

Jason Upchurch - Ecclesiastes 3:5 - When to Embrace

This morning we come to maybe the most unusual of all the phrases in Solomon's famous poem here in Ecclesiastes: a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together. What is that talking about?

Well, that phrase and "embrace and refrain from embracing" seem to be saying the same type of thing. You're hear the phrase keep your friends close and your enemies closer? Well, Solomon teaches us that you keep your friends close, but your enemies at a distance. Sometimes you embrace people, sometimes you don't - we need to know when.

What does all that have to do with gathering stones? Gathering and scattering stones seems to be some sort of euphemism for when we're close with people or not so close with people.

Indulge me for a minute - there are 3 basic ideas about what this could mean.

1) The first is that this is referring to fields, how do we treat the fields of those around us? In Israel and other places around the world, fields are often filled with rocks which makes planting crops almost impossible unless you do the exhausting labor of removing rocks from a field to make it plantable.

If you've ever seen the British TV show All Creatures Great and Small, there are these vast landscapes of fields that are divided by rock walls. The rocks for the walls came from the fields. You cleared out the fields over years and decades and centuries. You did that so the field was usable.

You gathered stones together to make something useful. Why would you scatter stones? Well, you'd scatter stones of your enemy all over their field to destroy their field and their livelihood. It was basically an act of war.

2) So that's one option. Another option is that same kind of idea, just reversed. If stones were used as fences, then the idea is that gathering stones separates you from your neighbor. And scattering them brings you closer to your neighbor. So it's sort of the inverse of the first idea.

3) The third option is given from a Jewish Rabbi in the 3rd century, long after Jesus but everybody mentions it in the commentaries. The idea is that scattering stones is a euphemism for a man being intimate with his wife, and gathering stones means there are seasons of refraining from intimacy.

We know there are euphemisms throughout the Bible for things, even being intimate - knowing your spouse or laughing with your spouse are euphemisms. The reality is we just don't know for sure. But what we do know is it probably has something to do with being close or distant with our neighbor.

There are times when we're embrace people warmly and lovingly, and there's times when we don't.

You've had those times when someone you were once close with has gone south and now you're not close. Usually sin, or betrayal or all types of situations happen where you were together now you're not. That's okay - there are seasons for that.

I was at a get together recently and someone I used to be close with was there, but we're not close anymore. It's awkward. It's time to refrain from embracing.

There's also times for the opposite - where you go from being standoffish to friends. That's what this little couplet is about. **Read 5**

At the very least what we're talking about is that there are seasons where we're close with people and warm and inviting. But there are times when we need to separate and have space between us. And that's okay too.

So we're going to take these 2 as basically one unit since we don't know for sure what the casting stones is but it somehow parallels embracing and not embracing.

Why is it important that we understand that there are seasons of embracing or not embracing? Let me give you the 2 ditches that we see in the world.

The first ditch is that people think Christians should be open and welcoming of anyone and everyone without any reservation.

This means that anytime anyone imposes on you in any way, you must not only accommodate them but warmly agree with what they're doing.

Is your divorced sister getting remarried even though there was no grounds for the divorce? "We need to go to the wedding and embrace this because that's just what family does." No. It's the false idea that Christians don't ever judge anyone and whatever decision people make should be embraced no matter what.

Is your neighbor and her lesbian partner having a gender reveal for their baby? "We should all go and bring presents and encourage them. That's what Christians do." No.

Do you have mean and nasty neighbors? Then you should subject yourself to their abuse willingly and gladly and never push back on their incivility.

Over the years I've appreciated 9Marks Ministries - I still do in many ways. But they have an unusual version of church discipline. Basically if someone is a member of the church and is disciplined out of the church, they are immediately welcomed back into fellowship, we just pretend that their not believers. There's functionally no difference in the experience of someone who is disciplined and not disciplined except they have been removed from the official role of membership.

So that's one ditch we can fall into: we think we should always embrace. The other ditch is that we separate from everyone who isn't exactly like us in every way.

Anabaptists separate from broader society because they live in a different Kingdom.

German baptists and Amish and others separate from any sort of modern social life.

KJV Onlyists separate from anyone who doesn't use their translation. I remember this guy came once and sat through the service and when we were done came up and asked me 3 questions: what version was I using, did we only sing hymns and did the ladies all wear dresses. That was his criteria for fellowship. I told him none of those were actually biblical criteria. So he was creating 3 barriers to fellowship that the Bible doesn't even talk about.

Fundamentalist baptists separate from every other church possible. We can find a million reasons to separate, none of which are biblical.

And if we're honest, sometimes in our godly desire for doctrinal purity - and that's a good desire - we start thinking about separating from everyone under the sun too.

Alright, so when are the seasons for embracing and the seasons from refraining from embracing? When are we close with people, and when should we hold off.

Embrace:

1) When someone becomes a Christian, we embrace them. **Turn to Acts 9:19-31**

This is just after Saul's conversion, Saul, whom we know as the Apostle Paul. Remember he was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus to put Christians in prison. He was breathing threats and murder when the Lord Jesus appeared to him in glory on the road to Damascus, blinded for 3 days, and eventually sent a man named Ananias to heal Saul and baptize him. But Saul wasn't accepted by Christians immediately. They were afraid him. **Read 19-25**

So people in Damascus are concerned that Paul isn't really on their team. How did this guy change so fast? But eventually he proves he's on the team and they love him so much they hide him and help him escape. It happens again when he goes back to Jerusalem. **Read 26-31**

Same thing: the disciples are afraid that Saul is a spy, that he's secretly come in to destroy them. But Barnabas advocates for him and shows he's really a brother. Why? Because brothers embrace each other.

That's what we do in the family of God. That's why John says in **1 John 2:10**: whoever loves his brother abides in the light and in him there is no cause for stumbling.

Brothers love each other. **1 John 3:11**: This is the message that you have heard from the beginning: that we should love one another...if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

There is a tangible affection Christians have for one another.

That's why John also mentions at the end of 2 John and 3 John that he would rather not write to them, but see them face to face. He wants to see them, embrace them hug them. That's good and right.

And just make everyone uncomfortable: 5 times in the NT Christians are called to greet one another with a holy kiss. Not a handshake, not a hug, but a holy Christian kiss of warmth, like you'd give to your mom or grandma. Not sexual, not weird, something akin to what they do in France as a sign of affection.

We also see something like that when we are told that disciples gave each other the right hand of fellowship. It's the holy handshake you give to brothers and sisters in the Lord.

We embrace other Christians.

2) We embrace our spouses. Physical touch and affection is important in marriage. Even in our vows we promise to "have and to hold" our spouses.

That phrase was often used in real estate transactions - to have something meant legal possession. Holding something meant the ability to use it and enjoy the property without interference.

When transferred over to marriage the issue is not that you become each other's property, but that you are legally one in every sense of the word, and that you enjoy one another with relational and physical affection.

Sometimes sickness or difficult seasons of fighting and arguing or coldness can reduce the amount of physical touch and affection. It's hard to physically embrace your spouse sometimes because you're at odds.

Other times we embrace is when people need encouragement. Sometimes those who are weak and sick and downtrodden are hard to be around. And so we need to embrace them, be close to them and help them.

We embrace people who might be different than us but stand for a common cause. I have friends who are Mormon and often times they are very similar to us politically. Are we close when it comes to the gospel? Absolutely not. Are we on the same team when it comes to marriage and family ideology - a lot of times we are.

We don't only embrace one another when things are perfect. We have to have wisdom to know when it's appropriate.

Refrain

When do we refrain from embracing? When are we not close with people? When do we put up walls or stay away from other people?

1. Christians under church discipline. **Turn to Matt 18:15-20**

This is the classic church discipline passage. This is how Jesus tells us as Christians how to deal with a brother who is in sin. It's sort of a simple flow chart of options depending on how someone reacts to the situation.

Read

Alright, so step 1 is if someone sins against you, go them alone. Not your buddies, not me, not a bunch of random people. If they sin against you - you just go to them.

Hey you said this and I think that was sinful. Hey when you took that thing, I think was wrong. I don't think you should treat your child that way.

Whatever the case is, you go to them one on one. If they repent, great! You've gained your brother. You're back in fellowship.

Side: You know the verse love covers a multitude of what? Sins. **1 Pet 4:8**. When do we cover over sins and when do we confront sins? You have to decide. Sometimes someone says something that's a slight against you, and you just let it go. Sometimes someone takes advantage of you and you just let it go. You cover it over. Usually it's minor, interpersonal stuff.

But if you can't cover it over, you need to go confront it. That's step 1.

Step 2, if they're still in sin and don't repent you need to go get one or 2 other people. These should be wise godly people who can ask questions, get the full story and see what's going on. Especially with interpersonal stuff, sometimes there are 2 sides to the story, aren't there? Sometimes when something goes sideways it's not just 1 person's fault. These witnesses establish where the responsibility lies.

And hopefully at this point the person in sin repents. That's always the goal, always the desire. What if they don't we tell it to the church. If the person who is sinned against and the 1 or 2 witnesses can't get resolution from the accused, they should go to the elders, explain the situation and then the elders should tell it to the church. I know the passage doesn't mention elders here, but this is founded on Deuteronomy 19:15 where when a crime was established with witnesses, it was always done so with the town elders.

So if the person doesn't repent with the 1 or 2 others, the elders tell it to the congregation. Why? So the congregation can plead with the person to repent. They can pray for this brother to turn from their sin. To repent from this wickedness. The idea is the the full weight of the urging of the congregation is needed to bring this person into repentance.

Let me tell you, when someone becomes so hard hearted that they won't listen to 2 or 3 brothers or the elders it has to be taken to the church. The church - you guys - act as a corrective body to professing Christians who are in sin.

And if that doesn't work, step 4. **Read 17**

If he won't listen to the church, we treat him like a Gentile and a tax collector. What does that mean? In Israel in Jesus's day, Gentiles and Tax collectors were the worst of society. Gentiles were unclean, outside the covenant people of God. There was no close association with them. That's why when Peter goes to Cornelius's house and preaches the gospel and tells it to the church in Jerusalem they're like "What are you doing with those filthy Gentiles?" Peter's like "the Spirit came on them, I don't know what to tell you."

When we treat someone like they are a Gentile, it means they are to us as an outsider. They are not part of the covenant community of God.

What about tax collectors? Tax collectors in Jesus's time were traitors to their people. They were Jews who had taken the job of Roman government to tax Israelites. And usually they charged a bunch extra so they were rich. They were fattening themselves off their own people. They traitors to Israel. Jesus says we are to treat people who proclaim the name of Jesus but refuse to repent like Gentiles and Tax Collectors.

Or as Solomon says, we refrain from embracing. We're not close with them anymore. We're not tight. The two or 3 witnesses have established the guilt of the sinner and the congregation is doing what Jesus told them to do.

Why would we treat them like this? So that they would repent. That they would turn from their ways. This is sober, isn't it?

Paul says in **1 Tim 5** that this should happen even to elders who are caught up in sin, so that the rest would fear.

I know a guy who was sinned against in his church. The elders knew and tried to take care of it, but didn't do this. The sinning couple were just sort of told to leave the church and the church was never really told what happened.

Here's why that's sad: there's no opportunity for redemption there. There's no congregational prayer or urging that the couple should repent. And the congregation isn't warned about their own sin.

Turn to 1 Cor 5. This is a situation where a man is sleeping with his step mom and the whole church is applauding. They're proud of how accommodating they are. Not good. **Read 1-5**

So Paul calls for this guy's removal. Why not go through all the steps? Well, because the whole church already knows about the sin. So they're already functionally on step 3, aren't they? The whole church knows. So Paul says: Get him outta there. Hand him over to Satan.

What does that mean? When you excommunicate someone they are no longer under the spiritual protection or provision of the local church. There's a type of protection and grace we have as we gather together every week that's lost when someone is removed. And they are a wide open target for Satan. But that's what's required. Why do we do this? **Read 5**

So that even if it hurts, their soul might be saved. We're not vindictive, we're not arrogant or rude. We're not mean-spirited. We do the hard thing because we want their salvation. We want them to be saved in the Day of the Lord. **Read 6-8**

So here he uses an analogy: Just like at Passover in the OT the Jews were to clean out all the leaven in their house. Well, we find out that was just a type of the reality in Jesus. Jesus is the true Passover lamb and the leaven we need to clean out is our sin. Get it out. If we have a little leaven in the church, the whole church will become stained with sin.

I mean, if so and so is getting away with murder, why can't I have some fun? Complacency to sin just breeds more sin. Paul says: No, get it out. Now, this is interesting, this is where we see who we can and can't embrace. **Read 9-13**

Paul says, listen, you're going to be around people in the world like this. It's okay to have association with them. I'll actually address that in a few minutes. If we never talked to sinner in the world we'd never talk to anyone. No, the specific issue for Christians is that we don't associate with those who call themselves brothers - self-professed Christians - who are caught up in sin.

We don't even eat with them. Why? Because we're called to purge the evil person. Those are fighting words, aren't they. The unrepentant person is what? And evil person. This quote here is actually from the OT where the whole congregation of Israel would stone the person who was found guilty of a capital crime.

Obviously we don't kill people in sin, but we do cut them out of our fellowship. We don't embrace them. We don't treat them with kid gloves. We don't hang out, we don't have them over, we don't coddle them. It does them no good.

And a lot of people say: we can't shun people, that's not what Jesus would. I've got news for you. It's exactly what Jesus and Paul and all the apostles would do. Because that is true compassion. That is true concern for not only the purity of the body of Christ, but the purity of the person in sin.

Alright, now Paul just said that he wasn't meaning we don't associate with the world. **Read 9-10**

So we have freedom to associate with unbelievers who might be in sin. But sometimes we shouldn't.

2. We don't embrace foolishness. **Turn to Proverbs 1:8-19**

Listen, just because you can be around unbelievers who are sinful, doesn't mean you should. Bad company corrupts what? Good morals. You gotta be really careful who you choose to hang out with. **Read**

So listen, if sinners are enticing you into their sin, you need to run away. You need get out of there. Here the issue murder, but it could be theft, it could be sexual immorality, it could be lying, stealing, covetousness, all kinds of sin. We don't embrace those who are going to lead us astray.

3. Final time we don't embrace: Sometimes it's with our own family. **Turn to Gen 2.**

In Genesis 2 we have the creation of a new family unit in Adam and Eve. God marries them, they are united as one flesh. But that one flesh also means there are separation that occurs. **Read 2:23-25**

When you become one flesh in marriage you are now a sovereign family unit. Anyone who is detrimental to your marriage needs to be at arms length. No embracing. This could be parents, siblings, family members who cause your marriage harm. You and your spouse are now the new unit and you might need to refrain from embracing people.

This all takes wisdom. May the Lord give it to us.

Pray