

"That His Spirit May Be Saved"

Our session thought it would be appropriate to talk about church discipline today as we made announcements of the various members who have been removed from our membership rolls. The Reformed tradition typically identifies three marks of a true church: one, the preaching of God's Word, two, the administration of the sacraments, and three, the exercise of church discipline. And so church discipline is an important aspect of a church. It means that each of us as Christians are not out there on our own as Christians, just you and God, but that we are part of a community of fellow believers. And this community includes accountability, especially as Christ has entrusted this job of shepherding the flock to the elders of the church.

And so as we look at this passage in 1 Corinthians 5, we find this subject of church discipline being addressed. Paul is rebuking the Corinthian church for not administering church discipline for a wayward Christian. Paul then steps in on their behalf and tells them how they ought to handle this issue. Paul uses his special apostolic authority to render a judgment in this church discipline case. And so let's take a look at this passage for today and see what it tells us about the nature and importance of church discipline.

First, let's understand the background to this passage. There was a brother, a Christian in the Corinthian church, who had engaged in what Scripture defines as incest. A man had become involved intimately with his father's wife - presumably his step-mother. Verse 1 might even be idiomatic to say that this man married his father's wife. Leviticus and Deuteronomy both repeatedly lay out laws against this behavior, and place it in the category of incest. And by the way, note that this passage does not give any evidence to think that the step-mother was a Christian - presumably she was not. And so because of that, this passage focuses the church discipline and this issue of sin primarily on this man who claimed to be a Christian.

And Paul makes it very clear how outrageous this sin was. He says in verse 1 that this behavior would be unheard even among the pagan gentiles. That is saying a lot when you remember that the city of Corinth was a place infamously known for its sexual immorality. And yet Paul says that even among a place known for sexual immorality, this would *not* be normally acceptable behavior. And yet it happened among the Corinthian church, without any apparent disciplinary action from the church.

And clearly this sin is not something that would affect only this man and woman. People sometimes like to think that - "Oh what happens behind closed doors in the privacy of my own home is no one else's business." And yet clearly that's not the case with this incident. Look how Paul describes the situation in verse 1. Paul says, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality *among you*." Did you catch that? The report of the sexuality immorality had been connected with the church; not so much with the specific man, but with the church. Whatever may have happened with this man and his step mom, it obviously had brought public shame to the church. The word was out on the street: "That Christian church in Corinth has sexual immorality going on in it." And if this incestuous behavior was something that disgusted even the pagan gentiles, then certainly this report was not going to help the witness of the church in Corinth.

And so the background to this church discipline case in one sense was about a professing Christian engaging in the sin of incest. However, the sin was clearly affecting the church there as well. Just look at how Paul rebukes the Corinthians in verses 2 and 6. In these verses Paul rebukes the church for its pride and arrogance. They were puffed up and boasting. We're not told exactly how they were prideful in this situation. It doesn't tell us exactly what they were boasting about. It's possible that they were proud of this new relationship between the man and his step mom. I hope not. It's also possible that Paul was referring to their pride as a church in a more general way. Maybe the church and its leaders were proud about how their church was growing and doing ministry. Maybe they were going around praising their ministry and work. But Paul says that should not have been their attitude. When this sin happened, it should have caused the church to stop what it was doing and attend to this issue. Someone had publically sinned and was not willing to repent over it. The church should have been grieved. The church should have stopped any boasting that it was doing and turned inward to address this issue. The church should have fallen to its knees, saddened by this sin and look for their brother to be restored to a living that is consistent with his profession of faith in Christ. The church should have been broken in this action, not going around in pride.

In other words - this sin affected two groups: It affected the man and woman who committed it. But it also had effects on the entire church. This meant that the church must act, for both the sake of this Christian brother who had fallen in sin, and for the sake of the entire church.

But if the church was not willing to act, Paul certainly would. Beginning in verse 3, Paul declares to them his own authoritative judgment on this matter. If the church would not discipline and judge this brother through the ordinary courts of the church, then Paul would use his special apostolic authority to act. Paul's judgment would come as an official act of church discipline. He would judge this brother and his sin. You see the church should have done this. The church should have judged in this matter. When that didn't happen, Paul stepped up as apostle to initiate what the church should have already done.

Now this might be a helpful time to discuss what some might see as a contradiction. Didn't Jesus tell us not to judge, lest we be judged, and here Paul is judging and calling the church to judge (i.e. Matthew 7:1)? Well, as in most cases, context is everything. When Jesus called people not to judge, that was in the context of people condemning other's sins in a very legalistic way, while at the same time wanting grace and forgiveness for their own sins. And so Jesus was calling people to individually treat one another with the very sort of grace that they wanted to receive. Jesus wants us as individuals to not go around condemning but pointing people to God's grace. But that doesn't mean we ignore sin. That doesn't mean that we make people think sin is no big deal for a Christian. No, Jesus himself says in Matthew 18, that when issues of sin cannot be resolved between individuals, to take it to the church. The church can then judge on the matter and seek to resolve any areas of unrepentant sin among believers. The church officers have been especially appointed for that purpose, to shepherd the flock, and even to discipline it, according to God's word. This is part of what discipleship even means. The church as it disciplines its members is holding people accountable to the commands of Christ. That especially includes faith and repentance. And so when a Christian's life is not characterized by faith and repentance, the church must step in for everyone's well being.

And so that is what Paul does here. He initiates judgment and discipline against this sinning brother. Let's look at Paul's judgment further. Notice first that Paul says that this act of discipline is to be an official act of the church. In

verse 4, Paul describes that this church discipline is to be announced when the Corinthian church is gathered together. Though Paul couldn't be there physically - verse 3, he was writing to tell them that he would be with them spiritually - verse 4. So Paul, along with the church, would execute this judgment against the sinning brother.

And yet just because this was an official act of the church doesn't mean that it's a human judgment. No, Paul says in verse 4 that this was an action to be taken in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and with the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Recall back to the Matthew 18 passage we read earlier in the service. When Jesus was describing church discipline, he said that whenever two or three are gathered in his name, then Christ would be there with them. Jesus' statement was particularly in the context of church discipline. Christ is calling his church to discipline. He has ordained officers in the church to lead this effort. And so when church discipline happens, the authority comes from Jesus. It's not a mere human authority; it's the authority of Christ which has been entrusted to the church.

Just remember the Great Commission. Before Jesus ascended up into heaven, Jesus declared "all authority has been given to men in heaven and on earth." After making that bold declaration, Jesus then sends out the eleven disciples to a ministry of discipleship and evangelism. These eleven then serve as the foundation to the New Testament church. And so that foundation comes from Jesus, the one with all authority. And so Paul calls for the discipline to be executed in this way: an official act of the church, with Paul there in spirit, and more importantly with Christ and his authority there in Spirit!

So let's look then next at what this church discipline actually entails. In other words, what's the discipline being laid on the person? In the civil world, if I break a traffic law, I might get a ticket, or even lose my license. What's the judgment being placed on this sinning man? Well Paul describes this discipline in verse 5. He describes it as the person being delivered over to Satan! Wow! What does that mean? Well, verses 2 and 13 help further describe this. Paul says in verse 2 that the person should be taken away from among the church. In verse 13 Paul says that they must put away from themselves that wicked person. The NIV translates verse 13 saying, "Expel the wicked man from among you." And so Paul is talking about excommunication. They were to remove this man from being one of their own. They were in a sense giving this person back to the world. And if they are giving this person back to the world, they are in a sense giving him back to Satan. For the realm of the world is where we find Satan at work attacking man. When we become Christian, Scripture talks about us being saved out of the world. We are still physically in the world, but are no longer of the world. But now, when this judgment is placed upon this wayward brother, he will no longer be considered a brother. The church will tell him that he is no longer to be considered one of the saints. He is being taken out of the protection of God's house and being placed back into the world. He had lived like one of the world, now he was going back to the world.

This is what verses 10-12 flush out in greater measure. Paul mentions a previous letter that he had written to the Corinthians. In that letter, Paul had told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. But Paul clarifies: he didn't mean don't associate with non-Christians who are sexually immoral - otherwise they'd have to leave the world. But that obviously is not an option - for that matter, the church can't be a witness if it tries to escape the world. No, what Paul was talking about was associating with people *in the church* who took on this lifestyle. If someone is a member in the church but starts living in sexuality immorality, or

living in any other sins that are inconsistent with the Christian faith, we must change how we relate to the person.

What Paul is talking about is Christian fellowship. We should not give false hope to those who claim to be Christian but don't live like it. If they claim to be Christian, but their walk shows that they still revel in sin, then we shouldn't ignore the problem. If we see a fellow Christian in such a state, we should make clear to them that their actions are in opposition to their professed faith. We shouldn't give such people false hope. We know the world will act that way, but Christians must not. Ultimately, if their actions are not changed, church discipline will then step in and give them back to the world. They will be officially removed from the fellowship of the church. They will be expelled from the communion of the saints. They will be delivered over to Satan. We call this excommunication. That's what Paul is calling the Corinthian church to do to this wayward brother. They are to excommunicate him.

And of course, when excommunication happens, that doesn't mean that we never speak to the person again. It means that from then on we treat the person as a non-Christian. That's what Jesus had said in Matthew 18. We treat the person as a tax collector or sinner. How do we treat non-Christians? How do we treat those who are of the world? We evangelize to them! We call them to faith and to repentance.

Of course, this action of excommunication makes one important assumption: church membership. It assumes that there is church membership in place. You see, not every Christian church today practices church membership. In the same way, not every church today practices church discipline. But these things go hand in hand. And though the Scriptures do not use the exact word of church membership, clearly we see church membership described and assumed in the Bible. This passage is a great example of that. First, just look at all the references that Paul makes to the Corinthian church collectively. In verses 1, 2, and 13, Paul refers to them collectively as an officially recognized group. Verse 1: "among you." Verse 2: "among you." Verse 13: "put away from yourselves." When verses 2 and 13 talk about removing the wicked man from the church, that assumes there is some membership recognized that they would be officially removed from. Verses 10-11 make the distinction between those of the world and those named as a brother. The very fact that some are named as a brother suggests a formal recognition of who is a member in the church. Verses 12-13 make the same sort of distinction, referring to those who are inside and those who are outside. And Paul says that church discipline only deals with those who are inside. All these things clearly teach a biblical practice of church membership. The church must distinguish in some formal way who are the fellow saints and who are not. Church discipline requires it.

Of course, this isn't something new to the New Testament Church. Even the saints in the Old Testament in the nation of Israel had a similar practice of both church membership and church discipline. In the Old Testament there are various laws where someone could be cut off from God's people because of various sins. In the passage from Leviticus which we read we saw the punishment listed for this specific sin of incest - death. That's a permanent form of church discipline. They would be permanently cut off from God's people. But the severity of the punishments in the Old Testament gave a picture of the coming final judgment, that great and terrible Day of the Lord, where God would come to judge humanity at the last day.

Okay, so we've looked at this case of church discipline. We've seen what it meant and how it was to be executed. It was a formal act of excommunication by the church. That was the nature of this church discipline. But what was its purpose? Why must the church do this? I think there are two important purposes listed in this passage.

The first purpose: church discipline preserves the peace and purity of the church. It protects the church. Paul says in verse 7 that when an unrepentant sinner is allowed to remain in the fellowship of the church, it is like a bit of leaven. It only takes a little bit of leaven to raise the whole lump of dough. Paul sees the unrepentant sinner as a danger and threat to the church. Sin is infecting. If one person can get away with a sin, so to speak, others will be more inclined to do the same. "Well he's a Christian and he does that..." Or, that unrepentant sinner could go on a crusade in the church trying to convince others of the appropriateness of their actions. No, these things must not go unchallenged. Christ calls the church to protect its members from those who would lead them into sin.

The second purpose of church discipline: it is to restore the fallen brother. Church discipline aims at shaking the wayward sinner back to repentance. Remember, discipline is corrective. The church is not just out to condemn. We want to correct. That's the interesting thing about church discipline. If the person ends up repenting and being restored, this judgment turns out to be merely discipline. They are eventually restored and saved. But if not, then the judgment is actually for them condemnation, resulting in eternal damnation.

You see, that is the seriousness of the issue. That's what Paul is saying in verse 5. He'd rather deliver the brother now to Satan, that he might be shaken up through this process, that he might turn from his sins of the flesh. Paul wants his sinful nature, his old man according to the flesh, to be destroyed, that he could return to the church in faith and repentance. Why? Because Paul is looking to the Lord's return. Verse 5 mentions the Day of the Lord. That is a good day for those who are Christ's, and a terrible day for those of the world. Paul wants this brother to be restored to the faith before this day of Lord. The hope is that this excommunication wakes up the brother to the seriousness of the sin and tells him that his lifestyle of unrepentant sin is not in accordance with his Christian testimony.

This is how the Old Testament command is reconciled with the practice of the New Testament church. In the old covenant, the punishment for this sin of incest was physical death. This is physical death that would quickly meet eternal death. In an ultimate sense, when Christ returns, that is still the final punishment for incest. If someone refuses to repent of such sin, they show themselves to be a non-Christian, and will ultimately taste eternal death. But this is the graciousness of the new covenant. In the new covenant, God extends the opportunity for repentance now, allowing for the one who commits incest to be excommunicated instead of exterminated, sent back out to the world, spared from immediate physical death, that he would have opportunity to yet be saved from eternal death and damnation.

And so this is church discipline: It is our grief over sin turned toward protecting the church and looking to reclaim the wayward sinner. And what great hope we have amidst all this in verse 7. Verse 7 says, "For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us." In verses 7-8 Paul is comparing this excommunication with how the Jews celebrated the Passover. When the Jews celebrated Passover, they had to remove all the leaven from their homes and eat unleavened bread. The celebration culminated with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. And of course, this festival celebrated how God had brought the people out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt. And so during the ceremony, it was inconsistent for them to have leaven in their house when they were celebrating the Passover.

But Paul uses the Passover as an analogy to this situation. He compares this person under church discipline with the leaven. He says that just as the leaven

must be removed in the Passover celebration, so this man must be removed from the church. He then compares the church as the rest of the loaf. If they remove this man, then the church will remain unaffected by his sin, remaining as one unleavened loaf, so to speak. And why is this? What reason does Paul give? Because Jesus is the Passover lamb! That's what he says in verse 7. He brings his whole Passover analogy to a climax by pointing to Christ's sacrifice. And why not? If the purpose of church discipline is the purity of the church and the restoration of the excommunicated sinner, then Christ is the answer. He is the climax. It is Christ's sacrifice on the cross that has made the church pure. And it is Christ's sacrifice on the cross that is the means for the excommunicated to be restored. In church discipline, both the church and the one under discipline must turn their focus to Christ the savior, the great Passover lamb! The one who gives us freedom from the bondage of sin!

And so in verse 8 Paul charges them to keep the festival with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Paul is not telling them to keep the Passover in a literal sense. He's not talking specifically about the Lord's Supper here either. But he is applying the analogy he just made. He made the analogy between Passover and church discipline. And so when he says to "keep the festival" he's commanding us to do church discipline when the situation arises. Church discipline is not optional. It is a command. And it's all to God's glory.

Saints of God, church membership is important. Being a member in Christ's church comes with external benefits. You are part of God's covenant community where each week you receive the Lord's blessings in the worship service. Each week you are formally reminded of the assurance of God's pardon in Jesus Christ. You receive the teaching and instruction of God's word. For members who have come of age and confess Christ you can partake in the communion of the Lord's Supper. All these are great external benefits. But one of the external benefits is church discipline. Yes, that's right. If you were to look at a list of benefits for church members, it would include church discipline. You have the benefit of being shepherded and held accountable to God's word. That is a benefit.

Now I've mentioned that these are "external" benefits. That's right. They are external. But they can also be internal benefits. See, everyone who is a member in the visible church receives these external benefits, but you only receive the internal benefits if you truly believe. There are certainly people in the church who profess Christ but eventually through their actions show that they are not true believers. Such people have received the external benefits of the church but not the internal ones.

But when it becomes clear that someone who is externally benefiting from their membership in the church, but is not internally a true believer, that's when church discipline comes in. That's why it's a blessing. If someone is excommunicated because their actions show that there is an underlying problem with their faith, it's because we want that person to really, truly, know Christ. We see that they are only tasting externally of the benefits of the church. And so by excommunicating them, by sending them back into the world and to Satan, we remove those external benefits with the hope that they will return in true faith and true repentance, so that they can begin to taste of the true internal benefits of being a member in the body of Christ!

And so it's my prayer that you would all see the importance of both church membership and church discipline. I think it's partly due to our postmodern society that today many no longer like the idea of church membership or discipline. It's the postmodern mindset that we are all on our own solitary spiritual journey - we may interact with one another, but don't come to me with any claims of

authority. "Don't tell me where I should be or how I should act.. I'm in a relationship between God and me and if he wants to tell me something he can." Well, there's an element of truth there - yes, we are individually in a relationship with Christ. Yes, Christ does work in us directly by his Holy Spirit. Yes, we are all on a spiritual journey. But God's Word very clearly, repeatedly shows that when we become Christian we are being brought into a body of believers. We are saved into a community. That's why when we are baptized, we are baptized into the body of Christ. That's why when we eat of the Supper, we have fellowship with Christ and with one another. And in this divinely established community of believers, Christ has appointed elders and ministers to shepherd the flock. And he has charged them and the church to guide, and even discipline, its members, as needed. So, regardless of what our postmodern culture tries to tell us about our faith, we must first listen to God's Word. His Word tells us that membership in the church, and even church discipline, is part of what it means to be a Christian. It's an obligation, but it's also a benefit of being a Christian. Why throw away such a wonderful benefit! Especially when we are commanded not to!

And so when we see church discipline in action, may we respond appropriately. If you are the one under discipline, may you humble yourself and repent. Repent even before you have to face excommunication. And for those who are excommunicated from the church - pray for them. Pray for their restoration. And share the gospel with them. Treat them as those who desperately need Christ's grace. That brings us back to the membership announcements we made earlier. Some of our members, by withdrawing their membership and not seeking to find membership at a church, have voluntarily excommunicated themselves. This should break our hearts. It should cause us to grieve. And we should then see them as outside the church - and evangelize to them. Share the gospel with them. Call them back to the church. Point to Jesus Christ, our Passover lamb and savior. Amen.

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Last week we received Will Hankins as the newest member of our church. And you'll notice that we formally receive members during the worship service. In the same way, it is fitting that when people become no longer members of our church that we provide some official announcement to you of this change in their status. This is something we've not done recently, and you'll notice in your bulletins for today that we are trying to catch up on that.

And let me note that this might look like a long list of members leaving. Most of these people have actually not been attending our church for a long time but technically they were still officially on our membership rolls. The session has realized that this is something we've let go too long and have been trying to get caught up on cleaning up our membership roster to accurately reflect who is under our care. So, that's part of the reason why we now have this longer list of membership updates.

And so before we go to our time of prayer I'd like to give a few updates on some of the people who are now no longer members of our church. Then we will pray for these people.

First, please note that Jenny Hibbitts has transferred her membership to Tates Creek Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Lexington, KY. This is of course our preferred method of handling people's membership when they move away - to transfer it to another Christian church.

The rest of the membership announcements I have fall into a technical class called "erasure". These members have been erased from our membership rolls. Technically "erasure" is a form of church discipline. I'll give you a brief explanation for each member, however, because the nature of each erasure can vary pretty significantly.

The first erasure is with the Perkins family: Kevin, Marilyn, and Joshua Perkins, along with Jason May, have been erased from our church membership per their request. They are now attending the Calvary Chapel in Petaluma. Normally, we would have transferred their membership, but Calvary Chapels don't have formal membership which meant we couldn't actually transfer them in that case.

Next, we've also erased Matthew Jones from our church membership (this is Jerry's son) because he has not been attending the regular worship services and we've not been able to make any contact with him for many years. Hopefully one day we will be able to resume contact with him, but for now please pray for his spiritual well being. Jerry actually recently heard through the grapevine that he might be coming back to the area.

We've also erased Joel Miller from our church membership by his request. Sadly, Joel has expressed to me that he does not have a saving faith in Jesus Christ. This was a hard admission for Joel as you could imagine, especially being the son of a pastor. Please especially pray for Joel and for his salvation.

Finally, we've also erased Joseph Hibbitts from our church membership by his request. Joseph has moved to San Francisco and has not attended our church for many years. We've tried to persuade him to find a Christian church to transfer his membership to down there but for now he is not interested in that. He does casually attend the services of a Catholic church down there but is not seeking membership there either at this time. Please also pray for his spiritual well being.

And so those are our announcements to get caught up on some of these members who have left our church. Please do remember these people in your prayers. I'm especially concerned about Joel Miller and Joseph Hibbitts who have essentially excommunicated themselves from the visible church at this point.