

John 8:31-32
By Grace I'm Saved
Christian Fellowship

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To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Last week as we started looking at some of the different facets of a Christian's life, we talked about prayer--that wonderful opportunity redeemed children of God have to speak to our almighty king, to praise and thank Him, to bring our requests and petitions before Him, and to lay all of our troubles and worries into His more than capable hands.

Today we're going to be talking about a more "horizontal" aspect of a Christian's life as we look at the participation we have in Christian Church and the fellowship we share with other members of that Church. We can find the definition of the Christian church in one of the most well-known passages of God's Word, John 3:16: **For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.** Another familiar passage, Mark 16:16 says: **Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.** Those verses don't use the word "Church" per se, but they do tell us what it is; they identify for us that faith in Jesus is the ultimate defining characteristic of all those in the saving Church.

The question, "Who belongs to the Christian Church?" therefore, is pretty straightforward. The answer is simply that the saving Church includes all those, and only those, who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin. But the question becomes much more difficult when we try to pry further and ask, "How many people belong to this church?" or, "Show me which individuals in particular belong to this church." We can make well-informed assumptions as to whether someone is a member of the Christian Church based on both their confession and the way they live their lives. Ultimately, though, only God can see for certain if there is faith in Jesus in someone's heart. Because of that, we sometimes refer to the one saving church as the "Invisible Church;" because we can't identify it with any one visible organization or church body.

We talk about this "Church" in the Nicene Creed when we confess that we believe in "the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." Those are one and the same thing. The communion of saints or the Holy Christian Church is the combined total of all of the saints, all of the people whom God has made holy through faith in Jesus as their Savior. We can call the Church holy for the same reason we can call ourselves saints, because through Jesus, God now sees each of us members of this church as radiant, spotless, holy, blameless, and without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.

So, if there is only one saving church--the invisible, holy Christian church--then why, oh why, are there so many different Christian church organizations and church bodies who disagree so strongly with each other? The answer is twofold: First, on this side of heaven, any Christian church organization or church body is going to consist entirely of sinners. Yes, some or many or even most of the members of those churches are God's saints, but at the same time they are still

always struggling against sin. At times, because of that sinfulness Christians are not able to resolve their differences in a godly, satisfactory way, and so, sadly, one church body turns into two or more.

The second reason there are so many different church bodies is because there are false prophets who sneak in among Christians, just as Jesus and His apostles and prophets warned us about. And keep that in mind--those warnings are not just for false prophets, they are for false prophets who are sneaky. Jesus called them **ferocious wolves**, but said that they come to us **in sheep's clothing** (Matthew 7:15). Peter said that **they will secretly introduce destructive heresies** (1 Peter 2:1). A little after our lesson from this morning, Peter tells us that **our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour** (1 Peter 5:8), and while that's true, he does not make his appearance as a roaring lion. He knows that you know that lions are dangerous, so he disguises himself.

I started fly fishing this year, and it's a really quite fascinating. You see, you can either buy your fly lures at a fishing supply store or you can take up what really becomes a hobby in and of itself of tying or making those flies by yourself. The idea is to create a lure that looks as close to the actual insect as possible so that a fish won't even think twice before swallowing it up. It looks very similar, but there's one major difference, my flies have hooks--hooks I can use to reel that fish in so that I can take it home, chop its head off, throw it on the grill in my back yard, and then eat it. Believe me when I tell you, that's a pretty big difference for that fish.

That's how Satan works through most of his false prophets. He is content to hide even just one or two little differences beneath a lot of truth, because he knows that one error breeds more error; it grows and expands. So he uses that error or lie as a hook to drag Christians farther and farther from Jesus until they deny Him as their Savior and then the devil has them in his net. And the end result for those people is even worse than what happens to the fish that I catch. The devil is not in the catch-and-release business.

And the devil has a whole tackle box full of different lies and errors that are attractive to different people and that he uses to catch different groups pulling them all in different directions but always away from that one, true, saving Church and the one true faith in Jesus as our Savior from sin. That's why there are so many different Christian church bodies, because of human sinfulness and many sneaky false teachers with well-crafted false teachings.

But as we discussed a couple weeks ago, God still wants us to benefit from the communion of saints. He wants us to be a part of a congregation. He wants us to gather for worship and to work together with our fellow Christians for the good of His kingdom.

But if all these church bodies are filled with sinful human beings and if there are so many sneaky false prophets to watch out for, then how do I ever go about picking one to be a part of? That's where our sermon text comes in. Jesus said, **If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.** And when Jesus says, **My teaching**, how much are we talking about? Not just the bare basics. Not just the parts we like the most. He means all of it. **Go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you** (Matthew 28:10-20).

We want to hold onto all of Jesus' teachings and keep on working at getting to know them better. So, the most important thing to consider when deciding on what church to go to isn't

what the building looks like or how friendly the people are; it's not what the music is like or how many youth programs they have. The most important question to ask is: What does it teach? The church you should join is one that strives to hold to Jesus' teaching, all of Jesus' teaching. Because wherever you find Jesus' teachings being taught, that's where you're going to find real disciples being made--members of that invisible Holy Christian Church. And that's where you will be able to be built up and have your faith strengthened.

Knowing Jesus' teachings and holding to them is so important that the apostle Paul tells us: **Watch out for those who continue to cause divisions and put obstacles in your faith that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them** (Romans 16:17).

When he says keep away from them, he doesn't mean don't work with them or play cards with them or talk to them. He means don't associate with them religiously. We shouldn't act as if we are united in the same faith. It may be that we are. It may be that we are both members of the invisible, holy Christian church. But we cannot read hearts like God. All we can do is judge and analyze teaching. And if the teaching is not the same, then God says keep away from them.

Deciding which church body to join and avoiding religious association with those who do not follow all of Jesus' teaching is what we call the doctrine of church fellowship. And as you might imagine, it's not a very popular doctrine in a culture that's all about tolerance, and inclusivity, and having everybody get along.

It's important then for us to understand, that God's concern in asking us to watch out for false teachings and stay away from them isn't to us the most socially popular congregation around, rather it is to keep us and the other members of our congregation safely in His Holy Church, away from the devil's hooks, and out of the devil's net so that one day we will be included in the great multitude of God's people gathered together in perfect unity in heaven. And when we do hold to the Bible's true teachings and put them to work in our lives, then that is going to make us attractive to others for the right reason.

We don't want to lose sight of the biblical doctrine of church fellowship, of why these teachings we've been reviewing over the past 15 weeks are so invaluable, or why the Bible is so important. It is so incredibly vital because, as God promises, these Holy Scriptures are **able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus** (2 Timothy 3:15).

Jesus' teachings are the words of eternal life. Jesus' words are the only thing that breathe unconditional love and forgiveness into a world dominated by hatred and grudges. His teachings are the only thing that can bring holiness to a world subject to sin, and provide sure hope in a world filled with doubt and despair. His Word alone tells us the truth in a world that has taken Satan's lies and deceit hook, line, and sinker. Jesus is the only one who gives the most priceless gift of salvation for free in a world where everything comes at a cost.

If you hold to My teaching, Jesus said, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. God grant that we may hold to His Son's teaching that we also may be free.

Amen.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. Amen.