

Understanding Church Discipline

“Reproof is unavoidable. God’s Word demands it when a brother falls into open sin. The practice of discipline in the congregation begins in the smallest circles. Where defection from God’s Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured. Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy, an ultimate offer of genuine fellowship, when we allow nothing but God’s Word to stand between us, judging and succoring. Then it is not we who are judging; God alone judges, and God’s judgment is helpful and healing. Ultimately, we have no charge but to serve our brother, never to set ourselves above him, and we serve him even when we must speak the judging and dividing Word of God to him, even when, in obedience to God, we must break off fellowship with him. We must know that it is not our human love which makes us loyal to the other person, but God’s love which breaks its way through to him only through judgment. Just because God’s Word judges, it serves the person. He who accepts the ministry of God’s judgment is helped.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Matthew 18

Please listen our first lesson, where we unpacked this more fully in its surrounding context.

1 Corinthians 5

ESV SB: “Deliver this man to Satan” (5:5) probably refers to removing him from the church, since those outside of the church are in Satan’s realm (Luke 4:5–6; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19). “His spirit may be saved”: The purpose of the discipline was not to punish the man for punishment’s sake but to effect his restoration to the church and eventual salvation (see 1 Tim. 1:20).

“Leaven” (5:6-7) – Not yeast (which was uncommon in the ancient world) but fermented dough, a little of which would be left from the previous week to be added to a new lump of dough. By analogy, when publicly known sin in the church

is not subjected to church discipline, it will silently spread its destructive consequences throughout the whole fellowship.

“Not to associate” (5:11) – One purpose here, as in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15, is redemptive with respect to the person committing the sin. But another purpose is to avoid giving the appearance of approving sinful conduct, lest reproach be brought on the church and the gospel.

“Purge ... from among you” (5:13) – As the newly constituted people of God (10:32), the Corinthians are to follow God’s instructions to Israel for preserving its holiness when flagrant, unrepented-of sin is in its midst (Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21–22, 24; 24:7). In this case, they are to do so by excommunicating the man committing incest.

Titus 3:10-11

CEV = “Warn troublemakers once or twice. Then don’t have anything else to do with them.”

CSB = “Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning.”

NLT – “If people are causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with them.”

AMP – “...reject a divisive man – ban him from your fellowship and have nothing more to do with him.”

Hairetikos (αἱρετικός) – from Greek lexicons, “a heretic” is not simply someone who promotes or teaches wrong doctrine, but rather someone who promotes themselves (and not Christ) – though often using [false] doctrines to gather disciples to themselves.¹

- Danker: “causing division”, “self-promoting”
- Strong’s: “disposed to form sects, factious”

¹ Cf. **Jude 17-19** (RC) – “But you, beloved, must remember, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They kept telling you, “In the end time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.” It is these who cause divisions [or, “those who set up distinctions”; KJV = “separate themselves”], worldly people [NIV = “who follow mere natural instincts”], devoid of the Spirit.”

- From the verb, “to have a distinctive opinion,” “to win others over to their own personal opinion, while creating harmful divisions.”
- Friberg: “denoting loyalty to a separatist group”
- BDAG: pertaining to causing divisions, “factious, division-making”

Paraitomai (παραιτέομαι)²

- BDAG: “to decline, refuse, avoid, reject”
- Strong’s: “to beg off, reject, decline, shun, avoid”
- Friberg: “to decline, reject, not accept someone, refuse to listen to someone, shun, avoid association with, have nothing to do with someone, refuse to pay attention to, avoid”

Acts 20:28-31

Because the church is under constant threat, the elders must keep a constant guard³ over (ESV = “pay careful attention to”) the flock entrusted to them.

This is necessary, as these wolves often are those who are themselves⁴ in, or seek, leadership [i.e., prominent] positions. Often, these wolves arise from “within the ranks” of the congregation to “draw away disciples after themselves.”⁵

- They do by speaking “perverse things”
 - This usually happens through teaching things that “deviate” or “stray” from the gospel.
 - E.g., NIV, NRSV, CSB, NLT = “distort the truth”; NAB = “pervert the truth”; NET = “teaching perversions of the truth”
 - BDAG includes the definition “to mislead someone”, “to cause to be uncertain about a belief.”

² Note that the imperative is in the present tense, highlighting the continuing process/aspect (i.e., “keep having nothing to do with those who cause divisions”).

³ The imperative (προσέχω) given to the shepherds/pastors here is in the present tense.

⁴ Hence the command to also “pay careful attention to yourselves.”

⁵ As in, for e.g., Galatians 4:17 (cf. 5:13b); 2 Timothy 3:5-9; Jude 12-13, 16

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Unfortunately, a faulty eschatology being taught by false teachers had caused some within the church to live as though Christ had already come,⁶ and that therefore how they lived in the body was irrelevant and mattered not.

- Amongst the believers were some who were “living an undisciplined life, not doing their own work but meddling in the work of others.” (3:11a, NET)
 - Because such a lifestyle was “disobeying” Paul’s teaching (3:10-11b, 14), as well as rejecting the example he left for them to emulate and imitate (3:10), it was bringing public reproach upon the gospel, something Paul did not take lightly to.

The solution?

- **3:6** – “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”
- **3:14b-15** – “Take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he might be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

Galatians 6:1-4

Again, church discipline is not merely a ‘job for the pastors.’ It is for all who have the Spirit.⁷

- *This* is what it looks like for us to live by the Spirit and fulfill the law of Christ (i.e., “love”).

The goal, like Matthew 18, is “to restore”⁸ the sinner.

⁶ See especially 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:7b-10; 2:1-12.

⁷ NIV = “live by the Spirit.” The word *pneumatikos* refers to people who are controlled and directed by God’s Spirit. In *this* light, “spiritual” is an acceptable translation, though it is easy to misunderstand and misinterpret.

⁸ The Greek verb *καταρτίζω* (*katartidzo*) means “to put in order, restore to a former condition, mend, repair; complete.” It is used, for example, in Matthew 4:21 of James and John “mending” their fishing nets. It was also used of setting a broken bone. The imperative is in the present tense: “keep restoring”.

The manner is gently, humbly, and soberly.

Church Discipline (9 Marks, Jonathan Leeman)