

**The Secrets of the Olive Tree:
Protecting the Health of the Tree
Romans 11: 16 – 22**

Romans 11: 16 – 22 if the root is holy, so are the branches. ¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

- As we have been examining these verses, over the last few weeks, we began by noticing that while it is impossible for a Christian to lose their salvation, it is entirely possible for a person to think they are saved, but not be saved at all.
 - What is the clearest indication that may be the case in a person's life? What Paul says in verse 22. They are no longer continuing in the kindness of God. That is living a life of faith and repentance.
 - That is the Christian life. It is not trying to be good. It is living by faith in the one who loved you and gave his life for you.

Colossians 2: 6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him

- How did you receive Christ Jesus as Lord? Faith and repentance. How do we continue in the kindness of God each day? Faith and repentance.
- The Old Testament is filled with men and woman who were sinful, men like David who committed terrible sins, but yet still was called a man after God's own heart. Why? He lived a life of faith and repentance. That made him a true Israelite. But in Romans 9: 6, Paul makes it clear that not every Israelite was like David.

Romans 9: 6 – 7 not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring,

- The same is true with the New Testament covenant community of the church. The church is comprised of sinners. That is why there is no perfect church. But among that group of sinners, there are the elect of God who are by God's grace persevering, in faith and repentance, to put to death their sinful nature and live for Christ. But just like with Old Testament Israel, there are also those, in the church, who:

1 John 2: 19 went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

- In other words, people who appeared to be part of the covenant community, maybe even being baptized into it, maybe joining in the worship, maybe joining in the Lord's Supper, but had never really laid down their life to take up the life of Christ in true faith.
- Both those in the Old Testament covenant community, that were descended from Israel but not Israel, and those in the New Testament covenant community, who

went out from us but were not of us, are represented on this olive tree as branches that are broken off. The fact that they are broken off proves that they were never part of the elect, never really saved.

- The breaking off is ultimately a judgment of God. Only God knows the heart. But, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, there are clear instructions for times and manners in which the covenant community itself is called by God to be a part of the process. This process, that the covenant community is called to be a part of, is what we refer to as church discipline.
- Church discipline is something nobody really likes to talk about, and few churches even bother to practice it. But think about Paul's words here in Romans 11.

Romans 11: 21 – 22 If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²²Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness.

- Notice these verses point us to the possibility of judgment for those who are part of the covenant community. How? Being broken off. Broken off is eternally lost.
 - Yes, Paul makes it clear that God can graft anyone, at any time, back in, but if a person remains broken off, they are eternally lost. That is the ultimate judgment from God. Jesus pointed us to this truth in John 15 as he gave us a similar illustration of the vine and its branches.

John 15: 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

- How does a person avoid that fate? By abiding in Jesus. How do we abide in Jesus?

Romans 11: 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness.

- As the covenant community takes church discipline seriously, what are they doing? They are helping everyone in the community take note of the severity of God, and in doing that they are also helping people to note and continue in the kindness of God.
 - Sin is a serious matter to God. So serious that:

Ezekiel 18: 4 the soul who sins shall die

- If the church does not point out the seriousness of sin and the severity of God, then its members will never even begin to comprehend the kindness of God. If sin matters so little that it is never addressed, then God's grace will also matter very little. And the less God's grace matters to a person, the less likely they are to persevere in faith and continue in the kindness of God.
- The purpose of church discipline is to help the individual members of the body of the church to note the severity and kindness of God and then to exhort its members to continue in that kindness.

Hebrews 3: 12 – 14 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of

Sin.¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

1. **Where does the Bible teach that the covenant community is called to discipline its members?**

- From exhortation, to admonishment, to excommunication, there are numerous examples in the Old Testament of God calling on people in the covenant community of Israel to exercise church discipline.
 - How many times did God send prophets to warn Israel of the severity of God? To warn them of the severity and consequences of their sin?
 - But while warning them, they also exhorted the people to note the kindness of God as He was willing to forgive and pardon sin if there was true repentance.
 - Oftentimes, the prophets were even called to announce God’s judgment on His people. What is that, if not church discipline?
 - Think of David when God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David over his sin with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. That was church discipline.
 - Beyond that, God spelled out for His Old Testament covenant people major areas of serious deviation from the laws of God, in which God specified that a person was to be separated from the community of faith, even put to death.
 - For example, those who worshiped false gods, or practiced sexual immorality, or committed crimes against society (murder, disrespect of parents, kidnapping), or scorned Yahweh through blasphemy, forfeited, not only their place in the covenant community, but also the right to live.
 - The classic example of this type of Old Testament “excommunication” is displayed for us in the story of Achan in Joshua 7. In fact, as we think about that account, we can see how church discipline not only seeks to protect the honor and glory of God but is also needed to protect the covenant community itself. It was because of Achan’s undealt with sin that Israel suffered a serious defeat at the hands of an insignificant city. Achan’s sin affected not just Achan but the whole community.
 - ♦ In dealing with Achan’s sin, not only was Achan cast out of the visible nation of Israel and cut off from the covenant of God with all its privileges, but he was also stoned. His physical death was a sign of the spiritual death that came as a result of his rebellion against God.
 - The book of Deuteronomy is a recounting of the covenant and the law to the people of Israel as the second generation prepares to enter the Promised Land. There is a line that becomes a common refrain throughout this recounting of the law.
 - In Deuteronomy 13: 1-5, God tells Israel how to deal with a false prophet, and the bottom line is, “purge the evil from among you.”
 - This phrase is repeated in Deuteronomy 17: 2– 7 where the text speaks explicitly about the way in which Israel should deal with those who worship other gods.
 - “Purge the evil from among you” is repeated again in Deuteronomy 19: 15 – 12, in connection with false witnesses.

- We find it again in Deuteronomy 21: 18– 21, in reference to a rebellious son who refuses to submit to the authority of his mother and father.
- And yet again, in Deuteronomy 22 where it is cited for a number of offenses, all of which deal with the sin of sexual immorality.
- Why is God so intent on purging the evil from Old Testament Israel? For the sake of the purity of His people and His glory. This purging of evil, went beyond exhortation and admonition. It was literally a purging, a removal of the person from the camp of Israel, often by death. Why so harsh?

1 Corinthians 5: 6 a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.

- But that was just the Old Testament, right? We might like to think that, but in the New Testament, we have the same God who is still concerned for His glory and the purity of His covenant people, who are the bride of Christ.
 - In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul is dealing with the failure of the church in Corinth to deal with one its members who is sleeping with his father’s wife.

1 Corinthians 5: 12 – 13 Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

- So, note two things that Paul is teaching us as he deals with the issue of sin in the church. First, just like Old Testament Israel, the covenant community of the church is to “purge the evil from it.”
- Second, the church is called to judge those within the church, but not those outside of the church. Judgment of those outside the church is reserved for God. But inside the covenant community the church is to act, wherever sin is obvious in its community.
 - ♦ We often get that exactly the opposite, don’t we? Judging and condemning those outside of the church, while letting those who are our friends inside the church slide.
- What are some of those offenses the church is called to take note of and purge from among us? We could look at various Scriptures, but I think for now we can just say that it is any pattern of unrepentant sin that distorts the glory of God, or mars either the purity or unity of the church.
 - So, one example of this that we already saw in 1 Corinthians 5, was Paul admonishing the church in Corinth to expel the immoral brother.
 - In 1 Timothy, Paul has clearly practiced church discipline in the case of two men involved in teaching a false doctrine.

1 Timothy 1: 19 – 20 By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

- To be handed over to Satan was another way of saying excommunicated.
- But church discipline isn’t just for those who engage in false teaching, or scandalous sins, it is even for those who seek to break the unity of the church by causing dissension.

Titus 3: 10 – 11 As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, ¹¹knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

- But not all discipline ends in excommunication. Sometimes, like with David in the Old Testament, discipline is an admonishment, as Paul does with Peter in:

Galatians 2: 11 – 12 But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹²For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.

- In the way he dealt with Peter, Paul was following the pattern that Jesus laid out for church discipline in:

Matthew 18: 15 – 18 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

- When a person refuses to listen to the church, what does Jesus say? Treat them as a Gentile or tax collector. In other words, excommunicate them.
 - Peter apparently took Paul’s admonishment to heart and that was the end of it, but if he hadn’t, church history would have been very different.
- Now notice, in those verses we not only see the expectation by Jesus that we will follow a course of church discipline. That’s why he gave us the pattern. But we also see the authority he gives the church to do this, in verse 18 (“Whatever you bind and loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven.”)
 - When a church is put in the position of having to excommunicate one of its members, it is making a judgment that based on all the evidence the church has, that person is spiritually dead.

Matthew 7: 16 – 20 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

- The teaching of the New Testament is very clear. The church is called to make judgments and discipline its own. To break off those branches who refuse to recognize the severity of God by willfully engaging in sinful practices that threaten the glory of the church, the purity of the church, and even the unity of the church.
- When a person refuses to repent and the church is forced to take the final step of church discipline, often referred to as excommunication, the church is essentially saying about that individual that they do not see the fruits of salvation, that is faith and repentance, being revealed in their lives.
 - A stubborn refusal to repent of sin does not characterize a Christian, and thus excommunication is a declaration by the church of potential end-time judgment. As such, the point of such an action is to call that person to repentance, and if they take that step, we lovingly restore them to the body of Christ.

2. Overcoming objections to church discipline.

- Let's start with people misinterpreting Jesus' words from Matthew 7: 1.

Matthew 7: 1 "Judge not, that you be not judged."

- Few texts are more misunderstood in our day than this one. It often comes up in conversations when one dares to make a moral assessment of another person that rubs the hearer the wrong way. "Who are you to judge?" comes the retort.
 - This, however, is a complete misreading of the text, and is a good example of why we never want to build a theology on one verse lifted out of its context. If we keep reading in Matthew 7, we will see that Jesus in fact tells us we are to judge. For example:

Matthew 7: 5 first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

- ♦ In the context, what are we doing when we take the speck out of a brother's eye? We are executing a judgment. Jesus is instructing us how to do that, telling us to be sure to deal with the sin in our own life first, but he is clear that it is right and proper for us to make a judgment and help a person whose vision is clouded by sin.
 - As Jesus goes on, he is even more direct in this.

Matthew 7: 6 "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."

- ♦ Clearly, Jesus is telling us to make several judgments in that verse alone. First as to what is sacred and holy and second as to who around us might be behaving as pigs and dogs would behave.
 - But even beyond the context of Matthew 7, we can clearly see from passages we looked at in the previous section that both Jesus and Paul expected the church to make judgments based on the teaching of Scripture, regarding misconduct in one's life, and false teachings.
 - As we already saw, in Matthew 18, Jesus even laid out a process for how we are to go about making and carrying out judgments.
 - What Jesus is really talking about in Matthew 7:1 is a judgment that is hypercritical. A judgment that you could not withstand if it was applied to you. A judgment that was not done in love to build up but rather done in condemnation to tear down. It was the kind of prideful judgment the Pharisees of Jesus' day were frequently engaged in making of others.
 - ♦ You can see this clearly in Matthew 7: 3 – 5 as Jesus talks about trying to remove the speck of sawdust from your brother's eye, even as you have a beam in your own eye.
 - ♦ Jesus was condemning a certain kind of hypocritical judgment that the Pharisees of his day engaged in, condemning another person while practicing, or even being worse in, the very same behavior.
 - So what Jesus is teaching in Matthew 7 is that it is not about whether or not to judge, but how we do it. Jesus reiterated this in:

John 7: 24 Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.

- ♦ How do we do that? By basing all of our judgments, whether they regard moral issues, or doctrinal issues, on the clear teaching of Scripture.

- But along with don't judge me, you will often have people in the church with the mindset of, "Stay out of my private life." For them, discipline seems to be too far-reaching, invading the privacy of people's lives and turning their sin into a public spectacle. To exact discipline, some would argue, would bring about humiliation over details that ought not to be known by the public.
 - This objection may feel right in a culture that so highly values autonomy and individual expression, but it goes against the grain of the Bible's teaching.
 - Think why. Faith involves the end of self-enthronement. At the heart of faith is the idea of dying to yourself to submit to the authority of Christ.

Luke 9: 23 Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

- To deny yourself is to give up your rights and life to Christ. He is Lord.

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'" — Abraham Kuypers

- The sad truth is most of us don't really think that or want that. We don't want to go to hell, we want Jesus as savior, but we do not want him as Lord that we have to submit to. That thinking is exactly why church discipline is an absolute necessity. We constantly need to be reminded that we are not lord of our life, but Jesus is.

Ephesians 1: 22 – 23 And (God) put all things under (Jesus') feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

- Submission to Christ and his kingdom means a submission to his body, the church. This submission is included in the vows a person takes as they join Foothills.
 - Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to strive for its purity and peace?
 - When you join the church, you are agreeing to allow the church into your life to help you continue in the kindness of God.
- But is it kind to point out sin in a persons' life and call them to repentance? Isn't the loving thing, the grace filled thing to just overlook sin? Isn't that what the church ought to do?
- It may feel that way but think about Jesus' instructions regarding church discipline in Matthew 18. What begins as a private matter, "If your brother offends you," ends as a public matter, "Tell it to the church."
 - What causes that change? An unwillingness to repent, and what is the lack of repentance evidence of? That the person is not a part of the community of faith. That's why Jesus said, "Treat them as a Gentile or tax collector." That is, treat them as an outsider.
 - Why? Because your relationship with that person changes. They are no longer part of the body of Christ. They are no longer a disciple in a discipling

relationship. They are now part of the world and need prayer and evangelism. They need to know this and the church needs to know this.

- As much as it may go against our feeling and intuition, discipline is actually a proper demonstration of the biblical concept of love. God disciplines those whom he loves.

Hebrews 12: 6 – 11 “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” ... God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

- A church who claims to love its members without disciplining them contradicts Scripture and offers a different kind of love than God does.
- Church discipline can potentially be a painful process, but as a spiritual family we are called to work through such matters faithfully and gently.

Galatians 6: 1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

- Who are those who are spiritual? Those who through humility have repented of their own sins, or as Jesus put it in Matthew 7:5, “Taken the plank out of their own eye.”
- Notice Paul also says there is to be a spirit of gentleness. The purpose of discipline isn’t to get back at or to punish, it is to point people to the severity and kindness of God. Discipline done correctly is an act of love.
- To not confront a wandering sinner is to not love them. To not confront is just cowardliness—being too afraid of hurting feelings to speak the truth in love. Our call as the body of Christ is to

Hebrews 3: 13 exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

- Part of the work within membership is to encourage one another to endure in the faith, and this includes the process of church discipline. We undergo this process to call those wandering from Christ to repentance, so that through repentance they can once again discover the joy of their salvation.

Psalms 32: 1 - 6 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

⁶Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found

- There is nothing better you can experience, nothing more loving to help another to experience, than knowing that your sin and transgression is forgiven. But true repentance is the only way to know that blessedness.