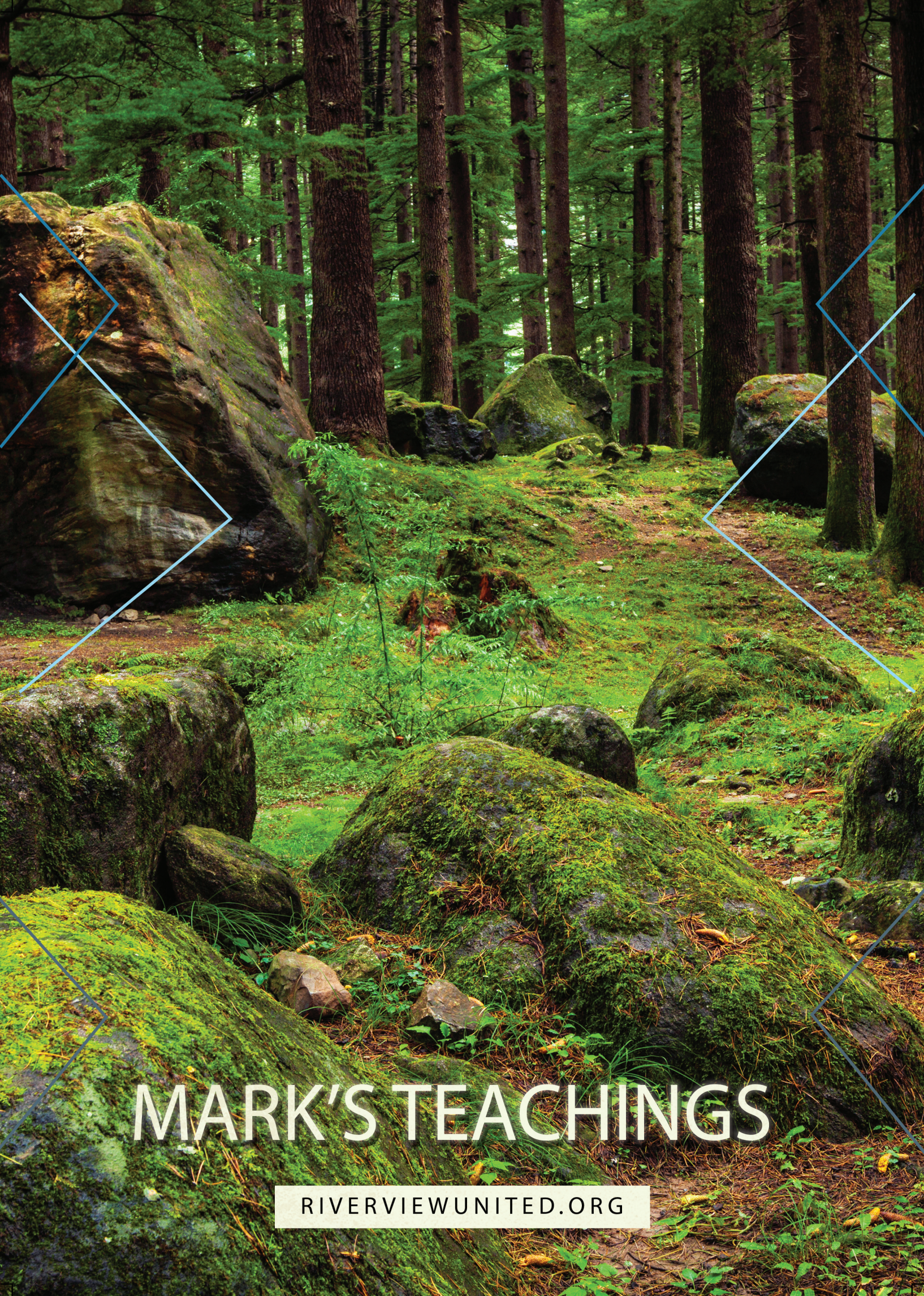


A photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, several large, dark rocks are covered in vibrant green moss. The ground is a mix of brown pine needles, green moss, and small green plants. In the background, a dense forest of tall, straight evergreen trees rises, their green needles creating a thick canopy. The lighting is soft and diffused, typical of a forest interior. Four light blue geometric lines, resembling stylized 'X' marks, are overlaid on the image: one in the top left, one in the top right, one in the bottom left, and one in the bottom right.

MARK'S TEACHINGS

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How to Have Unity in the Church

Psalm 133; Acts 4:32-45; 1 John 1:1–2:2

Riverview UMC, Sunday, April 8, 2018

Scripture Readings

Psalm 133 New International Version (NIV)

¹ *How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*

² *It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.*

³ *It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore."*

Acts 4:32-37 New International Version (NIV)

³² *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.*

³⁶ *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.*

1 John 1:1-2:2 New International Version (NIV)

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you

also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

² My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Prayer

Father, fill us with your Holy Spirit, that your Word be known, understood and applied according to the power, love and wisdom of your Spirit. May this message not be filled with “*wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that our faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on Your power*” (**1 Corinthians 2:4b-5**). In Christ’s name, Amen.

Sermon

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity...For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life evermore” (Psalm 133:1,3); “All the believers were one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32a). How is this unity achieved? Our passage from **1 John 1:5-9** tells us clearly: *“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* In fact, John goes on in **1 John 2:3-6**: *“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know*

him, 'but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.' And further in **1 John 3:6**: *"No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him."*

Sin destroys unity. But we are all sinners, you say...how then can we have unity? By walking in the light – a willingness to have our sins exposed and forgiven in the light of Christ (**1 John 1:7**). Why wouldn't we all do that? *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world"* (**1 John 2:15-16**). If we cling to our evil desires and the resulting sin rather than a desire to have our sins exposed in the light of Christ, then fellowship is destroyed – with God and other believers - and unity, therefore, cannot exist. The problem, therefore, is a denial by many of the ongoing need for repentance.

An old preacher said to me one time, "Satan couldn't drive the church out of the world, so he drove the world into the church." When the church leaders cannot agree on the need for ongoing repentance, and worse, what is a sin, and deny the truth of God's Word, the result is disunity. This way of thinking comes from an old apostasy called "antinomianism," a false teaching that purports that just believing in Christ takes care of everything – no need for ongoing repentance. Miriam Webster's dictionary defines an "antinomian" as "one who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation." Antinomians assert that Christ did away with the ceremonial law and the moral law...it's all about grace and love for one another.

What does Scripture say? **Galatians 5:13-21**: *"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other; so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness,*

orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” God is clearly telling us not to abuse the grace of Jesus Christ, and we can see why the Spirit of God (thru Paul) was so upset with those in the church in Galatia who were doing just that – continuing to indulge the sinful nature rather than living by the Spirit.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said this at the Conference of 1744 (from the book, “John Wesley the Methodist”): “God loves you; therefore, love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore live to God till you live with him in glory! So we preached; and so you believed! This is the Scriptural way, the Methodist way, the true way. God grant that we may never turn therefrom, to the right hand or to the left.” The author goes on to say, “Wesley’s intense conviction of the importance of practical morality led him to take drastic measures to rid his society of antinomian teachers, and their perversions of evangelical truth.” John Wesley was vehemently opposed to antinomianism and fought it throughout his ministry, and we must continue to fight it today. Antinomianism is growing and deceiving many in the Methodist Church today to the point that we won’t uphold God’s Word, nor even our own Book of Discipline.

But let me ask this: If Christ did away with the moral law, as the antinomians claim, then what are we to do with what God says is immoral? If we throw out the moral law, as found in **Leviticus 18**, what will the result be? Let’s read **Leviticus 18**:

“The Lord said to Moses, ²“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘I am the Lord your God. ³You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. ⁴You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. ⁵Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.

⁶“No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the Lord.

⁷“Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her.

⁸“Do not have sexual relations with your father’s wife; that would dishonor your father.

9 “Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere.

10 “Do not have sexual relations with your son’s daughter or your daughter’s daughter; that would dishonor you.

11 “Do not have sexual relations with the daughter of your father’s wife, born to your father; she is your sister.

12 “Do not have sexual relations with your father’s sister; she is your father’s close relative.

13 “Do not have sexual relations with your mother’s sister, because she is your mother’s close relative.

14 “Do not dishonor your father’s brother by approaching his wife to have sexual relations; she is your aunt.

15 “Do not have sexual relations with your daughter-in-law. She is your son’s wife; do not have relations with her.

16 “Do not have sexual relations with your brother’s wife; that would dishonor your brother.

17 “Do not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter. Do not have sexual relations with either her son’s daughter or her daughter’s daughter; they are her close relatives. That is wickedness.

18 “Do not take your wife’s sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living.

19 “Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period.

20 “Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor’s wife and defile yourself with her.

21 “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.

22 “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

²³ “Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion.

²⁴ “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. ²⁵ Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.²⁶ But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things, ²⁷ for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. ²⁸ And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

²⁹ “Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people. ³⁰ Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the Lord your God.”

We can't pick and choose which moral laws to keep and which ones to throw out. God has not changed his mind about what is moral and what He calls immoral – even detestable – behavior. Those in the church who would argue that acting on homosexual desire is ok because “God made them that way” need to be reminded that God made us all with a sinful nature. We can't use that as an excuse...that's exactly why Christ had to die for us! What the Scripture says is that we no longer have to try to obey in our own strength and thus be judged by the law. Instead, we can now live by the Spirit who empowers us to fulfill all of God's commandments. God did not change his mind about sinful behavior after we accepted Christ as our Savior: *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up”* (**Galatians 6:7-9**).

Now this may sound harsh to some, but here is what Scripture – Jesus - says to do when confronting the sin of a believer:

³ *So watch yourselves.*

“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.” **Luke 17:3-4**

Repentance is what leads to forgiveness and restoration of fellowship - no matter how often it is required...this is grace in action.

¹⁵ *“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”* **Matthew 18:15-17**

Jews had nothing to do with pagans or tax collectors, and Jesus is saying that we should separate ourselves from unrepentant sinners. Tough love is never easy to administer, but it is the only way to bring about repentance according to Jesus.

When Paul heard that a member of the Corinthian church was living in unrepentant sin, he chastised the church and instructed the following by inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? ³ For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. ⁴ So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

⁶ *Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

⁹ *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I*

am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Please note that the sin which Paul references is exactly what God said not to do in the moral law found in **Leviticus 18:8**: “*Do not have sexual relations with your father’s wife; that would dishonor your father.*” So, if the moral law was still to be upheld and enforced in the church after Jesus died and was resurrected, on what grounds in Scripture are some of our leaders, preachers, teachers, and members of the United Methodist Church basing their position that discipline for the purpose of leading to repentance is not the way of God? They are appalled at any who would call on the church to exercise biblical discipline – calling it unloving and legalistic. They say, “We are all sinners, and God loves all of us,” or, “how will they (the unrepentant sinner) ever get the Gospel if we expel them from the fellowship?” I would direct them to another New Testament passage:

⁵ And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Hebrews 12:5-11

The primary goal of discipline is not to get rid of the unrepentant sinner, but to lead them to repentance:

⁸ Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” **2 Corinthians 7:8-10**

However, if the unrepentant sinner refuses to repent, Jesus will take direct action:

¹⁸ “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

²⁰ Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²² So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³ I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” **Revelation 2:18-23**

The only way to have unity in the church is to be in unity with God’s Word, and the only way to be in unity with God’s Word is to be filled with God’s Spirit, “*so that we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*” The church can only be comprised of repentant sinners saved by grace – those who desire to be separated from sin (holy) and its devastating effects. Unrepentant sinners have no place in the church because, by not confessing, they are denying God’s grace by trying to fellowship with Him on their terms – not His. Only by exercising discipline will we be able to test the faith of a true believer and ensure they are not really a plant put there by the evil one. A true believer will repent because they miss the fellowship with God and other believers more than the wages of sin, “*which is death*” (**Romans 6:23b**). Remember, that was Paul’s stated purpose in **1 Corinthians 5:5** for handing the sinner over to Satan. We do not cease to love or to pray for all people as we follow the example of the loving father in Jesus’

parable about the prodigal son. But if there are no consequences for sinful behavior, then there will be no incentive for repentance. And worse, we will be responsible for teaching others that it is ok to continue to sin in Christ, because as Scripture says, “*a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough*” (1 Corinthians 5:6). If we cannot agree on God’s moral law and the ongoing need for repentance as we grow in grace, then we will find ourselves suffering at the hand of Christ in judgment.

Jesus said: “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*” (Matthew 5:4). He was speaking of those who mourn over their sin. In repentance we find forgiveness and restoration of fellowship with the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the family of God – unity. King David expressed it this way in Psalm 32:1-6:

*“Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
2 Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.
3 When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, “I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord.”
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.
6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.”*

My prayer is that we will follow the instruction of Scripture as we are led by the Spirit of God to do the will of God.

Amen

Benediction: *“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.”*

Ephesians 3:20-21