

One of the stunning realities and base foundations of our faith is that God is creating and constituting a people which the New Testament calls “the church.” It is through the church that God has done his work throughout history.

Having grown up in church, I find this a very interesting strategy. My mom worked at a church for a few years, and in some ways, I spent more time at church than at home. I have been through many services, and I have seen very much all that the church has to offer. When I look at the numbers and statistics coming out about people walking away from the church, there’s a part of me that understands. I, too, have seen the brokenness, the hypocrisy, the failure of the church. Yet Jesus has chosen the church to be his instrument with all of its flaws. The examples are numerous of how the church has never truly lived up to its calling, and yet God is faithful.

Well, the text today has a lot to say about this issue. For as much as I have held to the church, Jesus has held to it much stronger. What’s fascinating is when you look closely at Jesus, particularly some of the last words that he prayed and spoke to his disciples, it was about how this church, this community of believers, was to operate within one another. It was to function just like it was when God spoke the covenant promise to Abraham that through his line, he will bless many people. We are an extension of that from all the way back in Genesis. We stand here in a long lineage of church tradition that is meant to embody the very character and essence of God to the world around us.

When you look at something like John 13, where John has these epic moments in which you almost sense as he’s writing and narrating; he pulls back to heighten the awareness of the reader. There’s this scene when Jesus is predicting that Peter will deny the very existence of knowing Jesus. He’s speaking to the disciples, and he’s given them almost like a famous last word or instructions. Jesus says in John 13.

My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:33-35

Isn’t that interesting that of all the things Jesus could have said at this moment as to how the onlooking world would understand who followers of Jesus are, the thing he pinpoints here is the way in which you and I love one another, the way in which we interact together. Jesus says by that love, they will know that you are different than everything else in the world. They will know you are a different institution. It’s the defining marker that seems to cut across the grain of our world.

If you fast forward a few more chapters in John 17, he’s now at the Garden of Gethsemane, moments before he is about to be arrested and then will go on to be crucified. You see him in this final moment, which outside of the words in which Jesus says in the crucifixion account, are the final words recorded of Jesus. It’s in this epic prayer in John 17 in which he prays for himself to be glorified. He prays for the 12 disciples, and then he prays for all believers throughout time. That’s us. That’s Jesus praying for you and me.

**My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23**

Jesus’s last prayer for the church, the historic church throughout all generations to come, is that we may exist in complete unity. Well, it takes a pretty novice understanding of church history to know that this prayer has fallen, it seems, on deaf ears. It certainly doesn’t appear that we have lived into this calling, but rather we have continually fractured our own fellowship. But Jesus is convinced that this church is supposed to be known by the way we love one another and are in complete unity. I just wonder, in an age of division and an age in which hostility is the air we breathe, if this unity and hospitality can cut across the grain of our own vitriol in this world.

Jesus, in this text, is speaking of unity. Remember, he talked about this to the disciples. He pulled them aside. The address of this teaching is to the disciples alone, not the crowds. It’s a moment in which he’s speaking to the insiders, and in there, he’s talking about the dynamics in which we operate together, and he has very harsh words. The harshest, I would say, maybe in the Gospel of Mark, in which he’s writing to the unity of this church. He says if you cause these ones to stumble, if you cause them to not believe, well, it’s better if a millstone is wrapped around your neck and you’re thrown in the sea. It is strong language.

This is not an anomaly to the teachings of Jesus, but rather it’s in line with the very biblical story that’s written about Jesus, forming a new alternative community through which God will be made manifest in the world. A Holy Spirit-infused community that exists as the very embodiment of God to the world around them. Jesus here again has strong words. This is a challenging, complex teaching. It needs nuance. It’s

meant to disrupt us. It's meant to disrupt the comfortable. It's meant to allow us, the church, to wrestle with the depth that Jesus is calling us to.

We are in Mark 9 today. As I mentioned, this is in the same vein as the text that Dan preached last week. All of those subheadings in your Bible were added much later. Those were not original to the text, and at times they disrupted the flow of thought in damaging ways. I think this is one of those times. Jesus is in this long section that starts in verse 30, and it goes much beyond that where he's teaching these disciples. We pick up in verse 38, but we pick up where John seems to be disrupting Jesus.

**“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward. Mark 9:38-41**

Notice that out of Jesus' declaration in the text before, this emphatic hard teaching says anyone who wants to be first must be last. It's this reversal of the dynamics of the world saying the Kingdom of God functions differently. You remember a little bit earlier when Jesus declares he's going to have to come to the cross. Remember who piped up there? It was Peter who said, “No, that can't be the way the Kingdom of God operates.”

Here we see another disciple, John who says, “This can't be the way the world works,” and he does it through a side door. He said that there was somebody casting out demons, and they're doing it in your name, but he's not one of us. And Jesus says, “What's your problem?” He identifies that this declaration, this interruption within John, is a declaration of arrogance. What would've been associated with the exorcism of demons would've been a status, a power that was swelling up in this person.

And John, who's in this inner group, this 12, this exclusive followership of Jesus, says, “Wait a minute!” Notice he doesn't say this person is not a follower of Jesus. He says he's not one of us. He's not one of the 12. John liked his elite status. He liked being set apart. But Jesus says to not stop him because he's doing this work in my name. It's good gospel work going on. And Jesus says that if this person is not against us, then surely they are for us because he wouldn't be able to cast out demons in my name and then speak badly about me.

I would imagine John is getting frustrated at this point because Jesus is pushing the boundaries of who is in and who is out. He's done this with the religious leaders through the Gospel of Mark, but now he's doing it with the 12, and he's saying, “You think you're one of the insiders, but be careful.” It's been his message over and over, and this declaration of arrogance is one which seems a bit odd because if you remember, in 9:18, just a little bit before this, the text says this again, speaking to the disciples. *“Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not” (John 9:18).*

Just prior, they had been confronted with their inability to exorcise a demon. John wonders why that guy gets to, but he can't. John says, “Why? Why is that?” It's this confusion that is now moving beyond just the lack of knowledge. It's moving into the realm of a conscious arrogance in which he's saying, “I understand, but Lord, I don't get it.” The disciples here are no longer just lacking the head knowledge. They're actively pushing against the radical inclusion that Jesus is offering, which is if anyone is doing this work in my name, it must be good. If they're not against us, they're for us.

It can be easy in the church world to start drawing the lines and forming a community around that which we are against versus what we are for. John is pushing that boundary. He's saying that we are in the inner circle and that one over there is not one of us, Jesus.

I remember at the height of the pandemic when we had to make decision after decision about whether we would gather, would we not, masks or no masks. It was complicated. It was incredibly hard. I remember there was a tendency in those moments for me to look out at other churches and critique the decisions they were making and think that they must not even love people. Look at what they're doing. They must not really love Jesus or their neighbor or this or that. And gosh, they're doing this! I remember getting so overwhelmed by that cynicism within my own heart.

The Lord said, “Listen, I didn't call you to pastor that church; I called you to pastor this church.” It's been one of the greatest gifts of the pandemic, the humility that God had to cultivate in me. I have learned to recognize that I can trust that their community is doing the best they can to follow Jesus as I am trying to. And rather than having than forming community around that which we are against, I just wonder if, in Jesus' name, we can have a more gracious response to those expressions of church that may do and look different than us. Recognizing that they're doing good gospel work in Jesus' name.

I wonder if Jesus would speak to us as well, “Whoever's not against you is for you.” To have that same humility, there needs to be greater generosity in how we hold and view brothers and sisters in the faith. We can hold so tightly to the denominational convictions or different perspectives or values on non-essential items so much so that it drives division within the church. It is so easy to draw those lines. But I wonder if in our particularities in which we are called, and we hold with conviction, if we in humility say that these are the things that make our community that we believe and hold to that the Lord has led us in. We have our particularities such as the leadership of elders, the value of expository preaching, and all the things that make up our community. We don't disregard those particularities; we hold to those with conviction. But we hold them with humility and a conviction that doesn't denigrate the church across the street that does things differently, that views things differently.

It's the old reformer's adage that came up as the Protestant Reformation was taking foot, and they were trying to determine how they were to go through all of this division. The reformers had this great phrase in

which they said, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

I think that's a good adage for us, that we hold to the essentials in unity with the church. We lean into the creeds, those declarations of Jesus and who he is, that we are saved by his death and his death alone. And through that comes the resurrection of new life. We hold those with unity to the church around us. But in non-essentials, we hold those with charity and liberty. We allow the church in these different non-essential items to have an expression that may look different than us, and that's okay. Maybe that's the beauty of the tapestry of the church. And we hold those with liberty.

What Jesus seems to declare in John 13 and 17 is that we hold these things in love because they will know us by the way we love one another. They will know us by how we love one another and how we love our fellow brothers and sisters in different churches and denominations, and spaces. Jesus says they will know us by love. It's a unity that might be a little bit beyond our comfort, but that is what Jesus is calling us to.

The language in Mark ramps up a bit, but this is the context in which it comes. *"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42).*

Now a few things we have to unpack here. Who are the little ones? Well, there's a little debate on this. Some believe it was the children that Dan preached about last week that was in there. Remember that text where he says, "Whoever cares for these children is caring for me." Some believe that's the little ones. I tend not to think that. I believe Jesus actually defines it here for us. He says, "If anyone causes little ones, those who believe in me." I think we are the little ones. Or actually, as the kingdom of God is going, all of these new believers who are coming to the faith are the little ones. They're joining Jesus' way. I think this statement really is about disciples of all ages across all times. Because all of us are prone to stumble, all of us have this same warning. In some ways, whichever interpretation you take has little effect on the actual teaching because the teaching of Jesus is clear. He says, "If you cause one of these to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea."

This word "to stumble," or older translations might say "to sin," is one we have to pluck out and do some work on. It's the Greek word *skandalizo*, and it means to put a snare, to cause to stumble. It almost has that sense of scandalizing. For those who scandalize others, which causes them to lose faith, he has strong words against that.

This "cause to sin" is a bit too narrow of a translation. Certainly, if you're causing someone to sin, you are causing them to stumble. But there are other ways in which, whether it's a sin or not, it may be questionable, where you can still cause people to stumble. Think again of the way in which we operate. If Jesus says they'll know us by our love, our lack of loving another can also cause people to stumble.

Again, if you look at the literature, the research coming out about younger generations, a large part of the reason that many of them

are walking away from the faith is because of the hypocrisy within the church. They're walking away because they see the church not as a net good but as a net bad. They're watching us pull each other apart, fight and bicker internally, and they think, "Why would I join? That's no different than the world in which I inhabit."

Jesus says they'll know us by our love. They'll know you by the way you interact with one another. There's a temptation, just like there was with John, towards this exclusivity, and I just want to suggest that it's lazy and unfaithful to organize a community based on what we're against. But that is becoming what the church is known for, rather than this more open way in which we recognize that those doing work in his name are our fellow brothers and sisters. Jesus' words are strong and bold. He says it's better if the person who causes others to stumble is cast into the sea with a millstone hung around their neck.

Now this idea of a millstone would've been what was put behind farm animals, and they would roll over grain to crush it. It was a heavy, heavy weight, something that the first-century readers, the disciples, certainly would've seen around and known. And it's intentionally a bit dramatic and hyperbolic. Yes, this is what it would be like. You could strap that around your neck and throw yourself into the sea. That would be a better destiny than causing others to stumble.

I mean, think about that. That should foster in us a hesitancy to how we interact with one another, how we interact with fellow believers, how we operate on social media, how we operate in our workplace, and how we go about living the Christian life because it matters.

Jesus seems to have very harsh words. It's intense, but to be the cause of another spiritual shipwreck is so serious to Jesus that a quick drowning would be preferred. Frequently the disciples have sought their own glory at the expense of others' faith, and Jesus says to be careful. I imagine John squirming a little bit at this response. Jesus will go on in verses 43 through 48 and give three other examples.

**If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched." Mark 9:43-48**

Now there are two ways to understand this text, and if you're familiar with the New Testament, it should remind you of a similar text that takes place in the book of Matthew. If you read the Matthew account, it has a little more color and texture to it. They are two different teachings that are similar in scope but a different focus.

This text is a little less individually focused and more corporately focused. The text in Matthew seems much more individually focused. He's talking specifically in Matthew about sexual sin, lust, and idolatry, and he says, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out." That seems

more individually centered, but here, given the whole text from verse 30 through 50, particularly the last line where it says, "be at peace with each other." Jesus' vision seems to be more corporately focused. But this is another spot where both interpretations are warranted in the way of Jesus. Both are very fruitful because how we operate in the corporate is through the individual, and so both of these hold.

Notice the way Jesus talks about this. He says, "If your hand caused you to stumble, cut it off. It's better to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell where the fire never goes out." He says if in your causing others to stumble, your hand is causing the issue, it's better to get rid of that rather than the result. In the same way, he says, if you're causing others to stumble, it would be better for the millstone to be around your neck. He says not to go that route either. Then he talks about the foot and the eye.

You can't help but think corporately in Paul's words in Corinthians when he talks about the body of Christ as one that has many members. Some are the eyes, some are the hands, and some are the feet. There seems to be this intensity in which Jesus is talking to these disciples, and he says, if there's any in your midst that are causing the stumbling of others, the lack of belief, you need to deal with that severely.

Church discipleship in the way of Jesus is difficult. It requires sacrifice. It requires life change. It requires a community that's ruthlessly pursuing faithfulness to the way of Jesus. And here, Jesus' words directed at the communities say that we must deal severely with the sin that indwells us because it's toxic. It spreads. It damages the witness. It finds ways in which it distorts the very presence of God in the world. And Jesus says to deal severely with it. Take sin seriously. Take holiness seriously.

It's interesting because the hand, the foot, and the eye are good things. This is why when he talks about causing someone to stumble, he doesn't say causing someone to sin. There's a Greek word for that he could have used, but he didn't. Here's where we have to develop in our understanding of discipleship. We tend to think that the only thing that we're doing in following Jesus is having our sins removed, but there's more than that. Sin is the symptom of a greater problem, certainly without question; one of the cornerstones of Jesus' work is the removal and forgiveness of sin. But it's to a greater end.

The sin that's within us comes from somewhere. It comes from a soul that's been bent inward. It comes from something within us that is bent selfishly towards our own in which we don't care about the damaging effects to others. And then, from that place, sin manifests. So yes, Jesus wants to forgive your sins, but even more so, he wants to restore your inward being. He wants to reform you so you can find your life in Christ. Because as the Holy Spirit dwells within us and reshapes and re-fashions the very internal existence of who we are, then we live a life more in line with the way of Jesus. That's the deeper work that Jesus is after, which will require healing and a lifetime of the pursuit of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to come in and work within us.

That's the work that Jesus wants to do. It's getting beyond the view of following Jesus in what Dallas Willard called "the gospel of sin management." It's much more than that. Jesus doesn't just want to manage our

sins. He wants to renew your very soul. He wants to transform you from the inside out.

Now that work ultimately happens through Jesus' death on the cross for forgiveness and the resurrection in which, at the end of time, when we are made new and resurrected into new bodies that will ultimately be dealt with, but not before then. So we pursue Jesus; we disciple under Jesus.

Here's the challenging part. Until then, he says to deal with it severely. Cut your hand off, pluck your eye out, and take your foot off so that you can enter life as opposed to hell. We have to do a little work on that because our imaginations have been far more shaped by Dante's *Inferno* than by the scriptures on what it is that hell means.

The Greek word for hell here is the word *Gehenna*, which is a valley that's in the southwest corner of Jerusalem. It became, by Jesus' time, symbolic of the place of the suffering of the ungodly. So this idea of *Gehenna* was essentially Jerusalem's waste. It was their dump outside of the city. They would be burning that which they wanted to get rid of, and the fires would continually burn. It would never go out.

But ultimately, what hell is, these pictures that we have of it are metaphors. Now, don't lose it when I say that. Don't think I don't believe in hell. Clearly, the metaphor is incredibly difficult. It is an existence in which the descriptions of it cause you to squirm a little bit because that's the result of it. But hell is the result of the removal of God's presence. It is life without the very sustaining gift of God. Think about it. If God is love, if our lives are sustained by the very grace of God, if the work of God is that which restores us from the inside out and creates us new, when God's presence is removed, your soul slowly disintegrates because it's bent inward with no help or no hope of change.

So the imagery we get is the vivid pictures. The fire doesn't go out. The worms are eating away. It's quite literally where corpses would go. They'd place them there, and maggots would slowly disintegrate their bodies. It's not a good picture. Jesus says, "Be careful." He gives the choice. He says you can have two hands and continue to cause others to stumble. Or he says if you take it seriously enough and there's a different way, it's better to deal seriously with it than to go that route and have that destiny.

The reality of hell is God actively giving us up to what we have freely chosen. If you have chosen to go your own way, to be the master of your own fate, the captain of your own soul, then to get away from him and his control will result in that destiny. This is Paul in Romans when he says the wrath of God is coming, but he speaks of it in a way in which he's withdrawing and giving them over to their own desires. Hell is God actively giving us what we desire. Hell is simply one's freely chosen path going on forever, which is a soul that is bent inward, distorted towards itself. You launched that over the trajectory of eternity, and it becomes a very dark existence. C.S. Lewis says it in his beautiful allegory called *The Great Divorce*. It's an allegory about what it's like for people to enter into the presence of God.

**There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.'** CS Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Here is the reality, if your heart is bent against the presence of God, then hell will be being in the existence or the presence of God for eternity. And he says, those who find themselves in hell, they have chosen that. I love that line where he says, "No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it." If you pursue and set out to find God, those who knock find the doors open. Those who seek find. God isn't hiding anywhere. He's not trying to hide behind a corner, so you can't find him. No. He says that anyone who seeks, whoever brings a cup of water in his name will earn their rewards, and it will certainly not be taken from them. And Lewis says that anyone who constantly and seriously seeks that, they'll find it again. Hell is simply one's freely chosen path going on forever.

Dallas Willard from his book, *The Allure of Gentleness*, says this:

**The fundamental reality of hell is separation from God, and that comes about because people do not want to be with him. For those people, being with God is the worst thing that could possibly happen to them. A part of our problem with understanding hell comes from the way we think about heaven. We think about heaven as some kind of comfortable resort, but the greatest thing about heaven is going to be the presence of God. He has allowed us to avoid him here on earth in some measure if we want to, but if you go to heaven, God's the biggest thing on the horizon. You're no longer going to be able to avoid him. And that would be the supreme torture if you haven't gotten over thinking of yourself as God. That's why I sometimes say that the fires of heaven burn hotter than the fires of hell."**  
Dallas Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness*

For someone who doesn't want to be in the presence of God, and yet in the new creation, when God is all in all, that is a torturous existence, in which I can't imagine a heart so bent away from God that being forced to stand in the presence of God for eternity would be nothing short of being in a fiery heap.

Jesus seems to say that this is the destiny; this is the option. And what is so beautiful and brilliant about Jesus is he so frequently just lays the choice before us and says that here are your options. You can deal with the sin. You can deal with the problem, and it may be severe, but it will lead to life. If you don't, there's a different choice, but that's your choice. If you're bent against it, there's the choice.

The soul that's bent inward and, therefore, sins is a malformed and self-centered soul. Jesus is in the business of forgiving sin, but he is in the business of restoring that very core and that soul so that it can be bent towards the things of God. And then, when you are bent towards

the things of God, an eternity in the presence of God is nothing more than heaven. It is this astounding moment in which your heart is slowly drawn towards the very thing that it most desires and longs for, and you live in an eternal state of joy before the presence of God. That is what awaits the one who is willing to deal with the brokenness.

Jesus says as he looks at this community, "Be careful not to cause others to stumble. They will know you by the way you love one another. My prayer is that they will be in complete unity." I should mention, by the way, the reference in verse 48 alludes to Isaiah 66:24. It's a direct quote where "*the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.*" There are all sorts of things that are going on there, but what that's alluding to is the prior examples of the discussion of hell that Jesus had here.

There's both the sense in which it's a present reality, but yet this quote in Isaiah 66 is a direct reference to the eternal reality as well. So in some ways, Jesus is giving this fully rounded picture in which hell is a present reality and an eternal reality. It's the same way when he comes and says, the kingdom of Heaven is here. It's available. You can step into it. It, too, is a present reality and an eternal reality. Both are on offer. That's why he ends the way he does in verse 49. "*Everyone will be salted with fire. 'Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other'"* (vv. 49-50).

Now it's a pretty enigmatic statement, and scholars all agree that this must have been a common phrase somewhere in the first century that Jesus is drawing on. There's not a ton of clarity on exactly what Jesus means by everyone will be salted with fire, but the best way to go about this is pulling out those two metaphors, salt and fire, and you begin to see what Jesus might be alluding to.

First, fire is constantly used as this imagery of judgment. Don't think judgment is always this big scary thing, but rather a purifying element. To judge something is to differentiate that which is good and that which is evil. And so fire becomes this refining quality. It's used to allow the impurities to rise to the surface so they can be dealt with, and Jesus says that everyone will be salted with fire. We will all go through that process.

Put it in the context of what we've been talking about. If I don't know the dark areas of my soul and I'm not aware of those, then the fire is actually an act of mercy in which I recognize the impurities and the brokenness within me, and then I can deal with those things. I can have the option of dealing with the sin that resides within me.

Salt, the other imagery, is almost always used as a good thing. In the first century world, it would've been a preservative or a cleansing agent, or a flavoring agent. Salt is something that's given to help preserve and sustain life. So this idea that you are salted with fire, and this is again a bit of a conjecture, scholars are a little confused at what's going on here, but the imagery tends to make sense that all of us will have this purifying, life-giving element of fire given to us in which it sustains our life.

It allows us the picture of the sin that is within us coming up to the surface so we can deal with it. It says everyone will be salted with fire.

Salt is good, but if it loses its life-giving quality, its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?

I'm not a scientist, but I understand that the element of salt is a stable element that can't ever lose its saltiness. So what's Jesus is getting at here is that you can use judgment in a way that isn't life-giving and preserving. Everyone will be salted, but how, if salt loses its saltiness, can it be made salty again? Then he says, have some salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other.

He's talking about the way in which the community operates. He says that as you are pursuing the way of Jesus together, have that salt within you where you bring life to one another as this fire is salted on us. Where we are working with one another to judge one another in a healthy sense that brings life. It's the way in which I have people that I live in close community with who have access, who I've given permission to speak into my life if it is out of step with what I say from the stage. I want them to call that out in me because I need to see those things.

That's the salt within the community. It's working to refine and shape us. It's allowing us to be judged in a healthy way because that's the way the community operates. Out of love and out of grace and out of truth, we hold one another accountable to the way of Jesus because of a teaching like this where Jesus says it's a pretty serious matter. Sin that resides in your community must be dealt with, must be walked through.

To summarize, this has been one of those sprawling teachings of Jesus in which he seems to be hitting so many different things, so I want to close by offering three summary statements of what this means for us as followers of Jesus.

Followers of Jesus must resist practices of arrogant exclusivity. You see that at the beginning with John, where John's questioning the good work of the gospel happening in places outside the 12, where Jesus has strong language. He says not to stop him. They're doing that in my name. They must be on about the work of God. We, as the church, must resist those sorts of practices in which we have that exclusivity. The fact that we are an established church that God has blessed for many, many years, we have to be on the lookout for this. Because there can be a sense when you follow Jesus for some time, that arrogance can swell up in you because you believe you have it figured out.

Certainly, that's been my story growing up in the church. I don't remember my first conversion to the Lord, but I remember the subsequent conversions in which Jesus shook the cynicism and arrogance out of me. I can pinpoint the moments in which I thought too highly of myself. The pride and the arrogance swelled within me, and the damage it caused downstream still grieves me to this day. I think about the way that I, too, have caused people to stumble, because of my own failure, because of my own pride. We have to resist believing that we are God's gift to the world, that we have figured it out, but rather with a humble

conviction, we hold to the essentials. We hold to those core values that we have with the humility that says, "Lord, we're trying our best to follow you, but we know we may be off. We hold these because we want to be following you." Followers of Jesus must resist the practices of arrogant exclusivity.

Followers of Jesus cultivate humility. In the inverse of arrogant exclusivity, we hold to this hope that any who brings a cup of water in Jesus' name is doing that work. We develop humble unity. It's not just that we resist those practices; we actively pursue and embrace those that hold and do the work in Jesus' name that hold to those same essential doctrines. We hold them as brothers and sisters, whatever denominational affiliation they may find. If they hold to those essentials, they are brothers and sisters. They may look different. They may express church differently, but we are called to that humble unity. We lean into the reformer's adage of "In essentials unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things charity."

Followers of Jesus pursue radical faithfulness. We take seriously the sin that's within us and in our community, and we live in such a way as we desire, above anything, to be faithful to the way of Jesus. We pursue that radical faithfulness. We take the words of Jesus here, not literally; it's clearly a metaphor, but we take it seriously enough to say it is better if I enter the kingdom of heaven with one hand than two if that's causing others to stumble.

We deal severely with sin. We deal severely with the failures of the community. Church, my question for you is, what is it that, as you read this text, rises to the surface of your mind? What is it that is causing others to stumble? What is Jesus bringing to the surface for you that says, "I'm not quite sure that's worth the vitriol I give it."

In an age of hostility, can humble unity could cut across that noise. The way in which we love and operate with one another is what Jesus said when he said, "This is how I will know who my disciples are." This is how the world will know who the followers of Jesus are through a deep commitment in unity to the brothers and sisters in Christ. Church, what is God calling you to this morning? What are the practices of hypocrisy and derision and violence that we hold that are not in alignment with the forming of a people that God is doing throughout history?

By the grace of God, we can stand forgiven and begin a new way where we resist that arrogance but rather pursue faithfulness to him in the way of Jesus. May it never be so that we hold so closely that we cause others to stumble. May it never be so that these non-essential items rise to the surface in which the onlooking world says, why are you tearing your brothers and sisters apart? May that never be the case because the words of Jesus ring true in my ears. "They will know us by the way we love."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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