

Entering the Congregation of the LORD

Who can be among God's people? Who can come before God with God's people in holy assembly? Who can be a member in the church of God? Who can belong to the God's covenant community? This is a question raised throughout Scripture; and it's a question raised here in this passage from the context of the old covenant. Chapter 23, verse 1, describes who can "enter the congregation of the LORD." Verse 8 of that same chapter also mentions entering the congregation of the LORD. The word congregation here can also be translated as "assembly." It's referring to that group of people who come together into God's presence for worship. In the old covenant, many different peoples might find themselves physically living among Israel. But not everyone who physically dwelt among them enjoyed the same status to come before the holy God with the people of God. Not everyone could come and worship God together in a holy assembly. Not everyone had this same privilege of membership in the congregation of the LORD.

So the question is raised here in the old covenant, who can belong to the congregation of the LORD? The answer that's given is very typical for the old covenant. As we'd expect, in the old covenant, we see this question being answered with a measure of strict justice. In this passage, we see that if you already belonged to the covenant community, that there were certain sins that would cut you off from that community. We also see in this passage that if you were an outsider, there were certain past acts that would affect your ability to become a part of this worshipping community. In typical old covenant, fashion, there is quite a legal tone to all of this. Law is emphasized here.

Frankly, as those under the new covenant, passages like this in the old covenant can be sobering. You see, this same question is raised in the New Testament as well. In the new covenant we find grace and forgiveness so supremely heralded. And yet the new covenant is not at odds with the old, it's a fulfillment of the old. It's not like people weren't saved by grace in the old covenant. In fact, when we learn about strictness of God's law through the old covenant, we are all the more drawn to grace. That's how the people of old should have received these passages. That's how we should receive them as well. So let's dig into this passage. First, we'll consider some of the sins of sexual immorality under the old covenant that could remove you from membership in the church. That will be the last half of chapter 22. Then we'll look at some of the things that could keep someone from the outside coming into the membership of the visible church. That will be from chapter 23. We'll learn some important lessons of godliness and holiness as we look at these things. But finally, we'll see how all of this looks forward to God's grace. This passage is not God's final word on the matter; rather it causes us to long to always belong to God's people, and we'll see how that longing is fulfilled in Christ; even for us who have committed sins of a sexual nature; and even for us who had been an outsider to God's community from our births.

Well, let's begin then with chapter 22. We looked at verses 13 to the end of the chapter. I don't plan to talk much about these verses. What I do want to point out may be a bit obvious. There are many ways we can pervert the institution of marriage. God created marriage. God created even our ability

to physically unite with our spouses. But God intended the act of marriage to be expressed in marriage. God has called members of his church in both the old and new testaments to honor marriage, and to keep the marriage bed undefiled, Hebrews 13:4. What's especially the focus in this passage is how people can engage in acts of marriage outside of the marriage bond. There are numerous scenarios envisioned in these verses, several different kinds of immorality, but they basically boil down to that concern. The physical intimacy between a man and a woman described in these verses is to be reserved for marriage. That's the law of God. And it is a good law.

And yet you'll notice that not all of these different ways of violating this principle have the same punishment attached to it under the old covenant. Though all sins deserve God's wrath and curse, some sins are more heinous in the sight of God than others. Here, in terms of the old covenant, we notice that some sins result in a person being stoned to death. Verse 21 describes that, for example, with the familiar wording from Deuteronomy to put the evil person from among you. I've said it before as we've studied Deuteronomy: this is excommunication, in a physical way, in the old covenant. Well, that's what we're talking about today. Who belongs to the people of God? Who can come into the congregation of the LORD? Who is a member of the visible church on earth, in the old covenant? Obviously, the person who was stoned to death in the old covenant, has been removed from the visible church on earth. And so in the old covenant, there were certain sins that removed someone, in a very physical way, from belonging to the assembly of God's people. Of course, this was a very *permanent* removal.

Now I recognize this is point that could be made very generically about numerous laws in Deuteronomy. Why do I make that point here? Well, that's because of the relationship to this next chapter. Chapter 23, as I already pointed out, raises this question of who belongs in the congregation of the LORD. Though chapter 22 addresses a different subject, it seems there is some analogy and relationship between the two chapters. Chapter 22 addresses improper unions between a man and a woman, outside of marriage. Marriage is a covenant, and the union that happens is supposed to be a covenantal union. Well, chapter 23 describes covenantal union as well; not in a marriage covenant, but in a covenant with the LORD. Who can come into union with God and with God's people? Just as chapter 22 talks about improper unions amidst the marriage covenant, chapter 23 talks about improper unions within God's covenant; within God's covenant people.

You'll notice that the sins in chapter 22 become more serious when there is actually a marriage covenant already in place, or at least a betrothal; a contract for marriage. When one man and one woman have been contracted together through a covenant, the demands for keeping themselves pure become absolute. That explains why the punishment is less for fornication when there wasn't already a covenant in place with someone else. In general we have an obligation for sexual purity. But *covenantal* obligations for purity and union are even more serious.

In the same way, Israel had entered into a covenant relationship with God. There was an intimate union between God and his people. The terms of the covenant would serve to dictate who could come in. The terms of the covenant described who would be in communion with God and his people. In the old covenant, the purity of the congregation was administered in a very legal way. That's why you have the strictness of chapter 23. So, let's turn now to chapter 23 to consider how outsiders could or could not come into the visible church in the old covenant.

Right in the first two verses of chapter 23 you have two groups of people who can't come into the congregation of the LORD in the old covenant. Verse 1 is essentially describing self-made eunuchs. People who became eunuchs back then usually did this as an act of pagan false religion. So, those who had marked themselves in this visible way, had made a visible mark of how they weren't united to the one true God. As such, they weren't allowed into the congregation of the LORD. Verse 2 describes illegitimate children not being allowed either; commentators tend to think this is referring to those children that had been born out of the product of pagan fertility rites. If that's the case, their existence would represent the fruit of these false religions. As such, they weren't allowed into the congregation of the one true God either, in the old covenant. For those who were identified with false gods, we could understand why they weren't allowed into the congregation of the LORD.

The passage goes on to discuss which foreigners could gain entrance into the congregation of the LORD. The Edomites and Egyptians are described in verses 7-8. They give a typical example of how these foreign immigrants could be eventually granted membership in the congregation of the LORD. After they had lived there among Israel, upon the third generation of their offspring, they could be granted access to the assembly of the LORD. Quite a delay for this membership, but at least they were eventually allowed to come. The passage recognizes the positive relationship of Israel between Edom and Egypt. It doesn't mention how both of these two nations had most recently slighted Israel. Egypt of course had resisted Israelite freedom and pursued them to the Red Sea. Edom had refused to let the Israelites pass through their territory on the way to the Promised Land. And yet in honor of their past fellowship, they did have hope to eventually gain access to the congregation of the LORD in the third generation, of those who desired this access. Presumably this time delay would have given time for these foreigners to assimilate into Israel. In other words, time to drop their pagan gods and embrace the one true God. This would be a time where they go from being identified from their false gods to be identified with the God of Israel.

The other groups of foreigners mentioned here are the Ammonites and the Moabites. Verses 3-7. Unlike the Egyptians and Edomites, they were essentially permanently excluded from the assembly in the old covenant. Verse 3 mentions even to the tenth generation; this seems in context to mean a permanent exclusion. The reason is that they had not acted favorably toward Israel when they were in need. In fact they even looked to curse Israel. They hired Balaam to curse Israel, as mentioned here in verse 4. Balaam wasn't able to do this, however. God kept changing his curses into blessings.

And yet the height of Moab's sin was that they seduced many Israelites to commit harlotry with the Moabite women. These Moabite women then got the Israelite men to sacrifice to the false god, Baal of Peor. You can read about that in Numbers 25. God brought judgment and curse upon those Israelites who did this, having them put to death. Interesting here you have another connection to last chapter. Improper sexual unions could have had consequences for your membership in the old covenant community. These Israelites who went after the foreign women and the foreign gods were cut off permanently from the congregation of the LORD. Scripture actually credits the way Moab did this to Balaam. Revelation 2:14 and other passages paint a very negative picture of Balaam, blaming him for how Israel was seduced after

these foreign women and ultimately to foreign gods. And so one of the dangers of letting the foreigners into the congregation of the LORD too quickly was that instead of worshipping the one true God, they could turn Israel after false gods.

This is seen by example with the Moabites. And so the result of this past history meant that for the Moabites and Ammonites, they weren't to be allowed to become a part of the congregation of the LORD.

And so Moab's actions did result in certain Israelites being cursed by God. Those who went after the Moabite women and their false god, were judged by God, as mentioned. And yet as a whole, their attempt to curse Israel as a whole failed. Verse 5, God turned their curse into a blessing. Instead, they were the ones ultimately cursed. God had told Father Abraham back in Genesis 12 that those who curse Israel would be cursed. This is what happened here with Ammon and Moab. They had tried to curse Israel, and they instead found curse. This curse stood now as a barrier for them into joining with the people of God in the old covenant. This curse stood as barrier from their entering into the congregation of the LORD. How could that curse be lifted?

As we read this passage in light of the New Testament, I hope you find a lot of tension in it for us as Christians. We know how amazing God's grace is. When we look at how firm these regulations are, we probably have some questions raised in our heads. What if any of the groups truly repented of their former ways? What if they repented of their sexual immorality or their idolatry? What if the adulterer really, truly, repented of their sin and wanted to return to the one true God? What if the eunuch renounced his false religions that led him to become a eunuch? What if the illegitimate child born of a pagan ritual grew up to believe in the one true God? What if a Moabite woman renounced her false gods and came to find refuge under the wings of the one true God? Would they have no hope of being a part of God's people? Could they never become a member of God's congregation of saints?

This tension comes up especially for us because we have seen how gracious God is. The New Testament makes this very clear. And yet that gracious God is also visible in the Old Testament as well. This sort of question was raised even in the Old Testament, looking forward to the grace that would come in the new covenant, in Christ. Listen, for example, from this passage in Is 56:3-7 (turn there with me):

Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD speak, saying, 'The LORD has utterly separated me from His people'; nor let the eunuch say, 'Here I am, a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD: 'To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name That shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants -- everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant -- even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.

Isaiah's prophecy recognizes the tension in the old covenant for the eunuch and the foreigner. He raises the question of whether they have any hope. He asks if they will remain separated from the people of God. Isaiah says that

those eunuchs and foreigners who truly join themselves to the LORD, looking to keep his covenant, that they will not be cast aside.

We see an example of that even in the Old Testament. Some of you probably already caught my allusion to Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite woman who renounced her pagan gods and came to Israel and placed her trust in the one true God. The book of Ruth highly commends her for this action. Through Ruth, God raised up the line of King David, and ultimately brought forth King Jesus, the Messiah. We can expect to find Ruth in heaven, in the holy and heavenly congregation of the LORD.

Ruth's story showed hope for foreigners, even Moabites. It shows that this passage in Deuteronomy wasn't God's final word on this subject. This passage is pregnant. It speaks very legally of what ought to happen in terms of strict justice and outward ceremonial purity. But God's grace wasn't finished working. Ruth's story showed hope. Isaiah's prophecy that we just read spoke explicitly to this issue, again offering real hope to the real penitent. Those who truly inwardly turned to the one true God should have great hope. Isaiah said they would indeed be brought into the assembly of the LORD. He even says they'd be given a name better than the sons and daughters of Israel! They'd be given a name that couldn't be cut off! Well, Isaiah's prophecy looks forward to the new covenant in Christ. This is a prophecy that finds its fulfillment with what Christ has done. He's opened the way for Gentiles and sinners to find forgiveness and grace.

That's of course what we see in the New Testament. In the old covenant certain sins could remove you from membership in the church; you could be cut off. We saw that here with certain forms of adultery. Jesus wasn't light on this sin, of course; in the Sermon on the Mount he said even our mental lusts could break this commandment. And yet for those who turn from these sorts of sins unto him, he offers them not condemnation, but restoration, telling them to go and sin no more. Even for the New Testament church, when we practice excommunication, we don't physically cut people off from the church; we don't put people to death, in other words. If we have to excommunicate someone who is not looking to live consistently with their Christian confession, then we spiritually cut them off; but we continually hold out to them the possibility of forgiveness and grace. In the new covenant, we see so clearly that those who truly repent of their sins can be a part of God's people.

In the same way, we see that the old covenant restricted membership for certain groups. Eunuchs and foreigners for example, as we see here. Yet, in the new covenant, we see Isaiah's prophecy so beautifully working itself out in this area. Acts chapter 8 records Philip being brought by God to an Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is even reading Isaiah at time. God uses Philip to preach Christ to him, and the Ethiopian eunuch becomes a believer on the spot. He asks if there is anything *hindering* him from being baptized. Philip says there is nothing hindering him, and baptizes him right then and there. Of course, baptism is the new covenant sign of being brought into the congregation of the LORD. Here a foreigner and a eunuch find *immediate*, unhindered, access to God and his people. How? Through Christ.

Of course, how this can happen is foreshadowed here in our passage. Chapter 23, verse 5. God can turn curses into blessings. Those who sin against God, in terms of strict justice, deserve God's curse. They deserve to be cut off from God's people and from God himself. Even those who grow up in godly homes, who've grown up in the covenant community of believers, they deserve divine curse when they sin against God. Others who have not known God from

birth, who've lived in service to other false gods, are subject to divine curse. Just a change of heart in this, doesn't change the fact that they've lived their life apart from the one true God. No change of heart changes the fact that they've sinned against God by serving false gods. These things deserve divine curse. Divine curse ultimately separates us from God. And yet God can change curses into blessings. And he has in Jesus.

The New Testament makes it clear that Christ became a curse for us, so that we could be numbered among his people. Galatians 3:13-14, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. If we have believed in Jesus, if we have joined ourselves with the one true God through faith in Christ, our curse has turned into a blessing. We who ought to be cursed, find every spiritual blessing through faith in Christ. The gospel of Christ tells us to turn from our former cursed ways of living, and find blessing in Jesus. All who have done this now can enter into the congregation of the LORD. All who have done this, are a part of the congregation of the LORD. God turns curses into blessings. Christians have tasted of this first hand.

Saints of God, as a Christian, we should want to live moral, righteous, lives. The moral applications from here in Deuteronomy are clear. We should want to abstain from sexual immorality. We should only marry believers, other Christians, another moral application I've hinted at a bit from this passage. We should flee from all forms of pagan idolatry. All of this is God's call to us as his people. It's righteousness. God knows the way of living a blessed life in this world.

And yet as a Christian, we know that these things don't permanently bar someone from being a member in the church. They actually should, but because of God's grace, they don't. As Christians, each of us have experienced God's grace in different ways. That's what makes us a member in the church. We've placed our trust in Christ who forgives and restores. And so my call to each of us is to hold out this same grace to those who find themselves in these situations. People who have engaged in physical intimacy outside of marriage; people who've married unbelievers; even people who are following false gods. Let us share Christ with them. In Christ there is forgiveness and grace. In Christ, they too can belong to the family of God's people. In Christ, they too can know the love of God that changes curses into blessings.

We've all see how God does that even with some of these situations. Some who have married non-Christians have some of the most wonderful spouses, as spouses go in this life. Some amazing wonderful children had been born out of wedlock. God can and does great things in these sorts of situations. If God can do great things in these earthly circumstances, God can do great things in our hearts to those who have lived apart from him. If this is your story, I urge you to be reconciled to God today. If you're not a member of Christ's church, turn from your former ways that have been opposed to God's way. Confess your sins and find forgiveness and grace in Christ. Today, you can be numbered among God's people.

I thought it would be fitting to announce today as well that we'll be starting up some new membership classes in the church. This is a passage that shows in the old covenant that there was membership in the church. The new covenant shows that God still wants us to be members in his church. The Ethiopian eunuch became a member in the church when he was baptized. Maybe

some of you here today aren't sure what membership in Christ's church is all about. Well, that's what the membership class is for. You don't become a member by going to the class, but the class tells you what membership in the church is all about, as well as some specific things about our ministry here at Trinity. In other words, there's no obligation to join the church by going through the class. So, I encourage anyone who is not a member of our church to come out to this class. We'll be having it Sundays after church beginning next week. If you are interested, see me so I can get you the booklet ahead of time that we'll be going through.

My last exhortation is to all of us who are Christians, let's avoid looking down on those who've lived in ways that conflict with God's righteousness. That would be hypocrisy. The people mentioned in this passage could easily be looked down upon today by God's people. But who are we to look down on others? Let's instead point people to God's grace. Let's open up the arms of Christ's body to welcome into our midst sinners like you and me; sinners that need God's grace and forgiveness. Let us call each of us to then in turn endeavor to live by God's grace. Let's look to live in obedience to God, repenting of our former manner of life. Let us look to go and sin no more, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our lives. Amen.

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