

We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said,] "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. But 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. If 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. Truly, 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. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them."

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."^(ESV)

This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. (John 17:17)

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dear fellow redeemed,

There is enough material in these few verses to keep us occupied for many sermons.

We have the main passage here for how church discipline is to take place.

We have one of the 3 passages where Jesus gives His Church

the binding key to retain sins, that is, to not forgive the impenitent as long as they do not repent, and the loosing key to forgive the sins of the penitent.

We have a key passage for Christians gathering together in Jesus' name and His promise to be graciously present.

And we have Peter's question about how often we should forgive our offending brother.

Do you notice that assumed in all of these points is the existence of community?

This may seem rather basic, but I don't think that we should overlook its importance.

I'm sure that you have heard people say that they don't need to go to Church, they have their Bible and they can read.

Or they can go out into nature and worship God out there, just as well.

They say this as if it were somehow a better, more pure, way to have a relationship with God.

Or perhaps you have heard someone say that they won't go to Church because of all the hypocrites, or because of what someone (often a church leader) did, (often a scandal that became public).

But what is the end result for such a person?

He separates himself from the Church, God's community of believers, from the body of Christ.

But this is not God-pleasing either, as Hebrew's author exhorts,

And let us... not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24-25

So again... Jesus assumes the Christian community.

But let's talk about that community.

There are a lot of assumptions out there about what it should be.

But they're not all true.

The world, and us, quite frankly, think it should be a safe space,

where everyone is kind, helpful, generous, knows exactly what to say and how to say it,
and... it's perfect... all of the time.

People are labeled hypocrites if they aren't these things.

And the label is correct, but only to a certain extent.

The Bible certainly does teach these fruits of the Spirit, and Christians desire to grow in such graces,
but we will never be able to achieve them perfectly in this flesh.

But calling imperfect Christians "hypocrites" is also wrong.

A Christian is not a person who has become perfect,

but an imperfect person who believes in Jesus' death for their sins and is forgiven by God.

The Church is not a prom, where you show off your goodness.

Nor is the Church a self-help motivational seminar.

Nor is the Church a classroom or lecture hall where we are to be filled with information about Jesus.

The Church is made up of ordinary people with sins... with baggage.

We gather here – You gather here together to receive forgiveness.

The Church is a hospital,

where the wounded come to be healed;

where the starving are nourished with the Bread of Life;

where the sick receive the medicine of immortality in the body and blood of Jesus;

where the weak are strengthened by being in God's gracious presence.

Do you go to a hospital expecting to see perfectly healthy people?

Are you surprised when you hear reports that patients have gotten infections while at the hospital?

Sure they try to sanitize everything, but when you have such a high concentration
of various diseases and infections, something is bound to be passed on.

And the reality is, the same is true in the Church.

When you have such a high concentration of sinners,

sin is bound to be present and even to spread at times.

This shouldn't surprise us. After all, each of us is here.

But God knows our problems. And He knows the solution.

The solution is not to get rid of the sinners, but to heal them, to forgive them,
again, and again, and again, and again, yes, even more than seventy-seven times.

You come each week, for what? For forgiveness.

To hear how your Savior shed His blood & died, for you.

To receive His perfect life, lived on your behalf.

And you receive His life and death in the Invocation,

reminding you of your baptism and your sins being washed away.

You receive His life and death in the Absolution,

as the Pastor looses your sins from you and opens heaven.

You receive them in the recitation of the Creed,

as you confess the Triune God and His work of salvation for us and for our salvation.

You receive them in the sermon,

hearing how Christ has come to save you and hearing Him declare you righteous and holy.

You receive them at the Lord's table,
intimately receiving Jesus' crucified and risen body & blood for your forgiveness.
You have this opportunity week after week, along with your fellow sinners... and fellow redeemed.

It is an encouragement to us that we receive these divine gifts together,
showing us that we are not alone in our sins, nor are we alone in receiving Christ's forgiveness.
And that I can receive it week after week, is a testament to God's steadfast love and patience with me...
and you.

It is also a testament to His steadfast love and patience with the sinners around you.

Notice in our text, that Jesus knows there will be sin in the Church.

He assumes it, but He doesn't ignore it, does He?

Instead He tells us how to deal with it.

And the solution isn't to immediately cut the person out of the Church, the community of Christians.
And should we be surprised when it is to be dealt with in love and patience?

In love, we try to deal with our brother's sin privately, if it can be done so.

The goal is to win him over, not expose his shame to others.

So we are not to tell it to others before dealing with him.

If he acknowledges his sin, then we restore him in forgiveness.

And we say nothing to anyone else. It's forgiven... taken care of,
removed as far as the east is from the west.

And THIS is the goal of speaking to our erring brother: to forgive him,
so that he may be truly united to Christ once again, and to his fellow believers.

But it may take numerous visits with him to convict him of his sin.

This is not necessarily a "one and done" type of deal.

We patiently, humbly, and lovingly show him from Scripture that what he has done,
or is doing, is contrary to God's will and deserves eternal punishment.

But if he will not listen, then others become involved.

These others ideally are spiritually mature individuals who have a good reputation with the brother.

They will proceed with the same patience, humility, love, and seriousness of the matter.

This again, may take several visits over time.

And if he is then convinced and penitent then he is forgiven and restored.

But if even this does not convince him, then his sin is to be made public to the Church,
not to defame him,

but to show him the seriousness of his offense,

and how his impenitence is separating him from the body of Christ.

Again, if he repents at this time, he is to be forgiven.

But if he refuses, then he acknowledges that he is not united

in the faith confessed by the body of Christ, and is no longer recognized as a brother in Christ.

But this is never the desired outcome... it's never the goal.

Remember, we are members of the Church as well.

You and I struggle with specific sins and guilt.

I could just as easily be one of those who refuse to repent.

Or maybe you would be one who refuses to forgive.

It is by God's grace alone that we would be kept from such sins.

But if we should stumble and fall here, He has given us a community, His community, the Church, to show us our errors according to His Word, and lead us back to Him.

Our Lord loves to forgive. He has paid the price for sin already.

Now He would lavish that forgiveness on the world He came to save.

And so He sends out His ministers to preach it and to administer it in the Sacraments.

Our Savior never sinned, but is always sinned against.

He did not hold grudges but even sought the forgiveness of His executors,
and died that they might be forgiven...

so that your stubborn offenses and refusals to repent, and grudges are all paid for.

And for the penitent, they are forgiven ...Forgiven by the world's greatest Forgiver,
Jesus Christ Himself.

And now He sends your pastors to declare to you His verdict: "Your sins are forgiven."

God's desire to forgive is now yours as well.

He gives this responsibility to the Church, to you.

You may forgive your penitent brother or sister, father or mother, son or daughter,
supervisor, subordinate, and coworker, especially when they offend you,
as Jesus' answer to Peter's question shows.

...

Christians are like all other people. We have sin... we have baggage.

The difference is that we also know the solution in Christ: forgiveness.

And even more, you know how & where & when to receive it:

to gather here with your fellow sinners... and fellow redeemed... often & regularly
to hear Him say to you, "Your sins are forgiven."

God grant you to grow in your understanding and reception of His forgiveness,
as well as in the gift of giving it.

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria