

Church Discipline – 1 Cor 5:1-13

In light of recent events, I'm particularly sensitive to those of you who might be here for the first time, or the first time in a long time, because your heart has been sensitized to the things of God. You're searching and you're soft. You want the truth, and you want it straight. If that's you, welcome. You're in the right place, and we're glad you're here.

And before we open our Bibles – which we do every single week, because that's where the truth is found – I want you to know that this is a different Sunday for us. A very *rare* Sunday for us. Instead of continuing our study of the Gospel of John and the life of Jesus, we need to take a break for a church matter. Church discipline.

That means I'm going to preach on it, followed by a member's meeting right afterwards in the Legacy room. A brief meeting to announce it regarding a church member. Someone who has fallen into grievous sin. And continues.

And when I say a *members* meeting, I mean it's for members only. Those who have formally *joined* our church. As in, gone through the membership process and received the right hand of fellowship in one of our services. It's not for regular *attenders*, and it's certainly not for visitors. These are serious issues that require the utmost discretion.

So this is a different Sunday. But it's the same, in that we're going to open the Bible and apply it to our lives. So turn with me to 1 Corinthians 5.

Church discipline probably conjures up all kinds of thoughts in your mind. From, "What is it?" to "I hate it." Or all kinds of images. From *angry* men making *poor* decisions, to *passive* men making *no* decisions.

Whatever the case, let me start with the *summary* of church discipline that *Jesus* gave, and then a definition to ensure that we're all on the same page.

Matthew 18:15–17 – [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.*

And here's the church discipline part. [17] *If he refuses to listen to them [the witnesses], 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.* (ESV) One who isn't *part* of the church. Someone still in sin and proud of it. Have nothing to do with him, Jesus says.

So . . .

Church discipline is the means of dealing with blatant, unrepentant sin in professing believers who are part of our church

Blatant, in that it's outward and obvious; and unrepentant, in that they refuse to confess or even acknowledge it. And church discipline is the last-ditch effort to deal with it. To deal with sin in our midst.

What it *isn't*, is a witch hunt. Where we *look* for things wrong in each other. Or make a determination of someone's salvation. Or make assumptions that can't be proven.

Rather, church discipline is a determination of a person's *fitness* to be a *part* of our church. Their spiritual fitness. And once we've determined they're not, they're not fit, 1 Corinthians 5 gives us a pattern to follow. A pattern based on a real-life example.

And the very first part of it, is to . . .

1. Mourn the situation (v1-2a)

Church discipline is as close to a funeral as you can get. 1 Cor 5:1 – *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.* Somebody in the church was having sex with their mom or stepmom. That's not *our* situation. But it was in Corinth. Blatant, ongoing sin by a professing believer. Something even the *unbelievers* wouldn't do. Pagans at the time.

And as if *that* wasn't bad enough, the church was fine with it. A man has his father's wife, v2 – *And you are arrogant!* Paul says. You act as if it's okay. As if their freedom in Christ means they can do anything they want. And you occupy the *higher* ground because you're "showing grace" to them.

They weren't showing grace, they were enabling. And sinning *themselves*. When you *enable* someone to sin, on purpose, *you* sin. And when you *rationalize* it, you sin. Like the church in Corinth that was *arrogant*; openly condoning the sin of a member. Which means silence and complacency in matters of church discipline, is sin itself.

They should have been weeping. They should have been *grieving* the situation. *Ought you not rather to mourn?* Paul says in v2. Shouldn't you be filled with *grief*? That deep anguish of the soul that goes hand in hand with a righteous disdain for sin. Shouldn't it trouble you to no end?

When it becomes known that someone in the church is living in sin, we should mourn. Not gossip or succumb to nosiness. Not act as if it's okay; or doesn't affect us. But grieve. That's the first exhortation in this pattern to follow. Mourn.

The second, is to . . .

2. Remove them from the church (v2b,6-8)

When someone is guilty of blatant, unrepentant sin among us, it's our responsibility to *remove* them from us. V2b – *Let him who has done this be removed from among you.* As in kicked out. Denied participation. Refused entry. Or as Paul says it in v13, at the end of his instruction – *purge the evil person from among you.* Couldn't be clearer. Beginning and end.

And in between, in v7, he says it third way. *Cleanse out the old leaven.* A metaphor referring to the fermented dough they used to cook bread. Dough that's literally starting to rot. Get rid of it, Paul says. Take a look. V6.

[6] *Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven [a little sin] leavens [or influences] the whole lump?* [7] *Cleanse out the old leaven [get rid of the sinful person] that you may be a new lump [a new church], as you really are unleavened.* As we really are pure and righteous in God's sight. Not because of our perfection, but our repentance.

Get rid of the unrepentant sin in your midst, Paul says, so that you can *be* the righteous church that you *are* in God's eyes.

[7b] For Christ, our Passover lamb [our payment for such sin], *has been sacrificed*. [In other words, in dying for us, Jesus not only *paid* for our sin, but *cleansed* us of our sin. Giving us his righteousness.] [8] *Let us therefore celebrate the festival* [worship together] *not with the old leaven* [not with sin in our midst], *the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*. Let us worship in *genuine* repentance, Paul says. Genuine integrity. Let us be who we are – righteous in God’s sight.

It’s a poignant reminder that sin in our midst affects us all. Because sinful, unrepentant people grieve and quench the Holy Spirit. Grieve and quench the work of ministry. So Paul says remove them. Purge them. Cleanse them out.

It’s the same principle found in **Prov 22:10** – *Drive out a scoffer* [someone who’s unappeasable either by their sinful words or their sinful life], *and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease*. Remove them from the church and the pain will stop.

It’s not comfortable to *think* about, and even harder to do, but absolutely necessary if we’re going to *preserve* our “unleaven-ness.” Preserve our purity. Absolutely necessary if we’re going to act, and live, and worship, like the people of God we *are*. (7)

That’s the second part of the pattern Paul lays out. Remove them from the church.

The third is even stronger. And if it wasn’t explicit, I wouldn’t say it.

3. Deliver them to Satan (v3-5)

V5 – *you are to deliver this man to Satan*. And leading up to that, he gives us some key supporting points. Right after saying in v2b – *Let him who has done this be removed from among you*, he says in v3 – *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*.

By virtue of their common bond in Christ and mutual fellowship in the Spirit, Paul was *with* them; with the church. And they could carry out the discipline just as if he were there physically. Especially so, since he had *already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing*. (3) He had already reached a verdict. Already made a decision.

Implying that church discipline, and especially delivering someone to Satan, should be . . .

• Initiated and led by the elders

The men God has put in place to lead the church. Notice that *Paul* is the one who addresses the issue. And Paul is the one who leads them through the process. The one who planted the church. The *first* elder in Corinth.

And combined with the spiritual authority of elders in the rest of the New Testament (1 Tim 2:8-3:7; Titus 1:5-9; Heb 13:17; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Pet 5:5), it means church discipline is not for church members to do on their own. Delivering someone to Satan is such a serious act, such a weighty matter, that it should only be initiated and led by the elders. And it’s the elder’s responsibility to carry it out.

But the church also has some responsibility. It should be . . .

• Followed by the church

V4 – *When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus* [for his glory and worship] *and my spirit is present* [Paul says; one *more* indicator that he’s leading this], *with the*

power of our Lord Jesus [because that’s what it takes for such an extreme measure], [5] *you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*. God help us.

When someone is guilty of blatant, unrepentant sin in our midst, it’s our responsibility as a *church*, collectively, to hand them over to Satan. To force them *out* of the church and into the world. Out of safety and into the lion’s den. Out of light and into darkness.

And the *way* we do that, is by withdrawing and withholding our provision and protection. Provision and protection that most often comes in the form of encouragement, and accountability, and discipleship, and love, and care. It’s no longer given. In fact, it’s withheld. Like leaving a person to the wolves in the middle of the wilderness with no food and no weapon.

And the purpose, at least initially, is to allow Satan to destroy them. *Physically*. Or as it says in v5 – *You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*.

We are to deliver such a person to Satan . . .

• For their physical ruin

Their physical demise. It’s a free pass for Satan to afflict them with weakness, hardship, sickness, and suffering. That’s how seriously God takes all this. The purity of his church and the sin of his people. No wonder we should mourn. Who needs to be told?

But delivering them to Satan for their physical ruin is not just punishment for the sake of punishment. It’s punishment for the sake of redemption. It’s punishment to save their soul. That’s the *ultimate* purpose.

V5 again – *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*. The day of judgment. When Christ returns. The ultimate goal of church discipline is not *condemnation*, but salvation.

Just because God calls *us* to be done with them, doesn’t mean that *he* is. Nor does it mean there’s no way back. There is. It may be long and arduous and painful, but it’s possible. And in the end, their *spirit* may be saved, even if their body isn’t.

That’s the third exhortation in this pattern to follow. Deliver them to Satan.

And fourth, is . . .

4. Cut off contact (v9-13)

V9 – *I wrote to you in my letter* [Paul says; a letter we don’t have, but summarized here] *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*. In other words, it’s *impossible* to avoid sinful people in this world. “I don’t mean disassociate with unbelievers.”

I wrote before – [11] *But now* [v11] *I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother* [someone who professes to be a believer] *if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler* [indicating that church discipline is for all *kinds* of grievous sin]—[I’m writing, Paul says] *not even to eat with such a one*.

One of the final and *ongoing* acts toward someone removed from our church, is to cut off contact with them. Cease any and all association with them. Whether social, work-related, religious, or otherwise. *Have nothing more to do with* [them]. (Titus 3:10) Treat them like a sinful outsider as Jesus said in Matthew 18 (17).

Hard words. And even harder to do. But necessary. Necessary for every single one of us. Otherwise, we risk subverting the very process that God has ordained, to save a sinner from condemnation. It's incumbent upon *all* of us to cut off contact.

Then, in v12-13, Paul gives us one final clarification. *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."* A common phrase in the Old Testament. (Dt 13:15; et al.)

Making judgment calls about sinful *sinners*, those *outside* the church, is not for us. That's God's purview. But determining the guilt of those *inside*, is. And purging them from our midst by cutting off contact, is too. Because sin in the camp is a big deal.

That's the pattern for church discipline. Mourn the situation, remove them from our church, deliver them to Satan, and cut off contact.

And one more thing. To help us discern if a situation warrants such a response, we've established a **process**. A process to help us think clearly and carefully. They're not hard and fast *rules*, but general guidelines. Sometimes combined, and sometimes separate.

The first of which, is to . . .

- 1. Gather and establish evidence.** When something warrants our attention as elders, we start by getting the facts. And give the benefit of the doubt until we do.
- 2. Privately warn the sinful person in a meeting with 1 or 2 elders.** (Gal 6:1; Mt 18:15-17; 2 Tim 4:2) Giving them every opportunity possible, to confess and repent.
- 3. Rebuke them as a full elder board.** Warning them of the consequences as a group, and exhorting them to stop. (Heb 10:26-27)
- 4. Rescind their privilege to serve or lead in any ministry, and communicate it to those involved.** (2 Thess 3:13-15) Those involved in the ministry.
- 5. Withdraw their freedom to participate in ministry, and publicly tell the church.** (Mt 18:18; 1 Tim 5:22) And 6th, if they're still unrepentant, we . . .
- 6. Retract their membership, refuse them entry, and disassociate with them.** (1 Cor 5:13; Titus 3:10; Prov 22:10; 2 Chron 36:15-16; 2 Jn 9-11)

Not hard and fast rules, but guidelines to help us in the midst of difficult situations. And should the person repent, at any point along the way, we would welcome them with open arms. It may not prevent us from taking one of these steps, but it most certainly would bring about reconciliation.

Prayer – Father, let this serve as a warning that ongoing, unrepentant sin has consequences. Let it serve as a reminder that you take the purity of your flock seriously; and we should too. Let it serve as a preventative, to *keep* us from sin. And God, given the present need to carry these things out, give us *the power of our Lord Jesus* (1 Cor 5:4).

You Are Loved