seven, "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks." God is going to judge the people who put stumbling blocks in front of his children.

So if it is so serious this matter of sin and if there is such a consequence, even the consequence of chastening and even chastening unto death as we saw, by God you much then drastically deal with your sin as in verse eight and nine, get rid of it. Cut it out, cast it from you, and pursue a holy life.

So the basis of fellowship is salvation, the nature is sharing, the symbol is the supper, and the danger is sin. Now let's come to the responsibility. Stay in the same chapter for a little while, but let's come to the responsibility and the responsibility in a word is serving, is serving.

We are all servants and we look not on our own things according to Philippians 2 but on the things of others and we consider others better than ourselves. In 2 Corinthians 8:4 you can write that down, the Bible says, "The fellowship of serving." The fellowship of serving and that's exactly what the nature or the responsibility I should say of fellowship is. It is serving. We are involved as we've been pointing out all along in a mutual commitment to one another for the sake of spiritual service.

Now that falls into two broad categories and I want you to understand those though I'm not going to take the time to fully develop them. Perhaps down the line a little bit I might do that, we'll see. But the responsibility of fellowship which is serving falls into two categories. First of all, the use of spiritual gifts, the use of spiritual gifts. And as I said, that is really another study to be done on another occasion, but the Bible is very clear that every believer is given a spiritual gift. A spiritual gift for the use of the body.

Now when you look at someone who has a very obvious gift you can see the gift in action. Maybe you know somebody who has got what the Bible calls the gift of giving and the Scripture talks about some having the gift of giving. People who are just generous, just beyond the normal kind of even spiritually mature people; they give in a manner that is magnanimous and beyond even the norm. Those people have the gift of giving, and there are those who have the gift of teaching and the gift of preaching and there are some who have the gifts of helps and some who have the gifts of administration and those gifts are basically outlined in Romans 12 starting in verse three and down from there and also in 1 Corinthians 12.

If you read Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 you'll come across the various categories of spiritual gifts. They are also mentioned in general in 1 Peter 4. They are divided into two parts. 1 Peter 4 talks about the gifts that are speaking gifts and the gifts that are serving gifts. Some gifts like preaching, teaching, gifts of wisdom, knowledge, exhortation, and so forth are primarily speaking gifts. And then there are serving gifts like giving and helping and administrating and things like that. And so the gifts then are the means and this is just all I want to get to tonight, they are the means by which the Holy Spirit ministers through you to the body. Enough to say they're not really for you; they're for the body of Christ. Your gift is for me and my gift is for you. I use my gift to build you up, you use your gift to build me up, and that's how we mutually minister to one another.

And that's why the Scripture says to us, if you have the gift, use the gift. If you have the gift, the spirit of God has divided it to you, he's given it to you as a means by which you can minister mutually, a means by which you can serve and that's your responsibility in the body, and if you have that gift you are to use that gift.

Now every one of us has a gift. I like to think of it as one gift because it's in the singular in 1 Peter 4, "As each man has received the gift." You say, "Well don't people have sort of multiple gifts?" Well they have one gift which is the combination of multiple categories, let's put it that way. You have a gift, I have a gift. My gift might be a combination of multiple things. I have to preach and I have to teach and I do some exhortation and I do some technical things that somebody might consider a word of knowledge in the sense of digging in and uncovering the knowledge of the Scripture and God has given me the oversight of the church and so there are certain administrative gifts; really what I call gifts of leadership rather than administration which usually means to people sort of moving papers around on a desk, more the area of leadership. But that package of gifts that God put together and dropped in me is the way the spirit of God ministers through me to the body of Christ.

There are basically categories of giftedness, I like to think of them that way, like colors on a painting palette and the spirit of God takes the brush and dips into this color, that color, this color and paints you so that you really are in terms of your spiritual gift a combination of categories of giftedness all blended together and energized by the spirit of God for the ministry of the body of Christ. And some of you have gifts that are basically speaking gifts and some of you have gifts that are basically serving gifts and some even have a combination of those things and there is a marvelous uniqueness. Every one of us is sort of a spiritual snowflake; every one of us is different and distinct. Every one of us is a spiritual fingerprint and no two are alike so that the body of Christ is greatly dependent upon using your gifts.

Through the years at Grace Church this is one of the things that we have emphasized most strongly. I have taught many series on the gifts. We have written a book in the past on spiritual gifts, we have gone through this kind of teaching repeatedly through the years because it's absolutely essential that

we understand how God wants to use us with our gifts.

But let me just suggest something to you lest you sort of walk away in wonder trying to sort out what your gift is. It's very hard to define and I think it can be an oversimplification if you try too hard to do that. I know that through the years people have developed the little tests and little computerized process that you punch all the right little holes or you check all the right little boxes and the computer will spit out what your gift is. That to me is a gross oversimplification. There is one way that you can sort of define your gift in some kind of categorical way. In fact the lists of gift in 1 Corinthians 12 and the lists of gifts in Romans 12 differ which is to suggest to us that they're just sort of general categories of giftedness and they're not fixed and they're not necessarily exact. And there's a wonderful flexibility in the spirit of God and when those categories are blended in you, they come out very very uniquely. It's important to remember that.

The best to know what your gift is is simply to look and see what you do when you're filled with the Holy Spirit, obedient to the word of God and you get moving. What is it that you do best? What is it that you love to do? What is it that you do that people respond to? What is it that brings you the greatest amount of joy in the doing? That's how you can discern your gift. I guess maybe in a sense it's in retrospect. It isn't a question of somehow discovering your gift and saying, "Okay, now that I know what it is I'll use it." It's sort of a case of getting into motion as a Christian and doing what your heart tells you to do and what your desire is to do and see how people respond and saying in retrospect then that's my gift. I guess what I'm saying is if you don't get into action you're not going to ever find out what it is. And you may never really be ever to air tight define it. We're not a lot of rubber ducks who all came out of the same machine looking the same and quack in unison. We are distinct and spiritual gifts is one way in which we exercise our responsibility of serving the body. I have that responsibility and it's very obvious that I have it and I try to discharge that responsibility in my leadership and in my teaching and in my preaching. But my responsibility to be faithful to my gift is no greater than yours to be faithful to your gift. And you might say, "Well I don't have a very important gift." And we're back to 1 Corinthians 12 where somebody saying, "Well I'm only the little toe, so what? If I was the nose or the eyes or the face a more visible part I might get a little more excited about my role." But that's not how it works; every part of the body is designed by God to have a function so that the whole body can be everything it needs to be.

In fact in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul points out that some of the less lovely parts are the most necessary part. Now I don't want to get personal, but the most important part of you is ugly, and you say what are you talking about? What I'm talking about is when somebody slits you open at the hospital for your surgery, what is revealed is not particularly beautiful. It's pretty ugly stuff in there, but I would venture to say it's much more important than your skin condition. It's much more important than the shape of your nose. It's much more important than anything on the outside because that's the stuff that keeps you alive. While those more seemly parts of the body do have a role to play and we certainly thank God for those things that make us attractive to one another, and that's a wonderful gift

of God, they are in some ways at least by Paul's analogy in 1 Corinthians 12, not nearly as important as to make sure your heart and your lungs and your kidneys and other things work. And so it is in the body of Christ. What may not even be visible as something on the outside, what may not be even seen by people, may in reality be the most important thing.

You may think that your gift of prayer, the New Testament calls it the gift of faith but I really think the gift of faith is just another way to talk about the gift of prayer, people who are just consumed with intercession that to me is certainly vital to the life of the body of Christ and vital to my own ministry as well.

So, enough said about that. The first general category in which we discharge the responsibility of fellowship which is serving is through our spiritual gifts which is to say everybody is designed by God to have a ministry. Nobody is on the outside looking in on that one. You have a ministry and it is up to you to be faithful to discharge that ministry, to follow the desire of your heart, the longing of your heart, to do that thing which excites you and which is blessed by God and which generates a positive response from people, whatever that might be.

Now secondly, there is another category in which you discharge your responsibility of serving and that is the one anothers of the New Testament, the one anothers of the New Testament. You have a responsibility to discharge to one another all of those injunctions and commands that are laid out in the Scripture and there are many of them. Many years ago I decided to do a study of this and I went into the New Testament and extracted all the one anothers and then I went through them and preached a series on them because they really are the life of the church as it exercises its responsibility for serving. Everywhere that you read in the New Testament the phrase one another, you need to stop and take note because it's very likely that there you're going to find a mandate for your spiritual responsibility. We are to be involved in caring for one another in all of the ways in which the Scripture outlines that and I'll say more about that tonight.

Let's go back to Matthew 18 now with that in mind. We've already learned that we have this very important responsibility toward other believers and that is not to lead them into sin because of the danger that it poses to the unity of the body. But I want to go beyond that a little bit and I want to add something else that I think fits wonderfully into this point of responsibility. We're not so much talking about sin here, but we're talking about mutual ministry to each other, serving one another. Look at verse ten, Matthew 18:10 "See that you do not despise one of these little ones that is another believer. Well I say to you that there are angels in heaven continually behold the face of my father who is in heaven."

Now this simple little phrase says don't look down on another believer. That's a true commitment to fellowship. You're to care for every other believer. Every believer who comes across your path becomes an opportunity for you to exercise your spiritual gift for the one anothers or the New

Testament. To despise means to hold in contempt, to treat with indifference. It can be everything from contempt to indifference, everything in between. All ranges of non-response, everything from outright disdain and contempt all the way over to just plain indifference, not treating them with any value at all. And here our Lord says in verse ten "You should not do that to one of these little ones." The little ones are those who believe in him. You are not to belittle another Christian. You are not to despise another Christian. The Greek verb means here to think down, to demean. That's not to be done.

This is a warning and before we get into the positives of the one anothers, we need to look at this warning for just a moment. Now why is it important? Because it says in verse ten that "There are angels in heaven continually behold the face of my father who is in heaven." And I'll get to that in a moment, but that puts a very serious note on this matter. You cannot treat other believers with indifference. You must minister to them. You cannot think so little of them or have so much disdain for them that you disregard your responsibility.

Now there are a number of ways of doing this and I'll suggest a few of them that'll overlap a little with what we said this morning, but there are a number of ways in which you can despise another believer. It doesn't mean you hate them. It doesn't mean you feel anger or hostility or bitterness to them. Let me suggest some ways that you can belittle them or demean them or hold them in contempt or disdain or indifference: number one, by flaunting your liberty, by flaunting your liberty. Remember we saw this morning in Romans 14 and 15 that the Lord says, "You never use your liberty to be an occasion to cause somebody else to stumble." And we talked about that. We might be free to do a certain thing because it's not forbidden in Scripture, but if we were to do it, it would cause another Christian to stumble and there were for example a number of people in the early church, many who'd come out of Judaism and they were still holding to the Sabbath because they'd been raised, it was engrained in them, it was a part of the fabric of their life. It was so deeply embedded in their belief system that their conscience would be very very aggressive in accusing them if they ever violated the Sabbath. Well now they had become Christians and some Christians might tell them, "You don't need to keep the Sabbath." And those Christians might pay no attention to the Sabbath; they might be free to do anything and everything on the Sabbath. If they did that in the face of those other believers it would be a great offense. So you set your liberty aside so as not to offend them, not to grieve them, and not to cause them to stumble.

The same we said was true of someone converted out of paganism who had eaten meat off of Jew idols. You don't serve a person meat off of Jew idols who's come out of that kind of background because that will be an offense and that will send them right back into all the horrors of that kind of life. And sometimes, you know, when we find somebody who's legalistic or sort of still bound by the past we push too hard with our liberties and we cause them to stumble and be grieved and their conscience gets activated and they get accused by their conscience and they become guilty, and when they become guilty about the things that are not really biblical issues it tends to push them back

into the former patterns. And so you don't want to flaunt your liberty.

James gives us a second way that we can despise one another and it's a pretty clear one. James in chapter two of his epistle says, "My brethren do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." In other words in the fellowship you have to treat everybody the same, treat everybody better than you, not worse than you, don't look down on anyone. If a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes and there also come in a poor man in dirty clothes and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes and say, "You sit here in a good place." And you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, sit down by my footstool." Just basically get out of the draft, you know? Get out of the way. If you do that, verse four says, "Have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives?" Listen my beloved brethren did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into courts?" He says more about that in chapter five of course. "Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?" And the down in verse nine, "But if you show partiality you're committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

If you look down on poor people, you look down on people who aren't quite up at your economic level, you are despising them. We have a responsibility within the fellowship not to flaunt our liberty in the face of those who are weak and we have responsibility as believers not to look down on those who are poor.

Thirdly, you can despise a brother or sister within the fellowship by withholding from the what they need, by withholding from them what they need. You remember in 1 John 3 John says, "If you know that your brother has need and you don't give what he needs to meet that need how dwells the love of God in you?" How can you possibly think so little of your brother as not to meet his great need, and then in 1 Corinthians 11:21, "In your eating each one takes his own supper first and one is hungry and another is drunk." It's an unbelievable thing; they came together for a love supper, a love feast, a love meal which was basically pot luck. The problem was everybody ate their own pot and the people who showed up and didn't have anything, never got anything. Can you imagine that kind of a deal? Everybody ate his own and nobody who was hungry got anything and they not only ate their own, they indulged themselves to the point of drunkenness. "What?" he says, "Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Do you despise the church of God? Do you think so little of other believer's needs that you would come and sit opposite them at the same table and feed your face and give them nothing? What shall I say to you?" he says. "Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. You belittle another believer when you have no regard for their needs."

And fourthly, you can belittle another believer by ridiculing their physical features. In 2 Corinthians 11 I think of the cruelest things that were said against the Apostle Paul was in 2 Corinthians 10:10, they

say his letters are weighty and strong but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible. They said he lacks charm, he lacks charisma, he's homely, he's nothing to look at, and he's a terrible speaker. They just assaulted him as a person, ridiculing him.

Fifthly, you could belittle someone, think little of them, demean them, ignore them, disdain them by looking with indifference on a Christian, who has fallen, by looking with indifference on a Christian who has fallen. I worry about this particularly in a church like ours where we have the doctrine so clearly articulated and where we understand the standard to be what it is and what God has ordained it to be; standard of holiness and godly living, and it's easy for us in holding that standard high to become judgmental of the people who fail to meet it rather than compassionate. In Galatians 6, "Brethren even if a man is caught in any trespass," pretty broad, "if he's caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness or meekness each one looking to yourself lest you too be tempted." That really puts it in perspective doesn't it? "Recognize that except for the grace of God you could be there and don't look with indifference on a Christian who has fallen. When someone falls into sin you are spiritual restore him in a spirit of meekness or gentleness and look in your own heart and realize that it could be you, and you bear one another's burdens", it says in verse two.

You help that man pick himself up under the load of that sin and thus you'll fulfill the law of Christ. What's the law of Christ? The royal law, the law of liberty; James called it the law of love. The law of loving your neighbor as yourself.

So when we talk about not belittling or disdaining or treating with indifference another believer, we're talking about not flaunting our liberty in front of the weak, not looking down on the poor, not withholding from those in need, not ridiculing someone for some physical problem and not looking with indifference on one who has fallen.

Here's another one: you can belittle another Christian, you can disdain another Christian by rejecting those who confront your sinfulness, by rejecting those who confront your sinfulness. When some Christian comes to you or to me to point out some failure in our life, to point out some sin or some iniquity, we need to respond to that. We need to respond to that openly and honestly and gratefully. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4 says this, "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise. We are weak, but you are strong. You are distinguished, but we are without honor." Paul is so humble and so meek and though there are certain sarcasm there he acknowledges his own weakness, his own foolishness, his own lack of distinction. Verse 11 he says, "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless. We labor working with our hands. When we are reviled, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure. When we are slandered, we try to conciliate. We have become the scum of the world." The scum, we have become the dregs of all things.

Now a man who has that kind of an attitude is a man who could be confronted. A man humble enough to take some very strong medicine about his own weakness and his own failure. Later on to the Corinthians in chapter 16 verse ten of 1 Corinthians Paul says to them, "If Timothy comes, see that he's with you without cause to be afraid for he's doing the Lord's work as I also am. Don't frighten him. Let no one therefore despise him." Now why does he say that? Because Timothy was going to come into that congregation and what was he going to do? He was going to confront what? Their sin, because there just was blatant sin on so many categories as are indicated in 1 Corinthians and Paul sends the letter he says, "When Timothy comes, you listen to what he says and don't despise him." And so it is that you can despise another believer by rejecting him or her when they come to confront a weakness, a failure, sin in your life. Don't do that. Don't despise that one who comes as Christ comes.

And then one final thought and perhaps there will be more, but for now, you can despise another, disdain another by taking advantage of another, by taking advantage of another. 1 Thessalonians 4:6 Paul says, he's talking here about sexual sin, and he says, "No man should transgress and defraud his brother in the matter." Knowing that sexual sin is a partnering thing, it takes two, Paul says, "Don't ever treat another believer with such disdain as to compromise them in some sexual way." And in general don't ever take advantage of another brother.

So when we talk about this whole matter of fellowship and we talk about not, first of all on the negative side, what you don't do and according to Matthew 18 you don't despise any of these little ones who bear my name. We're saying then don't flaunt your liberty in front of the weak so as to cause them to stumble and be offended and further weakened. Don't look down on the poor. Don't withhold from those in those need. Don't ridicule people. Don't look with indifference on a Christian who has fallen. Don't reject those who confront your sin and don't ever take advantage of another brother or sister.

This is serious. Why is it serious? Back again to Matthew 18, it's serious because of what it says in the rest of that verse because their angels, verse ten, their angels in heaven, that is the angels who have the responsibility of the guardianship of believers as Hebrews 1:14 says, "Angels are sent to serve believers, to care for believers." So their angels in heaven continually behold the face of my father who's in heaven. This is a very wonderful statement. What it's saying is the angels are concerned about them. Be careful how you treat another believer because the angels are extremely concerned and why are the angels so concerned, because God is so concerned. And the angels are watching the face of God and they pick up his concern and he's concerned about how his children are treated. And so are they. And if we had the time to go through the Scriptures, I could unfold to you what the angels are involved in, but let me just give you a little list: they watch believers. They guide believers, that's amazing to think about. They provide, God has them dispatched to do what must be done and sometimes that's to make provisions. They protect, remember Psalm 91, "As you give us

angels charge over there, lest thou dash thy foot against the stone." They deliver. They rescue, such as Peter out of prison in Acts 5. They dispatch answers to prayer such as Daniel 9 and Acts 12.

So the angels are very involved in watching, guiding, providing, protecting, delivering and dispatching answers to prayer on behalf of believers and they're concerned about believers and they're watching the face of God who is concerned and they pick up his concern and they hear his orders as to how they're to go and to care for those believers. Bottom line you better be careful how you treat them, right? God is very concerned and so are the holy angels. They're very precious to God. In fact in verse 12 we are reminded if a man has 100 sheep and one of them has gone astray doesn't he leave the 99 on the mountains and go and search for that one that is stray and it turns out that if he finds it truly I say to you he rejoices it more than over the 99 which have not gone astray. Thus it is not the will of your father who is in heaven that one of the little ones literally go astray.

God cares for his own. He doesn't want any of them wandering away. So we have a responsibility then persistent care, persistent care, forgiving care, rejoicing care. No contempt, only love.

Archbishop Trench long ago wrote, "It is as when the mother concentrates for the moment all her affection on her sick child seeming to a bystander to love none but that only and actually rejoicing at the recovery of that more than at the uninterrupted health of all the others." And so God looks at his beloved children and he cares and the angels thus care and Christ cares and you much care. You must care. You can't lead them into sin and you can't treat them with disdain or indifference without activating a response from God and the holy angels and likely a response of chastening.

Well so much for the negative side, not leading them into sin and not treating them with disdain. Let's go to the positive side and to wrap up our talk tonight, to talk about the positive side I'm just going to give you some samples of the one anothers, some samples. Turn to James 5:16, James 5:16, this is not exhaustive by any means, but it is representative. James 5:16 "Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed." Literally confess your hamartia, your sin, your faults to one another. That's so important to make things right. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur because though they have fellowship with one another as believers and devout people, they do not have fellowship as sinners. So the final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur until there is purity and so dealing with sin is at the heart of it. True fellowship permits no one to be a sinner.

Now what does that do? Well, when you know that you tend to conceal your sin. If you know you can't participate in the fellowship, if you know that the final breakthrough to real fellowship is based upon purity and the absence of sin and there's sin in your life that you're holding onto, then you're going to conceal it. You're going to conceal your sin from the fellowship and maybe even deceive yourself. We then are in a very serious situation because when you remain alone with your own sin living in lies and hypocrisy, that is deadly stuff.

Listen to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about that. "Sin demands to have a person by himself. It withdraws him from the fellowship, the more isolated a person the more destructive will be the power of sin over him and the more deeply he becomes involved in it the more disastrous is his isolation." Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person.

This can happen even in the midst of a pious fellowship. In confession, however, the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart and the sin is brought into the light. The unexpressed is openly spoken and acknowledged and all that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted and then God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron. Great wisdom in it; sin wants you alone. Sin wants you in the secret place. Sin wants to isolate you and the more successful it is, the more you spin spiraling down in isolation.

I've said this through the years and I continue to say it even recently that when somebody begins to isolate themselves from the fellowship of the church, no matter what they are saying on the surface is the reason, the real reason is they seek to be alone because sin has them held there. And when confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian friend or Christian brother, the last stronghold of self justification is abandoned. And when you confess your sin you surrender, you give up your evil, you give your heart to God, and you find the forgiveness of sin that comes from Him and also the forgiveness that comes from your brother or sister. And then what happens? The sin has lost its power. The expressed and acknowledged sin has no power, it has been revealed and judged, it can no longer tear your heart, it can no longer tear the fellowship. Now the fellowship bears the sin with the brother. He's no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin in confession, he's handed it over to God. It's been taken away from him and now he stand in the fellowship, he lives by the grace of God that has touched everybody else in the fellowship. The sin that once concealed him, the sin that once separated him from the fellowship and made his apparent fellowship a sham and a disguise has been confessed and now he has true fellowship.

Confess your sin. Don't isolate yourself. We have to deal with each other in the matters of sin and sometimes that causes confrontation to happen so that that confession is forthcoming. That's just one of the two in that verse. We could talk about pray for one another, but let's go to Colossians 3:13.

Here is another mandate, another of the one anothers. In fact there are a couple of them here and we'll look at just one. "Bearing with one another", that's a wonderful, wonderful virtue, that means enduring people no matter how difficult it might be, "and forgiving one another," literally. "Whoever has a complaint against anyone just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you?" Confess your sins to one another, pray for one another, endure one another, and now forgive one another. And we talked at great length about forgiveness so I'm not going to belabor the point, let's suffice it to say that

we are called to forgive and we are called to forgive here in this verse because the Lord forgave us. Remember the parable in Matthew 18 if we were to go back there about the man who was forgiven the unpayable debt and wouldn't forgive his friend a small debt and how he was brought before the king and he was chastened because of that lack of forgiveness. And that's a picture of the Christian who has been forgiven everything by Christ and must forgive others the small debts they have incurred against him. And so we are called to forgive one another as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us.

Ephesians 4:32 says basically the very same thing. As we said earlier in Galatians 6:1 "When we know a believer is taken into fault we restore such a one in love considering ourselves and at that moment we freely forgive them." Matthew 18:21-22 Peter said, "If my brother sins how many times do I forgive him by seven times? And Jesus said '70 times seven; this must be a fellowship of forgiveness. Don't get so pious. Don't get so self-righteous that you can't forgive somebody else who desperately need forgiveness yourself. None of us is perfect.'"

It's very easy, as I said earlier, to become very very judgmental, but remember what it says in Matthew 6:14-15, "If you don't forgive one another the Lord's not going to forgive you." In other words, you'll be held under temporal chastening for your unforgiving heart. Well we are eager, yes, to confront sin and to rebuke and to exhort and to reprove and instruct and teach and do all of those things. We're also eager to seek a confession of sin and to hear that confession and just as eager to forgive the sin.

Thirdly go to Galatians 6 and I'm kind of circling back to where we've been here Galatians 6:2 just take this one little phrase, "Bear one another's burdens." Bear one another's burdens. Very simple statement; carry somebody else's weight. Get under somebody else's load. Be around long enough to hear their heart. Be around long enough to help them carry the load. If it's an emotional load, help them carry that. If it's a physical need that they have, help them meet that need. Whatever it is, this is simply spiritual sympathy. Caring. This is the law of the royal law, the law of Christ as I said from James. This is the law that Jesus outlined John 13:34-35, "Love one another as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples?" And how had Jesus just loved them? By washing their feet. Share a burden and bear a burden. Help somebody carry their load. Help them to understand the dark things that they don't understand. Help them in the struggle in their temptation to understand the way of escape. Get under their burden of prayer and come alongside and interceded with them.

Number four takes us back again to something I commented on a moment ago; reprove and rebuke sin. Look at Titus 1:13, again these are samples. It says in Titus 1:13 "For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith." And over in 2:15, "These things speak and exhort and approve with all authority, let no one disregard you."

Here is another category of responsibility to those of us who are in the church and regard the fellowship and that is to reprove and to rebuke. To reprove means to point out an error and to speak of its inevitable consequence because it is a violation of God's law. It's the same as rebuke, reprove rebuke really basically are the same thing. We are to confront sin; we are to point it out honestly and openly.

And then just central to everything, look at 1 Peter 1:22, 1 Peter 1:22 "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls," that's salvation, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren fervently love one another from the heart." I think some people from time to time think they can't love, it's sort of something that happens or doesn't happen emotionally, but here you not only are to love someone in some deed, but you're to love them fervently or passionately, the term here *ectanase* means to stretch to the limit; you're to love them to the max and you're to love them from the heart, from deep within, from down deep inside.

Some manuscripts read from a clean heart, a pure heart. Love one another from a pure heart passionately, fervently, and of course that section over arching and compelling one another, I mean, that sweeps over how we do everything else. We do everything we do driven by that heart of love.

In Romans 12:10 it says it another way, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." This is a compassionate love. Peter further later on in his epistle talks about it being a compassionate love, chapter three he says it is a love that shows hospitality to strangers, it is a love that shows submission to God and to leadership, it is physically manifest; that is to say it expresses itself outwardly. Look at the end of the epistle, 5:14, "Greet one another with a kiss of love."

Paul said a lot about loving one another; he said it should be a compassionate, hospitable, submissive, demonstrative love as well. He said it should provide service to each other, it should be patient, it should be long suffering, it should result in kindness, soft heartedness, and forgiveness. That is of course at the heart of everything we do. So these are just samples of how we engage ourselves with each other in ministry.

Number six, another one that's very important is found in Hebrews three and I mentioned it just in passing a moment ago, it's to exhort one another. Chapter three of Hebrews verse 13, "But encourage or exhort one another day after day." In other words continually you're exhorting and exhort means to encourage, it's the same as the verb to come alongside and assist building someone up, encouraging them, speaking wise counsel and exhortation to them and in Hebrews 10:25 right back to where we were this morning, "Not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." We come together to do just that. We come together to speak encouragement to each other, to build each other up. To bring encouraging words of truth, encouraging words of hope, encouraging words of comfort, encouraging words of exhortation; such a

wonderful, wonderful ministry.

Whether it is encouraging one another or loving one another or reproving one another or bearing one another's burdens or forgiving one another or confessing faults to one another, all of those are responsibilities of fellowship.

I'm just going to mention a couple more. Edify one another, edify one another. Romans 14:19 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11 both say that, edify one another. What it basically means is to impart truth because truth alone builds you up. According to Acts 20 it's the truth, the word that is able to build you up. Verse 32 Paul says, "I commit you to the word which is able to build you up." And so as we dispense the word of God to people we build them up. We edify them. In fact in Romans 14:19 I'll read it to you; it says "Pursue the things which make for peace and the edifying of one another or the building up of one another."

Now what do we mean by that? Say things that build people up, that doesn't mean appeal to their ego. That doesn't mean that you create a false sense of security. That doesn't mean that try to elevate their sense of psychological self-esteem. You say things that encourage them. You say things that give them hope. You say things that teach the truth to them. You say things to them for example in the midst of their terror and distress and fear, you remind them that God is absolutely sovereign and is working all things according to his purpose, that's encouraging, that's an encouraging word in a time of stress.

Well one more, pray for one another and we go back to James 5:16, I've eliminated a few, but it's a good place to end. Pray for one another. James says in this wonderful, wonderful section of his epistle, "If you're weak, go find somebody strong. Go to the elders who are strong. Let them hold you up. Let them pray in faith." He's not talking about physical disease here; he's talking about spiritual weakness. "Let the spiritually strong pray for you. Confess your sins. If there are sins that have come out of your spiritual weakness, confess your sins and pray for one another so that you may be healed." And then this great statement, "The effectual or effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." So many times we get caught up in trying to figure out the theology of prayer, don't do that. I don't know how it all works. I don't know how it sorts itself out with God's absolute sovereignty and his predetermined purposes, but I do know this verse says the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much, and simply to say that if you want to accomplish much pray. If you want to accomplish much, a righteous man needs to pray. And I think that again emphasizes the flow of the text here. You had people who were spiritually weak, they had been hammered by persecution and in their spiritual weakness they had fallen into sin, they were so spiritually weak they couldn't muster up enough strength to pray. They stumbled in as a word of the elders, the elders got around them, the elders sort of massaged them a little bit and then the elders took up their case before the Lord and the spiritually strong prayed for the spiritually weak and they were the righteous men whose prayers accomplished much.

Now beloved I've tried to summarize in just the brief time that we've had the essence of fellowship and as you can tell tonight has been a fast track and I've just kind of hit the highlights and nothing very deep or innovative, but just to touch these things I trust is to put them before you so that the spirit of God can apply them to your heart. I'm not trying to be clever, I'm not trying to be unique; I'm just want to tell you how it is from the word of God and let the spirit bring to bear his force on your heart to implement these things.

The basis of fellowship is salvation, the nature is sharing, the symbol the supper, the danger sin, the responsibility serving, and we need to get into that ministry of serving for which God has gifted us and to which he has commanded us in the one anothers of the New Testament.

I want to conclude with a passage of Scripture that we'll get to one of these Sundays, 2 Corinthians 13, this is a good place to sum it up. Verse 11, "Finally brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like minded, live in peace and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you," and then this wonderful benediction, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Join me in prayer. Father we so long to experience the fullness of the fellowship. We're so grateful that you have brought us into the fellowship and that you have caused us to participate in the supernatural partnership and companionship of the redeemed, the family, your family. And that our partnership, our companionship, our fellowship is with you and with Jesus Christ and with each other. May we enjoy the fullness of the fellowship. May we take the responsibility of serving seriously and use our gifts and apply the one anothers that you may be honored, your body built up and we enjoy the fullness of your blessing. And we ask these things really for the glory of Christ who is the one to be lifted up in the faithfulness of his church. Amen.

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