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The church is not an institution for perfect people. It is a sanctuary for sinners saved by grace, a nursery for God's sweet children to be nurtured and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep, the home for Christ's family. The church is the dearest place on earth.

[End of audio]

Hey, how are we tonight? Good? If you have your Bibles, let's go to Romans 8. This is week two in what will end up being six weeks on the church. The things we need to cover tonight are really beautiful things, but the back part of this sermon has some really difficult things in it, some things that will rub against our modern sensibilities. I want to go back just a little bit and really quickly recap a couple of big pieces from last week.

We simply just tried to define what the church is last week. I said early on that I had two hurdles I was going to have to get past. The first hurdle is if you call a sermon series on the church *The Dearest Place*, those of us who have had church experiences that have been negative, been filled with disappointments, where we have been betrayed, or we've watched really ridiculous things unfold would be able to roll our eyes at such a title. I read for you the quote I got the phrase from by Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

I will paraphrase his quote now. It was basically, "Praise God that there aren't any perfect churches, for two reasons. First, if there were perfect churches, the weight of a people who had gathered that were perfect would crush those of us who are far from it. Secondly, if we found a perfect church, upon our arrival, we would jack that perfect church up." That's a paraphrase. Spurgeon would never use the phrase "jacked up," but that's what he said.

So then we wanted to acknowledge right out of the gate that what the church is is not a gathering of people who have it all together. We're not a gathering of people who are perfect or are even close to being perfect.

In fact, I tried to draw out from Ephesians 2 last week that at any given point, if the church is being the church, there will be new believers among us, that is, spiritual infants among us.

If there are any of you in here who have had children, infants are messy, yet they're still family. Infants bring nothing to the table, yet they're still a part of the family. You don't wait until an infant brings something to the table before you go, "All right, now you're part of the family." Where there are infants, there will always be a mess. Where there are infants, there will always be crying. Where there are infants, there will always be some immaturity among the body.

If you're coming in with the mindset that everybody in church is mature, kind of walking in *shekinah* glory, don't get up to the alarm, just the Holy Spirit wakes them up, then you are going to be unbelievably disappointed with your church experience at any given time in any given place. If you're looking for the perfect church, you will spend the rest of your life dancing around every three to five years looking for what scratches your current itch and never participating in what God has given you for your sanctification, for your maturation, and for your experience of who God is.

That leads me to the second hurdle. The second hurdle is that we have come into this room tonight even with legitimate hurts, legitimate struggles. Some of us have come in, and we have massive relationship issues, whether that relationship is with a spouse or with some moron we're dating. We've come in, and maybe we're sick, literally sick. Maybe we've come in, and we're depressed or lonely or angry. Father's Day doesn't work well for us. We've come in like that.

The default position is, "Hey, would you just do something pragmatic? Are you kidding me right now? You're going to talk about the church? Why don't you do marriage, Matt? Why don't you do money? Why don't you do something with some steps that I can take and leave this place and apply to my life in such a way that things would get better?" I contended this last week. I still contend it with you. Regardless of where you find your life right now, the church and her role in your life has everything to do with where you are right now.

Anyone who has put themselves out there and walked with a group of Christians knows this to be true. God's tangible love is most often manifested to us through the saints, so get sick, and watch what happens with those who are members of the church around you. Be honest about your marriage being in a tough spot, and watch men and women in the church rally around you. Fall into depression. Watch men and women in the church rally around you.

You see, God is tangibly making himself known, touching you, hugging you, encouraging you, prodding you on, propping you up through other brothers and sisters in Christ who you're doing life deeply with, and

that simply won't happen through, "Here are six steps to get better." That's not going to happen if you never plug in and are known among a people in such a way that can happen. In fact, I've often preached, "To be 99 percent known is to be unknown altogether." We simply said we defined the church like this. The church is a group of men and women with various backgrounds.

Some of you...praise God...got saved as a kid. Mom and Daddy got you up every week, and they took you to church. You were in Awana. You were in GAs and RAs. You came looking like Patton with your sash and all your little patches. You just smoked everyone. You beat the pastor to his text. He's like, "Let's turn to 1 Corinthians..." "...7:14!" I mean, you were just on it, just smoking fools. Somewhere in the middle of all of that, Jesus grabbed ahold of your heart.

That's the story I want for my children. I have a 10-year-old, a 7-year-old, and a 4-year-old, and my earnest desire is that the testimony was, "Daddy loved Jesus. Daddy kept bringing us to church. Daddy kept laying the Bible before us, and somewhere in that, I'm not even sure where, Daddy's Jesus became my Jesus, and I loved him and followed him and served him. This is my testimony." It's a shame that for some of you that is your testimony, and you wish you had a better one. Do you not understand how over-powerful, what a great display of the grace of God that he would rescue you in that environment?

Then for some of us, that's not our story at all. Right? I mean, some of us were strung out, addicted, busted up. We were just a train wreck, yet God takes the church kid and the non-church kid, and he creates this new people in a local context, empowered by the Holy Spirit, informed by the Word of God, and held together by Christ, the cornerstone. I spent most of my sermon unpacking this idea of Christ as the cornerstone, because nothing else is going to hold us together other than the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

What enables us to do life together deeply is not that we've rallied around some justice cause. That's not going to hold us together because of our different backgrounds. We look at justice issues differently according to how we were raised, the color of our skin, the socioeconomic status we grew up with. We will approach justice issues differently. Justice issues, as good and right as they are, will not hold us together as a people. It is the experience of grace that binds us to one another.

What I mean by that is in that moment where I have said, you have said, "We have laid down our worst before the Lord and found him just to be gracious to us," that's transformative. That moment you say, "I'm an addict." He says, "No, you're my son." That changes things. When you say, "I'm an adulterer. I'm a fornicator. I'm a wicked man. I am a wicked woman." God's response to you in Christ is, "You are beloved. You are mine, and my delight is in you." At that moment, we are now empowered to be gracious and generous to one another in a way we would never be outside of that experience of grace.

The church is held together by Christ, the cornerstone, and the fact that you and I, at our worst, have been loved by the God of the universe. Without that, things fall apart. I'm involved with this church-planting network called Acts 29. It's global now. It's 500 churches, 6 continents. What we learn when we all get together in the summer is that there are crazy differences in how we see life, and if it wasn't for Christ, the cornerstone, there is no way we would be able to partner with one another to plant churches around the globe.

I'll give you just one quick example about how Christ had better be the cornerstone and not any other issue, because it enables us to give the benefit of the doubt. It enables us to be patient. It enables us to seek to understand rather than pushing away from the table when we don't understand something or get offended by something that wasn't meant to offend.

We were doing a panel on manhood. The ladies were out; it was just the men. We were challenging them to be not passive but actually to be engaging and live life on purpose for their families, for their children, for their churches. We're on that panel, and we're doing this Q and A after the talk. A man said, "What are ways you spend quality time with your son?" One of our church-planters from Texas says, "Well, we like to go out to the ranch, and I teach him how to shoot pistols and load and clean guns."

You heard an audible gasp from our brothers from the UK, because in Texas, it's a very loving thing to teach your son to use... In fact, I'll teach you right now. We love our... But in the UK, there is no framework for that. There is no understanding. They're thinking, "What awful fathers! What a wicked father! Why would your kid ever need to shoot a handgun? What purpose...?" For Texans, that's not even a question. "What do you mean, what's the purpose? What's the purpose of a car? What are you talking about?"

If it's not for the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, our brothers from the UK push away from the table and go, "Bunch of freaks. We can't be partnering with you guys...with the church-planting kid, an ESV study Bible, and a 9mm. Is that what comes with our kid? You guys are ridiculous." That's not what they did. They sought to understand. Why? Because Christ is the cornerstone. We have experienced grace so we can extend it. God has shown us patience, so we can show patience with one another. We are a people gathered in a local context, empowered by the Holy Spirit, informed by the Word of God, and held together by experiences of grace.

With that said, what I want to answer this week is really what the relationship with God is to the church and, therefore, what our relationship with one another should be. In essence, here's the question I want to answer...*What is Covenant?* That's the question I want to answer. If you're over the age of 16 (it looks like

that may be all of us), a bulk of your life is dictated and directed by the contracts you have agreed to enter into. I'll try to flesh that out a little bit.

If you own a house, you signed a mortgage. If you are renting an apartment, a townhome, or a house, you signed a lease. If you have a cell phone, you have entered into a contract with AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon, somebody, and a contract, in its essence... By the way, we can keep going. You have insurance. That's contractual. Whoever provides energy to your dwelling place, your inhabitation, that's a contract you're in. Your life is dictated and driven at so many levels by the contracts you have entered into.

What a contract is at its base is an agreement between two parties around services. It's an exchange around a product. Let's just take your cell phone, because I'm guessing almost all of us have cell phones. I'm old enough to remember when they didn't exist or only *über*wealthy people had them hardwired into their car or had the giant bag thing they could use. We had pagers in high school. Your friend would page you and put 9-1-1 on it, and then you would have to find a payphone like an idiot and get a quarter from somebody so you could call your buddy back, because he 9-1-1'd you, only to find out he was just wondering what you were doing.

Now that's not the case. Almost all of us have cell phones. Here's what has happened. You walked into a store. I don't know what store it was. You walked into a store. You opened up a...however you activated your phone. You entered into an agreement with whoever your provider is. Here's what you agreed upon. They were going to provide for you this service, a certain amount of data and a certain amount of minutes, unless you're big time and just went all in, unlimited, whatever that is.

You signed up for a certain amount of data, a certain amount of minutes, for a certain price. There's the exchange. There's the contract. "We're going to give you this, and you're going to pay that. If we lock you in for two years, you might get to upgrade to the next better phone than your phone, even though your phone will be working fine at that point, but you're not going to feel as cool until you get the new one. We're going to just wire this, and we can just keep you hooked on our products for the rest of your life."

You signed that contract, probably in blood, and then you got your first bill. You already found out that little plan of yours has all sorts of surcharges, and where you thought you were going to be paying \$80, you're now paying \$6840 a month. All right? You got that bill, and you got an exchange of goods. You have money, they have data, and you exchange. That's contractual. It's not relational at all. It's a contract. You are not in a relationship with Verizon. You're under contract with Verizon.

Here's what that means. If either of you stops the reciprocity, then the contract is either renegotiated or voided out altogether. I'll keep with the cell phone illustration. If you pick up your phone right now and it

just doesn't work... You can't call anyone. You can't check your apps. You can't get online. First of all, you'll probably panic, freak out, start to sweat, not know what to do. You'll probably melt down. That's how hardwired we are now into the net and all of that, just slaves to it.

Let's just say for the next month, you just can't get that device to work. You take it back to the store, and you're like, "Hey, this thing is not working." They're like, "Yeah, you know, we just decided we're not going to do that anymore." Then a month from now, you get the bill in the mail for the plan. Are you paying it? I'm not paying it. I'll tell you that right now. You can send the cops to my house. I'm not paying for it. I never got the service. I'm not paying for a service I wasn't provided for.

In the same way (maybe this will be helpful for you, knowing this is a college town), if you signed that contract, and the bill came, and you didn't have the flow at the time to pay your bill, and then a second notice came and reminded you that you were late and you were under contract. Here's an extra surcharge on top of the multiple surcharges they already got you for for being late on paying your bill. People aren't tipping well these days, so you can't pay your bill again.

You get that third notice, and then finally you wake up, and your phone is not working. Why? Because you didn't fulfill your side of the obligation. You see, contracts are built around reciprocity on services exchanged. Notice when I started listing out things like your house or apartment, your townhome, your phone, your insurance, your car, on and on I could go. When I'm talking about how your life is dictated by contracts, notice I didn't throw out there marriage, because marriage is not contractual; it is covenantal. It's not contractual; it's covenantal.

Maybe it would be helpful to explain it like this. How many of you have been to a wedding? I know you're used to the video. I'm here now. You have to raise your hand. All right. Has anybody never been to any wedding? Okay, we're batting a thousand, 100 percent. Oh, actually a couple of people haven't been to weddings. All right. Well, in a wedding, there is a part of the wedding that gets the most "awws," and it's the exchanging of the vows.

The bride and groom turn and face each other. They're no longer facing the minister. They're not facing the crowd. They turn and face one another, and they exchange vows, and those vows are never, ever contractual. If they were contractual, we would gasp and just know they're headed toward divorce. In fact, if I heard contractual vows, I would go get my gift out of the pile and take it home. They're not giving that to some pawn shop eight months from now when they're divorced.

They don't turn and face one another and go, "I'm in this as long as you mow the lawn." "Well I'm in this as long as you clean the dishes after we have dinner." "Well I'll do the dishes if you make enough money for

us to go out to eat every once in a while so I don't have to slave in the kitchen all the time." "Well okay, woman. I will bring home..." That's not right. What romance, heart-stirring, "Oh I want that," is that? Nobody dreams of that, a contractual agreement. No, because marriage isn't contractual; it's covenantal. In a covenant, we don't barter around services. We're not trying to get under a tax shelter. We're entering into a relationship in such a way that we give ourselves to one another. Vows aren't contractual; they're covenantal.

They sound like this. "For better or for worse. For richer or poorer." That's covenantal language. "I give myself to you. You're giving yourself to me, regardless of the goods, for better or for worse. If everything goes great and I find out as we start to live together and walk with one another that you're exactly who I was dating and exactly what I wanted, I'm in.

If we get married, and I find out you are a nightmare and had some crazy in you I just didn't see while we were dating, I'm not gone. I'm giving myself to you. I'm giving myself to you. If I make a billion dollars, baby I'm spending it on you, and we're going to spend that money together. I'm getting a plane. Or if I'm broke, we're going to share a Coke and eat a lot of ramen noodles, but I'm doing it with you." "For better or for worse, richer or poorer, till death do us part" is covenantal language.

It's why marriage is so serious and why divorce is so serious, because Ephesians 5 says, "Do you want to understand God's relationship to the church? Do you want to understand Jesus' love for the church? Look at the covenant of marriage. A man gives himself to a woman, and a woman gives herself to the man, regardless of circumstances." God's relationship to the church is not contractual; it's covenantal. What's mind-blowing about God's covenantal love toward the church is God fulfills the obligations of both parties.

Here's what I mean by that, because I don't want you to get confused about contractual and covenantal language. God has put on my life the command that I am to love Lauren like Christ loved the church. That is God's command on my life regardless of whether or not there is reciprocity there, regardless of whether or not she returns that love, regardless of how she responds to that. I don't love her that way to get something for that; I love her that way because that is what God has commanded me to do, and that's the way he has loved me.

When there is reciprocity, when she receives that love, when she returns that love, it's all the more easy to love her that way. What we're going to see happening in God's covenant with his people is not only is God going to institute and start and grab hold of us, but he also will then enable our ability to respond rightly to the covenant he has entered into with us. Let me unpack it. It might work better just walking through texts. You are in Romans 8. Stay there. I'm going to set up a couple of things before we get there.

In Revelation 5, starting in verse 9, the Bible says this. This is the scrolls being opened in heaven. They have a scroll no one can open. We pick it up in verse 9. **"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain, and by your blood you...'"** What? What's the word? **"...ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."**

What you have here is this picture of God instituting his covenant by the blood of Jesus that you and I, stuck in our sins, enslaved... This is the word. Ransomed. We were enslaved, we were held captive, we were stuck in our trespasses and sins, and God initiated the covenant. He pursued us. I've tried to say since the day I became a pastor and before, you didn't save you; God saved you. You weren't looking for Jesus. God came and found you. That old song, "I Found Jesus." He was never lost; you were. You were ransomed by God, rescued by God, through the blood of Jesus Christ.

You find this same idea in Acts 20:26-28. It says this. **"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all..."** This is Paul saying his work in Ephesus was pure, that he wasn't preaching to tickle ears. He wasn't preaching to gather a crowd. He wasn't preaching to make men happy. He preached the whole counsel of God, so much so that he said, "I'm innocent of the blood of any of these men." Then he's challenging the elders to stay obedient as now he is leaving.

He says in verse 27, **"...for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock..."** This is a command to the elders. **"...in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers..."** Listen to this. **"...to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."** Again, it's this idea that you and I have been made a people not by any act of our own, not by our own desire, not by our own work.

If we're really honest here, we would have probably picked a different team. Yet God obtained us by his blood. He makes us a people where we were not a people. He makes us a family where we were not a family, and he enters into a covenant with us by purchasing us with his blood. This is an idea that finds itself woven throughout the tapestry of Scripture. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 6, the argument against sexual immorality is that you have been bought with a price. You are no longer your own. You belong to God.

It's this idea that God has obtained us. He has rescued us. He has ransomed us by... What? By his blood, not by you cleaning yourself up. It is by his blood that you have been ransomed. Here's where I begin to marvel. Not only has he rescued us and ransomed us. On top of that, he is going to sustain and empower our obedience to him as he loves us. Let's look at Romans 8. We'll pick it up in verse 31. Really 31 only makes sense because of verses 28-30, which is why in verse 31 he says, **"What then shall we say to these things?"**

Let's read starting in verse 31. If you want to study that later this week, I would recommend that. **"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"**

Verse 33 is where we really begin to see God battling on our behalf. **"Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?"** What's the answer? **"It is God who justifies."**

Let me stop, and let's do just a little bit of work there. I need you to see the breadth of what God has done here. Who can bring any charge against God's elect when it's God who justifies? It's imperative for you to understand. I believe it's imperative for your joy, for your gladness of heart in God for you to understand that all of your sins were future sins when Christ absorbed all sins on the cross. Do you follow me? All of your sins were future sins when Jesus Christ absorbed all sins on the cross. If you are in Christ, who can make any charge against those who belong to him, because God has justified them completely?

The reason Romans 8 says there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus is because all of our sins, past, present, and future, were absorbed on the cross, sealed in the resurrection. You and I, blameless and spotless, are set free to pursue the Lord, run after him. Our obedience to the things of God is empowered by God's justifying completeness over our lives. If you don't understand you're justified like this, when you stumble about, you fall. When you screw up, you fall into whatever you normally fall into, you understand you're justified and welcome before God so you can run to him and not run from him and try to clean yourself up.

It sets you free from things like shame. There will still at times be conviction, but conviction should, at the back end of it, taste a little sweet. As you're reminded... Beau did such a good job of going, "Hey, when you're considering your sins, we don't want to consider them in an unhealthy way, a way that paralyzes us. Rather, it should move us to gratitude that God has already forgiven." He has already forgiven. There is a confidence that comes in understanding justification, where God then empowers our obedience to pursue him despite our ups and downs in regard to complete obedience to the Word of God.

Let's keep reading here. Verse 34. **"Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."** Jesus is interceding for us. Earlier here tonight, you just prayed for some people. Maybe they were around you. Maybe it was somebody the Spirit just brought to your mind. The Bible is telling us in this moment, because of union with Christ, Christ is praying for us.

I have had the grace to have some really cool men lay their hands on me and pray over me and have the Son of God actively doing that in this moment, because my union with him is a sight to marvel at. He

empowers the obedience he commands. That's spectacular stuff, which is why he is going to go on here and say, "What shall separate us then from the love of God?" He lists... There is nothing you could name that is not on the list. What could separate us? He's like, "Heights, depths, visible, invisible, up, down, left, right."

No matter what you could name... In fact, he even tags on, "...or anything else in all of creation," just in case you could think of something that doesn't fit into the massive categories he creates in this text. The God that enters into covenant with you and me by his blood then by the Spirit's power and the Word of God enables our obedience so our reciprocity toward his love is actually empowered by him so he fulfills the obligations of the covenant in full just by himself.

One of my favorite verses, probably the one that is most on replay in my own mind, is in Jude 1:24. Just the first sentence of it more than the context, even though the context is spectacular. It just says, "**Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling...**" Now I'll tell you why I like that. I don't know where you are in maturity. I'm about 20 years in with my journey with Christ, and there are still times I'll feel a desire creep up in me that is not a righteous desire. Anyone else?

I'll want to respond to a situation in a way that is not the way God wants me to respond to a situation. I'll want to handle something in a way that is not. I will have a desire of my heart that runs contrary to the Word of God. Before I was sealed with the Holy Spirit, I was powerless against sin. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Now that I have put my faith in Christ I'm no longer enslaved to sin. If I sin, I have chosen to sin. Because of the power of Christ, he is able to keep me from stumbling.

When I find that desire in me creeping up to do something I know is contrary to the Word of God, that I know runs really directly in line with rebellion against God, I know the Holy Spirit is able to keep me from stumbling, that God has made a way out for me. Really this is one of those verses I constantly quote to myself. When I feel that, I'm just going to handle it this way. I run to this verse. "**Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling...**" "Keep my feet here, Lord. Give me strength, Holy Spirit. Let me handle this the way you would have me handle this."

This is God fulfilling both parts of the obligation in his covenant with the church. He purchased us with his blood, and by his Spirit he enables our obedience toward him and covers those days when we stumble and fall. This is a spectacular relationship. That is God's relationship with his church. It's a covenantal relationship. Therefore, we as his people and we as members of this covenant are in covenant one with another. *How does our relationship work, and what does it look like to be a member of a local congregation?*

I think the best way to see this is in the 59 "one anothers" found in the New Testament. I could take 59 "one anothers" and preach for three years on that, so no one panic. I'm just going to read through them quickly so you can get a bit of the rhythm for how God expects us to interact with one another. Here we go. There are 59 of them.

The New Testament tells us 17 times to love one another. It tells us five times to serve one another. Accept one another. Strengthen one another. Help one another. Encourage one another. Care for one another. Forgive one another. Submit to one another. Commit to one another. Build trust with one another. Be devoted to one another. Be patient with one another. Be interested in one another. Isn't that an odd one? Be interested in one another. I know some of you single dudes are like, "On it." Don't do that. That's not for you.

Be accountable to one another. Confess to one another. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be conceited to one another. Do not pass judgment to one another. Do not slander one another. Instruct one another. Greet one another. Admonish one another. Spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Meet with one another. Agree with one another. Be concerned for one another. Be humble to love one another. Be compassionate to one another. Do not be consumed by one another.

This is why that one in particular is important. We are going to disagree. Are you tracking with me? We are going to disagree. There is a way to disagree that is Christian, distinctively Christian, and there is a way to disagree that is not. We don't consume one another. We don't bite and devour one another. We don't stab one another in the back. We don't behave like that toward one another. Do not be angry with one another. Do not lie to one another. Do not grumble to one another. Give preference to one another. Be at peace with one another. Sing to one another. Be of the same mind to one another.

It just keeps going. Comfort one another. Be kind to one another. Live in peace with one another. Carry one another's burdens. Listen to me. Thank God that's not contractual. If it's contractual, let's all tap out and go home, because I believe it's close to tip-off. We're not going to find a place that nails that, and you're not going to nail that. Let me put some flesh on this, because this is God's expectation of how his people are to interact with one another.

When I was dating Lauren, we got in the same fight every six to eight weeks. We didn't fight all the time. Just every six to eight weeks, we would have a fight. It was always the exact same fight. The circumstances around it would be different, but it was always at the core the same fight. Can I get a, "Glory," from someone? "Hallelujah." Something. There are a lot of you single people here, non-marrieds in the 7:15.

I loved Lauren and thought she was going to be my wife. In the end, I went to a good friend of mine, David, and just said, "David, here's the deal, man. I love Lauren. I really think I should marry her, but every six to eight weeks, we kind of get in the same fight over and over again, and I just don't know if I should marry this woman if this is the case." Here was his response to me. He said, "Matt, you are going to fight with someone for the rest of your life. Do you want to fight with Lauren for the rest of your life?"

I was simultaneously encouraged and destroyed. Right? Simultaneously, my idea of what it was going to be... I had kind of bought in on Hollywood. I'm going to find the one. I'm going to find the unicorn, the Oompa Loompa riding a unicorn. I was going to find her, and we were never going to fight. There would never be disagreements. It was just going to be harmony all the time. David is like, "Nuh-uh." Then he said, "But is she the one you want to fight with?" I was like, "Yeah. I kind of want to fight with her for the rest of my life."

A year later, I stood in front of God and all our family and friends, and we looked one another in the face, and before God said, "I'm giving myself to you." She said, "I'm giving myself to you for better or for worse." Hear me. We've had some worse, and we've had some better. "Richer or poorer." I was making \$12,000 a year when we got married. That's broke. Rent was \$350. The air unit was in the thing. Sewage was coming up through the bathtub every once in a while. It was just ghetto, awesome. We learned to love each other well in those days.

"In sickness and in health." Most of it has been health. We've had some pretty serious health issues over the years, and we gave each other to each other in covenant. Here I am on the eve of 15 years later, and every 12 to 15 weeks we still have that fight. We fight better than we used to. We fight more graciously, and we understand better where each other is coming from. We just disagree. It's sanctifying and spectacular and safe, because I'm not going anywhere, and neither is she. That's covenant.

How we are to approach the church is this. It's important when we start going through these "one anothers" that that doesn't become some kind of litmus test for your involvement in a local community. Here's the truth about community. "I don't demand this of you; I become this for you." That's the nature of covenant. Covenant is not me showing up going, "Somebody had better greet me. The Bible says, 'Greet one another.' I've been here 15, and no one has greeted me."

"You know what, Chandler, you are not encouraging me. I have listened to 36 minutes of this sermon, and I am not encouraged. I am out. No one has done these." That's not how covenant works. Can you imagine if that's what you brought into your marriage? "I'm home. Meet my needs." Are you guys dreaming of that? Men? Women? When you think of marriage, you're going, "That's what I would like. I would like the door to fly open at about 6:00 and someone just to show up going, 'It's all about me now.'" No.

Covenant is different than contract. Covenant says, "I'm going to become this for you. I pray to God that there will be reciprocity there, but if there's not, I'm still going to serve you in this way." We walk in and say, "I'm going to do my best to "one another" in these 59 ways with you. I'm going to push my chips in, and I'm going to belong, knowing there are going to be times you fall short, knowing there are going to be times I fall short, but I'm covenanting to walk with you as we figure out the 'one anothers.'"

Listen to me. You're going to figure out the "one anothers" somewhere, so you have to figure out where that is. It doesn't matter where you go to church. The church is going to disappoint you. I know some of you might be brand new here going, "I just don't believe you." Give us time. Just give us time. Give us another couple of weeks. I'm not even finished with this sermon. I might even land the plane tonight for you. That's not how we approach the church. We don't approach the church as consumers, in the same way you wouldn't approach marriage as a consumer.

No, we approach the covenant community of faith as, "This is what I'm going to bring to the table today. I'm going to walk in, and I'm going to greet people. I'm going to walk in, and I'm going to encourage them. I'm going to walk in and build them up. I'm going to walk in, and where God gives me favor, I'm going to instruct. I'm going to walk in, and I'm going to speak life into people. I'm going to walk in, and I'm going to be patient. I'm going to be gracious. When I'm hurt, I'm not going to push away from the table. I'm going to lock into the table, and I'm going to work it out in that place for my own good and for the glory of God."

When we begin to interact like this with one another, even in its imperfections it stands out in such a way (going back to last week now) that we really do reveal the manifold wisdom of God to the world around us, because our culture pushes away from the table. It's quick to push away from the table. It's quick to say, "I'm not happy. It's not satisfying me. It's not..." We don't bring that attitude to the church. We bring the attitude of, "What can I give?" not, "What can I get?"

You have to guard your heart on that for your own good, for your own maturation, for your own hope, for your own satisfaction in the Lord. This is our relationship one with another. It's a serious one. You start reading through this. You start talking about covenant. That's a really serious relationship we have with one another. If God's love for his church is covenantal, and if our love with one another is covenantal, that begets this question. *Is there ever a time it's okay to leave a local church?* Yes. Absolutely there is. Let me unpack for you biblical reasons to leave a church and join another.

Really the good, right way is that if you're transferred, or if you're moving... I'll give you a perfect example of this going really well. There was a young woman in the last service. She has been a covenant member of The Village Church for seven years. She is currently moving to Virginia. In fact, tonight was her last night

with us. She is moving to Virginia where she has a new job. She finished grad school and is heading off to Virginia where she is going to have a job.

She started talking with the elders and with the pastors here and said, "Hey, this is kind of what's going on in my life. I'm about to move. I have this job opportunity. Will you please pray with me about this job opportunity?" Then she gets the job. "Hey, do you guys know of any healthy, gospel-preaching, Bible-believing, passionate about the mission of God in the world churches up in Virginia?" We're like, "Well, you can try this one or look into this one when you get there or check out this one, but keep us informed and let us know. When you land, we'll celebrate. We're going to be praying for you until you find a new home. When you find a new home, we're going to celebrate that together." That's a great way to leave a church.

If you're a college student here or a young professional, we've prayed that you would hang out in Denton for a while, love this city well. We know not all of you are going to do that. Some of you are headed to Chicago or New York or Atlanta or wherever else you're going, but when all is said and done, a lot of you are going to move on to other places. Our hope would be, if you're a covenant member, that you would let us be a part of that process, and you would land in a healthy place. That's a good, beautiful, right way to leave.

Then there are times you leave, but it's not a good thing at all. I want to kind of unpack both of those just as I conclude. This is the part I said was going to be heavy. The front part was going to be really beautiful, this idea of covenant, but then you get this kind of breakdown because of the hardness of heart and sinfulness of men that has to be addressed. Let me give you two ways you leave that are under duress. Let me go through the first one.

First of all, the Bible is pretty clear that God has built boundaries for us and organized things in such a way for our own good, for our own benefit. In fact, Psalm 16 says that for us who are in Christ, the boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places, which means God has created structures for our protection. The way the church is designed and wired is that there is a governing body of elders. We'll address elders in two weeks. I love addressing elders, because everybody is so confused. There are some people who kind of think of it like the Jedi Council. There are others still who kind of get confused about the 18-year-old Mormon kid from Utah who kind of shows up on your porch called an elder. There is this kind of... "What is an elder?"

In our culture, because of our dark skepticism toward authority, we think of the idea of a governing body as being ripe for perversion and sinfulness and destruction. The idea of a governing body having an authority over us is something we kick against. The line of reasoning goes something like this. "Matt, because of the sinfulness of the world and the slippery slope of success, if there is an elder board in which almost all

power is held, it's only a matter of time until you fill that elder board with "yes" men for you and you do whatever you want, you're king, and we become just your personal playground, and all you know is millionaires, and you're using this as your little personal piggy bank." On and on and on it goes. Right?

Nepotism sets in. "You're probably going to have your whole family..." If you've been around church, you've heard these kinds of nightmares. The elder board was locked in. There was no way to remove. There was no way, but the Bible doesn't say that. The Bible gives you clear boundaries in which to engage elders, confront elders in a loving gracious way, and if those elders refuse to repent of their sins, to leave. Let me paint the picture using The Village. Let's just say I come across an article, and in that article, I read that young people do not view the Bible as being authoritative. What they gravitate to is historic figures who have made a difference in the world.

Let's say I get up next week, and I'm going, "Hey, here's the subject. Don't worry about your Bibles. This is what Gandhi said." I throw up a quote from Gandhi. Then I exegete the quote from Gandhi. "What Gandhi was saying when he said this was... If you look this word up in Hindi, what it actually connotes is this." I begin to just drift from the Word of God. All of a sudden, I'm not calling people toward repentance. I'm no longer willing to call sin sin. I'm not trusting the Word of God to be the hammer of God that shapes, moves, bends, and calls us unto himself, and I completely drift away from the gospel.

You come and confront me, and I say back to you, "Have you read this article? That's what I'm doing." You go to the elders, and you say, "Listen, Chandler said he doesn't have to preach the Bible anymore, that to exegete Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and those guys... That's effective enough to transform the hearts of people." The elders go, "Well, look at our numbers from the next few months. He's right. We've opened up a campus. We've grown by a thousand. Our budget is up 60 percent." The elders shrink back from their responsibility to discipline me or remove me altogether.

I'm telling you for the good of your soul and the good of your family, bounce and find a place that will unapologetically preach the Word of God, call sin sin, and call men and women to repentance and point toward the majesty of the gospel of the glory of God. That's one of the reasons people need to leave churches, because it's unhealthy, and it's no longer preaching the gospel in any way. You still don't be divisive. You lovingly engage the process, and if there is not repentance, then you leave.

The second way (this is a reality too, God help us) is when members of a church begin to walk in blatant unrepentant sin and must be engaged over that sin. There are not a lot of categories for this one in our culture. Matthew 18:15-17 says this. **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or**

**three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."**

Let's walk through the process. If we see a brother or sister sin, we are to approach them. This becomes important. If you write in your Bible, I would strongly encourage you to circle this, highlight, or whatever. The key line in this, and where I believe the thing falls apart in so many instances, is this idea of gaining your brother. When we engage someone over their sin, our intent is not to be right, not to flex our maturity, not to show our knowledge of the Scripture.

We approach them in humility with a passion to win them back to the idea and the reality that God is ultimately for them and the commands of God are about their joy, about their gladness of heart, and ultimately about the fullness of life for them. We plead with them, "Brother, sister, this way ends in death. God is not trying to take from you. How would he be glorified by making you miserable? God is for you, brother. Heed his commands."

If we approach him lovingly, approach her lovingly, and they go, "You know what. Forget you. I just feel like God would want me to be happy, and this is going to make me happy, so I'm going to just do that," then we go and grab two or three others who are for him. This isn't pitchforks and torches. Are you tracking with me? That's not how this works. The second it starts to work like that, we've already lost.

Two or three who know this brother or sister also will then sit down, and we make the appeal again. "Please don't do this, brother. You entered into covenant. You promised to do these things. What about the 'one anothers'? What about the grace of God? What about that transforming moment where God called you 'son'? What about these things? We're in covenant with one another to pursue Christ seriously together. What are you doing? I'm nervous for you."

What if he tells the four of you, "Forget you. I think God wants me to be happy. I know that's what the Word of God says. I still don't care. I know this is right. I just want to do what I want to do." Now it goes to the church. If you're a regular attendee, this process will probably never show up on your radar. If you're a covenant member of ours, it eventually will. If you come to our member meeting, you'll see this happen.

Also, right now I can tell you some of you don't have a lot of framework for that. That feels arrogant. That feels crazy. Who is the church to say this must be what you do? I already covered that last week. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit and informed by the Word of God, walking with one another as those who have experienced the transforming power of the grace of God, which means we lovingly then lay it before the church for the good of the person's soul.

If they still say, "Forget you. I'm going to do what I want. I know that's what the Word of God says. I know what you guys are encouraging me to do is right and good, but I want to do what I want to do, so I'm going to do it." At that point, they are removed from membership, and we treat them as tax collectors and Gentiles. Let's talk about that, because I'm guessing you don't know a lot of tax collectors, and you are Gentiles. Let me unpack this for you.

There is a lot of debate about this text and how this text should be interpreted. Let me tell you what I believe it means. When you walk with tax collectors and Gentiles, those are unbelievers within the context of what Jesus is saying, those who do not believe. So you walk with people who do not believe in the hope that they will repent and believe.

My 10-year-old daughter has brought a woman into our world. She's a 51-year-old woman, which is strange, that my 10-year-old daughter has brought a 51-year-old woman into our lives. She has been coming to our house and eating and swimming in the pool and hanging out. She's a single mom with a really rough life. My 10-year-old daughter has just been loving on her.

Now she and my wife have become kind of friends. It's this really interesting dynamic. She's not a believer at all. In fact, she's in an extremely perverse relationship, and just about three or four weeks ago she began to confide in my wife that, "This relationship isn't working, and this is what's happening, and here's what..." My wife just really lovingly said, "Listen. There is a reason that's happening. You're in a perverse relationship. That's not what God has for you."

She was able to hear that. She started to come to church with us. We're walking with her in a way that shows we believe she's not a believer, and we're trying to lay before her the love and mercy of God. When we remove a member, it's not what you've seen on TV, kind of Amish. "You're out of Denton! We had better not see you on the Square. Don't you show your face in this church. I can't believe..."

That's not how we treat those removed from membership. In fact, wouldn't we want them in this place to sit under the proclamation of the gospel, to hear the good news, that for those who repent, there is grace and mercy to be found? Hear me. If a brother or sister gets to the point that to the whole church, they say, "I don't care what the Word of God says, and I don't care what the church says. I'm going to do what I want," is that not objective evidence of un-regenerance? Does that not reveal that more than likely, they're not saved at all?

How could you be sealed with the Holy Spirit and say, "I don't care what the Word of God says. I could care less what you say as my friend, a "one another" with me, and I have no intention of submitting to the authority God has put over me in order to protect me from myself." That shows a heart in glad rebellion

against God, who the Bible would then say, "Treat them as unbelievers, because they're acting like unbelievers."

Listen to me. This is hard, and we do this here. Man, if you're just a regular attender and not a member, and you're considering membership, I would consider that we take it that seriously here. At our last member meeting down in Flower Mound, with tears and snot, we read the names of seven men and women who have been removed from our roles, and we have encouraged our body to treat them as tax collectors and Gentiles, to begin to walk with them in a way that's loving but call them to repentance.

What's so terrifying to me and really pushes me back to that Jude 1:24 text is all of these people sat down across from other members here at the church, read through our covenant, read through the promises, and signed their name and said, "I'm in." Within two year, three years, four years, they're going, "Forget you all. I'm going to do this my own way." How wicked are our hearts that we can drift to that place? That we can go from being all in and dedicated to one another, and then in just a short period of time, say, "I'm god. I'm the master of my domain. I'm the one that runs my world and my life. I submit to no one but me. I am in essence my own god."

That's a terrifying idea, that we're prone to drift in that direction. It's one of the reasons why the boundary lines have been given to you. It's one of the reasons why the church is so necessary and not just you going and hearing sermons. You being in, all the way in, and every weekend when we gather, being reminded, "We're in." So I thought I would end our time together by just showing you a testimony. Lore Ferguson is one of the most brilliant people I know. I'm not going to say, "...*women* I know." She's just one of the most brilliant people I know. She's a godly, godly woman.

She had a very difficult 10- or 15-year stretch with her family and with the church to the point that she finally just said, "I'm not a believer anymore." She moved to Texas. One of her good friends was a member at The Village who had been removed from membership because of some pretty grotesque sins, and then God broke her heart. She repented and came back. Lore watched us love her, and that kind of stirred up her heart once again to maybe believe in the things of the Lord. As heavy as this sounds, really when done well, and the Holy Spirit of God works, it's a really beautiful, beautiful thing for the people of God. I'll let Lore tell you her story. Hopefully I haven't given away too many spoilers.

[Video]

**Lore Ferguson:** My name is Lore Ferguson, and I've been at The Village since the fall of 2010. I was raised in a home where there was not a lot of respect for authority, which led to illegal activities as far as the government and lot of church-hopping. There was just not a lot of submission or leadership done well in our family. In 2010, I could look behind me at a decade of just a lot of brokenness in my family and in my life. Someone called it the backhand of God. To me there was just wreckage wherever I looked. I confessed to my pastor, "I don't believe in God anymore. If he's good, he's not good to me. I'm done with this. I'm done with church."

One of the reasons I moved to Texas was because of a friend I had lived with in New York who had moved here under church discipline from my church back home. I just got to see in my first four months here just her restored and repenting to the church leadership here at The Village. The way that was handled was so beautifully done and so impacting to me that I just began to feel like, "Maybe the Lord does put structures and boundaries around us to keep us in safe places."

Psalm 16 says the boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places, so I began to see that boundaries around me didn't keep me from sin, but they kept me in safe places where sin would be discovered, where it would be challenged, where it would be pushed on in good and holy ways for my good and my joy and for God's glory. I wish I could say it has been easy to be under authority and submitted in ways that push on me, but it's not.

For me it's just an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to say that what he says is good is good. Every day, I have to re-covenant myself here and recommit to being all in when it's difficult and when people push against me. When people push for my time, when they correct sin, when they challenge me, I have to say again and again and again, "I'm here. I'm all in to see it flourish under God's good rule and his good boundaries."

[End of video]