

CHURCH DISCIPLINE: THE MOST NEGLECTED TRUTH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
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Let's Begin

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who defied Hitler and was subsequently executed, wrote in his most popular book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, these stirring words, "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." Bonhoeffer captured the spirit of what many think the church is about—a fellowship where accountability too often appears absent.

Paul's words to Corinth in chapter 5 tell a different story, however. He demanded accountability for immoral behavior. He expected discipline to be exercised on sinning church members, discipline which included expulsion from the church roll! Paul's discipline hardly describes the average New Testament church today. With Bonhoeffer, we may safely say many fellowships require neither repentance nor church discipline.

Hence, our lesson this week focuses on the most neglected truth in the New Testament and the least practiced mark of the New Testament church—church discipline. As we explore chapter 5, note the outline we'll be following:

- I. The Report of Sin in the Church (vv. 1-2)
- II. The Removal of Sin in the Church (vv. 3-5)
- III. The Remedy for Sin in the Church (vv. 6-13)

I. The Report of Sin in the Church (vv. 1-2)

Up until now, Paul has dealt almost exclusively with division in the church at Corinth. It is no surprise that he now turns to defilement in the church. A divisive culture is the perfect breeding ground for decadent behavior. A church that cannot get its belief right inevitably fails to get its behavior right.

Paul planted the church in Corinth to change the city. Sadly, the city was changing the church. More of the city was in the church than the church in the city. Nor was this only a phenomenon Paul had to squarely face. Through the centuries, the church has had to face a creeping culture determined to make the church into its image rather than the church remaining faithful to Christ. Every new era poses new challenges for the church to remain the church of Jesus Christ, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

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Paul begins perhaps the most unpleasant section he ever penned to the church which he loved, "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" (1 Cor. 5:1-2). For Paul, the church must learn the significance concerning the standard of life Jesus expects from His believing people.

Even more, the church can never possess the purity and power God intends until it faces this truth. Therefore, Paul begins the Corinthian education about godliness, purity, and power.

"It is reported commonly," Paul confesses, that sin enjoys a comfortable presence in the church at Corinth. Neither hearsay nor



Reflection Connection

We clearly note Paul's abhorrence for tolerating the horrid unholiness of incest in the church's fellowship. However, is discipline exercised for gross sin not also applicable to "lesser" sins? In other words, is there a distinction the church should observe concerning which sins may or may not be tolerated? Ask your pastor to lead a short discussion during this time.

gossip brought this word to Paul. Undoubtedly, it came from a vibrant church member whom Paul chooses to leave anonymous. Yet, he owned no fear the news he possessed was rumor, since it was "reported commonly." The reality was, what Paul was hearing was not only true, the verb tense indicates that what Paul heard was continually being told. In the face of this continued moral scandal stood the Corinthian leaders doing absolutely nothing! The whole city knew and talked about it but the church pastors who also knew remained silent. Open, flagrant sin was ignored by the church. No words could express Paul's grief.

In addition, not only was the church silent about sin, they were silent about such degenerate behavior, that even lost people knew it to be wrong! Paul describes the behavior as "not so much as named among the Gentiles." In other words, not even pagans who do not know Christ approve of this behavior, but the church ignored it.

What was the behavior about which the Corinthians were so strangely silent? One can imagine Paul's moral embarrassment as he squeezed the words from his pen, "that there is fornication among you, and such fornication...that one should have his father's wife." As unbelievable as it may sound, the Corinthians were tolerating incest. This sexual crime found tolerance in neither Jewish, Roman, nor even natural law. Yet, in Corinth this despicable practice found a comfortable home in the church of Jesus Christ.

How can we account for this? Easy. While a person who has faith in Christ is born again and consequently receives a new nature (2 Cor. 5:17), the old nature still remains (Rom. 7:18). Hence, a struggle between the flesh and the spirit continues throughout this life (Gal. 5:19-24). And, if a believer does not seek the filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), a life chasing the sinful flesh results—the carnal Christian (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

While the carnality of the man involved in this sin constitutes a personal tragedy, the public tolerance of his behavior by the church remained inexcusable. More troubling for Paul was the church's attitude about it all—"And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned." It is almost as if the church felt a sense of pride about it all. The term "puffed up" is the same one used earlier (4:6,18,19) and literally means "to blow up." Paul reminds the church they should be on their knees about this tragedy, not on a proud pedestal! Is it possible we may come to the point we are proud of our wild, unorthodox behavior? In some circles today, drinking beer at Bible studies has become the "hip" thing to do. For Paul, ungodly attitudes like this have no place in God's church.

Public tolerance shows neither our sensitivity to sin nor our love to the church body. Allowing sin a free pass earns no respect from Biblical truth. And, as Paul showed, tolerating fornication doesn't even win approval from unsaved pagans.

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II. The Removal of Sin in the Church (vv. 3-5)

Paul was not known for beating around the bush. He writes, “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” (1 Cor. 5:4-5). The term translated “gathered together” does not necessarily mean the church gathered together for worship. In fact, the gathering Paul had in mind was probably a special meeting, what we might today call a “special called business meeting.” In other words, the meeting possesses a special purpose— to deal with this issue.

Furthermore, if the gathering does not happen, this may be indicative of a visible loss of power the church experienced. When moral purity leaves, moral power follows close behind. Could it be the reason the church of today appears to have lost a measure of its moral influence is precisely because it has lost a significant measure of its moral purity?

A life of sin separates one not only from God, but also from God’s people.

In addition, we must keep in mind the *protocol* Paul is revealing concerning church discipline. If the sin were a private sin—that is, a sin known only to a few—then there would be no need to deal with it publicly. A small group could easily and effectively take proper care of the problem (cp. Matt. 18:15-17). However, because the sin was not only public, but publicly ignored by the church, public confession and public correction were necessary. If a believer will not face his or her sin, the church must face it for them. Thus, a gathering in the proper spirit for the specific purpose stood at the forefront of the disciplinary process.

The particular strategy of the discipline was not left for the imagination, “To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh...” A person living in sin and hiding in the church must be stripped of his or her covering. Remove them from the security of the church and place them in the world dominated by the one they have been openly serving—Satan. The New Testament leaves us several examples of believers turned over to Satan (1 Tim. 1:20; Luke 22:31; Acts 5:1-6; 1 Cor. 11:30). Christians out of fellowship with God cannot be in true fellowship with the church. A life of sin separates one not only from God, but also from God’s people.

Even so, the church must ever remember that church discipline is not to punish one for sin but to purge one from sin. Discipline is not a day of reckoning but a day of redemption. Exclusion from body life is to force a sinner to face reality, not ban sinners from reconciliation. Thus, Paul says, “that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” When the church stands for purity, the church stands with Jesus. And, as we will surely discover later, the man was restored (cp. 2 Cor. 2:6-8). No matter the outcome, obedience to Christ always brings ultimate blessing and gracious results.

Reflection Connection

If the church is to turn erring brothers and sisters over to Satan for the “destruction of the flesh” where does forgiveness fit into such a procedure? Explain.



III. The Remedy for Sin in the Church (vv. 6-13)

Once the reality of sin is faced, Paul counsels to remove the source of the sin—the leaven which affects the entire lump. As hard as it may sound, God’s Word commands the church to practice church discipline. Paul now details the remedy more carefully. He writes, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.” (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

First, he reveals hatefulness in relation to sin. He says we must “purge out” the old and only then the feast may be kept. Preceding Passover, the Jewish wife would scour her home with candle and broom, seeking for any speck of leaven and safely remove it before Passover began. In Scripture, leaven is a perpetual picture of sin (cp. Matt. 16:6, 12; Luke 12:1; Gal. 5:9). Leaven begins small but grows large, bloats and infects all it touches. Sin works precisely in the same manner. It may begin small but gets out of control very quickly.

Many people have ended up in gross misconduct and horrible sin that began as an unclean thought left to germinate in the mind and heart. Innumerable churches which only began in a small way to tolerate attitudes or small indiscretions

have ended in rank heresy and ungodly practice. Some churches have a genuine passion to influence the Gay community and win them to Christ. No church should ever be discouraged from proclaiming the Gospel to homosexuals! However, the church which swims in deeper water must be finely tuned, taking every precaution not to compromise a single jot or tittle in its purity before the Lord. Unfortunately, many churches become blind to their own compromise and end up in the unhealthy Corinthian condition. In other words, Christians must maintain their rightful hatred of sin.

Second, Paul revealed the helpfulness in relation to the world. Paul records, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.” (1 Cor. 5:9-10). Note the balance believers must maintain. We cannot be isolated from the world. Such misconception can only lead to false holiness and evangelistic impotence. But neither can we be inclusive of the world. Inclusiveness was the problem against which Corinth struggled. Inclusiveness is the problem against which we so often struggle.

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Reflection Connection

How do you tell the difference between living in the world and not being of the world? Be specific.

Our Lord taught us the lesson Paul now teaches. We must be in the world but we cannot be of the world (cp. John 17:15). We are here neither to condemn the world nor condone the world. Rather we are here to confront the world, and, through faithful Gospel preaching, convert the world, changing it as we ourselves have been changed.

Third, Paul reveals the holiness in relation to the church. Hear carefully the Apostle's words, "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother 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. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." (1 Cor. 5:11-13).

Since we cannot be inclusive of the world, we cannot be inclusive of church members who cater to the world. We cannot tolerate the world's behavior inside the church of Jesus Christ. Indeed we have just as much fellowship with those outside the church who behave in worldly ways as we do with those inside the church who behave in worldly ways (cp. 2 Thess. 3:6,14; Rom. 16:17). We are not to even associate with members who are "railers," "covetous," or a "fornicator." The term translated "to keep company" literally means "to mix up together." Paul

Golden Greek Nugget

In verse 13, Paul counsels the church to "put away" from them the one who is grievously sinning. Two Greek terms are placed together to translate "put away." The term "ek" means "out of" and "airo" means "to take up, remove." Hence, *exairo* means to "take up and remove out." It is a strong word indicating deliberate and decisive action. Church discipline takes moral courage and must be pursued for Christ's sake.

Wrap Up

Many churches have attempted to improve on God's remedy for dealing with sin in the church. Corinth's strategy was to remain silent. Of course, as we saw, silence is not a proper strategy at all. Silence was and still is a moral embarrassment to the church Jesus builds. Others compromise on what they feel are small, insignificant areas, but inevitably end up compromising Gospel integrity. We must face it: no strategy for church discipline exceeds the One Who designed and built the church. If we do church discipline, we must report the sin, remove the source of the sin, and follow the remedy the Lord provides.

