

Grace and purity:

Sin and restoration within the body of Christ

A letter from the elders to the body at GNBC.

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Lately, the elders at Good News have been receiving numerous questions about some events that took place during the Breaking of Bread service in September and October. During service, Mark Wurster spoke to the assembly about sin on the part of some believers in fellowship at Good News, how these believers had subsequently repented of the sin, and how they should be shown love and full acceptance by the church.

A number of people approached us in the days and weeks that followed with comments like:

“What was that all about?”

“It’s seems unfair to single a few people out and make examples of them when there are others that are guilty of sin that goes unaddressed.”

“That should be between that person and God. It’s really no one else’s business.”

“That seemed mean-spirited, insensitive and unloving.”

We would like to reply to these comments and explain the reasons behind the actions that were taken and the statements that were made during the Breaking of Bread service.

At the outset, the elders would like to confess that with respect to this issue we HAVE failed in several ways. First of all, we incorrectly assumed that the body would understand what transpired at the Breaking of Bread service even though we had never explained or in any way taught on this subject. This was a poor assumption. We hope that this letter begins to clarify the reasons for the steps that were taken. We also hope to take some time in the upcoming weeks to sit down together as a family and have an open and frank discussion about this. The second way we failed is by not having been consistent in the past in addressing public sin at Good News. This has been a serious but unintentional oversight on our part for which we now sincerely apologize and hope to rectify going forward.

To answer the first comment, “What was that all about?” we’d like to take a look in the Bible at the basis for what is commonly called “church discipline.” While the term “church discipline” is not found in the scriptures, the idea of discipline is well developed in the New Testament. The word that appears most often translated as discipline is the Greek word **paideia** which denotes training or education—most often the training or education of a child. In our current usage there is a negative connotation attached to the term. When we consider discipline today we often view it as aversive and punitive. This is not however in line with New Testament usage. Take one of the most frequently quoted passages with respect to discipline, Hebrews 12:5-11:

And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline— then you are not legitimate children at all. Moreover, we have all had parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

When read in its context (cf. vv. 1-4), we observe that the discipline described here came in the form of persecution that Hebrew Christians were experiencing at the time the epistle was written. This “discipline” then is the suffering that God was allowing to take place in the lives of those believers that would ultimately produce “good”, “holiness” and a “harvest of righteousness and peace” in their lives. According to Hebrews, the motivating factor behind God disciplining His children is love and nurture (v. 6) and not a desire to punish.

When “church discipline” occurs today it should also be motivated out of a loving concern for a struggling believer and not a desire to punish them or “make them pay” for their error. The goal of discipline should be the training, nurture and complete restoration of the person experiencing it.

The New Testament presents us with instances where it was necessary for leaders within the early church to address sin within the local assembly. Today, as we, redeemed humans within the body of Christ continue to be deeply flawed, the need to address sin continues. The purpose is twofold. From a **vertical perspective**, we serve a holy God and are therefore called to be holy (1 Pet 1:16). God’s intent is to conform his children to the image of his son (Rom 8:29; Gal 4:19) and we should make it our desire to not only allow him to “work in us” (Phil. 2:13) but also to encourage our fellow believers to a deeper faith (1 Thes. 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:25). From a **horizontal perspective**, the church exists as the

tangible expression or “incarnation” of Jesus Christ. It is critical therefore that the visible church maintains a testimony that is consistent with the qualities of her Head, Jesus Christ. In his 1st epistle Peter encourages us...

“as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (2:11-12)

Jonathan Leeman succinctly states the “big picture” purpose behind church discipline:

“Behind church discipline is one of the grand projects of redemptive history—the project of restoring God’s fallen people to the place where they will once more image God as they extend his benevolent and life-producing rule throughout creation (Gen. 1:26-28; 3:1-6).

Adam and Eve were to image God. So was the kingdom of Israel. Yet Adam and Eve’s failure to represent God’s rule, prompted by the desire to rule on their own terms, resulted in their exile from God’s place, the Garden. Israel’s same failure to keep God’s law and reflect God’s character to the nations also resulted in an exile.

As creatures made in God’s image, our actions intrinsically speak about him, like mirrors representing the object which they face. The problem is, fallen humanity distorts the image of God, like wavy carnival mirrors. Since fallen humanity speaks lies, for instance, the world has concluded that God’s own words cannot be trusted. He, too, must be a liar. As goes a creature, so must go its creator.

Gratefully, one son of Adam, one son of Israel, did keep God’s law perfectly, the same one whom Paul would describe as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Now, those who are united to this one Son are called to bear that same “image,” which we learn to do through the life of the church “from one degree of glory to the next” (see 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 3:9-10).

Local churches should be those places on earth where the nations can go to find humans who increasingly image God truly and honestly. As the world beholds the holiness, love, and unity of local churches, they will better know what God is like and will give him praise (e.g. Matt. 5:14-16; John 13:34-35; 1 Peter 2:12). Church discipline, then, is the church’s response when one of its own fails to represent God’s holiness, love, or unity by being disobedient to God. It’s an attempt to correct false images as they rise up within the life of Christ’s body, almost like polishing smudges of dirt out of a mirror.”

At this point let’s take a look at some passages in the New Testament that either discuss discipline or give us some insight as to how it was applied in the early church.

Matthew 18:15-20

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Many believe that this passage gives us a template as to how sin and restoration should occur among God's people. Whether or not this is the case, we do learn some important principles about sin and conflict within a community of believers. Did you ever notice that often, in the Gospels, as Jesus teaches, he begins by saying something like: "You have heard that it was said..." (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38). This is an example of taking an established principle and expanding upon it. Typically, a Rabbi, or Old Testament teacher would simply regurgitate interpretations from previous Rabbis. Very, very rarely, a Rabbi would come along and offer some new interpretations of what was already taught. When this happened, the Rabbi was said to teach with "authority," or "**shmikah**" in the Hebrew. Jesus taught with **shmikah** (Matt. 7:28-29). In this instance Jesus was taking an established Old Testament principle from the book of Deuteronomy:

One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. (19:5-6)

and expanding upon it. While the Law said that a person guilty of some offense should be confronted by "two or three witnesses" Jesus was saying that among his followers, this should not be the first course of action. He said:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."

Jesus is saying that if you have an issue with a fellow believer you should confront that individual one on one. The principle here is that the circle of those involved should be kept as small as possible. Many times our tendency is to discuss a matter of suspected sin in the life of a brother or sister with other individuals. This is not only unbiblical, it is in fact anti-biblical as the person that does this is classified as a talebearer (Lev. 19:16) and consequently does not operate in love (Lev. 19:18).

The ideal outcome is that the person who was confronted one on one with the sin would demonstrate a repentant attitude and restoration would occur. If this is not the case, Jesus says “two or three witnesses” should be taken and this individual should be confronted once again. These witnesses, ideally, should be people that have some knowledge of the incident, details or people involved. If the individual confronted recognizes their sin and repents, then he or she should be accepted and forgiven. If the first two steps are not effective then finally the matter should be brought before the entire church. If this also does not avail, as a last resort, that person should be excluded from the fellowship of believers.

Galatians 6:1-5

It is important to note at this point the spirit in which discipline should occur.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. (Galatians 6:1-5)

Let's be perfectly clear on this- we *all* fail in many ways (James 3:2). Exercising discipline is not about saying “I'm better than you”, “you're no good” or even “I want to punish you for being bad.” Discipline should be grounded in both humility and love and done with gentleness. One of the comments that the elders heard was: “*That should be between that person and God. It's really no one else's business.*”

Is that the way a family operates though? If the people you love are in an unhealthy situation, do you say: “It's none of my business?” That's not love. Love causes us to confront the people that matter to us, not to judge them, but to express our concern and desire to help them. In the book of Proverbs we read the following: “Faithful are the **wounds** of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (27:6). Being a friend often involves “wounding” the ones we love. To “brush over” sin so as not to cause conflict is not the action of a friend but that of an enemy.

This passage also makes it clear that confronting sin and seeking restoration is not something optional in the community of believers but is a command. The verses say that if someone is caught in a sin those that are spiritual **should** restore that person gently. We at Good News are a spiritual family, and as is the case with our earthly families we all need help at times. When a family is healthy, its members

lovingly seek the best interest of the other members. This also is how the body of Christ, the family of God, should function (Phil. 2:4).

Finally, we'll look at some specific instances in the New Testament where discipline was either discussed or actually carried out.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

Let's try to understand the details of what Paul discusses in the passage above. He is telling the church at Corinth that he has become aware of a disturbing situation. Apparently, a member of the church was living conjugally with his stepmother ("his Father's wife"). This woman may have been his father's widow, or at least divorced from him. This was incest and violated a number of biblical principles (Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:22) and, beyond that, was not even permitted in Greco-Roman culture (Institutes of Gaius 1.63). Aside from the obvious problem of the man living with his stepmother was the fact that the church did nothing about it- Paul even says they were "proud" of it. When we read the following chapter (1 Cor. 6) we come to understand that the Corinthians were using their "freedom in Christ" to try and justify their open-mindedness toward sin.

Paul reprimands the entire church and especially the Corinthian elders for tolerating, even proudly accepting this situation and in essence says that because they have failed to deal with this problem, he

(Paul) is now taking action. The apostle Paul says to “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his Spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” This seems rather severe. He didn’t say “warn him” or even “give him an ultimatum”- just “put out of fellowship the man that did this” (v.2). The key here was the attitude of both the individual and the church. The scripture uses words like “proud” and “boasting” to describe their mind-set.

Tolerance of sin will destroy a church. That is clear in this passage.

Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

Here the yeast is used to typify sin. Paul says that a “little yeast” left unchecked “works through” the entire dough. Sin, left unchecked in the community of believers will cause the entire church to become compromised and ineffective in its Christian witness as discussed earlier.

It is also important to note in this passage the public aspect of discipline. This matter was not addressed privately, behind closed doors. The public nature of the offense requires an equally public response. This is not done to shame the individual or cause embarrassment; in fact it ultimately benefits the both the person being disciplined as well as the rest of the body. By dealing with this publicly, we accomplish several things:

- It quells the hateful gossip that thrives on the speculation and innuendo that arises from the undisclosed nature of the person’s sin. Further, if the individual has repented from their sin, the leadership can publicly call on the assembly to accept, love and support that individual.
- It benefits the body by clarifying the status of the person who sinned. When the leadership does not address the sin publicly it leaves the body wondering how to respond to this individual and thus, by leaving the matter open to speculation, this often breeds gossip.

The happy ending to this story is that as a result of the discipline, this man repented and was later restored to complete fellowship with the body. In 2 Corinthians 2 the apostle writes:

The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. (v.6-8)

This passage dealt with sin of a sexual/relational nature but Paul addresses other types of sin as well.

Titus 3:10-11

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

Paul here speaks of those that were causing division within the church and says that after a second warning “have nothing to do with them.” Important to note at this time is the fact that there is no simple formula as far as church discipline is involved. In the Corinthian passage Paul orders the removal of the offending individual without warning, while here, he speaks of two warnings prior to removal. There is no “1-2-3” approach to church discipline. Each instance of sin must be considered on its own, prayed about and discussed, and then dealt with individually.

In Thessalonians Paul discusses another occasion that warranted discipline.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

The particular circumstance described in these verses had to do with the fact that the Thessalonians were eagerly awaiting the return of the Lord Jesus. This is a good thing. The bad thing is that as a result of their believing that Jesus was returning any day, many were voluntarily quitting their jobs. This, as one can imagine, was causing hardship within the church at Thessalonica. The people that quit their jobs

were becoming a financial burden to those that were still working, and worse yet, because of their free time they had become idle busybodies. Please note that this doesn't describe people that had lost their jobs and were unable to find employment, but individuals that could work and had work available but refused to do so. To these people Paul advises the elders to "command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat" (v. 12) and if they refused to do so to "not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." (v. 14-15).

A Final Word

In conclusion, the elders fully realize that this is not a popular topic- especially in this day and age and as mentioned, there is no easy 1-2-3 approach to church discipline. None of us particularly enjoy confrontation or the difficult and uncomfortable conversations that occur as a result of addressing sin. If it was a matter of personal choice, I'm sure that none of the elders would feel compelled to do this. We are, however, obligated to follow the principles of sin and restoration as they are laid out in the Scriptures and feel that part of being a good shepherd is looking out for the welfare of the flock however difficult that may be at times. We certainly don't want to create a "policing" environment where the lives of believers are constantly under scrutiny. This is not consistent with mercy, grace or love and this is not how the body of Christ should operate. We will ensure this never happens. While we're all hopefully striving to be more like Jesus, the fact of the matter is, that each one of us, elders included, are deeply flawed human beings in desperate need of God's grace and mercy.

We leave you in closing with Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians.

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. (1 Thes. 5:12-24)

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