



“Church Discipline”

Part I

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Today, we’re going to give the Bible a fair hearing on what has become a controversial subject. What does the Bible teach about church discipline? Is it appropriate for a congregation to withdraw its fellowship from a person because of sin or immorality? Does the church have any responsibility in judging and correcting an unrepentant, sinning brother or sister? In recent years, we’ve heard of church splits and even lawsuits being filed, claims of discrimination being hurled, because of church discipline being carried out.

God demands that His people live holy lives (**Hebrews 12:14**), and Paul gave this order to the church in Ephesus:

Ephesians 5:3 “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints;”

But does the Bible tell us what to do in the case of a brother or sister who lives in sin and will not repent? Paul addressed such a situation in **I Corinthians 5**. The church at Corinth was established with people who came from a particularly lewd and licentious background, but in their conversion to Christ, that was all to be left behind. Unfortunately, though, the influence of the culture around them and their own pasts as sinners came back to haunt them even as Christians. There was a man who was living in sexual immorality; he first of all was committing fornication, and with his stepmother at that. It appears that the church was aware of his sin and at the least was remaining silent about it. Paul addresses the matter and tells them how it is to be dealt with.

I Corinthians 5:1-5 “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed

might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

What does Paul instruct the church to do about this man, and why? How should churches today react to sin and immorality in their own ranks? Let’s see what the Bible has to say.

Joshua, the leader of ancient Israel, simply could not understand. After the thirteenth march around the walls of Jericho, the walls had fallen and the city was burned with fire. It was a great victory and Joshua was being hailed a hero throughout the land. It had been a stunning victory against a powerful, fortified foe, but now, Joshua has suffered a stinging defeat. Thirty-six of his men now lay dead outside the small vulnerable city of Ai. He had even sent men up to Ai *before* the attack to assess the situation, and those men had come back and told Joshua, *we won’t even need a full army to attack that little town! There are only a few of them. Just send up a small force and we can take care of Ai in short order.*

But thirty-six of Joshua’s men had immediately died when they were chased away from the gates of that little, insignificant city. Joshua was dumbfounded and distraught. He asked God how this could be; why mighty Jericho, and not tiny Ai? Here is God’s answer to him:

Joshua 7:10-12 “And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you.”

God said, *you lost the battle at Ai because there was sin in the camp.* You see, after Jericho fell, one of Joshua’s men disobeyed God’s orders. God had said that the treasures of that city belonged to Him, and if any of them took it for themselves, they would suffer His wrath. There was a covetous man by the name of Achan who tiptoed through the city, hiding the gold and silver beneath his garment. He snuck it back to the camp and buried it beneath his tent. The people may not have known it, but God did.

Joshua 7:1 “But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel.”

That is an interesting verse and an interesting incident from which we learn a few things:

1. The camp of God’s people is to remain holy. God will not tolerate sin that is not repented of in the midst of His people.
2. Other people suffer as a result of the sin of one person. Here, thirty-six people died *plus* Achan and his own family because of this one man’s sin.
3. Others can even be culpable for the sin of another. Remember, the passage we just read said that *the children of Israel committed a trespass...and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel*, even though it was Achan who actually committed the sin.

Later, speaking of the experiences of ancient Israel, the apostle Paul wrote this to the church at Corinth:

I Corinthians 10:6,11 “Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted...Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.”

Like Israel of old, the Corinthian church had sin in the camp. There was a particularly grievous situation there, and at the very least, the congregation had shown indifference to it. A man living in fornication—in fact, he was committing fornication with his stepmother. It was so scandalous and shocking that Paul says it was not even named among the pagan people.

I Corinthians 5:1 “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.”

How do you suppose that scenario would be met in many churches today? Wouldn't we expect to hear things like, *that's really his and her business and none of ours*. Likely, some would say, *it's not up to us to judge. Only God can be their judge*. Some might say, *it's two consenting adults—who are we to tell them what they can and can't do?* Perhaps someone would even say, *Jesus forgave the adulterous woman that the Pharisees brought to Him. We shouldn't be like the Pharisees. We should just love them and maybe everything will work out. After all, Jesus ate with publicans and sinners, so let's not do anything that is very radical in regard to this situation*.

It's not very hard to imagine those types of reactions because in fact, that's what we usually hear when a person is living in sin and some person or church says something about it. Unfortunately, the church has been bullied into silence and complicity today. Friend, what matters is NOT what you or I think or feel. I know that feelings reign supreme in our postmodern age today. But that doesn't matter. The U.S. Constitution doesn't have any authority in this matter. The ACLU or any other so-called “rights advocacy group” doesn't have a say in this as it pertains to the kingdom of God. King Jesus and His ambassadors, the apostles, they are the authorities in kingdom matters.

We're going to read what Paul, speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and acting by the authority of the Lord Jesus, said in response to this man living in sin. He first said that the church, to its shame, was tolerating that sin.

I Corinthians 5:2 “And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned...”

In other words, they knew this man was living in sin, but they saw no need to correct him. They thought everything was okay, but Paul said that instead of glorying in the man, they should mourn or grieve over him. Some speculate that he was a wealthy or influential man among their number, but if that is the case, it made no difference to Paul. The man should've been ashamed of how he was living and the church should've been grieved over the fact that this man was living in sin and was going to be lost if he didn't repent. You see, that's really the bottom line.

I Corinthians 5:3-5 “For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus

Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”

First, Paul says the prescribed action was *in the name* or *by the authority of the Lord Jesus Himself*. Get that now: by Christ’s authority, the church was to gather together and deliver this offender over to Satan, so that his flesh might be destroyed. That is, that he’ll learn that the sin of the flesh must cease if he wants to be saved, and thus, his spirit can be saved in judgment.

We’ll see what that means in a moment, but first, what does Paul mean when he talks about *delivering him over to Satan*? Was this some physical act or punishment? Were they to take his life and let him go to hell? No, that’s not what Paul is saying at all. Rather, they were to turn him out of the kingdom of light back over to Satan’s domain: the world. In other words, there are only two spiritual domains: the church and the world. Every human being is in one of those two kingdoms, either the church or the world. You’re not in both, you’re not in neither; you’re either in the church or you’re in the world. The kingdom of Christ, which is the church of Christ, and the kingdom of Satan, which is the world with its sin and darkness, are the two opposing kingdoms. To be excluded from one means to be part of the other. So, Paul is simply instructing them that they are to remove him from their fellowship, and he explains how to do that.

I Corinthians 5:11 “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother (that is, a Christian) be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.”

They were not to have any corporate or social fellowship or dealings with this man until he repented of his sin. They were not to interact with him and treat him as though everything was okay. They were not to share the Lord’s table or any other table with him because he was to be to them an outcast. Why? Was it to be mean? Was it an act of vengeful spite or punishment? Was it to make other members of the church feel superior to the man and to somehow put him down? No. And if church discipline is carried out as a result of such motives today, friend, that is not church discipline; rather it is hypocrisy, injustice and cruelty. What Paul is talking about is legitimate, scriptural discipline of God’s children. I was searching for some images in regards to this topic and this one happened to come up.



Unfortunately, right there is the image that a lot of people have when you mention something like church discipline. If that is the image that is conjured up in your mind when we talk about church discipline, you may be misunderstanding what the apostle Paul is teaching. He is instructing the church here not to so much punish the man, but to admonish and correct him. How? By demonstrating the fact

that he has no fellowship with God while he lives in his sin. And they demonstrate that by the fact that he would no longer have fellowship with God's people. Fellowship exists in a relational triangle.

I John 1:5-7 "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

In order for two people to truly, scripturally be in fellowship, both people must have fellowship with God. And if two people are in fellowship with God, that by default means that they are to be in fellowship with each other. But, if fellowship is broken between a person and God, then it is to be broken between that sinning person and the other person who remains in fellowship with God as well. Therefore, fellowship is a relational triangle.

The action that Paul commands in **I Corinthians 5** is really an outward demonstration of the state of this man's fellowship with God. In other words, the action was designed to make this man see the reality and gravity of his sin, and cause him to repent. Remember, the church should've been mourning over this man's sin. How could they do so and not urge him to turn away from his sin? We're not grieved over a man's sin if we simply go along as if sin is no problem, allowing a man to continue in his sinful way that will cause him to be lost, without admonishment and correction.

II Thessalonians 3:6 "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us."

Paul says *withdraw yourselves from the disorderly brother*. This phrase *deliver him to Satan* that Paul commands means *withdrawing the church's fellowship* from the sinning brother or sister. They are not to have spiritual or social intercourse with him. They are merely to admonish him to repent of his sin. That's as far as it goes.

You see, it is an act of discipline. What seems so ironic to many is that it's really an act of love and concern. You may be saying, *well, I sure don't look at it that way. It's hateful to discipline a brother or sister in Christ*. Let me ask you this: do you love your children? Do you discipline them? Is that discipline pleasant? Is it sometimes even painful to you both? Do you administer it to be mean or cruel, or to get revenge on your child? Why, of course not! If so, that's not discipline, but child abuse.

Let me ask you another question: does God love HIS children? The Bible says that God is love. The Bible also says that God chastens His children (**Hebrews 12:6**). I believe that He does that through trials that He allows to enter into our lives to refine us and mold us into what He wants us to be—just as discipline, whether instructive or corrective, shapes and molds a child into what a parent envisions him to become.

Hebrews 12:6,11 "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth...Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

He is saying that discipline is for our good. The erring brother is delivered over to Satan in order to provoke and produce repentance. In fact, it did exactly what it was intended to do, because when Paul wrote back to the church in his second letter to the Corinthians, he acknowledged that that man had repented of his sin, and was to be restored to the fellowship of the church. Paul also cites another reason for withdrawing from this man.

I Corinthians 5:6 “Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?”

Glorying here doesn't mean that they were going around boasting about the man's sin; rather they were overlooking it, considering themselves to be a sound, healthy, thriving church, perhaps with some appeal to the world. Paul said, *No, no. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.* Sin is often compared to leaven or yeast in the Bible. Paul says that if sin is left unnoticed and unwarned and uncorrected, that sin--like leaven--not only destroys the soul of the one who remains in it, but also has a contagion about it. It spreads. Sin is like a cancer: either you get the cancer or the cancer gets you. Had this man been allowed to continue in his sin unrebuked, unchallenged and undisciplined, it would've emboldened others to live in sin. Perhaps as was the case of the ancient Israelites in the book of **Joshua** that we read about earlier, it would even kindle the wrath of God towards the congregation. My friend, God will not bless those who cling to sin. It's as simple as that. God's blessing will not rest upon a church who does not desire and strive to be a holy church. God will not bless a church who overlooks and harbors, and even if by nothing else than ignoring it, encourages sin.

It's not a pleasant thing; it's a heartbreaking thing. It is a terrible thing to have to administer, but church discipline is a scriptural and necessary thing if people are going to be saved. It is a very serious thing and the apostle Paul makes that very plain in the passages we have read.

So, what does all of this mean in regards to how we look at people in the world who are not members of the church? Are we to have the same disposition toward people who are in the world who live in an immoral fashion? What are the sins that the Bible says warrant church discipline being enacted? What are we to do and how are we to carry out this disciplinary action when a brother refuses to repent of sin? What about those who argue that church discipline is unloving and contrary to the spirit and the actual teaching of Jesus Himself? What about the parable of the wheat and the tares—didn't Jesus teach that we are to coexist with sinners until the end of time and let Him be the judge?

All of those are very valid questions. Lord willing, we'll take them up in the second part of our study.

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