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1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Church Discipline: Part 2

I've never liked cough syrup; it makes me gag as soon as I put it in my mouth. But if I can't stop coughing, and it's keeping me up at night, then I'm going to take that cough syrup, no matter how bad it tastes - because I detest my coughing fits and the lack of sleep they cause way more than the momentary unpleasant taste of cough syrup! And this doesn't just apply with cough syrup. Sometimes, taking certain medications can even make us uncomfortable afterwards. But if we understand the gravity of our sickness, or the severity of our symptoms, then we gladly take the medication. Why? Because we know that *it is good for us*, despite the unpleasantness it causes at first; a little bit of unpleasantness, discomfort, and even pain, in the short term leads to greater healing and relief - therefore, the healing effects of the medicine makes the unpleasantness worth it!

Last week, as we continued our trek through the Gospel of Matthew, our sermon text was *Matthew 18:15-20*. In that sermon, we tackled a difficult, yet necessary, topic of what it means to be and operate as a Christian church: the topic of **church discipline**. In Matthew 18, Jesus gives us *church discipline* like a doctor prescribes medicine to a sick patient; just like a disease that attacks and destroys our bodies, continues to grow and produce terrible symptoms, and even contagiously spreads to others around us, so our common *disease of sin* corrupts, harms, and destroys us. It does so to us as *individuals*, destroying our lives, hardening our hearts, and ultimately producing death. Our sin causes all kinds of terrible symptoms in our lives, for as we walk away from God's good design for our lives, our lives inevitably fall apart. But it doesn't just hurt us - our sin is contagious; it spreads to, infects, corrupts, and harms those around us. This is true for each individual. This is also true for us as a *church* - each local church is a *body*; just like a disease running through a physical body wreaks havoc, so sin, if unchecked, can run through a church body, infecting and corrupting other members of the church body.

But thankfully, Jesus has graciously given us medicine to treat the symptoms of the disease of sin in our church body! And part of that medicine is **church discipline**. This is what we saw in Matt. 18 last week. Jesus tells us there that part of our responsibility and authority as a church body includes dealing with unrepentant sin within the church community, among the

members of the church body. He tells us there that if a professing believer, who is a member of our church, sins in a clear way, then we are to lovingly yet firmly address their sin and call them to repentance in the least humiliating way possible (Matt. 18:15). But if he refuses to acknowledge and repent from this particular sin, Jesus tells us to involve others - at first two or three others, but if the person continues in unrepentant sin, then we must eventually bring it to the whole church (Matt. 18:16-17a). And even then, if the person refuses to repent when the whole church calls out his sin and calls him to repentance, then we are to put the unrepentant sinner outside of the community of church membership - we are to view him or her as a "Gentile or tax collector" - that is, as an unbeliever, a non-Christian. Historically, the church has referred to this as *excommunication*: if the person shows no signs of true repentance, then their faith is called into question, and if they refuse to repent, then the church must show that they can no longer call that person a Christian in good conscience by formally *removing them from membership* and no longer partake of the Lord's Supper.

Now, we saw this very clearly laid out for us in Matt. 18 last week. Jesus himself told us to do it. And this has been acknowledged as biblical throughout most of the history of the church - especially among Protestants since the Reformation. And so, many churches have an understanding of biblical church discipline outlined in their statement of faith and constitution - just like we do, here are Bread of Life. But if this is the case - if it is so biblically clear - then why don't we see it carried out in most churches these days - even in churches who officially acknowledge the doctrine in their constitution? Is it because unrepentant and public sins have become increasingly rare? We wish that were the case - but no, we know that it's not. There are, of course, thriving, healthy, and rigorously biblical churches that still faithfully carry out the commands of Christ, even when it involves the very difficult, even painful practice of church discipline today! But sadly, far too often, many churches today acknowledge the biblical doctrine of church discipline on paper, but neglect to practice it when they need to - when there are clear cases of unrepentant sin going on in the church. And I think the reason why is clear: ***church discipline is a very uncomfortable topic***. It can be very difficult, messy, and even painful to carry out at times. Our culture prizes tolerance above pretty much every other virtue - so it is quite risky to publicly call out a person for their sin in this day and age. And so, church discipline has become a contentious issue; it's even become a topic that many *Christians* are ashamed of, or view with disgust.

So why on earth, then, would we want to practice church discipline when it can be so difficult and uncomfortable to deal with? Well, the short answer is: *because Jesus commands it*. That is enough. The Bible really is God's Word; if we believe this, we must obey it. But the Bible isn't arbitrary; we don't blindly follow for no good reason - we know that God has *very good reasons and purposes for the commands he gives us!* They are for our good, the good of the church, the good of the lost, and for His glory! And so, God has graciously told us why *church discipline* is for our good as well. Though it is uncomfortable at first, maybe even painful at times, just like medicine brings health and strength to the body, so *church discipline* is medicine we need to deal with the symptoms of sin in our lives and church for the health of each member and the health of our church body as a whole. Therefore, we need to be firmly convinced of *what biblical church discipline is and why it is good and necessary for us today*.

And **1 Corinthians 5:1-13** helps us shows us just those very things. There are several other passages on church discipline in the New Testament, but this passage is the longest on the subject.¹ In it, Paul addresses a very clear, very public case of unrepentant sin in the church of Corinth, which he planted; the church is ignoring the sin and refusing to rebuke and call the church member to repentance - and so, Paul *rebukes the church*, and reminds them that they are required to do so; but he also reminds them - and us! - *why it is so necessary*: not only for the good of the whole church, *but also for the good of the individual sinner*. So let's see what this passage teaches us about *church discipline* and its medicinal purposes of grace for us in Christ's church.

I. What is Church Discipline? - If a Church Member is Clearly and Intentionally Sinning but Refuses to Repent, We Must Remove Him/Her from Membership (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 9-13)

Again, this is the same principle we saw Jesus teaching us last week, in Matt. 18. But here we see it applied in a real life situation, dealing with real people, in a real church. Just in case we might have been tempted to think, "Surely Jesus was just speaking with hyperbole, for dramatic effect? Surely he doesn't actually command us to deal with unrepentant sin publicly, call someone's profession of faith into question if it's not backed up by their life, and even kick them out of church membership?" If we're tempted to think that way, this passage cuts such

¹ Other relevant NT scriptures are Matt. 18:15-20; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 1:20; 5:19-20; Titus 3:9-11; Heb. 12:1-14.

think short; just as Jesus taught us, so Paul commands believers in the early church, under the authority of the Holy Spirit, to do the same.

In 1 Cor. 5:1, we learned that there was a man who was sinning in a very clear, public, and unrepentant way; we read: “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.” Most likely, this means that a man who professed faith in Christ and was a member of the church of Corinth was sleeping with his step-mother. The man was very clearly in sin; his sin was very public, every one knew about it; and the man was walking unrepentantly in this sin - even though he knew it was wrong, he justified his behavior, did not repent from it, and kept willingly living in this sinful lifestyle. But even though his sin was known, *the church did not do anything about it, but tolerated it.*

Paul rebukes them, in verse 2, saying, “And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” IN verse 6, he says, “Your boasting is not good.” Paul rebukes them for not dealing with this situation by practicing church discipline; but he also rebukes the church for *arrogantly boasting* about this situation. We might wonder, “what could there possibly be to boast about if such a clear, terrible issue of scandalous sin was going on?” The clearest answer seems to be: they were most likely *boasting about their “gracious tolerance” of this sinner.* It seems the church boasted that they didn’t deal with this sin and just let it go on because of how loving, gracious, and tolerant we are. And this sounds very much like what we might find among Christians and churches today, doesn’t it? Cases of gross immorality and unrepentant sin pop up in churches all the time; but as we’ve already talked about, many Christians and churches today shy away from dealing with them because we’ve bought into the lie of our culture that *to love someone* means we must *tolerate and accept their behavior.* And so, some might say, “it is *unloving, ungracious, or unkind* to confront someone in their sin, especially in a public way, let alone remove them from church membership! And how dare we call someone’s faith or salvation into question! We would never be so intolerant here! After all, we’re *loving and gracious*; we don’t judge people.” But if that is our stance, than we are more *tolerant and accepting* than Jesus is; and that means we aren’t being gracious, loving, or kind at all. After all, love requires tough love at times; it requires *passing judgment* on the fruit of faith and repentance in the lives of fellow Christians, fellow church members. Paul tells us this very clearly at the end of this passage: “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it

not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside.. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’” (vv.12-13).

No, it is not loving or kind to ignore sin in each other’s lives; especially not when the sin is clear and unrepentant; especially not when it is public in nature and lots of people know about it, both inside and outside the church walls. It’s not loving to let the sin fester, for that will only destroy the individual and spread to others. No, if we are truly going to walk in love and obey Christ faithfully, we must deal with it. How? By practicing *biblical church discipline*.

The first steps of discipline that we saw last week called for it to be done in the least humiliating way possible. However, it’s impossible to keep the matter private in Corinth at this point: the man’s sin is clear and public; his unrepentant sin is already known. This means the church is left with no choice but to follow through with the last, final stage of church discipline: *to remove the unrepentant man from church membership*. This is what the church in Corinth failed to do; and so, Paul very clearly tells them this is what they must do, in vv. 2-5: “Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 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. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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.” Now, that last verse requires some more explanation - but we will return to it later, in our final point.

For now, let’s simply make these observations:

1. First, though Paul has already personally decided that this is the case and needs to be done, he tells them that *the whole congregation* is required to officially make this declaration - they are to do this when “assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus” - in other words, when they are gathered together at church, like on Sunday, or at what we would call a “church members meeting” or “business meeting.”

2. Secondly, Paul tells them to “remove” this unrepentant sinner from “among you.” Or, to use the language we use today: he’s telling them to remove this person from church membership; to no longer consider him a Christian or member of the church body.

3. Thirdly, the issue is not that this man committed a sin, even a grievous sin - but rather, that he is clearly living in an ongoing lifestyle of sin; he is refusing to repent; he is living in a way that is simply not OK for a professing Christian to live without being convicted by the Holy

Spirit and striving to turn away from it. This does not mean we're to go around publicly condemning every person living in sin, either - it is specifically reserved for people who *claim to be believers*, being members of a church community, but are not producing the fruit of repentant faith and godliness, but are instead living in sin and refusing to acknowledge or turn from it. We see this fleshed out explicitly in vv. 9-13:

“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - 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. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who *bears the name of brother* if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler - not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders?” (that is, non-believers) “Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (That is, church members.) “God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”

Clearly, Paul wants us to understand firmly that this applies to *church members, people who profess faith in Christ as Christians, but walk in unrepentant sin*. And not just the gross cases of immorality, but people who are “greedy” and “swindlers” - people who have greedy hearts, who rip people off, who take advantage of customers or employees at work, or other such sins. It includes “idolaters” and “drunkards.” It even includes a “reviler.” Other translations translate this word as a “slanderer,” or someone who is “verbally abusive;” the KJV says “railer” - the idea being someone who is known for angrily railing at others when he doesn't get his way. In short, it's talking about someone who is known for just being a bully - maybe not physically, but still trying to throw his weight around with his words and temper to get his way.

And so the list could go on; but we get the point: this applies to any unrepentant sinner - even more so the more clear and public it is. We must deal with it by removing the unrepentant sinner from our church membership, making very clear we don't consider them a believer and call them to repent.

The action we must take is very clear. But still we might ask, “Why is this what we're supposed to do?” Two main reasons are given in the text; let's look at them one at a time:

II. Why is Church Discipline Needed? - For the Good of the Whole Church Body (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

We see this in verses 6-8: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For

Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Sin is contagious - it influences, infects, and corrupts others. Unrepentant sin in the church, that is not address and is only allowed to continue, causes harm to others in the church - even to the church itself. It profanes the gospel witness and hinders our mission. It brings dishonor to the name of Christ. Therefore, church discipline is good *for the whole church body*. If we don't deal with the unrepentant sins and immoral lifestyles of those within the church - *especially* when they are public in nature, or among church leaders who are held up as examples - then the sin will *corrupt and influence other people in the church as well*. A little “leaven” of sin in the the church will corrupt and destroy the whole church - just like a little bit of “leaven” will change and transform an entire lump of dough, turning it from “unleavened” flat bread to “leavened” bread that rises.

For example, if a child grows up seeing his parents promote sinful things as good, then he will learn to adopt those same sinful views and lifestyles as well. And so a son might learn to deal with his problems in anger, the way his father does. A child might learn to think that it is perfectly normal and OK to watch inappropriate things because their parents do.

And so it is in the church. If a new Christian starts going to a new church, he or she will be learning what it means to be a Christian, in all areas of lif - as a church member, a husband or wife, a mother or father, or CHristian *anything* - by the examples of other people in the church. And so, if a young Christian man reads in the Bible that lust is wrong, but then sees that several men in the church actively pursue lustful desires and lifestyles, and there is absolutely *no recourse* taken by others in the church in calling those men to repentance - well, then he might conclude that such actions are perfectly acceptable among Christians, just like it is in the secular world. Or if a new CHristian reads in her Bible that gossip, slander, and divisive talk is a serious sin, but then sees prominent women in the church partaking in it all the time, maybe even inviting her into it - well, then, she might very well conclude this is just normal, acceptable Christian behavior. Yet all the while, they are simply being corrupted by the sinful influence of others in the church.

This is even more so the case when a church leader is involved. If a pastor or deacon, for example, is held up as a spiritual leader and example of Christian maturity, even though they have obvious sins in their life that are never corrected, then this sends a dangerous message to

everyone else in the church: it tells everyone that *those sins* are OK. “After all, Brother Billy is a deacon, seen as a mature, godly man and leader in the church - if he cheats on his wife and cheats on his taxes, then such behavior must just be normal and acceptable among CHristians, at least in this church - right?” Or, “Just look at Pastor Willy. Sure, he reeks of pride, abuses his power in the church by being domineering, wanting to get everything his own way or else his temper flares into an angry outburst; really, come to think of it, he’s really just a *church bully* - but, it must be OK, because he is a leader in the church, after all; and I do the same thing at times, so this must just all be normal, acceptable behavior, right?” If we don’t deal with the clear, public, ongoing sins of church leaders, *that* is the message we’re sending to people. Seeing this go on publicly in the church, some might conclude those things must not be sins. Others might conclude that, even though they are sins, repentance, obedience and holiness must not really matter among Christians after all, since even the “mature ones” willingly sin and live unrepentantly lifestyles anyways, just like the church. Either way, when we hold up such people as godly leaders and examples, without addressing their sin or without confession and repentance on their part, we are simply ignoring and justifying sin, endorsing hypocrisy, and *undermining the gospel’s demand for repentance and obedience*.

Make no mistake, the good news of the gospel of Christ is unending mercy and grace by the blood of Jesus! But it is only for those who *repent and believe in the gospel*. True faith is a repentant faith. Where there is not repentance, there is no forgiveness.

If we tolerate unChristian sin and lifestyles in the church without applying the gospel to them, then we will slowly become an unChristian church. Brothers and Sisters, let us take the medicine that Jesus Christ, our soul’s physician, has given us, so that we might be a healthy body - a healthy church! Let us obey Christ and love each other enough by *carrying out church discipline*.

For this is also the only way we can truly love our unrepentant brother or sister who’s living in sin. THis leads us to our final point:

III. Why is Church Discipline Needed? - So that the Unrepentant Sinner would Repent, for his/her Own Salvation (1 Cor. 5:5)

The goal of church discipline is *always* for the good of the person being disciplined. The goal is never to publicly shame or punish a person, or seek vengeance. The goal is for that

individual to *acknowledge, confess, and repent of their sin so that they can cling to the gospel of grace through faith*. The goal of church discipline is the individual sinner's *restoration and salvation*.

We see this in verses 5-6: "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus... 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."

Now, this verse sounds odd to us, but let me unpack it this way: Paul often uses the word "flesh" to refer to the way of life of *unbelief*: to walk by the "flesh" is to walk in a lifestyle of ongoing sin; but to walk by the "spirit" is to live a life that reflects the righteousness of Christ, by the "fruit" of the Holy Spirit within each believer (for example, we see this in Rom. 8:3-8). To live by the flesh is to identify with the unbelieving world - for all people, apart from Christ, are slaves to sin and under the dominion of Satan. But the church is an outpost of the Kingdom of Christ - it is *safe* for us in here; this is where the Lord heals and grows us. So when we exercise church discipline and put them out of membership, we are declaring that we think they are not of the church, but the world, not under the protection of Christ, but the dominion of Satan, because they are living not by the Spirit but by the flesh - that is, unrepentant sin.

But here the reason Paul gives for this extreme language: "***so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.***" The whole point of church discipline is to serve as a *wake-up call*, to be a means of the Holy Spirit convicting the individual of his or her sin so that it leads to *repentance and salvation* - as Paul says, so that "his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." We must take this very seriously: when someone is walking in unrepentant sin, their *salvation* is at stake. True believers eventually repent. The goal is that as this extreme final stage of discipline happens, and they are removed from membership, it leads to this person *repenting*. Maybe this means for the first time, so that they truly become a believer! Or, maybe this shows that the person was already a believer and is finally turning back to the Lord, like the prodigal son! Either way, *repentance is a sign of true faith, and therefore, an assurance of salvation in the gospel of Christ*.

That is our goal. That each person would be saved. That each person would believe in the gospel of Christ! And not just in their minds, or to profess this with their lips - but that each man and woman, each adult and child, would truly *turn away from sin and turn to Christ in faith*; that each person would truly believe the gospel of Christ: the good news that we are saved *by grace*

along, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone! That Jesus lived a perfect life in our place, died on the cross to take away God's wrath against our sin, and rose again victorious on the third day! This is the good news of the gospel. So let us all *repent and believe* this morning - not by turning to our own moral perfection, but by turning to the sufficient grace of Jesus.

If you have questions about this gospel, about becoming a Christian, or about church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can come now, or find me after the service. Let us pray.