

# Church Discipline

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**1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (NKJV) “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! <sup>2</sup> And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. <sup>3</sup> For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. <sup>4</sup> In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>5</sup> deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. <sup>8</sup> Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. <sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. <sup>10</sup> Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup> But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner— not even to eat with such a person. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? <sup>13</sup> But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’”**

One of the most important and misunderstood responsibilities of the church is the accountability and discipline of its sinning and unrepentant members. There was a time when churches took this responsibility seriously and “letters” of good standing in a former congregation were required before a person could join another congregation. Unfortunately, in an age where personal freedom and privacy are defended in court, many churches have refused to hold its membership accountable. The idea that numbers of members equals church success has caused many churches to avoid church discipline issues in order to gain or maintain these numbers. Neglect of church discipline is unbiblical, irresponsible, destructive, and it receives a sharp rebuke by the apostle Paul.

The controversy over church discipline really centers around the question: “Does sin really matter?” If it does, then the second question is: “Does the church have a responsibility to confront sin in its fellowship?” Does the church have a responsibility to discipline sinning members?

Church discipline is important for many reasons. First, sin is scandalous. Scandalous sin by one of its members had gone unaddressed in the church. The report of a member committing incest with his stepmother had gone public. This kind of immorality was unheard of among the Gentiles, was illegal by Roman law, and was punishable by death in the Old Testament.

Neglect of church discipline was a sure sign of corruption in the church. Instead of mourning over sin and bringing necessary correction, the church’s neglect revealed its proud attitude toward sin.

Paul called for action—a convening of the church as a court to judge this matter. This court process had been established by Jesus' himself in Matthew 18:15-18. Although Paul was not present, he had already judged the man as though he were present. Paul invoked the authority (Name) and the power of the Lord Jesus Christ to impose church discipline by “delivering” the man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh! Few churches today are that serious about sin!

“To deliver” is a strong word that means “to give into the hands of another”. By delivering the sinning man into the hands of Satan, Paul was essentially thrusting the man away from the blessings of Christian fellowship and the merciful dealings of God shown to those who fear Him (Psalm 103:10-14). In this case Satan would have the ability to unleash the full measure of consequences of the man's sin for the “destruction of the flesh” in this present life (1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 John 5:16-17).

As harsh as that may sound, Paul's purpose for delivering such a one to Satan is not annihilation but fleshly ruin—severe chastening in this life in order to rescue the man from the ultimate destruction of his soul. Granted, while this kind of sentence often seems unloving by those who do not understand the serious nature of sin, the opposite is actually true.

First, it lovingly protects the church from the attitude and influence of the unrepentant person much the same way as cutting off a cancerous limb can prevent the cancer from spreading to the entire body. Second, it is more loving to take action against an unrepentant believer who is involved in blatant and shameless sin than to allow them to maintain a false sense of security through ignoring their sin. Third, church discipline is an act of love. The Lord disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6). Discipline can be severe, but the consequences of a lack of discipline can be more severe.

The goal of church discipline is the repentance and restoration of the sinning believer. The purpose of delivering a person to Satan is to produce brokenness in the life of the sinner so that he will humble himself, repent of his sin, and turn back to the Lord “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”. The “day of the Lord Jesus” is when Jesus Christ returns to give rewards to His faithful people.

The consequences of neglecting church discipline are serious. First, pride grows where there is no church discipline. We will either be proud in our sin or humble in our obedience. Second, sin spreads where there is no church discipline. Like leaven inflating bread, neglected or delayed judgment against sin allows a casual attitude toward sin to permeate the hearts of believers in the church. Third, when a church neglects to hold sinning members accountable for sin, the Lord will remove that church from its position of authority and influence (Revelation 2:5).

Worldly mindsets, behaviors, and lifestyles seek to infiltrate the church. The church faces a challenge. It must stay free of sin. Jesus our Passover has been sacrificed for sin. Therefore we are to “keep the feast” by getting rid of three kinds of sinful “leaven” in our lives. First is the “old leaven” which involves mindsets, reasoning, affections, desires, influences, behavior, and religious traditions that are contrary to the Word of God and are associated with our former life in the world. Second is the “leaven of malice” which is a bitter and persistent ill will or hatred toward someone that desires to see them experience pain, suffering, and harm. Third is the “leaven of wickedness” which is involvement in anything that is morally bad.

Once we get the sin out, we are to “keep the feast” with the “unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”. Sincerity speaks of the spiritual qualities of purity, honesty, and freedom from hypocrisy. Truth speaks of God's Word (John 17:17) that is the opposite of anything that is fictitious, feigned, or false. It is possible that Paul recalled Jesus' assertion that those who worship the Father must do so in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24).

Paul makes it clear that church discipline is not an option. Paul asserts that we are not to “keep company” with so-called believers whose sin is blatant, hardened, and shameless.

Although God will judge those outside the church, the church must judge those inside its fellowship. Of course, Paul is by no means talking about weak believers who, in times of temptation, are overtaken in a trespass or stumble into sin (Galatians 6:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; James 3:2). Rather the church must remove the unrepentant “evil person” through serious steps of restricting access to fellowship and/or rights of membership. As the church accepts responsibility to protect the holy nature of its fellowship through accountability and discipline as well as its witness before the world, it will regain its moral and spiritual voice and authority in this dark world.