

Fellowship, Forgiveness, and You, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

TMC268

Well, thank you so much, Peter. It's wonderful to be with you. I'm not like the poor. You don't always have me with you. But, I'm not very far away down at Grace Community Church, as you know, ministering the Word of God there. These are especially wonderful days for us there as you probably have heard, if you don't know firsthand. We're about to begin a new era at the church in which I will be teaching from the Old Testament after 43 years of going through the New Testament verse by verse. And focusing on the Lord Jesus Christ in the Old Testament.

I have been preparing to start this series for I guess about eight months of wide reading and I'm full to overflowing and looking forward to launching it on this coming Sunday with the greatest of the Old Testament pictures of Christ, Isaiah chapter 53. So, very thankful that the Lord has given me a second life after I did what I was supposed to do, and now we can take a look at Christ in the Old Testament. What a great privilege.

Along with months and months of trying to discover Christ in the Old Testament, read everything I could on that so I could fill up my understanding, I've also enjoyed reading some Christian biographies. Quite a number of them. I'm always fascinated by how the Lord works in the lives of significant people.

One of the biographies that I read is the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Eric Metaxas. At least on my electronic format, it was about 650 pages. So, it was quite an exercise to read the entire story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was imprisoned under Hitler. I feel like I was an eyewitness to his life because of the detail of that biography. I could've wished that there was not only historic detail and the record of events and persons in his life, but that there had been a lot more with regard to his own heart and his own theology. I think I kept looking for insights into that that weren't there. But nonetheless, it was an amazing, amazing journey for me to live vicariously, the life of this most remarkable German.

It was the grey dawn of an April day in 1945 in a Nazi concentration camp at Flossenbürg that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed. He was executed directly as a special order of Heinrich Himmler, who was the arch executioner of Hitler.

Prior to that, for a number of years, he had been shifted from prison to prison to prison to prison. Places like Tegel, Berlin, Buchenwald, Schönburg, finally Flossenbürg. And as he was systematically moved from place to place to place to place, all contacts with the outside world disappeared and faded away.

He felt most profoundly, the loss of fellowship with other believers. And it was systematically taken

away from him as he was moved deeper and deeper and deeper into those concentration camps. The view that he had of the importance and priority of fellowship he wrote about in a book called "Life Together." If you have the opportunity to read the biography by Metaxas, you would enjoy reading it, but you probably really should read the book, "Life Together." It's a very short treatise by Bonhoeffer on the whole idea of fellowship and the priceless value of fellowship, and what it's like to live without it.

You are luxuriating in fellowship here at the Master's College. And very likely, in the church that you came from, and the family that you come from, and perhaps in the church that you now attend, you are enjoying the best that Christian fellowship can provide, and it's a very remote stretch to even imagine yourself being completely isolated from other believers.

In his book, "Life Together," Bonhoeffer wrote this: "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly, the imprisoned apostle Paul calls his dearly beloved son in the faith, Timothy, to come to him in prison. In the last days of his life, he would see him again and have him near. Paul has not forgotten the tears Timothy shed when last they parted. Remembering the congregation in Thessalonica, Paul prays night and day exceedingly that we might see Your face. The aged apostle John," says Bonhoeffer, "knows that His joy will not be full until He can come to His own people and speak face to face instead of writing them with pen and ink."

Bonhoeffer goes on to say, "The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of the fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the Triune God. Visitor and visited in loneliness recognize in each other the Christ who is present in his body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other's benedictions as the benedictions of the Lord Jesus. But if there is so much blessing and joy, even in a single encounter of brother with brother, how inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who, by God's will, are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians." He goes on to say, "It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden underfoot by those who have the gift every day."

That would be us. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may in fact be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in a community with Christian brothers. Good word from somebody in a concentration camp feeling the absence of that. Fellowship is a precious, precious gift.

And I wonder sometimes if those of us who have it the way we do really appreciate it. The Scripture identifies salvation as a corporate experience. While each individual is saved individually, upon that salvation, we are immediately immersed into the body of Christ. The true church is one body. And, all the members of that body are members of each other, and no one can escape the responsibility that he or she has to the others in the body.

In fact, when you look at the scripture, the metaphors that define or represent the people of God are all collective metaphors. They're all intended to convey the idea of union, unity, communion, partnership, fellowship. For example, even in the Old Testament when God looked on Israel, God

looked on Israel in her maidenhood, the Bible says, betrothed Himself to her, took her as His bride, and entered a marriage covenant with her. That's the most intimate of all human unions.

God also says Isaiah planted Israel as a vine in Canaan, where she took root, and filled the land. God also saw Himself as the shepherd of Israel, whom He led like a flock. Communion, union, partnership, fellowship in all of these images. Each of them shows God's relation to Israel, and stresses direct dealings, personal dealings.

He chose Israel as His bride, planted Israel as His vine, shepherded Israel as His flock. And in each case, there is an intimate connection between God and His people. And when you come to the New Testament, these metaphors are adapted for the church, emphasizing the intrinsic idea of unity inherent in each metaphor.

For example, in Ephesians 5, you will remember, Christ is the bridegroom; the church is the bride. In John 15, Christ is the vine, and believing Christians are the branches that draw their life from Him. In John 10, Christ is the good shepherd, and He is the one who saves, and leads, and protects, and feeds, and even gives His life for the flock.

There are further New Testament metaphors that describe our fellowship. We are identified in Colossians 1:13 as a kingdom, a collective group of people under one monarch. We are described in Ephesians 2:19 as a family. We are described in 2:20 and 22 as a building fit together in perfect harmony and unity. And summing it up, we could say it this way: as Christ's, we are one wife with one Husband, one set of branches with one Vine, one flock with one Shepherd, one kingdom with one King, one family with one Father, one building with one Foundation.

And there is one more image, and I mentioned it earlier, and that is that we are a body with one head, and that is the distinct identity of the church in the New Testament that has no parallel in the Old. All those others, including the idea of family and kingdom, you can find with reference with Israel, but not the metaphor of the Body of Christ. We are united in one organic body, which means flowing through us is one life. This is our fellowship. And that is how we must view our life together. It is a fellowship of life at its basic level. Real, spiritual union, shared because we have the same common, eternal life. This is fellowship.

We are a fellowship, a partnership, a communion. We share life together, and that's where Bonhoeffer got his title. The verb, to fellowship, *koinoneo* [??], is used eight times in the New Testament. Seven of those times, it's translated in the NAS as the word "share," and one time in 2 John, it's translated as "participate." Same thing. We share life at its very spiritual level. We have the same life of God coursing through our souls.

The noun form, fellowship, *koinonia*, is used I think about 30 times in the New Testament. Sometimes translated "sharing," sometimes "contributing," sometimes "partner," sometimes "participation," and sometimes "fellowship," and even sometimes "communion." But *koinonia*, again, is a fellowship. It is a union of people who partake, who contribute, who share, who come together in common life. It is a sharing in the realities of spiritual life, spiritual ministry, and spiritual power.

Now, we live in a very isolated world today. We live in a world where people isolate themselves to their own little zone. We live in a world that is consumed with selfishness and self-fulfillment that

works against the idea that we are a fellowship, we are a body, we are a communion. This is against the grain of the world in which we live. And the essence of that shared life is that we give and we give and we give to the others who are part of that shared life. That also is against the grain of a very consuming, take everything you can get, kind of mentality. Many people would view the church as a spectator event where you go on Sunday and somebody does something that you like. They entertain you, rather than opportunity to express the core of common spiritual life shared together.

You have, here at the Master's College, the most unique kind of manifestation of the possibilities and the potentials of true spiritual fellowship that could be identified. Because, this is a period of time in your life when you literally live together 24/7 with other believers. That's not going to happen. That hasn't happened in the past, and that's not going to happen in the future. You're going to be isolated to one, and a few little kids that come out of that union. At this level of intimacy. Unless you're in the military. Then you get stuck in the barracks. But this is a very unique period of time in your life, and it's a time when you would do well to learn the lessons of fellowship. And so, I want to share some of them with you this morning.

I just want to give you a few things to think about when you think about fellowship and our shared life. Understanding what Bonhoeffer said, that it is indeed a precious commodity. Let's break it up a little bit and try to get a handle on the essence of it.

So, let's talk, first of all, about the basis of fellowship. The basis of fellowship. Now, I know how life works. You all break up into little groups. I get it. We're all that way. We all are attracted to certain people. We are thrown together with certain people. We end up spending more time with them than we do with others. And, you almost have to fight against that, because it's very easy to stay always in your comfort zone and never get out of your comfort zone, and even to be a little suspicious of the people who aren't in your group and not sure that you want to open your group and let them in anyway.

So, we have to start then with the basis of fellowship. What qualifies someone to fellowship with you? What qualifies someone to fellowship with you? What gives someone the right to fellowship with you? Let's look at 1 John chapter 1. First John chapter 1. And always, for these kinds of questions, the Word of God provides the answer. John begins this epistle talking about his experience with the Word of Life, the end of verse 1, who is none other than Christ, whom he identified as the Word in his gospel. He saw the life of Christ manifested, verse 2, proclaimed that eternal life that comes through Christ, and so forth. In verse 3, he says, "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

What is the basis of fellowship? It is salvation. It is salvation. We proclaim to you the eternal life. We proclaim what we have seen and heard concerning that eternal life, namely Christ, the gospel, so that you too may have fellowship with us. The proclamation of the gospel is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, and the end is to create a fellowship, a sharing in common life, common purpose, common power, common ministry, common love, common support. The goal of the gospel is not just to save an individual from hell, but to put a person into a fellowship. Fellowship with God, with Christ. That's what he says here. Our fellowship, our, meaning all of us who believe the gospel, is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. So, it is a fellowship with God the Father, with the Son, and with each other. This is the fellowship.

First Corinthians 6:17 says, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit." In other words, when you are joined to the Lord, you are one with everyone else who is joined to the Lord. That's the same reality. Sometimes you hear people say, well, so-and-so's not walking obediently. So-and-so's not being faithful. They're out of fellowship. If you're a believer, you're in the fellowship. You may be sinning. You may be disobedient. You may be for a period of time indifferent, but you can't leave the fellowship because you've been born into it by regeneration. That's the goal of salvation. It placed into a common life, common purpose, common power, common ministry in the Body of Christ. Fellowship then has as its basis salvation.

Now, why do I emphasize this? Because, you must recognize that every true believer is in the fellowship. The objective and the proclamation of the gospel is to make a person part of an eternal partnership, shared eternal life, shared partaking of the divine nature, and that's what salvation does. This is most important because it means that every believer is entitled to full participation, full involvement in the fellowship. In Christ, there's neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free. We're all in the fellowship. Our responsibility then, in the fellowship, extends to anyone and everyone who is in the fellowship. Whatever church background, whatever condition of life, whatever ability, whatever status, whatever race. God is no respecter of persons. Matthew 18:10 says the Lord instructs us: do not despise one of these little ones who believe in Me. You may think a person insignificant, not worthy of participation with you, fellowship with you, sharing with your life. You couldn't be further from the truth.

The basis of fellowship is salvation, and all believers have a right to full acceptance, full communion, full participation, full ministry in the fellowship. That's all of us. All of us. If you're a true believer, you're in the fellowship. You couldn't be out of the fellowship, because the fellowship is that eternal life which is an eternal, irrevocable gift.

People might stumble and fall, and injure themselves, but they can't be out of the fellowship. You could maybe look at it this way. You may be walking down the aisle in an airplane, as this has happened to me on a few occasions in my many travels, and the airplane hits a bump, and you fall, you stumble, you land on some poor person sitting there comfortably in the chair, and you may hurt yourself and hurt that person. But you have fallen inside the airplane. That's very different than opening the door and jumping out. There's no way out of the fellowship, even though you stumble inside. That's the way it has to be viewed.

And consequently what that means is that the responsibility that we have for each other in the fellowship keeps going on. The fellowship is forever. When David was struggling in his own life, he said, restore to me the joy of thy salvation. He didn't need to get his salvation back; he just needed the joy.

Bonhoeffer had some great thoughts on this. He said this: "I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me. The other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him. The fact that we are brothers only through Jesus Christ is of immeasurable significance. Not only the other person who is earnest and devout, who comes to me seeking my fellowship, must I deal with in fellowship, my brother is rather that other person who has been redeemed by Christ, delivered from his sin, called to faith, and given eternal life, whether he seeks it or not. It is not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality that constitutes the basis of our fellowship. What determines our fellowship is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us." I love that. "And it remains so

for all the future and to all eternity.”

“So,” concludes Bonhoeffer, “Christian fellowship is not an ideal which we must realize. It is a reality created by God in Christ in which we must participate. We need to learn that the ground and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone. When we understand that, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship.”

So, the basis of fellowship is salvation. What that means is you look around, every one in your world who belongs to Christ belongs to you, and you to them.

What is the nature of fellowship? The basis is salvation. What’s the nature of it? We’ve already hinted at it. The nature of it is sharing, and that’s kind of a popular word, but nonetheless suits the point. How does fellowship function? It is a sharing together, sharing together. You might want to look at Acts chapter 2 as a good illustration of that, when the day of Pentecost came and the Holy Spirit came. The church was born, it says in verse 42 of Acts 2, they were continually devoting themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship. And to fellowship.

Breaking of bread, prayer, everyone feeling a sense of awe, many wonders and signs taking place through the apostles. Then, verse 44, all who believed were together. All who believed were together. Not in a superficial way, but in a profound way. They even had all things in common. They began selling their property and possessions and sharing with them all as any one might have need. That’s not communism. It’s very, very clearly not communism. It doesn’t mean that they liquidated everything and then spread it out equally. That would be a communist, socialist approach.

What it says is: they began selling their property, which means they owned it, they retained it. And selling their possessions and were sharing them with all as anyone might have need. This is not a mass liquidation and then redistribution. This was simply sharing to the degree that if someone else had a need, I would sell a possession in order to get what I needed to get to provide for that need.

I love the fact that they were continually devoting themselves to fellowship. One of the realities of that first church on the day of Pentecost, 3,000 people saved, was that the professors were possessors, that the ones who said they were Christians were Christians. They were the real deal. There were no false Christians in the mix on the day of Pentecost. 3,000 people believed, were baptized true believers. Immediately, what happened? Immediately, they shared common life, common purpose, common power, common ministry. They expressed their partnership in mutual sharing of everything that they possessed. Hebrews 10 even takes it into the spiritual realm. “Forsake not the assembling of ourselves together, as a manner of sum is; and much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” And why do you do that? To stimulate one another to love and good works.

And so, the stimulation was not just material and physical, but it was spiritual. On the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people were converted, you would remember of course that was a monumental feast day in Israel. Consequently, there were pilgrims who had come from all over the Mediterranean world into Jerusalem to celebrate the Pentecost Feast with a view to going back home. But, when the Holy Spirit came and established the church, this was the only church in the world. So, believers who were saved, and they were saved 3,000 on the day of Pentecost, thousands more as you go through chapter 3, chapter 4. Maybe 20,000, 25,000 believers in a few weeks in Jerusalem. They don’t want to go home, even though they’re from all the Mediterranean

area, because there's only one church. There's only one fellowship. And they're caught in this fellowship, and they want to express that fellowship, that common life, and they know that if they all disappear and go back to their thousands of original locations, there will be no fellowship, there will be no church, there will be no other believers or very few, and the fellowship is too precious.

So, what happens is: the Jerusalem church now has a massive burden on its hands. It's got thousands and thousands of people who are there and don't live there, and don't work there, and have needs. I've got to provide for those needs. And so, the early church on the day of Pentecost and the subsequent weeks literally becomes the model for fellowship. If somebody had a need, they sold their property to meet that need. If somebody needed a place to stay, they opened the home. They shared spiritually. They assembled themselves together. In fact, every single day, every day, they met together. In verse 46, "Day by day, continuing with one mind in the temple, breaking bread from house to house, taking their meals together with sadness and sincerity of heart, praising God." And the testimony was powerful, "having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day such as were being saved," because of the power of the testimony of their fellowship.

This is fellowship. They began selling. It's a continuous action, imperfect tense. They sold as there was need. They shared common life. Bonhoeffer again speaks to this. He says, "Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ. Long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that communion life not as demanders, but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what He's done for us. We thank God for giving us brothers who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and in His promise. We don't complain of what God doesn't give us. We'd rather thank God for what He does give us daily. And is not what has been given to us enough? Even when sin and misunderstanding burden our fellowship, is not the sinning brother still my brother with whom I too stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus, the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one word indeed that really binds us together: the forgiveness provided through Jesus Christ."

This is Christianity. Aristides wrote in ancient times about Christians, a pagan looking at Christians. He wrote, "They abstain from all impurity in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world. When there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and if they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days, that they may supply the needy with the necessary food. Such is the law of the Christians, and such is their conduct." This is fellowship, sharing love, sharing ministry, sharing needs, stimulating righteousness mutually. Humble sharing.

Well, a lot more can be said about that, and the New Testament does say a lot about it. But for the sake of today, let me take you to a third point: the symbol. That the basis of fellowship is salvation, the nature of fellowship is sharing, the symbol of fellowship is communion, the Lord's table, in 1 Corinthians chapter 10. And that's why they were doing that every day. Every day. They engaged in the Lord's table in that early fellowship, the breaking of bread. They were doing it daily in the temple. But in 1 Corinthians 10, we have an explicit statement about this, which I think we have to take note of. Very specific.

First Corinthians 10:16. "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a fellowship in the blood of

Christ?" *Koinonia*. "Is not the bread which we break a fellowship in the body of Christ?" This is a magnificent symbol the Lord has given us. We only have two ordinances given to us. The one is baptism, which demonstrates visibly our union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. And the other is communion, which is the symbol of our common, shared life through the work of Christ on the cross. We are common participants in His salvation. We stand the same at the foot of the cross. At the communion table, we stand the same. We take the cup as a fellowship of the blood of Christ. We eat the bread as a fellowship of the body of Christ. When we gather at the Lord's table, this is the symbol of our common ground. We have all come as sinners to the foot of the cross, forgiven by Christ, one with each other, because we are one in Him.

Communion, then, visualizes the fellowship. Christ as head, and Savior of all members of His body. All equally redeemed by Him. All equally possessing His eternal life. All sustained by Him. The Lord's table, as we call it then, is a vivid demonstration of reconciliation between God and man through the work of Jesus Christ. It's our symbol, and it's part of something that you should not forsake. We are, verse 17 says, "one bread, we who are many are one body; we all partake of the one bread." That's the communion demonstrating our unity. We are all one in Christ, one in His blood, one in His body, one with each other. That's the holy table, the symbol of our fellowship.

I would hate to think that as believers, you would not participate regularly in the table of the Lord, and be brought to the realization of this in the beautiful and simple symbol of communion.

A fourth thing to think about, and you have to get to this. The basis of fellowship is salvation. The nature is sharing. The symbol is communion. The danger, the danger. What is the danger to fellowship? In a word, it's sin. That's the danger. Sin devastates the fellowship. Sin wounds the fellowship. We're not talking about the issue of forgiveness in a redemptive sense. All our sins are forgiven, covered by the sacrifice of Christ; He paid in full, the penalty for all our sins. It's not a matter of salvation. It's not a matter of love. That was settled in eternity. He has set His love on us before the foundation of the world. It's not a question of fellowship. We're not going to get thrown out of the fellowship if we sin.

So, it's not about our eternal life. It's not about God loving us. It's not about our fellowship. But it is a matter of our blessing, and our peace, and our power, and our usefulness, and our witness. Pride, lust, materialism, selfishness. Any sin in any category; every sin in every category shatters the unity, restricts the ministry, halts the power, confuses the purposes, interrupts God's intention. That's another reason why we come to the Lord's table, and we are instructed in 1 Corinthians 11 to examine ourselves and see if there's any sin in us, so that we don't come to that table in an unworthy way, and eat and drink judgment on ourselves.

I guess you could say that if you're cultivating sin in your life, you would probably want to avoid the Lord's table. But that would be exactly the wrong thing to do. But better to avoid it than to come and be a hypocrite and profess worshipping Christ through the bread and the cup while at the same time cultivating iniquity in your heart. That puts you in a very dangerous position of judgment.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, if somebody hasn't been dealing with the sin in their life, they need to be shut out from the symbol. Through the history of the church, there have been very, very serious viewpoints of the Lord's table. Things like closed communion. Unless you were examined fully by the elders of the church, you couldn't participate because they wanted to protect their people from the judgment of God, lest they partake in an unworthy way. Everything nowadays is so absolutely

casual. People think they can waltz in and do the routine, and waltz back out without so much as any kind of self-examination. There were times when pastors and leaders were more protective of their people. Sin is a devastating, devastating reality in the body of Christ.

That is why we're instructed, if a brother's in sin, do what? Matthew 18. Go to him. Go to him. That's part of the fellowship. And if he hears you, you've gained your brother. And if he doesn't hear you, take two or three with you. And if he doesn't hear them, tell the church. And if the church goes and he still doesn't hear them, then put him out, because a little leaven will leaven the whole lump, and you'll have devastation in the church if you allow sinning people in the church. This is a million miles from the way most churches conduct their life today. They're happy to have a church full of sinners, unopposed, but that's not the biblical way, and that's not the Lord's way.

And you might say, "Well, that gets a little scary if you go to the church and they're going to confront your sin." I remember years ago, I didn't know a church anywhere when I came to Grace in 1969, that did this. I didn't know anybody that would ever advocate this. And I said, well, it's in the Bible, so let's do it. And people said to me, "You're going to empty the place. People are not going to come to your church if you have people going up to them saying they're concerned about this sin or that sin." Well, we didn't empty it. It was just the opposite, 'cause God's people have holy affections, and they long for the sanctification that the Lord desires for them, and they want a place where people care about their virtue and their holiness. They want that kind of thing.

I remember a few years ago, a student came to me who'd been here about a month, and first year, he came and said, "I've got to leave. I've got to get out of here. I can't stand this many people concerned about my spiritual life." Well, if you're not a believer, then I understand that. You don't want this many people concerned about your spiritual life. But if you are a believer, that's one of the blessings of the fellowship, and you embrace that.

Does this mean that we hide our sin? Does this mean that if sin's going to shatter the fellowship, we hide our sin? Is that the right thing? Do we all become hypocrites so everybody thinks we have no sin? No. James 5:16 says, "Confess your sins, one to another."

Listen to what Bonhoeffer said. "The final breakthrough to fellowship doesn't occur because though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as sinners. The final breakthrough to fellowship does not occur because people cover their sin." Listen to what else he says. "The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal sin from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners." Bonhoeffer says, "Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among them. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy."

Get it? That the fact is: we are all sinners. We are all sinners. You are a sinner. We know it. You're a great and desperate sinner, and so am I. But God has saved us. I can't hide my remaining fallenness from God. I don't want to wear a mask before men. That does no good. The final breakthrough, says Bonhoeffer, is when there's a place for being honest about being sinners. If you don't do that, Bonhoeffer says, you go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin.

And then, this is a very good paragraph. He said, "Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the fellowship. The more isolated a person is, 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 fellowship. In confession, the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and the seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron." Sin, says Bonhoeffer, "The confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother." James 5:16, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders, gives up his evil, and finds forgiveness in the fellowship.

And of course, that also is part of fellowship. Forgive one another, Colossians 3:13. Galatians 6:2, bear one another's burden, so fulfill the law of Christ, the burden of sin, the burden of temptation. So, the danger to the fellowship is sin, but that doesn't mean that we hide sin, because that becomes even a greater danger.

Just a fifth, and then a final point. The responsibility of fellowship is serving. Second Corinthians 8:4. "The fellowship of serving" is a phrase there. The fellowship of serving. The fellowship of serving the one another, the spiritual gifts, meeting needs, the whole range of things would be encompassed in that.

And just kind of skipping a few things to a last thought: what, in the end of all of this, is the result of this kind of fellowship? What's the result? Well, if we go back to where we began in 1 John, it's pretty simple. First John chapter 1. "We have fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, and of course with you. These things we write so that our joy may be made complete." The result of fully-functioning fellowship is true spiritual joy.

Lord, we thank You that we've been able this morning to worship You and to sing praises to You. We thank You that we've been able to consider some things from Scripture, and even from the vantage point of a man for whom the fellowship was most precious when lost. Help us to hold as precious and valuable and even priceless the riches of the fellowship we enjoy here at the Master's College together as fellow believers. May this fellowship here be everything that You would want it to be so that the watching world can see us and be amazed and astonished as they were at the early church, and so that the witness of the gospel will be powerful. And through the testimony that we have in this community, You may be able to add to the church those who are being saved. Give us a testimony of what true fellowship looks like. Thank You for making us part of the fellowship with each other and with You, our Triune God. And we give You honor and praise. In the name of our Savior, Amen.

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