

"The Hands of all the People"

In last week's sermon we talked about justice. Today we'll again look at that topic of justice. Though last week was more on various principles of justice. Today's passage is more focused on the process of enforcing justice in the old covenant. This passage describes how the justice system of Israel was to work in practice once they settled down into the Promised Land.

Well last week I made the case that Israel's system of judges was part of the foundation for how the New Testament church is ruled by elders. The elders who rule the church in the new covenant are given the responsibility to judge. This is one of their responsibilities. They judge in matters of disputes between believers, when the believers aren't able to work things out individually. And they judge in spiritual matters, when a person's profession of faith is not matching up against their actions. All of this falls under what we call "church discipline." Church discipline is a mark of the church. It's one of the things that the New Testament church is called to be doing. It's a function of discipleship. And what we see in the New Testament is that the process and practice of church discipline in many ways finds its roots in the Old Testament, in passages like this.

Now certainly there's a difference between what we read of here, and the church discipline we're called to perform. But there is a relationship. The obvious difference that stands out to us is the severity and nature of the penalty. Israel was given the authority to stone people to death for a number of different violations in the old covenant. In the new covenant, the church is given the sword of the Spirit to enact judgment. When the elders pronounce a judgment on someone, even in the case of apostasy, we'd not execute the death penalty. What we do instead is excommunicate them. That's the highest censure our church elders can bring. What's it mean to excommunicate someone? Well, in the words of Jesus, it means you treat them as a "Gentile and tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). Now the Jews back then didn't treat Gentiles and tax collectors very well. But that's not how Jesus treated them. No, these were the sorts of people Jesus reached out to. Jesus got a lot of flak for doing that at times. But Jesus said it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

In other words, Jesus is saying that the height of church discipline is that we treat someone like they are not a part of God's people. And what did Jesus do for such people? He devoted large amounts of his time to reach out to them, holding out the offer of grace and forgiveness. He called them into relationship with himself. You see, that is what church discipline under the new covenant does. If the elders of the church excommunicate someone, it's telling that person that they do not belong to the church. It's saying to them that there is something about either their faith or their actions that's not consistent with their claim to being a Christian. In which case it's an act of love and an act of truth to excommunicate them. It doesn't let them falsely believe that they are in a right standing before God. It confronts them with their sin and their need for forgiveness that comes in Jesus. It calls them to have real saving faith in Jesus.

And so there is a difference between church discipline in the new covenant, and this process of justice here in this passage. And yet, repeatedly the

New Testament makes references to this and other similar passages in the Old Testament to justify the process of church discipline now for Christians. In other words, our process of church discipline is rooted in part in this passage. And so, I want us to look today at the judicial process afforded the people under the old covenant. As we do that, we'll make applications to us in the new covenant. We'll keep looking at how the processes outlined here apply to church discipline today.

And so the first thing I want us to address in this judicial process described here is the crime. Before anyone can be condemned as guilty, the process first starts with an accusation of a crime. Look at verse 3. The crime that's specifically mentioned here is essentially apostasy. It's breaking the first commandment. It's placing other false gods before the one true God. You can understand why that would be such a serious crime. Ultimately this is a crime worthy of capital punishment, isn't it? It's one that leads to eternal damnation and death. Of course, this is not the only crime punishable by death in the old covenant. There were actually a number of laws listed earlier in the Torah that would carry the punishment of death. That's why this passage is not only applicable to breaking the first commandment. Rather verse 2 gives the broader principle. It talks about the person who has transgressed the covenant. Down in verse 6 it talks about the person who is worthy of death. So this passage applies to all the crimes under the old covenant that were deserving of death. This is the due process that was then to be afforded to those accused of such crimes. This due process was a protection to the innocent, but would bring justice to bear on the guilty.

My point then is that here you have in the old covenant a number of things that would break the covenant and make someone worthy of death. In applying that to church discipline today, we realize that there are broad set of things that could result in someone being excommunicated from the church. Someone could commit murder, adultery, theft, and many other things, that could ultimately lead to someone being excommunicated from the church. In one sense, there's a broad list of things that could result in excommunication. But in another sense, it's a very small list. You see, if the concern in this passage was about people transgressing the covenant, how does someone transgress the covenant today? In the new covenant, how do you break it? Well, actually as a side note, Scripture says that the new covenant is something that we can't break. Rather, what the elders try to decide is if someone has actually really been in the covenant at all in the first place. Remember, what's the means for becoming a part of the new covenant? It's faith. We are in the new covenant by having a saving faith in Jesus. It's not our works that get us in. Nor is it our works that keep us in the covenant.

And yet as I mentioned, there are a number of sins that could result in your excommunication. Am I contradicting myself here? Which is it, faith or works? Well, remember what James says. James says that faith without works is dead. James describes a sort of counterfeit faith that he says won't save you. James says it's only genuine faith that will save you, and that genuine faith will bear fruit. And so when someone in the church commits some public or gross sin, the elders are going to go to that person and call them to repentance. To turn from those sins. To find forgiveness and grace in Jesus. But if that person refuses, or if that person maybe gives lip service to the request but doesn't really repent, that's where church discipline comes in. The elders call the person to account in excommunication. They are saying that your professed faith appears to be counterfeit; fake. This

is what Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 13:5. He's talking about how he's going to come and examine them and possibly execute church discipline. And ahead of that, he tells the Corinthians to examine themselves, and see if they are in the faith. He tells them to prove to themselves that they are in the faith. You see, this is what church discipline does. The only real "crime" so to speak, under the new covenant, is to not have a real saving faith. If you don't have a real saving faith in Jesus, one that shows itself alive, then the elders' judgment is saying that you are *not* a part of the new covenant. That's because membership in the new covenant is by faith!

The next part of the due process of justice mentioned here, is that there must be a careful investigation. Verse 4 says that when someone is accused of a crime, that the judges must make a diligent investigation. Verse 6 says that part of this will require having multiple witnesses. It's not just to put someone to death based on the testimony of just one witnesses. At that point, it would just be one person's word against another. This is part of the due process afforded the people. The matter must be investigated. According to verse 4 the goal is to establish the truth with certainty.

Well, this applies to us very specifically in church discipline today. For example, this provision requiring multiple witnesses appears in quite a few places in the New Testament. Often the reference is applying it to church discipline under the new covenant. Matthew 18, for example, when Jesus describes the process for dealing with a conflict with a fellow believer, he says that if you can't resolve it individually with the person first, then go and bring one or two people along with you to witness the circumstances. In other words, all these reference in the New Testament in the context of church discipline makes the connection I've been describing. There's a relationship between church discipline and what we read of here.

And in the case of witnesses, this is something very directly applied to us. Any church discipline the elders execute must be based on established truth. The OPC Book of Church Order lists out specific steps the elders are to perform when there is a formal accusation given against someone. Those steps are based on these biblical principles. They include a preliminary investigation, requirement of multiple witnesses to attest to the truth of any claim, a hearing to give both sides the opportunity to make their case, etc.

Of course this means that each of us individually should be very careful not to go around passing judgment on someone in the church without that person having been given a fair hearing. This passage affords believers due process. Even our civil government believes that you are innocent until proven guilty. It's not just for believer to go around condemning others in the church who has not had a fair trial.

Now of course, on the other hand, you might become aware of some area of sin in someone's life that you think needs to be addressed. For example, you may believe that a fellow Christian has wronged you in some serious way. The wrong way to deal with it would be to pass judgment on them and go telling everyone in the church how that person sinned against you. The right way would be to follow the due process afforded that believer in Scripture. Matthew 18 lists that process clearly. You go to them individually and try to find reconciliation. If you can't get it resolved, then you bring one or two witness along with you and try again. If you still can't get it resolved, then you bring it as a case to the church elders. That's when they'll investigate and try the case. In the mean time, you shouldn't go

around condemning that person until they've been given their biblically afforded chance to defend themselves. This is of course part of humility too. Often in a conflict we assume ourselves to be the final judge. But Jesus very clearly warned against judging others. Instead, he has setup elders as judges in the church for these matters. Ultimately, Christ himself is the final judge in all things. Don't presume to be the judge in these matters. Believe that God will work through the mechanism that he has setup for justice.

The next point of the judicial process mentioned here is the option to refer difficult cases. Verses 8-9 describe this. If a case was too difficult for the local judges, they could refer it to the Levites, the priests, and the judges, in the central place of worship. This would have replaced the former practice in which the people referred the harder cases to Moses. This envisions that there could be things that present too much difficulty for the local judges. Verse 8 lists some of the examples: cases of bloodguiltiness, such as for example trying to determine if it was a case of murder or manslaughter, which would have a different punishment; cases of which punishment applied to a specific situation; cases of controversy where there's sufficient division among the judges. These could all be referred to the highest court at the central place of worship.

Again we see this applied in the New Testament. The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is exactly this sort of thing. There arose a matter of controversy in some of the local churches, and so the matter was brought up to Jerusalem and a gathering of elders and apostles made a judgment. We have the same sort of thing in our denomination through our regional presbyteries and the overall General Assembly. We can both refer matters to the higher courts, as well as we provide an appeal process to the higher courts as well. And so this principle is applied to the New Testament church, and accordingly we've implemented that in our denomination as well. This is, by the way, something typically lacking in independent churches, is that they often don't have any venue to refer a case to a higher court. The local church becomes the *only* court in that situation.

Well the last point of the judicial process to mention from this passage is the judgment. When someone is accused, there's a careful investigation, the case might be referred to the higher court, but ultimately a decision is rendered. And look at how that decision must be treated. Verses 10-11 says that the decision must be respected. You must submit to the judges' pronouncement. Of course, this assumes that the judgment is from Scripture, as verse 11 says that they give the sentence of the law. This holds a mandate that the judges only judge according to God's Word. But assuming they do, we are each called to submit to their judgment.

That's the clear command here. In fact, look how serious this matter is. Verses 12-13 go on to talk about those who won't submit to the judge's decision. It describes such a person as acting presumptuously. This is describing contemptuous behavior. Someone who pridefully refuses to heed the decision of the court, is acting presumptuously. And that it says in verse 12 is a crime itself. It's also a capital offense. To be subversive and not submit to the judge's decision was punishable by death under the old covenant. That should tell us the seriousness of this. It uses the same language in verse 12, as it did for the original offender; they must be put away from the people.

The application to our church discipline here should be clear. The New Testament repeatedly calls us to submit to the leadership and judgment of the elders in the church. Yes, we do this in the Lord. Yes, there are times like how Martin Luther had to break away from their decision because the church leaders themselves had become apostate, and no longer gave their judgment from Scripture. But that should typically be a very rare sort of occurrence. Don't be presumptuous. Just because you don't agree with the decision of a church court, doesn't mean that you are right. Remember, not all cases are easy. Some are complex. What might seem to you as a cut and dry situation, may not be the way the elders see it as they carefully examine the details, as they listen to all the witnesses, as they search out the applicability of different Scriptures. This is where biblical humility really is challenged. Will you submit to their decision even though it may not be what you wanted? Will you really seek to understand and embrace their judgment even as your own? Instead of trying to subvert their judgment?

This is important because of the other point I'd like to make about this judgment. You see, this judgment is ultimately an act of the whole. The whole church is bringing this judgment. Yes, the elders make the decision. Yes, the witnesses take a primary role here. But ultimately, the whole church must join together in enacting this judgment against the person.

That's what's described in the old covenant here in verse 7. When the guilty person is stoned, the hands of the witnesses pick up the first stones. But after that, the hands of all the people are to stone the guilty. The witnesses bring their accusations. The judges make the decision. But the people as a whole enforce the judgment. They are to be united in the decision and the judgment. This principle also finds expression in the church discipline of the new covenant. Paul, for example, in 1 Corinthians 5 says that when they church discipline is pronounced, it is to be done as the people gather together. There he refers to the idea in verses 7 and 12 as well, that the guilty person is to be put away from them. 2 Corinthians 2:6 describes this punishment as the "punishment of the majority." The idea is that this matter is not kept secret at that point, with only a few to bring the judgment on the person. But the whole church is to act together to enforce the judgment. Of course in the context of excommunication that's very important. No one in that case should pretend to the guilty that there's not a problem. They shouldn't treat them like a Christian anymore. They should instead evangelize to them. We each then in the church become responsible for applying the discipline. Of course, that means you must not only submit to the elders decision, but also that if you are unsure what that means, you should ask the elders for clarification on how to support the judgment that's been made.

Well, let's tie this all together in the gospel. We've seen today how the process of justice here in the old covenant has various applications to church discipline in the new covenant. But let's return again to the main difference we noted at the beginning. In the old covenant, the greatest penalty was death; that's a *physical* excommunication. In the new covenant, the greatest penalty is *spiritual* excommunication. We declare that the person is no longer a part of the church. They've taken on the status of an apostate. But do you see the greater measure of God's grace in the new covenant form of church discipline? In this church discipline, you yet have the opportunity to repent. If you are excommunicated today from the church, you can yet recognize your sin and flee to Christ in a real saving faith. That's one of the primary purposes of church discipline today. We want the person to really be saved. We excommunicate them to wake them up and point

them to Jesus. If they show that they do repent and return to Christ, the censure of excommunication is lifted and the person is restored as a member in the church. In 2 Corinthians 2, there's a great reference back to 1 Corinthians. It seems that the brother who ended up being excommunicated at Corinth did end up repenting. Paul then tells the church in 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 to forgive and comfort the man, to reaffirm their love to him. This is the graciousness of church discipline in the new covenant. It doesn't result in physical death, but it gives yet another opportunity for people to find the salvation that comes through faith in Christ. That's a salvation offered even to those who have been excommunicated.

But of course, that doesn't take away from the seriousness of all this. If the person in the old covenant was physically put to death, this is a picture of the state of the person excommunicated in the new covenant. If you are excommunicated in the church, it's the church saying that they believe you are worthy of death; spiritual death; eternal death; damnation. This is of course what we all deserve, but the only escape is faith in Christ. If you are excommunicated, it's the church saying, we don't think you have a real faith in Christ. The picture of stoning to death becomes a real warning then to any who are excommunicated, that they face an even worse punishment of eternal hell fire. And yet in God's graciousness, church discipline today holds out yet time to turn to Christ. And that's my call again today to us. If there are any here today that are living either publically or secretly in sins that are not fitting for one who confesses Christ, turn from them. Confess them. Repent of them. Ask for God's power to overcome them. Look fast in faith to Christ for forgiveness. And indeed he tells you that your sins are forgiven. You will not be perfect in this life; but may each day you live by laying down yours sins at the foot of the cross and crying out to God for the mercy and grace he freely offers. In Christ, you are forgiven.

Brothers and sisters, no one usually enjoys discipline. Certainly it's not fun for the people receiving it. Usually the person giving it doesn't enjoy it either. We've had issues of church discipline in our midst before; we'll surely have them again in the future. Read over the letters in the book of Revelation to see how the churches are called as a whole to be enforcing church discipline; shepherding the people accordingly.

Surely this can be a turn off to some people. Especially if you've been in a church where this authority has been abused. For some people it's a turn off because they just dislike authority in general. But this is something that the church as a whole has a vested interest in. It's part of our discipleship. It's even part of how we edify and build one another up. For we're each called to participate in this judgment. It becomes an act of the whole church.

See the benefits of it. The OPC Book of Church Order summarizes the benefits like this. It says, "The purpose of judicial discipline is to vindicate the honor of Christ, to promote the purity of his church, and to reclaim the offender" (BoD I.3). Realize this is both a benefit and an obligation of being a member of the church of Jesus Christ. It's a benefit when you receive discipline, even though it seems unpleasant at the time. But this is part of his grace working in your life. It's an obligation when you're called to participate in the judgment being enforced on someone. But this is all a part of the work of the ministry that Christians are a part of. We know we'll perform this part fallibly, just like all ministry. It won't be perfect. Our leaders may not always make the wisest judgments. But let us trust Christ in the form of government that he's established. Let's pray for

our leaders, not act presumptuously against them. Let's pray for those under discipline, that they would return to Christ. And let's look forward to that great day when the Great Judge and King will return. On that final day of judgment, finally justice will, in the words of the prophet Amos, "roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Amen.

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