

I've been reading a book about a group of people who were being held in captivity. The people in charge devised a plan to get them out, but it was dangerous, and the guy they were going to send in was putting his life at risk. Ultimately, the rescue mission worked, and they got out alive. This group of people became friends with each other and grew close to the guy who rescued them, but an interesting thing happened along the way. These people, from time to time, wanted to return to their place of captivity. Something drew them back, and they would find ways to secretly return. When they did this, it interfered with their lives and their relationship with the guy who rescued them. When they got back, they would often tell the others and ask that they help keep that from happening again. One guy even went and stayed, and a few of them gathered and went back in to pull him out. My guess is you know the book. It's the Bible.

God's story tells us we were captive to sin and death, we were rescued by Jesus to live a new and abundant life with him and with our new friends called the Church, but that each of us is drawn back. Our flesh wants to return to captivity, and we have an enemy who encourages that. We are in a battle. But, thankfully, we are not alone. As we continue our series called *Belonging*, I believe this morning we will look at maybe the most difficult, but rewarding, group of one another commands found in Scripture. They are difficult because they call us to courageous vulnerability, courageous confrontation, and the whole exercise is deeply personal and fraught with the potential for hurt, shame, and rejection. But, if lived out right, they have the potential to generate wholeness, freedom, forgiveness, intimacy, and the flourishing life that God has for us. It is a battle worth fighting, and it's one we must do together.

To understand the battle, we have to begin with what's at stake. If you are a follower of Jesus, you have been forgiven of your sins and your eternity with God is secure. However, that doesn't mean sin no longer bears consequences. The wages of sin is still death, and sin in a believer's life, though forgiven, still leads to death in some way.

³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. – Ephesians 4:30

¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Hebrews - 3:13

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? – 1 Corinthians 5:6

Our sin grieves the Holy Spirit. God's justice is satisfied in Christ's work on the cross, but our sin is painful to him because it is an expression of unbelief; not unbelief in the gospel, but unbelief that God's way is the best way, the way to the most fulfillment and satisfaction.

Our sin hardens our heart towards God. It moves us away from him, it moves us away from his love, it breaks fellowship with him, and it diminishes the impact he can have in our hearts. The harder our hearts get, the less inclined we will be to pursue God and live our life for him.

Our sin can be contagious. It infects the body. Paul challenges the Corinthians' indifference towards someone committing unrepentant, flagrant sin in their midst, because he knows it can influence and infect the rest of the church.

This is the substance of our battle. These are the consequences of sin we work against together, and to do that, we must become a people of confession, forgiveness, and loving engagement.

Belonging calls us to be a people of confession. The battle begins with being open and honest about our sin and asking for help to overcome it.

[James 5:14-16] ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

There's a lot of confusion around this passage, and we can't get into it all this morning. When James says "sick", he is not referring exclusively to physical illness. The word he uses means "to be weak". And while that may include physical weakness, it certainly refers to spiritual weakness. There is a debilitating spiritual weakness that comes from sin. If you've ever had the flu, you know how it feels. Your body aches and you don't want to move. A spiritual flu brought on by the germ of sin does the same thing, and the combination of confession and prayer is the cure. James says we are to raise our hand to ask for help and confess our sins to one another. And if we are the ones called in as reinforcements, our call is to pray.

The result is forgiveness and restoration. There is no guarantee for physical healing in this passage, but there is of spiritual healing. Confession admits wrongdoing and opens the door of our hearts to receiving God's grace. Prayer asks for God's healing power to be given to the sinner, and that is something God is eager to provide. Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name will be given to you", whatever you ask that aligns with my will I will do. Because God is able and willing to forgive, and because he wants to restore the sinner to full spiritual health, he will answer that prayer to forgive sins and heal the sinner. And as we ask for God's forgiveness, we must also remember to offer our own if someone's confession is because they have offended us. Colossians calls us to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. He has done so freely and graciously, without end, and at great cost to himself. We should be as eager as God is to pass on that forgiveness and we do that when we remember we have been forgiven much.

If we have a guarantee, why is it so difficult to do? Because confession exposes us. It tells others who we are inside, where we are weak, that we don't have it all together. It triggers the fear we all have that says, "If they know who I truly am, they won't accept me." We become vulnerable, powerless really, subject to judgment, rejection, and manipulation. And if we succumb to that fear, we'll stay in the dark and in a weakened condition to deal with our sin on our own.

But what happens if we have the courage to confess? Most importantly is spiritual healing. None of us want to walk around with the weight of our sin wearing us down and hardening our hearts (we'll talk more about that in May). Confession is a softening agent. Think of a candle. The wax is softened as it experiences the warmth of the flame. But cut the flame for long enough, and the wax grows hard again. Our hearts are the same way. If we stay away from the warmth of Christ's love through disobedience, our hearts will grow hard. But if we expose it to the warmth of Christ's love through confession, it will grow soft and be receptive to him once again.

The impact is also felt by others. Confession and prayer are ways we live out our belonging. They lead to intimacy. We are drawn to someone who cares enough to pray for us, and we are drawn to someone who has the humility to say, “I don’t have it all together and I need your help.” In fact, in *Life Together* Dietrich Bonhoeffer says confession is the “breakthrough” to fellowship. That when we get real with each other about our struggles, the distance between us closes and our lives are knitted together.

We saw earlier that sin is contagious. Well, so is confession. When you go first, you make it safe for others to raise their hand and ask for help too. You then go from confessor to prayer, and the spiritual healing that you have experienced now becomes available to them. That leads to a community set free from the power of sin and able to live with and for God.

I have experienced the blessing found in this combination of confession, prayer, and forgiveness. In the first few years of our marriage, Martha and I often lived in what one author calls the Crazy Cycle. When conflict happened, it would eventually get to the place where Martha would get cutting and sarcastic, and I’d get angry and loud. And the more sarcastic she’d get, the louder and angrier I’d get, and the angrier and louder I’d get, the more sarcastic she’d get. Those moments were miserable, and we’d often wake up the next day and ask how we got here.

As much as I wanted to blame all of this on Martha’s disrespect, I had a growing conviction that this was on me and I needed to do something about it. But I was stuck. I had always aspired to be a wonderful husband and I was ashamed and humiliated to admit that I would treat the person I love most in the world this poorly. I didn’t want to admit it to her because I was afraid she would reject me and say she never would have married me if she knew I was this way. And I certainly didn’t want to ask for anyone else’s help because I’d have to tell them what a lousy husband I could be.

But I also got to the point where I didn’t want to continue this way. I was weak, I was sick, and so I did two things. I told another man what was going on, and he received me with grace, acceptance, “been there done that”, and he reminded me that God had forgiven me, wants to help me in this, and he prayed for God to do that work. God answered that prayer. And then I went to Martha and confessed to her. Instead of rejecting me, she forgave me, and then she confessed she had been treating me poorly too and asked for my forgiveness, which I quickly gave. It was a turning point for our marriage and it’s never been the same since.

Confession may put us at the mercy of God and others, but it’s only when we give away our power that we can gain our soul. I pray God would give you the courage to do so this week.

Belonging calls us to be a people of loving engagement.

Confession is initiated by the one who is sinning, but Scripture also calls us to initiate with the one who is sinning. Some of you just bristled at that, and I get it. You don’t want to get in anybody’s business, and you don’t want anyone getting in yours. There are few things more delicate than what we are about to discuss, and that’s why we need to understand what Scripture calls us to. If we do this poorly, we can crush someone’s spirit and do damage to their relationship with the Lord and us. But if we do this well, we can be used by God as agents of restoration to help someone flourish in the life God has for them.

[Romans 15:14] ¹⁴ I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

This may seem like a fairly benign verse, but it's more loaded than it might appear. The Greek word *noutheteo* is here translated "instruct", so we might think this is about sitting in a classroom and receiving instruction, which it can mean. But that word gets translated in many other ways that show its range and richness; words like train, teach, warn, correct, and admonish. These are words with weight, and they have the potential to be used for good or not so good.

I have a wonderful niece who is full of spirit and spunk, and she's been that way since she was born. There is a hilarious story that's told of a neighbor of theirs who was a smoker. Every time he saw her walking towards him, he'd quickly throw his cigarette away if he was smoking. The reason is because of an encounter he had with her. As the story goes, my niece, who was five or six at the time, walked up to him one day while he was smoking, put her hands on her hips, and said, "You're going to die...and you will never, ever, ever, ever, ever see your children again."

Now THAT'S admonishment! But it's not what Scripture calls us to. She was well-intended and speaking truth, but her approach was less than gentle, and instead of her being an encouragement to change behavior, it instead caused him to hide it. Our approach can do the same. What we intend for good and healing becomes shame-inducing, privacy-keeping motivation that believes it is not safe to be open with our sin because of fear of judgment and condemnation. It keeps a person feeling all alone and leaves their sin in the dark, where it can fester and harden hearts towards God and one another.

Given all that, we may just decide to ignore this command. But none of us would think twice about keeping someone from running into a burning building. We can do this with the same spirit. But to do this well, to do this the way God intended, we must have the right preparation, process, and purpose that Scripture gives us.

Notice what Paul says before "instruct". He's confident they are full of goodness and filled with all knowledge. These are essential prerequisites to speaking into someone's life. Goodness is a fruit of the Spirit. It is evidence of a growing relationship with Jesus, of becoming more like him, and it includes a growing knowledge of Scripture. This is not a call to perfection or the need to be a biblical scholar before we can engage one another in this way. It is, though, a call to spiritual maturity and an understanding of the full scope of God's Word. Without it, our "instruction" can become our own thoughts or preferences instead of what God says in his Word. Just like an operation being much more successful when performed by a skilled surgeon instead of a med student, instructing/admonishing one another is to be done by someone who has made progress in becoming like Jesus.

That's how we prepare. Paul's other uses of this word tell us of process and purpose. In Acts 20:31, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders how he had admonished them with tears for three years. In 1 Corinthians 4:14, Paul says he writes not to shame but to warn them as his beloved children. And in Col 1:28 he says his motivation is to present everyone perfect in Christ.

The process is relationship and the purpose is love. We do this because we seek the best for the other. We must have knowledge of God's Word, but we must also have knowledge of someone's life. That comes over time, and that comes with getting close. Remember the example of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. We're not to run out into the concourse and grab the first person we see and admonish them. This is the outpouring of a devoted and loving relationship where trust and intimacy have been built and we have earned the right to speak into someone's life. Our purpose must also be for their good, not so we can be heard. In the first week of the series I challenged all of us to first ask ourselves "Is my motivation to do this love?" if we are about to one another someone. If the answer is anything other than yes, hit pause, and examine yourself. If there is a one another that needs that check, it's this one.

When Martha and I taught the pre-marriage class, we would always *noutheteo* the couples about God's boundaries around sex and marriage. I would challenge the couples, always as a class and sometimes in individual counseling, to live within those bounds and, almost without fail, at least one couple would come up to me a couple months later, tell me they began to live within those boundaries, and it changed their relationship with God and with each other in significant ways. This is not about getting people in trouble. It's about helping them remove spiritual obstacles that hinder or prevent them from living the life God has for them.

Examine your heart. How is your relationship with the Lord? A difficult but important practice is to ask God to search your heart and show you anything you are keeping in the dark, away from him and away from others. He does not want you to keep it there. He knows it will weaken you and derail the plan he has for your life. He's not looking to bust you, he's looking to heal you and free you.

Evaluate your network. As we went through these passages, I hope you thought about the people in your life to do this with. It is one of the primary reasons Jesus built his Church. A Life Group is the ideal place for these one anothers to happen. If you are not in one, I would encourage you again to be a part of Christian community. And if there is something you've been keeping to yourself and it's eating you up and you need immediate help with it, we have prayer partners when you leave and we have a loving staff who would be happy to meet with you and help get you the healing God so desires for you to experience.

Engage with love. Our motivation for all of this must be love, and the best way to ensure that is through abundant prayer before you move. Ask for God to reveal your motives, to give you wisdom, and to remind you how much he has forgiven you so that you can truly enter that conversation with compassion and the other person's best interests at heart. I would also encourage you to process it with a wise and mature believer before you do. You don't have to divulge names or details, but let them hear your heart and make sure you are on the right track.

An old theologian once said that the effect of sin in a believer's life is like a soldier trying to run through the battlefield with his pants at his ankles. He won't be much good to the cause and he won't be much good to his fellow soldiers. You and I are in a battle, a battle that directly impacts our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our ability to live the life he has for us. But it's a battle he never intended us to fight on our own. We do not have to go back to our place of captivity. He has set us free, and he's given us each other to keep it that way.