

Church Discipline (Part 1)

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

As Paul now deals with sexual sin in Corinth, he speaks of something that is almost unmentionable in polite Christian circles today. His topic is highly offensive. Many consider it utterly reprehensible and shocking. Paul's offensive topic is not the incestuous relationship in Corinth (as bad as that was), but the careful and faithful practice of church discipline.

Historically, Protestant churches have recognized three distinguishing marks of a true church: the faithful preaching of God's Word; the right administration of the sacraments; and the exercise of church discipline. This third mark, however, is often misunderstood and neglected today, thus its offensive nature to so many Christians.

Consider Paul's response to the Corinthian man caught in sexual sin: he urges the church to remove the sinner from among them (v. 2); he judges the man (v. 3); he tells the church to deliver the man over to Satan (v. 5); he instructs them not to associate with this man (v. 11); and his last words on the matter are, "Purge the evil person from among you" (v. 13). This is enough to make some Christians sick. We may be tempted to ask, "Paul, where's the love? Where is the mercy and grace? Who are you to judge?"

These are the typical responses that are often voiced when church discipline is faithfully practiced today. And indeed, in some ways it is understandable. No one likes to see formal church discipline happen. Sin is messy, and sometimes it is even messier when it happens within the church. Sometimes church officers abuse their authority and

discipline is mishandled. But even with all of its potential pitfalls, the practice of church discipline is absolutely necessary and thoroughly biblical in the life of Christ's church. To fail to exercise proper discipline is to stop being Christ's church. As we study this topic my hope is that we learn to embrace church discipline, properly exercised under Christ's authority, as an absolutely essential and truly loving means of correcting wayward sinners.

This morning we will take a broad biblical overview of church discipline, a kind of "church discipline primer," and we will consider three things: 1) the reasons for church discipline; 2) the process of church discipline; and 3) your role in church discipline.

The Reasons for Church Discipline

Although the reasons for church discipline are many, let's consider just two for now. First, church discipline must be practiced for the good of the offending party. Church discipline, properly exercised, is always carried out with an attitude of mercy toward the sinner and with the goal of restoration and repentance. It is never to be used for destruction or wrath.

Earlier, we saw Paul speaking of the potential need to come to the Corinthians with the rod, basically, in a spirit of discipline and rebuke (1 Cor. 4:21). But even there Paul was clearly speaking to the Corinthians as their loving father. And as their father he desired their good. He longed for their repentance. He hoped for their restoration to biblical doctrine and life, and that is why he exercised discipline.

Here, even as Paul urges for this man to be turned over to Satan, the reason he gives is "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). Paul was not acting out of vengeance or wrath, but out of love and concern for his brother. We see a similar concern from Jesus in Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." So, the goal of addressing sin is to "gain your brother."

Because God loves us as his children, he disciplines us for our own good. We see this clearly in the book of Hebrews:

⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:5-11).

In light of Hebrews 12, we understand that receiving discipline from the Lord - often times from the Lord through his church - is one of the most clear indications of God's tender love and mercy towards us. Hebrews 12:8 tells us that we are illegitimate children, not sons, if we are left without discipline. Ultimately, God's faithful and loving discipline over us, although painful at the time, yields "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11). So, church discipline is always practiced for the good of the offending party to bring about restoration and repentance.

Second, church discipline must be practiced for the sake of the purity of Christ's church. We see this in 1 Corinthians 5:6-11. There Paul uses the analogy of leaven. The church should be unleavened (as practiced during Passover and here figuratively applied to the church), so any hint of leaven must be removed. Even just a small amount of leaven will affect the whole lump. Since Christ has been sacrificed, we must be holy. This is the end for which Jesus died. Church discipline, therefore, must be practiced for the sake of the purity of the church.

The church is simply not a place where "anything goes." Sometimes unrepentant sinners must be removed from the church. Jesus didn't die to make his bride, the church, a blemished bride, but a spotless bride.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:25-27).

Church discipline must be exercised for the good of the sinner and for the purity of Christ's church.

The Process of Church Discipline

The most prevalent form of church discipline is the formative discipline that takes place through regular instruction in God's Word. Thus, whenever we are in worship, hearing God's Word taught, we are under God's formative discipline. As Paul tells Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). When we come to worship and hear sermons, we don't expect debate, conversation, new ideas being bounced around, or even interesting theological discussion. We come for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, all from God's Word, that we might be formed as Christians, competent and equipped for every good work. The formative discipline of regularly hearing God's Word preached is the primary way God disciplines his people.

If sin persists in the church then corrective discipline must take place. The pattern for corrective discipline is laid out by Jesus:

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be

established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mt. 18:15-18).

Four basic steps are evident. First, if one believer sins, another believer is to privately approach the sinner and address the fault. If he repents, the matter ends there (Mt. 18:15). This is the kind of private, personal accountability to one another that ought to be happening quite naturally within the church.

Second, if the sinner refuses to repent he must be approached with one or two others so that he may more clearly see the reality of his sin and that the charges against him may be established (Mt. 18:16). At this point this is still a generally private matter. The hope is that with the help of additional people the sinner will see the reality of his sin and repent. It is easy to disagree with one person. When multiple people approach you, we naturally listen a little more carefully.

Third, if the sinner still refuses to repent, the church is to be told (Mt. 18:17). At this point the matter is handled by our church elders. Usually the elders first make an attempt to informally address the sin and call for repentance. If that fails the elders move to formal discipline as a last resort. Charges are brought against the sinner, their case is tried, a judgment is rendered, and if necessary a specific act of discipline is brought against the sinner.

Fourth, if after all of this the sinner still refuses to repent, he is excommunicated. As Jesus says in Mt. 18:17, “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This is also what Paul urges in 1 Cor. 5:2, “let him be removed from among you.”

When a matter does reach the church Session the elders handle the matter first by reminding themselves of the biblical injunction in Gal. 6:1, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Our Session makes every effort to maintain a spirit of patience and gentleness when dealing with an unrepentant sinner. Through much prayer, counseling, biblical admonition, and loving rebuke we strive to bring the sinner to a place of repentance and restoration.

In some cases it is necessary for the Session to issue a formal censure as we strive to lead sinners to repentance. The possible censures are:

- 1) Admonition: This is a formal reproof against a sinner by the church, warning him of his guilt and danger, and instructing him to be more careful in the future.
- 2) Suspension from the sacraments: This is a temporary exclusion from the sacraments, the purpose being to exhibit the gravity of the sin to the offender and call him to repentance.
- 3) Suspension from office: At times church officers may need to be suspended temporarily from office for the sake of the purity and peace of the church.
- 4) Excommunication: This is the removal of the sinner from the communion of the church. This is, as Jesus says, treating the sinner as “a Gentile or a tax collector.”¹

Excommunication is a very serious matter. It is reserved for the most serious of sins and heresies, and the most incorrigible offenders. Although excommunication is a harsh and difficult sentence, it is never to be administered in a spirit of wrath, but in mercy. When

Jesus himself teaches excommunication in Mt. 18, he does so immediately after telling the parable of the lost sheep, in which the emphasis is on the joy that comes from the recovery of one who went astray.

As much as possible, our church leadership tries to handle matters of sin within our church privately and quietly. We always strive to do everything we can to protect the names of those involved, to never spread gossip. Sometimes, however, when sin is public and known to many, it must be addressed publicly. If a sin is known to many and the church remains silent, questions will arise from people both inside and outside the church about its tolerance of open, public, unrepentant sin. Clearly this was a concern of Paul's in 1 Cor. 5 as he dealt with the well-known incestuous relationship the church was permitting. From Paul's perspective, the sin had to be handled publicly, "when you are assembled in the name of the Lord..." (v. 4).

Another reason for dealing publicly with public sin is that it serves as a warning to the entire church to take heed of our own lives lest we too fall in a similar manner. Paul says in 1 Tim. 5:20, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. Additionally, when public sin is dealt with publicly, the sinner has the added benefit of the prayers, loving rebuke, and the open forgiveness of the entire church.

Your Role in Church Discipline

Let's consider for a moment your role in church discipline. What can you do to make church discipline go well here at our own church?

First, since we are a family, take time to build relationships within our church fellowship. Last week we discussed the prevalence of family imagery in the Bible applied to the church. Here is the reality, the more we see ourselves as a family with strong bonds, the better church discipline is going to go. If we are building relationships with one another as a family, it is quite simply going to be easier to address sin with one another when necessary. It is not a coincidence that Jesus uses the word "brother" in Mt. 18. It is not a coincidence that Paul uses fatherly imagery in 1 Cor. 4 as he talks about his potential need to come to the Corinthians with a rod. The reality is that the more we see ourselves as a family, the more we strive to live as a family, the more natural discipline and accountability will come to us.

Also, if we really understand that we are a family, when a brother or sister within this fellowship sins against us we will inherently know that we can't just cut and run. I remember being a kid riding in the back of my dad's Oldsmobile station wagon between my two brothers. At times we would fight, argue, push, shove, touch, annoy, and generally work pretty hard to sin against one another. But, at the end of the day, because we were family, because we were brothers, we knew that we couldn't just get out of the car at the next red-light and leave. We had to live together. We were family and that meant we had to learn to deal with sin among us.

And the same is true in the church. We are family. We do no favor to anyone, especially ourselves, when we just cut and run when sin shows up. Our default mindset can never be, "How do I get out of this family?" It must instead be, "How do we better live together, love one another, and handle sin as a family?"

One pastor, borrowing from the form of the classic C. S. Lewis *Screwtape Letters*, offers a valuable perspective on how Satan works against Christians within the context of the local church. Writing from the perspective of a demon warring against God, he says:

Though your subject seems safe from the clutches of our Enemy Above, you will recall that he has spent the majority of his Sundays, thus far, in church. The habit may not be easy to break. If he tries church for a few weeks, make sure it is a pointless endeavor. Do not forget our little rhyme: “If to church one must go, lead him to an empty show. And when all we can do is meddle, make sure on one church he does not settle.

Church attendance is bad enough, nephew, but consistent attendance at the same church spells almost certain doom for our cause. If your human persists in his church interest, you simply must devise some way to shuffle him around from congregation to congregation. See to it he never knows the people he is worshiping with....

Our concern, and I must reiterate it is a deep concern, is with churches that act like churches, the ones that preach Christ and live out their blasphemous faith. Such churches introduce many bad habits in our subjects. They become more thoughtful. They become more aware of our Enemy’s character and schemes. They learn to love each other, even people unlike them in situation and temperament. This can only bode ill for our work in the long run.²

The point is well made. The more we live together, know one another, and love one another as a family within the household of God, the more Satan and his minions are utterly defeated.

Second, we must embrace church membership, and we must constantly remind ourselves of our membership vows and fulfill them within the context of the local church. If you are not a member of the church you are not a full participant in this family. When we take our membership vows, we become bound together covenantally, mutually submitting to one another (Eph. 5:21) and to the government, authority, and discipline of the Church.

Think about this for a moment. If you are not a member, if you do not think church membership is important, you can’t be excommunicated. If you can’t be excommunicated, if you can’t fall under the formal discipline of Christ’s church, you have removed yourself from the primary way God disciplines his people. And, if you have removed yourself from God’s discipline, you have removed yourself from God’s loving, fatherly care. Remember Heb. 12:8, “If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.”

Third, we must expect a clear line to be drawn between the church and the world. In many ways church discipline is all about making distinctions between sin and righteousness, the holy and the profane, God’s people and the world. Throughout Scripture a clear line has consistently been drawn in this way: between inside and outside Eden; inside and outside the ark; inside and outside the Israelite camp; inside and outside the walls of the heavenly New Jerusalem; and inside and outside the church.³

One of the most loving things a church can do is to draw clear lines of distinction between the people of God and the world, to say with great clarity, “you’re in” or “you’re out.” This is precisely what makes excommunication so very serious, and, if taken seriously, so very helpful to bring about repentance.

In Mt. 16 Jesus told Peter that he was the rock on which the church would be built. He gave to Peter and the church the keys of the kingdom of heaven. He said, “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:19). Jesus expected the church to draw lines. When lines are drawn between those within and without the fold of God’s people, the lines between heaven and hell are more clearly made manifest. This does not mean that our salvation is measured by church membership, but nonetheless church membership is essential. Calvin was right to say, “To those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother,”⁴ and, “beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for.”⁵

Far from being unloving, churches that draw these boundary lines through formal membership and the exercise of church discipline are actually being faithful to Jesus and loving to others. Later in 2 Corinthians we are given a beautiful picture of one who was cast out of the church communion because of his sin and then brought back in. Paul writes, “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:6-8). This kind of love is impossible without church membership and adherence to our membership vows.

Fourth, when church discipline becomes a public matter, pray for the sinner and for the Session, and remember to be extra diligent against sin yourself.

Fifth, learn to practice the first two steps of Matthew 18 discipline thoughtfully, prayerfully, respectfully, and well. Learn the value of wise, loving, and gentle private rebukes – and do it when necessary. We don’t need to address every sin. We must always remember that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). But we also must remember that complacency toward sin is truly deadly to Christians and their churches.

Sixth, we must be ready to receive God’s discipline (both the formative and corrective discipline of the church) humbly, carefully, and gladly. When we find ourselves under discipline, perhaps through a sermon, perhaps through the godly counsel of another, perhaps through the formal processes of the church courts, we must always stand humble, ready to repent and turn from our sin at a moment’s notice. We must listen carefully to what is said, consider how the Lord may be refining you, and ultimately rejoice in the truth that the Lord really does discipline those he loves.

A Personal Note

Friends, I long to be ready for my bridegroom, Jesus Christ, when he comes (Rev. 19:7). I long to grow in holiness and obedience. I long to grow in my love to God and neighbor. And because I long for these things, I am in desperate need of church discipline, properly exercised.

I am prone to sin. Sometimes I need my brother to come and privately address my sin. At times I am stubborn in sin, so I need my brothers and sisters, and possibly the

church courts, to watch out for me, to warn me, to call me to repentance, to call me back to Christ and his church communion. I hope you share with me these same longings.

Jesus says in Rev. 3:19, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.” When the church practices discipline properly, Christ’s love for his people is powerfully manifest to all who have eyes to see.

¹ *The Book of Church Order: The Presbyterian Church of America*, 30-1.

² Kevin DeYoung, “A Lost Letter to Wormwood.” *The Gospel Coalition*. 25 Aug. 2010. Web. 26 Aug. 2010. <<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2010/08/25/a-lost-letter-to-wormwood/>>.

³ Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 20.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), IV.I.1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.I.4.