

THE FORMATION AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

Taught by Bruce Bickel

Session: March 2, 2012

Gracious Father, you are a Father of mercy and compassion. We thank you that you don't treat us as our sins deserve. Father, cleanse us of all of our unrighteousness, those spots, those attitudes, those actions, those things that we do thinking that we need to deify ourselves and control our own lives. Father, forgive us for the sin of presumption, presuming upon your grace because we know that we have been forgiven. May we have a love response in obedience to express our gratitude for your saving grace. Father, we pray once again that your Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth and fulfill his job description and call attention to the glories of the person and the beauties of Christ, and to that end, we thank you in Jesus' name, and may it be so. Amen.

Last week, we had a wonderful presentation on church discipline by Bishop Rogers, looking at our study on the membership of a local church. If you'll take a look at your handout, lesson 13, we've been working our way through a series of different issues related to the description of what we're calling a healthy church; using the word "healthy" to describe one that's alive and that is growing and expanding, it has some action behind it, as opposed to a perfect church realizing that none of us are perfect. The moment that we join a church, that church is no longer perfect.

We've been looking at such things as the essential ingredients were expository preaching. That's how we are taught from the Scripture. We've been looking at biblical theology. That is what we are taught from the Scripture. We've looked at a biblical gospel. Is it a God-centered or a man-centered Gospel? Then we saw some other important marks of a healthy, growing church, and that would be a biblical understanding of conversion; that it is a work of grace, not a work of works.

We've been looking at a biblical view of evangelism. Is our evangelism today in our culture, is it authentic, God-centered, or is it synthetic and man-centered? We've been looking at a biblical understanding of church leadership, that God qualifies mature leaders who under shepherds, under the auspices of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus himself. We looked at, several weeks, the qualifications of biblical leadership, different than the world standard.

Now we've been looking at a biblical view of membership and a biblical view of church discipline. When we look at just an overall view of church membership, it's obvious that the Scripture did have some roll taking, because we saw that they kept a list of the widows who were taken care of in the local church. People were added to the numbers of the local church at Pentecost, so there is some semblance and some biblical record of some record keeping.

We need to understand basically five critical ingredients of church membership, and that would be, first of all, it's a commitment to worship together. When the body of Christ is called together on the Lord's Day, we come together to worship, do not forget the assembling of the saints as the Scripture teaches us in Hebrews. One of the things when you join a church, you're basically saying, "One of my primary responsibilities is to show up," and that when the church doors are open and they have some ministry activity, that our responsibility as a church member is to be there. We have a commitment to worship together.

We have a commit to obey church leaders (Hebrews 13:7). One of the real critical ingredients, quite honestly, of church membership is really quite simple. It's really show up and obey your leaders. Now hopefully, if we have the right kind of leaders, you'll want to obey them. A lot of times people ask me, "Should I join this church or that church?" One of my first questions is, "Can you obey the leadership? Do you know what they teach? What are their Creeds? What is their standard? What is their doctrine?"

What are their positions on certain elements of theology? Do you know that? Because your responsibility, should you elect to join that church, will be to be responsive to those leaders. Do you know what direction those leaders are taking you?"

You see, we have, normally in the church, we have an investigation, a questioning of the potential church member, but do we ever have a questioning of the Pastor and the church leader? We ought to reverse it. Before you join, you ought to sit down with the Pastor and the church leaders and ask them those questions, because your responsibility, once you become a member and you decide to join that church, is to show up and follow the leadership. Why would you choose to follow them? Do you know what direction they're going? That's a very important ingredient.

Also our commitment is to hold those church leaders accountable; accountable to the Scripture, to the doctrines, to the standards of biblical theology that we're committed. So we have another responsibility to hold them accountable to a biblical standard. When they begin to wander off, we need to graciously appeal to them to hold the standard of what the Scripture says.

Then we have a commitment to being held accountable ourselves (Ephesians 4:11-16). So a commitment to worship together, a commitment to obey church leaders, a commitment to hold them accountable, and a commitment to being held accountable ourselves. Part of that comes through what we are going to call today the one another commands. You have a handout with lesson 13 of a list of all these 58 one another commands.

This comes from a Greek word "alleon" which is the Greek word for one another. It's used over 100 times in the New Testament, and 58 of those are commands to the local members of a church of how to get along together. You have this list in your handout of these commands and how they're broken down. Basically, these are imperatives, they are commands, that basically say this is how the body of Christ is to relate to one another.

What we do, brothers, is what we understand by these commands is, we practice these on each other inside the local church. If you're going to make a mistake, you want to make a mistake inside the church, not outside. It's inside the church where you're given grace and forgiveness. That doesn't give us license to be sloppy. I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is we ought to practice these one another commands on one another so that we learn how to do them, so that we can take them into the world, and that becomes part of our witness of being salt and light, and it's part of our being M8, a mission minded-member of a movement motivated by mercy for ministry in the marketplace.

What we do is we give away to the world what we practice on each other. These are vital commands. As I gave you the illustration last week, these are not suggestions. These are not "if you'd like to do this." These are basically the young Marine whose at Parris Island and the drill sergeant says, "Right face," and he says, "Ah check with me later." You see, that's not going to be too well received. Likewise, these are one another commands.

I want to walk you through them. Several years ago, we spent several months going through each one of these. We're not going to do that today. I'm just going to give you a big picture. I've arranged this for you so you could take a look at the verses, because this is really the heart of church membership. It's really holding one another accountable. How do we do that? Robert. E. Lee makes a wonderful statement about leadership, "The goal of leadership is the management of the welfare of our relationships, by taking the interest of your soldiers and your troops ahead of the interest of yourself." That's from Robert E. Lee. That's one of the great leadership statements you'll ever see. He says the end result of leadership is to stand for something that is good, and that is the management of your relationships.

That's the whole goal of the church. It is the management of our relationships. One of my mentors in Scotland when I was studying overseas said, "Bruce, you're going to love church work, except for the people." {LAUGHTER} Unfortunately, that's true in many cases. Church is great except for the people who are there. Now that's correctable. That's refineable. You see, there's a standard by which we, in the local church, are to operate and we are to relate to one another, and that's found in these 58 one another commands.

When you take these commands and look at all of them together, I've broken them down into four major categories. First of all our relation to one another. You and I relate to one another differently than we would relate to somebody who's outside the body of Christ because of these particular verses, which we'll go through in a moment.

The first category would be verses that deal with our relation to one another, and then we come to our reception of one another. Then after our reception of one another, it's our response to another. Then after our response to one another, it's our restoration of one another, and that's what Bishop Rogers took us through last week.

I wanted you to see the last of these four major categories, our restoration of one another, to help you understand that point of church discipline is the perfecting of the first three categories. The more effective we are at understanding how we relate to one another, how we receive one another, and how we respond to one another is basically a way of exercising church discipline in the preventative sense. You see, church discipline is not something that the church does to a person; it's something that God works in a person. And it's through relationships.

Let me walk you through, just very quickly, these four major categories. I would encourage you to, on your own, just study; look up these verses and see how they fit into these categories. First of all, we see these one another commands, our first grouping would be this—our relation to one another. You and I, as brothers in Christ, with saving faith, have a very, very unique relationship with one another. That's because we belong to one another. The basic premise is this—I'm going to relate to you radically different because I know this—that you and I have the same heavenly father. That means I belong to you and you belong to me.

That's going to set the stage of how I'm going to relate to you as a fellow church member of the body of Christ. It's the recognition that it has nothing to do with the color of your skin, your ethnic background, where you were born or your position in life. It has to do with one central thing. God has redeemed you through the saving grace of Christ and you and I have the same Heavenly Father. That radically changes the way I'm going to look at you. Therefore, the way I look at you is going to be radically changed by the way I'm going to treat you. That's the beginning of this. It's not about me. It's not about you. It's about us and the Kingdom of God. It's about the glory of God because we have the same Heavenly Father.

The moment you and I lose sight of the fact that we have the same Heavenly Father, our conduct changes. You see, it all starts with our relationship to one another. I've given you this illustration, but to me it's one that's very poignant in my own life. My second tour in Vietnam, I was pulled off the carrier and sent into the country to be a forward air controller with the Army. I was the only Naval Officer among 20,000 Army guys, the 101st Airborne Division of the 1st Calvary Division in the Northern section of I-Corps. Twenty thousand Army guys against me as one Naval Officer. But I thought that made the odds even. {LAUGHTER}

My responsibility was to provide naval aircraft support for infantry operations in the Northern section of

Vietnam. I was coordinating naval aircraft fighter and bomber support for the Infantry troops of the Army. I was in my jeep one day going into the village of the City of Wei, which was the provincial capital of Northern South Vietnam. I was waiting to cross the river, the Perfume River. Now at the Perfume River, sometimes the bridge would be up and sometimes the bridge would be down. The VC would blow up the bridge, the Navy Seabees would erect the bridge. If the bridge was up, you crossed it. If not, they ferried you across on a little barge.

This day, the bridge was down. I was waiting my turn to go put on the barge to be ferried across the river to go into the walled city to brief the Army of the Republic of Vietnam on the missions they were going to operate and how I was going to support them from the air. I was there in my jeep waiting to cross the river and my New Testament fell out of my flight suit. A young man came by and picked it up. He was on a Moped. He came by and picked it up and saw that it was a Bible. He came over very excited to me and brushed off the dust on the Bible and said, “Christian!” Well I’d been to Vietnamese language school for six weeks, so I said, “Yes.” {LAUGHTER} He said, “Christian!” (pointing to himself) The moment he did that, I got out of my jeep, and I embraced him. So we started jumping up and down. {LAUGHTER}

The reason I did that is because of this—he and I had the same Heavenly Father. It had nothing to do with his background. Had nothing to do with the fact that he was Vietnamese. Now the long story of this is...remember I’ve told that one of the things my father told me, he said, “Bruce, wherever you go, always ask the Lord to give you one brother to hold you spiritually accountable.” Now I had prayed that since I’d been in country, “Lord, provide one brother to hold me spiritually accountable.” As it turned out, that was the young man, over the next 18 months, who was going to hold me spiritually accountable, and he was Vietnamese. It had nothing to do with his background. Had nothing to do with his education. It had to do with one central thing, that established our whole relationship is that when he and I both identified the fact that we were Christians by God’s saving grace, we realized this. We have the same Heavenly Father. That shaped everything we did.

You see, look at the power of that, folks. If you and I took that attitude into the local church, and to those people whom we know are in Christ Jesus, who do have saving faith, and we looked at them and we treated them by the realization that we have the same Heavenly Father, that would radically change the relationships in the local church. People who came into the church would radically see something different they’ve never seen in the world.

You see, when people from the world come into the church, they ought to see something radically different as it is in the management of relationships, because all of us understand this. We have the same Heavenly Father and that shapes everything we do. You see, that’s powerful. That’s a ministry to the lost world. You’re not going to get that at PNC. You’re not going to get that at Mellon or CMU or Pitt or your insurance agency. The only place you’re going to find that is inside the local church. We’ve lost the power of the significance of the body of Christ relating to one another because we understand this—I’ve got the same Heavenly Father that you do. That’s the beginning of our relationship. Everything starts with that. Everything starts with that.

The next several verses under that category deal with our being like-minded. Now that doesn’t mean that we always agree upon every jot and tittle. But it does mean this—we’re all committed to the same thing. We’re all like-minded. We may not agree on everything specifically, but we have this commonality, that we have this like-mindedness, that we’re mission minded-member of a movement and we’re focused on that singly because we agree upon the same thing. The two things that we need to agree upon are this—the sufficiency of Scripture and the all sufficiency of Christ. The sufficiency of Scripture and the sufficiency of Christ.

You see, that's our like-mindedness. And we're saying, "Yes, I'm going to relate to you differently because you and I have the same Heavenly Father. Let's work on these little nuances of our differences and see how can we make sure they don't violate the two major premises of our relationship, and that is this—the sufficiency of Scripture and the all sufficiency and primacy of Jesus Christ. Those two things are never going to violate us and separate us, and we're always going to be like-minded. It doesn't mean that you agree upon everything, but it does mean this—that you're focusing on the same things. You're focusing on the same things. And why is it you're focusing on the same things? It's because you have the same Heavenly Father. You see the whole issue of relationships in the church starts right there—understanding that we have the same Heavenly Father in our relation to one another.

Based upon that understanding, we go to the next series, and it has to do with our reception of one another. In other words, how do I receive you as one who has the same Heavenly Father? How do I receive you as one who is committed to the same things I'm committed to? Our like-mindedness. How then do I receive you? Now we begin to see how we treat one another. It's in the reception of one another.

First of all, it says be non-judgmental of one another. We talked about this before, and a lot of times people throw this at us because they say, "Oh, you're judgmental." Well quite honestly, brothers, there's nothing left for us to judge. Scripture has prejudged everything. Honestly, Scripture has prejudged everything because of its sufficiency. So there's nothing left for us to judge.

What we can do is we can take people up against the Scripture and let them see and evaluate themselves according to the Scripture, but there's nothing left for us to judge. We don't judge one another, we hold each other accountable. That's different. There's a difference between holding somebody accountable and judging them. There's nothing left for us to judge. The Scripture's already done that. We have not been given that ministry.

One of the ministries we do not have is to examine a person's motive. I can't judge your motives. You can't judge mine. That's a work of the Holy Spirit. All we can do is take people up against the Scripture and let the Scripture judge that. We can't do that ourselves. We point people to the Scripture, but we're not in a judgmental attitude. But we do hold each other accountable.

Next is we greet one another. These are the verses that deal with what the Scripture would call a holy kiss. Back in the culture of Jesus' day, in the biblical times, when you would greet somebody, you would give them a holy kiss on both sides of the cheek. It's a sign of respect. The person who initiates that greeting of a holy kiss is the one who initiates demonstrating respect to someone. Rather than sitting on our haunches when we go to the church, we need to initiate in the sense of showing respect to one another by the way that we greet one another.

In my judgment, in my mind, when a non-believer comes to the local church, the non-believer ought to experience two different feelings. First of all, they should feel rather uncomfortable. They need to feel uncomfortable because they're coming into an environment that's radically different than the world. If they come in and feel comfortable, then we are creating too much of a worship that's worldly-centered not God-centered. They need to feel somewhat uncomfortable by saying, "I've never been in an environment like that." The other thing they ought to feel is absolutely welcome. They need to feel absolutely welcome. We need to be like bees going to honey. When we see visitors, we ought to be going and greeting them with a holy kiss because we're taking the initiation to say that I'm going to respect you by taking the initiation to greet you.

Non-believers coming to a local church service, in my judgment, should feel uncomfortable. If we have our worship service makes them feel comfortable, just like it's MTV, then why come to church at all.

It's no different than anything else. There needs to be a degree of their uncomfortableness. But that uncomfortableness needs to be off-centered by the fact that you and I are greeting them because we're showing them respect. This idea of greeting one another is the concept of bestowing respect upon people.

Let me show you what respect can do. Relationships are built upon respect. When a culture or when a nation loses respect, it is the insidious cancer that destroys the organization. When an organization loses respect, it deteriorates from the inside out. When a culture loses respect, it deteriorates from the inside out. All relationships are based upon one principle, and that's the principle of respect.

We respect each other because of our relationship to one another because we have the same Heavenly Father. All I'm suggesting is part of our ministry to the non-believer is demonstrating respect to them when they come to worship with us and greeting them so that they feel absolutely welcome.

I think I gave you the illustration in the churches that I pastored in Kansas and Chicago. As I was teaching this, this is one of the first series I taught our church. It was about a nine-week series on the one another commands. I wanted to make sure that we understood how we're supposed to relate to each other. If we're going to be a church and be a body, we need to function like it. Where do we get the ideas of that? We get it from the Scripture, from these one another commands.

I began saying at the end of the church, "You know, we are such a friendly church, that I'm sure if you're a visitor, that you'll be asked to go out for lunch by at least two or three people." Well, for the first five or six weeks, I was taking a lot of people to lunch. After five or six weeks, our congregation, the membership, began to catch on, "Oh, he's speaking about us. Maybe we need to do that." Whenever we had visitors, we always had other people who now are bees to honey saying, "Could we take you to lunch?" and began to just talk about the church. It was part of our witness because we wanted them to explore the understanding of the unique relationships that we had with each other. So there's this idea of bestowing respect upon one another.

One day when I was at Camp Evans with the 101st Airborne, we got the word that the Chief of all Naval Forces was going to visit the little artillery base where I was flying out of. He happened to be an Admiral who was the Commandant of the Midshipmen at the Naval Academy when I was there. He was also our football team officer, so I knew him very well. The Admiral was coming and everybody got excited. You know how they do it in the military. When you have a dignitary come, they line up the three star commanding general, the division, then they have the two star general, then the one star general, then you have your full colonels and your light colonels and your majors, your captains and all the way down. They put you in rank order who's going to greet the Admiral who is head of all Naval forces in Southeast Asia.

They put me down at very end. That's because I was a Navy Lieutenant, which is the same as an Army Captain. We had about 30 guys in front of me and I'm down here, the only Naval Officer in this whole line of guys. The Admiral comes up in his helicopter. He gets out of the helicopter. He goes over and says hello to the Commanding General, and then he bypassed everybody {LAUGHTER} and he walked down here to see me. Passed up 3 generals, 9 colonels, 15 majors, 35 captains and came down to see me, the lone Naval officer in this whole band of brothers.

He came up to me and I saluted him. I said, "Admiral Kenny it's great to see you." He said, "Bruce, I knew you were here. I'm so glad to see you." Do you know what that did for me? That just all of a sudden, the Army started treating me differently {LAUGHTER} because he demonstrated and initiated and gave some respect to me positionally.

The Army treated me radically different because they knew I was the Admiral's friend. {LAUGHTER} But you see, the point I'm saying? You see, when you do something like that, that initiates respect, and that's what we need to do when visitors come to the church. We practice that on each other. Week after week after week, we practice this on each other inside the body of Christ because of our relation to one another. We practice that, and when we see a visitor come, we just take that automatic, that discipline that habit we've now worked on each other and we give that away to a visitor. You see, that's why we can offset their uncomfortableness of coming into a worship service that's different than the world. We offset that by the respect we give them because we greet them. There's power in that initiation of respect. We practice that on each other inside the local church.

We're non-judgmental. We greet one another. And we're hospitable to one another. I think there was a study I did several years ago. I don't know the exact numbers, but there's something like 33 times Jesus had conversations with people in the New Testament, and 30 of those times it centered around food. There's something about that. When you sit down with somebody to eat, something happens. You have the distractions of the world put aside for a little bit and you can focus on the relationship and developing that with another person. So there is some value to being in a food-centered environment where the relationships can be more singly focused than it would be just in a great big room.

Hospitality is sharing your food and life with those whom God brings you in contact with. Now I'm not saying it has to be around food, but all I'm saying is the definition of hospitality is the sharing of food and other resources with the people that I come in contact with. All I'm suggesting is that part of the enhancement of good solid relationship development can be in a food environment by just sitting around a round table and talking, going out together for coffee after the meeting.

One of the things that I know that many of you brothers do, which I'm very encouraged to hear, is that often times after these sessions together, you guys go out and play golf together, you go out to a restaurant, to Denny's or to Kings, and have food together and you have fellowship. You see, that's part of being hospitable to one another. We need to practice that on each other inside the church so that we can go give that away. That's part of how well we receive one another. Non-judgmentally. We do it with respect and we share our lives and the resources we have as a means of being hospitable.

Then we come to the third element, and that would be our response to one another. Our relation to one another leads us to our reception of one another, and now our reception of one another inside the church, leads to our response to one another. How do we respond to each other inside the local church? You see, these are the things we are practicing on each other. First of all, we love one another. Now you notice that? That is listed 13 times. Thirteen times—that's probably the single most one another command would be the command to love one another.

I want to take you just to one of those. Go with me to John 13 please. Again, I think we have this whole series recorded somewhere that we did five or six years ago if you wanted to go more in depth in each of these verses. I'm just giving you the big concept to help us understand the value of these one another commands as it relates to our responsibilities of church membership. Look John 13:34-35, “³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In reality, this is not a new command. It's an old commandment because it was given in the Old Testament. You can read in the Old Testament where the instruction was love one another. What makes this new is the qualifier that you see in the New Testament, which raises that command to a higher standard. The higher standard is this, “as I have loved you.” The old commandment was love one another. Period. In the new covenant, we live at a higher standard than we did under the law. You see, grace brings us to a higher standard than the law. The law said this, “Love one another.” Period. That

basically said if I get along well with you and I like the way you treat me and you're worthy of it, I'm going to love you.

That's blown away in the new covenant. Under grace it's this, "Love one another as I have loved you." That means the descriptive change that makes this a new commandment is do you really understand how you God loves you? It is that understanding that you take and give away to somebody else. It's not based upon how they treat you. Are they worthy of it? Do they deserve it? Do they irritate you? Those things are gone by the wayside. Now the qualifier is this. I understand how God has loved me. That's going to be the genesis, the desire and the basis of my relationship to you, and I'm going to treat you that way. Not because you deserve it. Because I didn't deserve the love that God gave me. But that's the qualifier to make this a new commandment.

Notice the result of that in the next verse, "By all this..." By what? Loving one another. "As I have loved you. They'll know you're a disciple." Now there's one of the great powerful evangelistic verses in all of Scripture. How is the world going to know that you, personally, are a follower of Christ? It's by the love that you show for the brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. You see, we practice this on each other. And yes, there are times that you will find people in the church that are very irritable and irascible and very angry, and it's difficult. But you've got to go back and realize how have I been loved because my responsibility is to give that away, not my feelings. Now there's nothing wrong with feelings. They're neutral. They're neither positive nor are they negative. You've just got to realize you have them. Sometimes your prayer might be, "Lord I don't want to do that. I don't want to love them the way that you love me, but remind me of how I have been loved by you."

Let me just show you a quick example of how we have been loved. Go to Romans 8, just as a reminder. You see, brothers, this is so powerful that John records it and says, "By this, by loving one another as I have loved you, the whole world's going to know you're a disciple." Notice in Romans 8:1-2, we start with no condemnation, "¹Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

Now do we deserve condemnation? Absolutely. It's just that we're not exposed to it. Why are we not exposed to it? Because of the sacrificial work of the all sufficiency of Christ. You see, you're no longer condemned. There are consequences to our sinful choices. No question. But the condemnation of that choice has been eradicated at the cross. When Jesus was on the cross, if you have saving faith today, you, by name, were on his mind. Now you're not condemned. You're not condemned because of your failure, your sin.

Go to the end of the chapter. Chapter 8. Look at verse 35. Chapter 8 ends with no separation. Why is there no separation? It's because there's no condemnation. Look at the verses beginning at 35, "³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶Just as it is written, 'For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' ³⁷But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Do you see guys? That's the way that you and I relate to each other. It's not based upon how we treat each other. It's based upon the fact that I realize this—by God's grace I'm no longer condemned. I'm free. I'm no longer condemned. And I know this—because there's no condemnation, there's no possible way I'm ever going to be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

John 10 says this—Jesus says, "No one can snatch you out of my hand, and just to make sure, my

Father's hands are stronger than mine. My Father's going to wrap His hand around My hand and if He can't take you out of My hand and my Father's stronger than Me, no one can take you out of my hand." Do you realize that, brothers? That no one, there's nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That's the basis of our loving one another. You've got to go back and remind yourself how have I been loved. What are the implications of that? That's what I give away to somebody else. The result... all men will know you're a disciple. They'll know. You don't have to tell them. They're going to know.

As soon as we finish this today, I'm flying down to Ft. Lauderdale to do a memorial service for one of my clients. She passed away three weeks ago. I've been managing her foundation, her grant distribution program, for about nine years. The Lord has been very pleased to do some seed planting there, and I'm not sure the fruition of all of this, but let me just give you a quick overview.

The day that I met her, she was a hippie from the 60's who hasn't grown up. I met her at the Duquesne Club. They wouldn't let her in because of the way she was dressed. The two kids, they wouldn't let them in. I had to take them across the street and buy them clothes to get them into the Duquesne Club. When I met her, she said, "I know about you and I hate religion." I said, "Well so do I. We're going to get along fine." She said, "But aren't you a minister?" I said, "I'm a follower of Christ." She said, "What the F is the difference?" I said, "Well, stick with me for the next five or six years and I'll show you the difference." It's the only thing I ever said to her.

Over the years, we just developed this wonderful relationship. Three years ago, she fell and broke both of her hips. Her son called me and said, "Bruce, you know, mom is petrified to go into the hospital because she's got all kinds of internal diseases from her previous choices." I mean, you name a disease, she had it. She had very little resistance to anything her body could resist. The reason she passed away really was she got an infection in her intestine and her body's immune system just couldn't keep up with it. She had AIDS, HIV. She had everything.

The son said, "Mom's just scared to death. She wants to know if you'll come down and be with her." So I went down. I met her in the hospital and she said, "Bruce, I've never ever had anybody pray for me, and I'm scared. Would you pray for me?" I said, "Absolutely." So I prayed with her. I stayed with her. Took her out of the hospital when the surgery was over. Took her back to her house. Every time I talked to her after that, she would always say, "Bruce, are you still praying for me?" I said, "I certainly am."

Then every time I would talk to her, she'd say, "I remember once you told me the difference between being religious and being a follower of Christ, and I want you to know I now know the difference. I just wish I'd lived my life like you do." I said, "Dear, you know, it's not too late." Now I don't know what the Lord did with that. That was my last conversation with her, was when I said to her, "It's not too late. You can begin that style of life at any time." She said, "Just keep praying for me." Then she went in the hospital and three days later, she passed away because of infection. I'm leaving right after this to go down and do the memorial service for the family.

You see, guys, you and I don't relate to one another because of how we treat each other. We relate to each other because we know this—I've been loved by a merciful, compassionate God, and nothing can separate me from that.

Why is there no separation? It's because of no condemnation. But there's one other thing we need to see. Look at Romans 8 again, and go to verse 33. Chapter 8 begins with no condemnation; it ends with no separation, and I want you to see why. Here's why there's no separation. Verse 33, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies." That means declares you righteous. Verse 34, "who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the

right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”

Now guys, do you know why there’s no separation? Because this very moment Jesus our Lord is at the right hand of the Father saying, “Father, there’s a group of us, part of our family, meeting at Christ Church at Grove Farm in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on March the 2nd. They begin at 6:30 and they end at 7:30. They’re part of us. They’re the ones that I paid the price for because they’re not condemned anymore. Father, I’m just going to intercede for them.” Do you realize that every moment of your life when you’re in Christ, the reason there’s no condemnation and there’s no separation, it’s because of the intercessory work of Christ on your behalf every second of your life? Do you realize that? You see, we don’t realize that. That’s why we gripe, complain and blame so much. We don’t realize this—that the most significant intercessory work of Christ right now is that he’s at the right hand of the Father interceding for you and me. That’s why there’s no separation. That’s why there’s no condemnation. Because He’s saying, “Father, he’s one of ours. I paid the price. When I was on the cross, Father, he was on my mind.” That’s how we respond to each other. “Love one another, just as I have loved you.”

Guys, the great barometer of my own life is my failure when I realize that I have a right to be vengeful. When I think I have a right to be vengeful. What I’m doing is I’m basically entering into self-deification. I’m saying, “I’m God. I get to run my own life. I don’t have to respond to that person this way. Because I made myself my own God.” Isn’t that the great sin of Adam? Self-deification.

If you ask me, the problem with the church today is we’re self-deifying. We’ve made ourselves God. That’s what we’ve done. When I’m exposed, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” You see, when I don’t have the spirit of being merciful, what that exposes is this. It doesn’t expose that person’s conduct to me; it exposes me to them because it teaches me this, “Bruce, you really don’t understand how merciful God’s been to you, because that person’s treatment of you just exposes the fact that you think you have a right to be treated that way.”

Love one another just as I have loved you. That’s how we respond to one another. Also respond with humility. Humility is seeing that which is perfect and realizing I can’t achieve it by myself. Seeing that which is perfect and realizing that I can’t achieve it by myself, that I need you to help me do what I need to do well. Whatever I do well by myself, I’m going to do it better when I do it with you. That’s humility. The greatest confidence ability we have in the body of Christ is our humility; not our experience or training or education. I’m not saying those aren’t important. I’m saying this—it’s our humility. It’s the realization of saying, “I see what is perfect and I can’t do it. Father, I need your help.” That drives us to our knees. It’s humility that drives us to prayer because we know that we can’t do it by ourselves and we’re dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

Then when you’re humble like that, one of the first evidences of being humbled is you’re going to care for one another. One of the first evidences of our caring for one another is you’re going to serve one another. A servant’s heart is this—you’re willing to do something for someone and expect nothing in return. You can’t have that attitude unless you’re humble; unless you realize this, “I see what is perfect and I see the sinless perfection and perfect obedience of Jesus Christ and I know that I can’t do that, but I need that, and so Father, would you give me your grace at this very moment when I need it.” That’s the expression of humility. When that humility manifests itself, the result of that is you care for one another and you serve one another because you’re wanting to give away to somebody else what God has given you and you expect nothing in return.

That’s contrary to human nature. That is absolutely contrary to everything that we are as human beings. But when God regenerates you and takes the heart of stone and gives you a heart of flesh that beats after him and is sensitive to spiritual things, your desire changes, and you now have a different desire. Your desire is I just want to care for them and I want to serve them and expect nothing back. You can’t do that

in your former nature. That's the beauty of regeneration. It changes our desire.

Lastly, sometimes after working on these first three, our relationship to one another, our reception of one another, our response to one another, sometimes there is relationship strain, and sometimes there is sin in the midst of a relationship. That's when we come to the last segment of these one another commands, and that would be our restoration of one another. Bishop Rogers, last week, gave us a very good introduction to the whole concept of church discipline. Remember, church discipline is not something we do to a person; it is something that God works in a person. Sometimes you might have to go the full-fledged scenario of church discipline.

It starts with restoring one another. Look at Galatians 6:1. You've got to examine yourself before you do it to somebody else. You've got to examine yourself. The two times that I've had to exercise church discipline according to Matthew 18, as Bishop Rogers instructed us, it might be that you might have to excommunicate that person. Go to Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted."

In other words, before you go to somebody else, what's the first thing you do? Look at yourself. Look at yourself. That's why you've heard me say that you take Galatians 6:1 and put that with Matthew 5. It says, "If you're at the altar and realize your brother's got something against you, lay your gift at the altar and go be reconciled to your brother and then come back. It means this—the issue in separated relationships is never in the body of Christ who's right or wrong. It this—if you know you go. If I know that somebody has offended me, I'm going to them. If I know that I have offended them, I'm going to them. Ideally, when we're practicing the one another commands, you're going to have two offended people running to each other because they know this—the issue is not right or wrong, it's if you know you go. I know I've offended or I know I've been offended.

***Audience Member:** Bruce, which Scripture was the if I have offended my brother...*

Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount. If you know you go. That's how you restore one another. And we admonish one another. The word "admonish" means to warn. Sometimes we have to warn each other. Sometimes we have to edify. We have to encourage one another. That's all part of our church discipline—restoring one another. Sometimes we have to forgive one another. That's all part of our restoration. Forgiving means not holding their offenses against you anymore. You don't keep a record.

Forgive as you've been forgiven. Sometimes we speak to one another and we need to be at peace with one another. Just let me give you an illustration of if we have to in Matthew 18 exercise church discipline, which is the description of if you know you go. Bishop Rogers taught us last week, sometimes you take somebody with you then you bring it to the whole church, and if you have to, you have to expel them from the church. I've had to do that twice. Both times, let me tell you the value of it.

The first time we had to do it, it took us about six weeks before we could exercise church discipline on another brother because we had to examine ourselves. As I taught this from the pulpit over a series of weeks because I knew we were going to have to do this. I really instructed is, we've got to examine ourselves and our own relationship. It took us six weeks before we could exercise church discipline on the one brother who was sinning because it took us six weeks to clean up our own relationships. We had people going to be reconciled to each other—if you know you go. They went, they repented, there was forgiveness, there was restored relationships. The beauty of this, we saved one man, but we purified 399 others.

You see, church discipline is a purification process. You purify the body of Christ in the whole concept

of church discipline. It is not something that you zero in on one person. It is a purification for the whole body of Christ so that we're now in a position to go and exercise loving church discipline, to restore a brother.

The value of it, yes 18 months later, the man repented and came back to saving faith. He came back to the church rather. But it took him 18 months to get to the point. One of the things we had to do was this. We had to teach the people how to respond to him once we excommunicated him, and that was this. You can be amicable. You can be friendly. You can be gracious. But when he says, "Hey, can we go have lunch, you say," say "I'd love to have lunch. Let's talk about your repentance." We always said this, "We'll talk about your repentance." He had 399 people telling him the same thing. For 18 months, whenever he would invite somebody out to lunch, "Can we go have lunch? Let's go play golf," "Hey, I'd love to go do that. I'll pick you up. We'll talk about your repentance. You ready to do that?" "Well no." "Well I tell you what. When you're ready to do that, call me. I'd love to have lunch with you."

You see, we all treated him the same way. I had to teach them how to do that. When he came to me 18 months later just with tears in his eyes and said, "Bruce, I can't take it anymore," I said, "What can't you take?" He said, "I can't separate and take the lack of fellowship. I want to be with all of you." I said, "Are you ready to talk about your repentance?" He said, "Yes." He repented. We had a worship service on Wednesday night that was one of the most glorious things we've ever had. It last about three hours. He came up and just asked forgiveness of the whole church. He repented. Asked to be forgiven by the whole church body. They just were like bees to honey. They just went around him. We sang hymns and we prayed and we had a worship service. I preached and there was a wonderful, wonderful restoration of a body, of a brother. You see, the body was saved. But the beauty of it was this. Church discipline is not something you do to a person; it's something that God works in the body of Christ.

First of all, you have to really understand in Galatians 6, you've got to examine yourself before you can do that to somebody else. That's the purification process.

Brothers, take these one another commands seriously. It all starts with our relation to one another, then our reception of one another, and then our response to one another, and then should we need to, there may be the restoration of one another. It's all for the glory of God and the functioning of the local church. And to God be the glory.

Let's pray. Father, it's so clear what you want us to be and how you want us to think and how you want us to act and treat one another inside the body of Christ. Father, forgive us in our self-deification process of thinking that I have rights to be treated a certain way, that I deserve to be treated a certain way, and that I don't have to treat them the way you want me to treat them because I'm really the center of my own life. Forgive us, Father, for that heinous attitude. Deeply imbed upon us the understanding of what these commands mean as to our becoming followers of Jesus Christ so that the world might know that you are the one sent from the Father. Father, the world has a right to reject the deity of the person and work of Christ as they look at our relationships in the body of Christ. Forgive us, Father, when we deify ourselves and make ourselves the center of our own universe. Father, we just thank you for your mercy and your grace. If I've said anything that's inconsistent with your glory, the sufficiency of Scripture or your nature or your attributes, please remove that from our minds, and only those things that are consistent with your revealed word will be the things that we remember. To that end, all the Brave Men said...Amen!