

As We Come to the Table

By Don Green



Bible Verse: Matthew 5:21-26
Preached on: Sunday, December 19, 2021

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Well, according to the calendar, this is certainly a special day in the life of Truth Community Church. This is the 10th anniversary of the start of our church, this weekend was. It was 10 years ago plus two days that I walked in to a small group of people in a private home that I had never met and we began talking about the possibilities of starting a church in the Cincinnati area. The next day, there were a few more people as we gathered in a room elsewhere and I preached and now 10 years later, here we are and it's pretty remarkable to contemplate. I think that it's fair to say that by any objective measure we can say with gratitude and with confidence that the Lord has been in it from the beginning, and I just like to use objective measures, not simply assert something like that. Based on baptisms over the past 10 years, Christ has certainly saved many of his own in those 10 years. We have certainly seen Christians grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have seen, welcome new people come and become part of our church. We have seen others stay and be with us throughout those entire 10 years. There's so much to be grateful for. Our pulpit has reached all 50 states and over 75 countries through the wonder of internet distribution. People have moved from other states in order to become a part of our church. Several adults, young adults, have found their life spouse in the ministry of Truth Community Church. Families have welcomed dozens of babies into their homes. I can say from direct personal experience that over the past several years never has there been a sweeter or more unified elder board than what I am privileged to serve alongside with those men. There's just all kinds of remarkable evidences of the grace and blessing of the Lord and so it's with a lot of gratitude that we come together here today. Certainly we've all made friends, Christian friends, and relationships that we did not have 10 years ago. This building was not in our possession 10 years ago. We just have so very very much to be grateful for. This is a spiritual work and we are giving thanks for spiritual blessings in our midst as we contemplate these things.

As we contemplate these things, beloved, I want to remind you of a couple of things as we do. For all of the reasons that we have to be grateful, there are also reasons to be humbled and in some places even chastened. We have received very very much from the Lord here at Truth Community Church and you all are a part of that gift to us. There's just so much that we have received but we need to remember as we contemplate this, is that to receive much from the Lord is to be accountable for much, "To whom much is given, much is required." And so we can't simply luxuriate in the blessings of God and recount

these things and somehow, you know, in a hidden way congratulate ourselves as if we were somehow responsible for it. No, to whom much is given, much is required, and it's that sense of responsibility that I want to address here this morning, to have what we have here, you know, there is a high degree of accountability for the elders, there's a high degree of accountability for the deacons. What's true of elders and deacons, having a higher standard God has for us, this is also true of a congregation, especially members of Truth Community Church. There is a responsibility that members have to contribute to the life and the health and the well-being of the church, not simply to be passive recipients of it but to actively be involved in the promotion of the spiritual health and the spiritual well-being of Truth Community Church and we are all responsible and accountable for that.

Our members, for those of you maybe that haven't been here long enough to see us welcome new members into the church, every one of our members from the very beginning when we first established membership in October of 2014, every member that has come into Truth Community Church has made this public commitment which I am about to quote to you. Every single member affirms and promises before God and before the congregation vertically and horizontally, they make a pledge of fidelity and faithfulness to the local church by answering yes to this question. They are asked every time without exception, "Do you agree as a faithful steward of Christ Jesus to pray and to give of your time, talent, love and resources in such measure as God prospers you so that the people and work of Truth Community Church may flourish under the hand of God?" That's a very broad commitment and, you know, as much as we try to impress it upon people in our membership class and we do everything, you know, I realize that there's always the danger of people not really absorbing that, thinking through it in their hearts and making that kind of commitment with the depth of sobriety and seriousness that it requires, so it's good from time to time to step back and contemplate things. That question and that answer, that commitment, beloved, is nothing less than this, that pledge that members make is a commitment, an open-ended commitment of love to the prosperity and to the unity of Truth Community Church, and we as elders and certainly I as a pastor, we take that commitment seriously. We're not playing games here. We're not simply going through motions. This is just not an outward display in order to, you know, give some kind of form and function to a social club. This church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is his church and this is what he wants from his church.

Look over at the book of Philippians 2. This is all still by way of introduction. Philippians 2. My heart is full of gratitude and also full of earnestness as we consider Scripture here this morning. It's common as you read the New Testament, much of the New Testament is given over to addressing the matter of unity in the church and addressing attitudes of mutual love and mutual forgiveness; we'll see those things played out as we go through our message here this morning. But the Apostle Paul in writing to a church in a letter that's known as the epistle of joy because he emphasizes joy so much, is addressing a church where there were fissure in the midst of it, cracks in the well-being of the church, and Paul is looking to address and correct those and to heal things.

So in Philippians 2:1 after he had said in chapter 1, verse 27, he had said, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Okay, he emphasizes and opens up with this theme of living life in the body of Christ in a manner that's worthy of the gospel, worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ who left heaven and sacrificed himself on our behalf that we might be reconciled to God; who came into the world with a disposition of forgiveness and kindness toward his people, toward his enemies really, you know, Romans 5 talks about how while we were still enemies, Christ died for us. And Paul with that spirit in mind, that fullness of love for the church, love for Christ, love for the gospel, says that this is the consequence, one of the consequences of embracing Christ, one of the consequences of being born again by the Spirit, of being a part of the body of Christ is this, Philippians 2:1, he says, "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion," he says, "make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Then he goes and illustrates it by showing that that was the very attitude with which Christ came into the world. Nothing from selfishness, nothing from empty conceit but marked by a humble spirit that seeks the oneness of mind, the oneness of love, the oneness of unity in Christ, that that would be the mark of everyone who is a living participant in the life of the body of Christ.

So we take this commitment seriously because Scripture takes it seriously. This is a direct consequence of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ for his people; because Christ was concerned for the love and the unity of his people, that becomes a preeminent concern for everyone who knows Christ. You know, and the idea of tolerating, cultivating any kind of division or resentment within the body is utterly contrary to the spirit of the New Testament 100%. Scripture says, and we need to be mindful of this, in the midst of all of our blessing we need to be mindful of the fact that we do have an adversary. Scripture says that the adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, and we are not ignorant of the devices of Satan. He stirs up false doctrine. He quietly sows division within the church. And for me, you know, it is my particular responsibility as a pastor to keep the fence up and to keep the fence repaired in order to protect the work of the Lord in the midst of his own flock.

And so we have to take these things seriously and it would do...someone asked me, I don't even remember exactly who it was, someone asked me a while back, "Is there going to be a big celebration or anything on the 10th anniversary of the church?" You know, I'm not given to that kind of stuff really, you know, because it just become a means of self-congratulation and, you know, within each other and it just promotes the entirely wrong spirit about these things. We recognize our blessings and we're grateful for them from the bottom of our heart but we realize that the spirit of Scripture when you recognize the blessing of God, the Spirit of God comes to us and says in the words of Scripture, "You're doing well but excel still more." The work is not done. We have not arrived at anything. There is work to be done. So we must watch and protect what has been given to us. We must be diligent to make sure that we ourselves are contributing everything to the

positive development of this work, and those of us that have entered into it, you know, after the beginning of it, that we come in with a sense that I'm here to contribute to what has already been taking place. And it ought to be a matter of great concern and caution and watchfulness for each one of us to say, "I would never want to be the one through whom division came into the church, that my, you know, that my own attitudes, my words, my remoteness, would somehow diminish the work of God in this place that is so obviously under the blessing of God."

Now having said that, I know that no one would intend to do that. Certainly none of our membership would intend to do that, but these things can happen when we're not paying attention and so we have to watch ourselves. Think about it this way. You remember when the Lord told even Peter, said, "Peter, get behind Me, Satan," when Peter tried to discourage him from going to the cross. Just moments earlier, Peter had recognized Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ had affirmed him and said, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but My Father who is in heaven." And so Peter was tracking, Peter had it right, and in the very next moment, he becomes a mouthpiece for the devil in trying to hinder the advance of Christ to the appointed cross where he would redeem his people.

So here on the 10th anniversary of Truth Community Church, we have an opportunity to give thanks for all that we've been given, and we also have an opportunity to examine ourselves, every one of us. We have a Communion service coming up on Tuesday evening, and I invite and hope and expect, you know, many many many of you to be here for that. The remembrance of Communion, the celebration of the Lord's Table is a vitally important time in the life of a local church. It's not something to be skipped over or missed lightly, actually it's something to be that other things are sacrificed in order to be a part of. And Scripture, as we contemplate Communion, you can kind of see how all of this is coming together, Scripture speaks to us about how to prepare our hearts for the Lord's Table and that is what I want to address this morning from the perspective of gratitude for all that the Lord has done over the past 10 years, considering the present and looking forward to the future as well.

As you know very well, the Lord's Table is a time at which we remember the Lord's death for us, the bread representing his body that was on the tree, the juice indicating the blood that was shed through his wounds at the cross for the atonement of our sins, and it reminds us of his love and his suffering for us, and it keeps fresh in our minds the gratitude in our hearts for what our Lord did for us. But as you read Scripture, Communion is also a time, it's not just that, leading up to Communion is also a time of self-examination and preparation. Now normally, normally in the way that things are done, you know, normally the time of preparation is just a brief, you know, we have a consideration of the Lord's word and then we take the elements and we prepare that way, but the way that the Lord has blessed us this week is that he's giving us an opportunity to hear things, to take them in and to have a period of a couple of days in order to process this and to examine ourselves and to ask ourselves whether there is anything in us that might be hindering, that might be contrary to, better stated, anything in us that might be

contrary to that loving, gracious, wonderful spirit that the Lord intends for his people to enjoy and to live out in their own lives and with each other.

So I want to ask and answer two questions as we contemplate the coming of Communion on Tuesday evening. I want to ask this question: what do we examine? We say that we are called to self-examination, well, what do we examine in that light? Then secondly, to address the question: how do we respond? How do we respond? So we need to know what it is that we should examine ourselves for and then we need to know how to respond.

Now for the longest time as a newer Christian and I would say for many of you when we think about examining ourselves, our thoughts quickly go to some things that are important but rather superficial. We ask ourselves, you know, how have I kept my daily quiet time over the past week? And oh, a couple of times, oh, I've got a lot to confess here where I missed, and all of that, you know, and it just becomes a cycle of superficial conviction and things like that that are important but don't go to the deeper issues. What I want to address to you here today is to realize that the process of preparing ourselves for Communion calls us to examine matters of church unity actually, and our part and our role and whether we're contributing to that or detracting that. So to take you to the consideration of this, I want you to turn to 1 Corinthians 11 as we consider what it is that we should examine in our own lives as we contemplate the Lord's Table. We are not giving this so that we can say this is what somebody else should be thinking about, you know, this isn't what the wife should be telling her husband, "This is what you need to be focused on," or anyone else, this is for us to take personally, for us to examine ourselves individually and to contemplate the tenor of our lives, the tenor of our conversations, the tenor of our relationships in light of the priority that the Lord puts on the unity and blessing of his people.

So in 1 Corinthians 11, you'll remember that the church at Corinth had a number of spiritual problems in their midst. There were divisions that Paul alludes to right from the beginning in chapter 1, and then they had all kinds of selfish manifestations in the life of the body. It's always remarkable to see that Paul addresses them as believers in the light of the carnality and the division that was in the church, and it shows us that even genuine believers as recognized by an apostle, can have many many things that need to be sanctified in their lives, and the way that they approach the Lord's Table was one of those matters at the church of Corinth.

So in chapter 11, verse 17, the Apostle Paul says this, he says, "But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you." Then he goes into dealing with the Lord's Table, the Lord's Supper, and he says, verse 20, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have

nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." And he goes on to describe the Lord's Table in verse 23, he says, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."

What Paul has done there is he's set their existing practice side-by-side with the way that the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper at that last Passover meal before he was crucified, and he contrasts there the Lord's generous sacrificial spirit with the carnality and the divisive spirit that was marking the church at that time. People were coming together for a meal and people were just hurrying to serve themselves and take care of themselves while others were left on the side without anything to eat or drink. Paul says, "This is shameful that you're behaving this way." And he goes on and gives instruction about the way that Christ intends his Table, how the spirit of that is to be. His Table, the Lord's Table is to be a time of loving harmony for the people of God, and as we're going to see, beloved, conscious – every word I'm about to say here is important and emphatic here – conscious toleration of broken relationships in the body of Christ violates the spirit of harmony that the Lord's Table is supposed to promote, and for someone to come with conscious division, conscious resentment, conscious grudges in their heart and in their mind against another believer in Christ.

And come to the Table that way is an utter reversal of what the Lord intends the Table to promote so that in verse 27 here in 1 Corinthians 11:27, he says this, he says, "Therefore," in light of how the Lord instituted the Table, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." This is serious. He's saying this is a sin against the sacrifice of Christ to approach the Lord's Table with division and resentment in your heart toward others in the body of Christ and selfishness toward them.

So he goes on in verse 28 and says here's the consequence of this, "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Before we come to the Table, we're to examine ourselves for these things, to examine ourselves not only for whether we, you know, we had our quiet time the day before, we're to examine ourselves and to contemplate whether you are actively involved in resentment or grudges toward someone else in the body of Christ, and you're to examine that and to deal with it.

In verse 29 he says, "For he who eats and drinks," in an unworthy manner otherwise, "eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly." So much so that verse 30, "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." He said, "God is disciplining you. You're experiencing physical weakness and physical judgment and some people have even died as a result of God's judgment upon them, God's discipline upon them for not taking the Lord's Table in a worthy manner."

So it's very serious. In verse 31 he says, "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged." In other words, if you examine yourselves and you deal with things, then you can take the Lord's Table without a fear of judgment, but if you ignore that process of examination, if you come with consciously tolerated division in your heart and you're not dealing with that, the Lord's Table is no longer a blessing but an instrument of judgment upon you when you do. It's very very serious. So Paul says, verse 31, "if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world."

We are to examine ourselves before we come to the Lord's Table and it's obviously not a superficial matter that you can just do in a few seconds before you tip the cup back and take, you know, take the element. Paul is speaking in the context of communion and disunity in the church and so, beloved, what you and I are to do, you know, we're all under the authority of the Lord here and the authority of the word, what you and I are to do is we are to examine ourselves for this, what do we examine? We don't examine other people. We don't examine what others in the body are doing. We look in the mirror and we examine ourselves. We examine ourselves to see if we are holding grudges or bitterness against anyone in the body, if there is a relational disruption that is in the body that you are participating in, that you are a part of. And here's the thing for us and this is a very big bridge to cross but it is a very important one to cross. Beloved, it is not a question of whether there was a wrong done to you or not. That's not the spirit of this at all, and that if, "Well, you know, there was a wrong done to me and therefore I'm justified in my, you know, in my resentment." That's so wrong. That is so utterly contrary to the spirit of Christ. Think about it. Jesus Christ was sinless. All of us had sinned against him and he had legitimate grievances against us when he came into the world and when he laid his life down and sacrificed himself in order that we might be forgiven. That's the spirit. Christ had done no wrong, he bore the grievance, he bore the sin himself in order that we might be forgiven, something that we did not deserve.

So it's not, you know, the question, the question, the question that you and I have to put aside, the question that we need to put aside in these matters and it can be, you know, within a family, within a marriage, not just within the broader body of Christ, the question is not did that person wrong me? The question is that you're examining yourself for is, is there a gracious forgiving spirit in my heart toward the one that I am thinking about? It's not a question of whether you were wronged. Christ was wronged far more, infinitely more than any of us have been wronged on a horizontal level and he came and he sacrificed and he forgave. So the question isn't whether you've been wronged or whether you think you've been wronged, that's the wrong starting point. The question for the self-examination is whether you, I say this gently but it needs to be said, the question is whether you are holding something against someone in the body of Christ, something against your spouse, against a child, against a parent, against a friend in the body of Christ. This is where you start and say, "You know, there is something wrong in my heart here. I've been angry and bitter about this for a long time and the word of God is convicting me about it. It's obvious that my heart has not been right here." That's where we start.

Now overall, for those of you that are visiting, you're out of town and I don't want to give the wrong impression here, overall and for all of the church here I want to make very clear, overall we have a peaceful unified spirit at Truth Community Church. I believe that. I think that that is true and I'm very grateful for it and I know I speak for the other elders when I say that. At the same time, beloved, for none of us, none of us, this is not the first rodeo for any of us. We've all been around the block, you know, and most of us have been around the block in the church of Christ for a long period of time. You and I would be foolish and unfaithful even to think that there aren't occasional undercurrents, occasional streams that run contrary to that spirit of unity in our body whether it's in homes or whether it's in the broader church. And so we're not talking about someone else, we're talking about you here this morning. You know, we're holding up a mirror to you through the word of God and so I'd ask the question this way, and let me say this. One of the most difficult things that I have encountered in pastoral ministry is dealing with somebody that is bitter against someone else. There is sometimes if not often, they become enveloped in a suffocating overbearing sense of self-righteousness that that person wronged me and I'm justified in resenting them. It is humanly impossible to pierce through that self-righteousness and that angry spirit in order to get people to look at it objectively, and that's part of the reason why I want to preach and open the word of God on the matter, is because I believe that the Spirit of God uses the word of God in the hearts of his people and goes where human words cannot go.

So I ask you this question: what would a spirit of disunity look like in your heart? What would it look like in your heart? And I want to give you four "A's," not because you've done well here, as if this were an education class, but four "A's" for you to think about and to help you in your spirit of self-examination. I'm going to give you four words here that go from inward to outward in it; and just to say it briefly, four "A's" to help you identify a spirit of disunity in your own heart.

Well, number 1 is anger. Anger. Do you have an inward resentment against someone over something from the past that they said or didn't say, did or didn't do? You know, is there an inward resentment in your heart toward someone else in the body for whatever reason? And we say that and we start there because we remember what the Lord God said about himself, 1 Samuel 16:7 said the Lord is not like a man, he doesn't look on the outward appearance of a man, he looks at the heart. He looks at this inward matter and is there anger in your heart? Is there resentment? Is there bitterness toward another person in your heart? That's a bad sign. That's a bad sign, especially if it's been there and you know that it's been there for a long period of time, more than a few hours or a couple of days. You know, you start to embrace that and more and more you go on.

Secondly, there's this matter of accusation. Accusation. You complain verbally to other people about the person, maybe bypassing addressing the person directly as Matthew 18 would call you to do, and instead you just complain, "Do you know what this person did? Do you know what he did to me? Do you know what he said? Do you know what they did?" And there are accusations that are made and sometimes maybe it's nothing more than simply having these conversations around your own dinner table and just feeding off

of that within the confines of your own family. That's not okay. I realize those are private conversations at your own table but those words are an expression of what's in your heart, and it's very possible for people to turn their family against others through the poisoning words that they inject, you know, in the context of your own home.

So anger, accusation, thirdly, avoidance. We're just being real here. This is what we need to address. Avoidance. You won't talk to the person. You see them coming and you walk the other way, you pretend like you didn't see them. You won't engage them.

And fourthly, here's the worst one of them all, here's the climax of it all: alibi. Alibi. You justify your behavior to yourself or to someone else if you're questioned about it.

So you go from anger, to accusation, to avoidance, and then alibi and you start to justify yourself in what you're doing. You justify your inward grudge. You justify your avoidance. And listen, I'm saying this because, look, we're all on the same side here. I'm on your side as I say these things. Part of a pastor's duty, part of a preacher's duty, it's not simply to teach the word of God and it's not simply to affirm the people of the word of God, Scripture says there's time for rebuke and admonishment as well. Part of being a faithful pastor is pointing these things out and calling people to repentance.

So it's in that spirit of love that I'm speaking here this morning, not in a spirit of condemnation but we need to expose these things to our heart and lay all of these things out under the light of God's word and let the light have its cleansing effect of the darkness that can accrue in our hearts. And I want to say this, you know, if you find yourself in that cycle that I just described, the peril of self-deception in that condition is unbelievably great. It is unbelievably great. It's not simply that others can't draw it out and help you see it clearly, you don't see it clearly yourself. We have the capacity, each one of us and probably each one of us have done it at one time or another even if it's not true of us now, that we hold bitter attitudes against someone in the body of Christ and we think we're right to do so. We think it's right for us to respond this way, as if Christ had never come to die for sinners like you.

So this is a very real danger, this is a very real danger and we're going to see how real and substantive the danger is in a few moments, but how do you examine your heart to identify this spirit in yourself? You hear yourself saying and thinking things like that, "I just will not talk to him after what he did to me. What she did was wrong. I won't forgive him for that. I won't forgive her for that." Really? Really? You would claim to know Christ and you would have an attitude like that in your heart? Really? Really? Do you not know the first thing about the gospel and about your own sin against God, to claim to know Christ, to claim that Christ has forgiven you and you won't forgive someone else of a lesser offense? Scripture is filled with warnings and rebukes about this. It's filled with it and yet we are so capable, our hearts are so deceitful that we can think we're walking well with the Lord while we've got that side-by-side in our heart.

So we all, you and I, we all need a warning as our church comes to the Table on Tuesday night. What do we examine? We've covered that and if that kind of bitterness is in your

heart, then you need to repent and you need to make it right, and you need to do it now. That brings us to our second point: how do we respond if that's the case? How do we respond if that's the case? We say, you know, that what do we examine? We examine our hearts for that spirit of disunity and resentment and the question then is how do we respond? Here's the question, it doesn't matter what pastor says, in one sense here, because I know people that want to can dismiss anything that a human being says to them, but what does God call you and me to do if we find that in our hearts, and this process of self-examination strikes us with the recognition that the word of God has pointed us and said, "You're the man. You're the woman here that the word of God is describing." How do we respond, and this brings us into a test of whether our profession of faith is genuine or not, or whether we're simply a hypocrite that does not have and participate in the realities of spiritual life that the Spirit produces in the true people of God, the true people of Christ.

What does God call us to do when we find that in our heart? Turn to Matthew 5. Scripture could not be more clear, more explicit about this than it is. Matthew 5. What does God call us to do when we find that divisive spirit in our own heart, that resentful spirit in our own hearts? Well, in Matthew 5, this is, of course, in the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus is teaching what the fruit of true repentance looks like. When the Spirit of God has saved someone, he produces certain characteristics in their heart that are placed there in seed form and then they grow and flourish and blossom over the course of time as the Spirit of God works in their heart, and it's a matter of righteousness. You see in Matthew 5:20, and this is just so compelling to me as I contemplate these things, Jesus says in Matthew 5:20,

20 "... I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Scribes and Pharisees, of course, were the religious leaders. They were thought to be at the time the spiritual elite in society and Jesus says, "You've got to be better than them." And so he's setting a very high standard of righteousness, setting a very clear idea of what the fruit of true repentance looks like, and then in the rest of chapter 5, he gives a series of six illustrations to show what that righteousness looks like and what is the righteousness that God requires. And here's the thing that I want you to see, having set that standard, having emphasized how important this righteousness is, as he speaks to his disciples, as he speaks to those who would claim to know him, the very first illustration that he uses deals with this matter of holding grudges against someone else. The very first one.

Look at it there in verse 21. It goes down through verse 26. He says,

21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,'

shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

Pause there for just a moment. Jesus here is giving repetition to emphasize his point. It's not so much that there's a big progression from the court to the Supreme Court to fiery hell, it's rather a matter that he's emphasizing how important it is to address this sin in your heart. And notice that whatever else he's saying about this anger, whatever else he's saying about this kind of resentment, he says this, we're talking about a guilt that sends people to hell. This is a hellish sin. This is a particularly devilish rebellion against God to live like this, and so he goes on to say how is it then that you're to respond if you're angry with your brother. Well, you don't let it rest. Verse 23, he says, "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar," in other words, if you are coming to God to worship and you're right there, you're ready to offer in that Jewish context, you're ready to offer, hand your sacrifice over to the priest so it can be offered and he says at that moment and you remember that something is wrong, you stop everything, you turn away from your outward act of worship and you deal with the issue with your brother.

Let's look at verse 23 again,

23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

Jesus gives two principles here in responding when you find this in your heart or in a relationship. He says this, he says, "Seek peace first and seek peace fast." Seek peace first and seek it fast is what he is saying.

Now Jesus had already emphasized the importance of peace and being a peacemaker in the Sermon on the Mount. Look back at chapter 5, verse 9, where he says this, he says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they," and the idea is this, they and they alone, "shall be called sons of God." It's those who make peace that are called the true sons of God. They're the ones who manifest the true peacemaking character of the very nature of God. What was Christ doing when he came into the world except he was making peace with those who were in rebellion against him. He came on a mission of reconciliation. He came on a mission of restoring harmony to a broken relationship. That's at the core of the Incarnation. That's at the core of the atonement is reconciliation between sinners and a holy God. So obviously, only the people who share something of that peacemaking spirit could truly belong to him, somebody that cast aside someone that does not practice peacemaking, someone that resists it could not possibly, could not possibly have the Spirit of God inside them if that is a settled, hardened refusal to make peace that's being manifested in their heart.

Now somebody could hear that and say, "Well, you know, I've been around a few churches, you might say. If that's true, then that means that there's a lot of people in the church that aren't even Christians." Yeah. Yeah, that may be the implication, what does it have to do with the truth of the matter? You can't reject the truth simply because of what its implications might be, you just look at the word of God and see what it says. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they," and they alone, "shall be called sons of God."

Now the peace here of which Jesus speaks is not that inner tranquility that modern evangelicals are so fascinated with. "Well, I feel peace about this." It's not what he's talking about. He's talking about harmony in relationships. Peacemakers, not peace-feelers. And beloved, here's a very important point as we're contemplating this before the Lord in his presence, you know, just mentally conscious of the fact of being in the presence of Christ, being in the presence of the Holy Spirit, being in the presence of this cosmic peacemaker who made peace with me despite my rebellion against him; he sought me and bought me with his own precious blood. I'm conscious of these things as I speak to you and what Scripture tells us is that those who have received forgiveness from Christ forgive others. Those who have received forgiveness from Christ forgive others.

Look at Matthew 6:12. Jesus taught us to pray, said, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." That guarantees integrity in your quest for forgiveness. If you are a stingy forgiver and you pray that way, you're asking God, "God, forgive me in a stingy way." But if you're a generous forgiver, God gladly forgives you. Verse 14 he says, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

Look at Ephesians 4. I told you Scripture is filled with this and I left things out for the sake of time. Ephesians 4, beginning in verse 30. I'll give you all a moment to find it there. We're in no hurry today. Ephesians 4:30, the Apostle Paul says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." What comes next? What does he say next after he says do not vertically grieve the Holy Spirit of God? He says this in verse 31, he goes directly to this issue of relationships and unity, he says, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

Beloved, ask yourself this question if you find yourself trapped in this spiritual condition. What do you believe about the forgiveness of God in Christ to you? If you're a Christian, you should know, "God forgave all of my sins in Christ. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin," 1 John 1:7. Well, then if you've been completely forgiven, then your perspective on horizontal wrongs is that you completely forgive them all and hold nothing against the one who wronged you. I can't tell you how many times over the years, we, as elders, have talked about matters in the church and we just shake our heads and

say, "If that person would just forgive and move on, this whole situation would go away." And it's true.

Look over at Hebrews 12:14, "Pursue peace with all men," Hebrews 12, "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled." So this is a priority for true Christians. This matter of peace, of reconciliation, this is a high priority. It's far more important than your earthly job. It's far more important than extra-curricular activities. It's far more important than, you know, your Christmas celebrations. This is a high priority to God as shown by how many times it's addressed in the word and shown by how it reflects the spirit of the sacrifice of Christ himself.

So Jesus, going back to Matthew 5 now after we've illustrated from those verses, go back to Matthew 5, Jesus says that this condition of heart is to be addressed first. It just became your highest priority under the authority of Christ when he says there in verse 23, "if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother." So you seek peace first and we see something of the priority of God, you seek resolution first before you go to worship, and over these next 48 hours, I would venture to say for some of you, you're dealing with things in your heart and maybe you need to seek someone out and talk to them and say, "This isn't right. I want to make it right. I've been wrong in the way that I have held something against you." And this is the spirit of it, it's not you saying, "You did me wrong and I'm here to fix it." No, it's you going and saying, "I've been in the wrong toward you and I am so sorry. I've betrayed my Lord with the bitterness that I've cultivated and held in my heart. Please forgive me. I'm not here asking you to repent, I'm here asking you to forgive." That's the spirit of it.

So you seek resolution first before you worship. The greater priority is reconciliation. Beloved, to sit at the Lord's Table you must first clear the air with men. Jesus says it's more important to reconcile that relationship than to be present at worship. This is just the word of God. This isn't me trying to protect turf in Truth Community Church. This is the word of God to his people. This is the natural consequence of salvation, forgiven vertically, now forgiving horizontally. And without that, you have to go back to whether the first principle is in place or not. You say, "I've been a member of churches for 20-30 years." Do you know what? That's not a consideration in this context. The consideration is what do you do with that anger and bitterness that's in your heart.

So you seek it first, second point in terms of what you do in response, you seek peace fast. Seek peace first, we saw that from Jesus' words, you seek it fast. Look at verse 25. Jesus says in verse 25, "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent." They had debtor's prisons in those days and if you owed a debt to someone, they'd throw you into prison until the debt was paid

off. It was a means of motivating the family to contribute in order to seek the release of their loved one. But what Jesus is talking about here is he's picturing litigants on their way to a courtroom, you could put it that way, and the idea is that once you get before the judge, you don't know what's going to happen. The judge might rule completely against you and rule completely in favor of your opponent. There is real genuine risk here in the picture that Jesus uses and those that have any acquaintance with the legal world and with litigation, they know and understand that the closer that the trial date gets, the more likely settlement is to come because people want to control their risks. And so people get a lot more tolerable, people start to work together the closer the judgment day is coming and Jesus says let that picture of avoiding the risk of an uncertain outcome, let that picture inform the way that you seek reconciliation with others.

There is a coming judgment day where we're all going to stand before the Lord and we're going to give an account to him and we won't take the time to develop this any further, but Scripture gives us the sense that somehow the Lord will dispense rewards in proportion to the manner in which we have been generous in dealing with others and being gracious toward others. You know, what do you want from God, do you want God to deal with your reward strictly and harshly as you deal with those people you refuse to forgive, do you want God to treat you like you treat people who have offended you? Or do you want to treat people now like God has dealt with you in Christ and trust the Lord to sort that out and forgive as freely and generously as you want the Lord to freely and generously forgive you?

But there's got to be an internal integrity, there has to be consistency here about it and Jesus says to seek it fast. He says, verse 25, "Make friends quickly." Do it fast. The commands emphasize, the form of the commands in the Greek text communicate urgency. It says this is an urgent matter and, beloved, I want to tell you that to this mindset, "I'll do it later. I'll do it later." That is lethal to spiritual life. You resolve that relationship now before you feel the discipline of God on your life for failing to do it. That's the instruction and wisdom of our Lord.

So beloved, churches divide, churches divide because individuals disobey these words from Matthew 5. Individuals get self-righteous in the midst of a perceived offense, they justify themselves and accuse others, and then when it finally comes out weeks, months, years later, they're too hardened to reconcile, they refuse to listen, you know, and they'll pack up their bags and walk out the church. I've seen it so many times, people that prefer their anger to sitting down and trying to work something out. I have multiple instances in my mind, multiple examples of people long gone, and what a grief it is to my heart. These things all could have been worked out but they didn't want to. They preferred their self-justifying resentment and misunderstanding and sometimes lies to just sitting down and talking and obeying Matthew 5.

Sinclair Ferguson says this in his book on the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "Animosity is a time-bomb. We do not know when it will go off. We must deal with it quickly before the consequences of our bitterness get completely out of control. Most human relationships that are destroyed could have been preserved if there had been

communication at the right time. Jesus says the right time is as soon as we are conscious that we are at enmity with our brother."

So brothers and sisters in Christ, on this wonderful anniversary when we have so much to give thanks, we recognize that to have much is to take responsibility for what that implies, and for professing Christians and for members of Truth Community Church, there's no avoiding this topic and our coming Communion in the Christmas season no less, provides the occasion for us to respond and heightens our responsibility to act. God has given us providentially the opportunity to consider this for a couple of days before we gather together, and speaking corporately as well as individually, our response will reveal the reality of our gratitude for God's grace to us in Christ and our gratitude for his grace to us in this church, or it will show something else.

So beloved, if you're upset with someone under your roof or outside of your roof within the body of Christ, seek peace first, seek it fast. May the Lord humble us to respond in repentance and then by grace restore us where needed to Christ and to each other.

Let's pray together.

Gracious Father, thank You for Your unending patience with Your erring children. Thank You for the continual outpouring of grace that You make on our lives. How many times we all have stumbled in precisely this principle, Lord, that we've considered today. How many times, Father, we've retreated into resentment rather than moving forward in forgiveness. Be gracious to us once again, Father. We've recounted so many of the signs of Your favor upon us. Well, Father, add to the signs of Your favor upon us anything that might need to be dealt with in response to Your word here today. We seek You. We humble ourselves and we pray that there might be a spirit of gentle reasonableness, of kind consideration, of a desire to put the past where it belongs, in the past, and to move forward in a reconciled spirit with those of like precious faith. Please help us to that end, O God, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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