

I Corinthians 5
Excommunication Applied
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How does the church of Christ interact with those who have been excommunicated?

I. With trust in the ordinances of God

A. Matt 16: Binding and losing (instituted by Christ)

B. Matt 18: As a tax collector and sinner

C. Person stands outside of Christ and needs to be saved, rather than a sinning Christian.

II. With prayers that God would teach them

A. Make it a point of prayer

B. I Corinthians 5.5 For the destruction of the flesh

C. I Timothy 1.20 Learn not to blaspheme

III. With the work needed to change your relationship

A. Romans 16:17

B. 2 Thes. 3:14

C. I Cor. 5:11: Do not eat with (Jesus ate with: purposeful evangelism)

IV. With more fervency in love than towards unbelievers

A. Damnation is greater for those who have tasted

B. With greater kindness and respect

C. Grieving while attempting to persuade

There are times in the life of a congregation where a pastoral issue requires us to pause from our regular teaching series and answer a question that may be on the hearts and minds of congregation. Today is one of those times, and the question that I would like to answer for you all is this: What does your relationship look like to one that has been excommunicated? What changes and what are some practical ways that you take the teaching of the New Testament on discipline and apply them in a context where one has just been excommunicated. These are important questions, and I want to ensure you that this not merely an intellectual exercise, but one of great practical importance in the life of the church.

So this morning, I would like to share four ways that you can better prepare your heart and mind for interacting with an excommunicated person as well as help you to discern how to apply this. Now, I am hoping to share principles rather than just a list of “do-this” and “don’t do that” so it will require you to apply principles and work through this further in your application—but these principles and applications should help in answering some of your questions about your responsibility when a person has been excommunicated from the church.

We are going to begin this morning with our first point. As you interact with a person who has been excommunicated, you need to begin with trust in the ordinances of God. With trust in the ordinances of God.

The practice of excommunication is something that we see in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament we see that one could be barred from public worship because of some sins, and there were other sins that led to the penalty of death, which was the most extreme discipline for unrepentant and gross sin. But when we come to the New Testament we are reminded that the church’s entire ministry is one that is word-based and declarative. In Matthew 16 we the Lord Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom to Peter on behalf of the leadership of the church and in so doing he says that whatever the elders bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

This same language of binding and losing is used in Matthew 18 where the Lord Jesus Christ uses it to describe the way in which church discipline is to occur—when one has been excommunicated properly, lawfully, and

according to the pattern of the New Testament. This means that since this has been a lawful and orderly excommunication, it is something that was not just done in the session room, but was something that is a reflection of the will of God—it was done in heaven as well.

Now we need to trust in that. Trusting not in the will of your elders, as church discipline is never easy, but trusting instead that when an excommunication is done in the name of Jesus Christ and through the means that the New Testament sets out—this is the will of God. Are you trusting in that? Are you trusting that this excommunication is not to be seen as something that your elders did to someone that we all love, but that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one who has excommunicated this individual?

So as we are trusting this this is the will of God and we are trusting that Christ himself is the one who has done this in heaven, we also must trust that our applications of this ordinance are also the will of God.

Matthew 18 says that when a person has been excommunicated, he or she is to be treated like a “Gentile and a tax collector.” We will talk more about this in a bit, but what it means is that as you are trusting in the ordinances of God, the way that you think about this person needs to change—you are reminded that one who has been lawfully excommunicated is not to be viewed as a Christian, but instead as one who is outside of Christ, one who is not a believer, and one who is in need of being saved. We must trust in the ordinance of God—one who is excommunicated is not to be considered a Christian—but considered as one who needs to repent and believe the gospel.

This trusting in the ordinances of God will have application in your life—and that application begins with changing the way that you think about and speak about one who has been excommunicated, we are no longer to view one as a Christian, but as an unbeliever. And as you trust, hope in the restoration of one who has been disciplined. The New Testament’s desire is for repentance and restoration—much more gracious than what we find in the Old Testament. Trust that God knows what he is doing, and trust in the means that he has provided.

Now secondly, there is application that we have not only to how we think about one who has been excommunicated, but also you should find time

in your prayer life for God to teach the one who has been excommunicated as well. You are to interact with prayers that God would teach them.

I mentioned that we must trust in the ordinances of God and that part of the purpose of the ordinance of excommunication is that one would repent and believe the gospel, but what we must look at is that the New Testament sets prayer as a direct application of how you are to interact with a person who has been excommunicated.

Prayer is such a major way that you can continue to love and manifest love towards a person who has been excommunicated. You see, excommunication is not administered when the session gets tired of interacting with a person who is living in sin—excommunication is not just taking off of the roll of the church so that we are free to do other ministerial things. Excommunication is putting a person in a different category all together—in part so that prayers, specific prayers will be prayed, and Lord willing, answered on the person's behalf.

And this is hard. This is really hard—because when we see the ways in which the New Testament teach us to pray for one who has been excommunicated, we are reminded that the life to come is so much more valuable than the life that we live here on earth. Heaven and hell are eternal, this life is but a moment, a breath, as the grass that is green one day and brown the next.

A few weeks ago we looked out I Timothy 1:20 in our afternoon service and we dealt with a really difficult passage: There Paul says, “By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” And connected to that verse is I Corinthians 5:5, which we read this morning, and that verse says, “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

That phrase “handing over to Satan” is a reminder of the categories into which the person who has been excommunicated falls. They are no longer seen as one who will enjoy the benefits and the beauties of heaven in the

life to come, but instead as one who, without repentance and restoration, will be eternally damned—and yet, Paul says here that the purpose of this type of discipline, this excommunication, is that they would learn to not blaspheme, and that they would be destroyed in their flesh. The flesh is here that which is opposed to God.

So how does this affect your prayer life? You are to pray that one who has been excommunicated will experience life in such a way that the realities and beauties of heaven with Christ are seen more excellent than the life of sin chosen.

That's hard for us today—I believe the American church is so earthly-minded. I believe that the pleasures of this life do have a higher experiential value than an eternity with Christ.

But when one is excommunicated, the church's prayers should be that that person come to experientially know that this life is a but a vapor—and a season of pleasure is not worth an eternity under the wrath of God.

One commentator says, “ In the early years of the church, after this major excommunication, there followed great terrors in the persons excommunicated, agonies of spirit, indeed, even torments of the body. God permitted these afflictions, not for the utter and irrevocable destruction of sinners, but for their correction and amendment, that their souls might be saved, though their bodies suffer.”

Martin Bucer, the great reformer said that faithful elders will “show the power of Christ and employ drastic measures to bring about the humiliation and mortification of the sinful flesh and require some significant proof of sorrow and intention to mend their ways. For such shepherds and caregivers of souls are true servants of Christ in the care of souls and the pastoral ministry... will not the spirit of Christ therefore work and act in them as well as he worked and acted in St. Paul and as he has commanded his ancient people?” (Concerning the True Care of Souls, 122).

So I want you to think about your prayer life for those who have been excommunicated—think about the way that you pray for them and realize that this is not a game. This is not just a matter of you do your thing and I

will do my thing. This is a matter of life and death, it is a matter of heaven and hell, it is a matter of eternal importance and significance.

Your prayers should be as such that the Lord, through his providence and his spirit would do whatever it takes—whatever means necessary to bring one who was excommunicated back to himself. It is better to enter heaven limping than to enter hell running. It is better to enter heaven dismembered, than to enter hell whole. It is better to enter heaven with eyes plucked and hands removed, than to enter hell with full sight and full feeling.

Will you pray to that end? Will you pray that God would do anything necessary that it takes so that you can be in eternity with the one with whom you had fellowship, the one with whom you prayed and sang to Jesus and worshiped? Heaven with Christ is worth extreme prayers.

And friends, I need to nuance that this is not asking for punishment. This is not me saying that this one has been bad and needs to suffer—this is the Word of God saying that for some destruction of the flesh means an eternity with Christ and an eternity with the church is to be seen as much more valuable and much more loving than the “live and let live” mentality of so many. Eternity is at stake—and as your pastor, I would, out of love, ask that you pray that God’s will would be done and that he would do all that is necessary to retrieve the one who has been lost.

I would urge you to pray and ask that God would teach the necessary lessons to draw the excommunicated back to himself.

So trusting in the ordinances, praying that God would teach—and restore, and thirdly this morning we see that your relationship to the excommunicated means that you will need to work to re-define your relationship. You will need to work to re-define your relationship.

Excommunication from the church of Jesus Christ is not like being a member of the Elks Club or some other local club where when you decide to not renew your membership life can go on in the same way with your friends. The Church of Jesus Christ is an institution of the redeemed along with their children and discipline and especially excommunication are ways that the church is kept pure and a way to show all connected to her of the importance of a holy life while clinging to Jesus Christ.

Now you must do the hard work of re-defining your relationship, and there are places in the New Testament that will help you to do that work.

Romans 16:17 says, “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.” Now I believe that this verse speaks especially of false teachers and those who are intentionally teaching against the doctrines of the church—trying to cause division and cause error in the life of the saints. I do not believe that Paul is specifically speaking of a member who disciplined for moral sins, rather this is about teaching. But there is still an important lesson here for you.

You must be discerning. You must use discernment in re-defining your relationship with one who has been excommunicated because relationships have reciprocal influence. If you don’t think that you are strong enough to maintain a relationship that will be evangelistic—then don’t do it. It is fine. You are free in Christ.

Second Thessalonians 3.14 tells us, “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.” The redefining of a relationship needs to take into consideration that there is something different now. One cannot make the mistake of saying that excommunication relates to church life and in one’s personal life and friendship nothing has to change—it does have to change.

The New Testament wants the church to respectfully and with wisdom change the relationship that you have with one who has been excommunicated so that godly shame may be felt, so that the person can know that this is serious business. Mark them and have nothing to do with them—that was Paul’s instruction so that the church could say this is the church and this is not the church and avoid complicated mixing of categories.

Let me put it this way—you know who your Christian friends are. You love them, you worship with some of them, you have fellowship with them outside of this building. And at the same time you know who your non-Christian friends are—you love them, you have a relationship with them,

and at times you share the gospel with them, and they know where you stand and you know where they stand—and that's okay.

But now we have a new category—one who has crossed over from category of Christian friend to category of non-Christian friend. This category change can cause some confusion and may be troublesome for you—the New Testament does not want you to mix categories, but to be clear in your definitions and in your re-defining, you will have to pull back and re-organize and make new boundaries and make it clear that things do not just go on as normal—there has been a crossing of category and maybe even for a time that means that there will be little to no contact until all of that can be sorted out.

There's one more place that is important to note—and that is see in I Corinthians 5:11. This is hard... listen to that verse: But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

Don't eat with one who has been accused and excommunicated for gross sin. This applies primarily to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but at the same time it means that if you are having meals at home or at a restaurant with a person who has been excommunicated, then you need to have a specific purpose in mind. Casual, friendly table fellowship has to give way to purposeful and redemptive interaction. Jesus ate with sinners—Jesus used every opportunity to point to himself and the redemption that is available in him as the only redeemer for God's elect.

Your relationship must be re-defined, it can no longer just be friendly, but for the purpose of saving a soul from hell. Calvin said, "this depends on the whole fellowship [of the church]. For the power of excommunication is... given to the entire body. Individual believers should not have friendly relations with a person whom the church has excommunicated. For otherwise, the authority of the church would become worthless... By sharing food Paul means here neither living together or familiar association at meals."

But another reformed author who was connected with Calvin qualifies that a bit more as he sees the focus on the word "associate." He says, "Do you associate with persons with you speak to them or when you have to eat and drink with them? No. For even our Lord ate with sinners. But he was

not associating with them... To associate with them is to give consent to their behavior, become a partner that mingles and mixes and participates with them. Truly, when a church decides that such persons should be removed from its midst, then it should not share eating and drinking and conversation with them unless they are words of holy exhortation and correction.” -Jaques Lefebvre, Commentary on I Corinthians.

So we see that you must re-define your relationship and it is not able to be casual or merely friendly, but it must be a call to repentance and restoration and a turning unto the Lord.

There is a great difference between having a sinner like Mary Magdalene at your table and having a Judas Iscariot at your table. The gospel must be at the center of any continued relationship that you will have with the excommunicated.

Now I want to share one more thing concerning your relationship with the excommunicated— fourthly, we see that you are to interact with more fervency in love than you have towards unbelievers. You are to be more fervent in your love than with unbelievers.

We must go back to the great principle that we find in the book of Hebrews—damnation is greater to those who have tasted and turned from the LORD than for those who have never tasted. Hell for the excommunicated will have more suffering than hell for those who have never heard of Jesus Christ.

This fact that damnation for an excommunicated person will be greater should drive you to love them more—it should cause tears and it should cause you to reach out with the gospel and it should cause concern for a lifestyle that is opposed to the word of God and it should cause you to weep and to reach out and to seek to correct and to do the hard work of wooing to Christ and praying for repentance.

Excommunication does not mean that we have ceased to love—but it means that we are increasing our love. And sometimes love is tough. Sometimes love has to do hard things. This is such a moment.

Jonathan Edwards was asked, “What kindness and respect may and ought to be shown to such persons?” He said, “There are some things by

which the members of the church are obliged to show kindness to them; and these things are chiefly, to pray for them, and to admonish them. - And the common duties and offices of humanity ought to be performed towards them; such as relieving them when they are sick, or under any other distress; allowing them those benefits of human society, and that help, which are needful for the support and defense of their lives and property. - The duties of natural and civil relations are still to be performed towards them. Excommunication doth not release children from the obligation of duty to their parents, nor parents from parental affection and care toward their children. Nor are husbands and wives released from the duties proper to their relation. And so of all other less relations, whether natural, domestic, or civil.”

You see love grows—and as is often the case the love that the world claims is opposed to the love that the Word of God puts forth.

Jonathan Edwards goes on to say, “Surely, if we love our brethren it will grieve us to see them wandering from the path of truth and duty, and in proportion as our compassion is moved, shall we be disposed to use all proper means to reclaim and bring them back to the right way. Now, the rules of discipline contained in the gospel are the most proper, and best adapted to this end, that infinite wisdom itself could devise. Even excommunication is instituted for this very end, the destruction of the flesh, and the salvation of the spirit. If, therefore, we have any love of benevolence to our offending and erring brethren, it becomes us to manifest it, in executing strictly the rules of gospel discipline, and even excommunication itself, whenever it is necessary.”

You see friends, there are many questions about what that relationship should now look like, and I would encourage you to meditate on these four things that you may be prepared to live and to love one who has been excommunicated from the body of Christ:

Trust in the ordinances of God.

Pray that God would teach through all means necessary.

Do the work needed to re-define the relationship.

Increase in fervency in love towards them.

May Christ be glorified and this one that we love redeemed. Amen.