

# Dealing with Sin in the Church, Part 1

2 Corinthians 2:5–11

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## Introduction

We return this morning to our study of the Book of 2 Corinthians, so I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Paul's Second Letter to the church at Corinth.

This morning we have the privilege of hosting a number of law enforcement offers from our community. During the second service, over 100 police offers who patrol the city of Los Angeles will have responded to Pastor John's invitation to join us for a Sunday morning honoring their commitment to protecting our society, and hearing what the Word of God has to say about *them*: the civil authorities. And Pastor John has mentioned that he had this idea to honor these men and women in light of numerous controversial events that have taken place on a national scale in recent months.

And I don't want to steal his thunder, but he's mentioned that he intends to preach from Romans 13, and will highlight the various institutions that God has raised up for the sake of restraining evil and maintaining order in a society. He mentioned these institutions before his sermon last week: there's the conscience, the family, the government, and the church. Each of these God-ordained institutions serves to restrain evil and maintain order in a society. And I would imagine that Pastor John is going to focus quite a bit on that third institution, the government, because that is the institution that these men and women are a part of.

But as providence would have it, our study in the Book of 2 Corinthians has brought us this morning to consider the fourth of those institutions, the church—yet, perhaps from a slightly different angle. You see, just as there is a great need for law and order to keep the peace in a civil society, so also is there a need for such law and order in the *church*. A civil society that has no laws, or that has no system of order to enforce those laws—no system to punish and rehabilitate offenders—well, that society is doomed to chaos. So severe is the nature of human depravity—so sinful is man in his natural state—that a society of depraved human beings unrestrained by law and order is just unthinkable.

And the same is true of the church. Now, yes, it's true that our depravity has been overcome by the work of Christ on the cross; it's true that we who are believers in Christ have the Holy Spirit of God dwelling inside of us, directing our desires and causing us to strive against the flesh, and leading us to walk in righteousness. But, those realities are not true for all who would sit between these walls. Even in the church, there are those who believe that they're saved, but who have not

yet turned from their sins and put their trust in Christ alone for their righteousness; there are those who have not experienced the miracle of the new birth. But even for those of us who *are* true Christians and who *have* been born again—even though we have been set free from the *penalty* of sin, and the *power* of sin through the Gospel—we have not yet been set free from the *presence* of sin in our flesh. Galatians 5:17: “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.” Paul says in Romans 7, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”

And so even though we who belong to Christ have been declared righteous in God’s sight on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, we nevertheless strive against the presence of remaining sin in our flesh. It is unhappy to admit it, but Christians sin. And that means that the church needs to know how to deal with sin in its midst. There needs to be law and order in the church—a process for identifying, disciplining, and rehabilitating sinners.

And the Lord Jesus Christ has provided that law and order for His church, hasn’t He? The rule of law in the church is the Word of God; the standard for conducting oneself as a citizen of the kingdom of God is laid out in the New Testament Scriptures. This Book is, in a manner of speaking, our rule of law. But Christ didn’t only provide law for His church; He also provided order. He instituted a system to be followed when the law was broken, in order to restrain sin in the church. And we have that system of order laid out for us in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 18. If there is sin in the church, there is to be *private* rebuke: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private.” If he does not repent, but persists in his sin, there is to be *plural* rebuke: “Take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.” If he still doesn’t repent, there is to be *public* rebuke: his sin is made known to the church, and the church is to pursue him. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, then he is to be put out of the church and regarded as unbeliever—because in refusing to let go of his sin he’s acting like an unbeliever, and may even be showing himself to truly *be* an unbeliever, despite his profession of faith.

This is the system of order that the Lord Jesus Himself instituted for the sake of dealing with sin in the church. We often call it “church discipline.” And as long as there are sinful people in the church—which is to say, *always*, on this side of heaven—as long as there is sin in the church, the church needs to be equipped to *deal* with sin in the church, according to the instructions the Lord Jesus left us.

And the situation that was going on between the Apostle Paul, the false apostles, and the Corinthians provides a prime example of how church discipline is to be carried out.

We've spoken about the controversy that Paul was dealing with that occasioned the writing of this letter. False teachers claiming to be apostles had infiltrated the church at Corinth and began doing everything they could to discredit Paul in the eyes of the believers there. The controversy led Paul to visit the Corinthians ahead of schedule, as he hoped his personal presence would help to quell the rebellion that had arisen. But as we learned last time, in chapter 2 verse 1, this visit turned out to be a sorrowful visit. While he was there, one of the men who belonged to the church of Corinth, but who was led astray by the false apostles, openly defied Paul and publicly insulted him before the church. This is the "offender" that he speaks of in 2 Corinthians 7:12. But worse than that open insult, the rest of the Corinthian church failed to take disciplinary action against this man. Rather than coming to Paul's defense and defending the Gospel that Paul preached, the Corinthians were taken in by this false teaching, and allowed this man's sin to go unchecked.

As we know, Paul then returned immediately to Ephesus and wrote the severe letter, rebuking them for failing to deal with sin in the church properly. And we learn in chapter 7 that God had worked through the severe letter, and that the majority of the Corinthians had repented of their attitude toward Paul. In 2 Corinthians 7:7 Paul says Titus "reported to me your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me." They were made sorrowful according to the will of God, and that godly sorrow brought about repentance, and their love and affection for Paul was once again made manifest (7:9–12). They even had such a change of heart that they disciplined the offender! They carried out the process that the Lord Jesus laid out in Matthew 18, and they had put this man out of the church.

But now, just as God had worked through the rebuke of Paul's severe letter to bring the majority of the Corinthians to repentance, so also He worked through the church discipline process. Just like the church as a whole, the offender had repented of his attitude toward Paul. He owned his defiance as sin, repudiated it as sin, and wished to be restored to the fellowship of the church. This is the amazing grace of God at work! Someone so grounded and mired in their sin so as to refuse the rebuke of a single person, of a group of people, and then of the whole church so much so that he's going to be put out of the church—God has so worked in his heart that He has humbled him, and he's now ready to rejoin the church. That is the grace of God to be celebrated!

But there was a problem. Even though this man had brought forth the evidence of repentance, there were some in the church who were hesitant to welcome him back. The Corinthians realized what a terrible sin it was to take sides against Christ's Apostle; they realized the damage that this man had done to the church, and they knew of the pain that it had caused Paul himself. And so here is this man who has come to this very same realization—who has repented of his sin just as they had—and yet they are unwilling to forgive him and receive him back into fellowship.

So in 2 Corinthians 2, verses 5 to 11, Paul instructs the church as to how they are to restore this man who has been disciplined out of the church, but who is now repentant. Let's read our text together: "But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you. <sup>6</sup>Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, <sup>7</sup>so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. <sup>10</sup>But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, <sup>11</sup>so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes."

If we as the church are going to properly deal with sin in our midst—if chaos is to be avoided and there is to be law and order within the church—we must follow the principles that Scripture lays out for us as we seek to faithfully practice church discipline. And contrary to what we might assume, the church discipline process does not end at excommunication. The goal of all correction, all rebuke, all discipline, is that our sinning brother might be brought to repentance, would forsake his sin, and would be restored to fellowship. And in matters such as these—which are so sensitive, so delicate, and often so painful—we need an extra measure of divine wisdom in order to carry out our responsibilities faithfully, unto the glory of God. And in this text, the Apostle Paul gives us an example of how to do just that by outlining for us **five stages of faithful and successful church discipline**. And I'll give them to you right up front. Those five stages are: harmful sin, corporate discipline, genuine repentance, comforting forgiveness, and loving reaffirmation.

And it's actually going to take us two sermons to cover those **five stages**. We'll examine two of them this week, and then the final three next week, if the Lord wills. But as we go through those **five stages** both today and next Sunday, you're going to notice that a consistent theme throughout the entire passage is the necessity of the people of God to *forgive* a sinner who is truly repentant. You're going to observe in the heart of the Apostle Paul the magnanimity—the large-heartedness—of one who is eager to forgive a wrong suffered for the sake of the spiritual benefit of God's people. And so as we examine this text, pay close attention to the example Paul sets for you in how you ought to forgive offenses against yourself—because we'll learn that the church deals with sin not only by reproof and correction and confrontation, but also by forgiveness.

## **I. Harmful Sin (v. 5)**

Well the **first stage** of church discipline is, of course, the sin that makes discipline necessary. **Stage number one** is **harmful sin**. Look with me at verse 5: “*But if any has caused sorrow*, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you.”

Now, once again we see the Apostle Paul exhibiting the great pastoral sensitivity that we observed in his character in the previous passage. Paul speaks so vaguely about the offender and his sin that you almost have a hard time understanding what he’s talking about! In the first place, he is careful to avoid mentioning the man’s name. He says, “If *any* has caused sorrow....” In the original language, this is the most generic way to refer to a person. It really is a beautiful exhibition of humility and grace. Everyone in the church knew who this man was, and because of that I doubt anyone would have thought Paul uncouth to identify him by name, especially because he’s making an appeal on his behalf to forgive him and welcome him back. But he doesn’t. In effect he says, “Friends, if *someone* has sinned....”

And he doesn’t even use the term “sin,” though of course he would be perfectly justified to do that. He doesn’t even speak of the nature of the offense. He doesn’t get into gory details. He simply says he’s “caused sorrow.” And then again, he phrases the whole thing as a conditional sentence. He says, “*If any has caused sorrow....*” Well everyone knows full well that the man did cause sorrow! But you see, Paul plays down the severity of the issue. He even says, “...he has caused sorrow not to me, but...to all of you.” Now again, this man did cause Paul sorrow! He was the occasion for Paul’s dear spiritual children to rebel against their spiritual father! Paul left from that painful visit in Corinth, changed his travel plans and immediately went back to Ephesus, and he wrote a letter, he says in verse 4, “out of much affliction and anguish of heart,” and “with many tears”! And the Corinthians feel that pain! Like I said, that letter worked a mourning in their heart over their sin against Paul. And so it would only be natural for them to be protective of him. But that protectiveness is leading to a lack of forgiveness and consequent disunity in the church. And so for the sake of the Gospel, Paul refuses to take that offense personally.

And friends, this example is so gloriously Christlike that I can’t resist making a brief word of application. How do you measure up against this example? In a real sense, the Apostle Paul has this man by the throat! He had defied Paul to his face before the whole church! He had made him look like a fool before those whom he loved! And now all have turned against this man and sided with the Apostle Paul, the man’s fate is entirely in Paul’s hands; here is Paul’s chance to really make him pay! Paul could have said, “Well I’ll teach that fool to cross *me*! Let him wallow in his sorrow and grief a little while! God knows I’ve had *my* share of grief over this situation!” Does that sound familiar to any of you? Does that sound like something you’d say? Or if not say, something that you’d *think*? Dear friends, nothing could have been further from Paul’s mind. There was no self-pity; there was no wounded ego; there was no self-preservation or political retaliation; there was no bitter resentment or seeking of vengeance! He does everything he can to

downplay his own hurt, and urges the church to deal with the offender objectively (cf. MacArthur, 53–54)! Oh, may God grant that the men and women of GraceLife would be possessed by such a spirit of humility, that you are *eager* to forgive those who have trespassed against you! May we be the kind of Christ-like, Spirit-filled people who *love* from the heart—who are not provoked, who do not take into account a wrong suffered, and who bear, believe, hope, and endure all things (1 Cor 13:5, 7)!

But besides that wonderful example of humble forgiveness, I want you to see that the first stage of discipline is **harmful sin**. Paul doesn't merely make light of the sorrow that the offender's sin had caused him. He downplays his hurt to whatever degree that he can, but doesn't make light of it. He also says that that sin was more principally directed at the Corinthians as a whole. Look again at verse 5. He says, "But if anyone has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me,"—it's not personal—"but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you." And here we learn of the essential interconnectedness of the body of Christ (Hafemann, 95). Sin's harm is not restricted to the offender and the offended. It brings sorrow to the entire church.

We are all members of the *body* of Christ. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:26: "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it." You see, just as the health of one member of my physical body affects the health of the other members, so also is it the case in the body of Christ. The spiritual health of the body as a whole depends on the spiritual health of each member. The presence of sin affects the entire body even if it's only in one member.

Some people scoff at the practice of church discipline. They say, "You do that, you're going to empty the church!" "You're going to get sued!" "That's not loving. That's judgmental! I mean, to read somebody's sin, publicly, before the whole church?!" They simply can't understand why such drastic measures need to be taken. I saw a story about a teenage girl who was admitted to the hospital with an unknown ailment. She was very physically active, and was even preparing to earn her living by being involved in nautical sports. Well during her stay at the hospital, the doctors had discovered that she had cancer in her arm. And it was so advanced at this point that the only way to make sure that it didn't spread to the rest of her body was to amputate her arm. Now that was absolutely devastating to her, and as you can imagine she resisted it. She was hoping for chemotherapy or surgery or radiation—anything less drastic than amputation! But the disease was too advanced, and drastic measures were unavoidable. To allow the cancer to linger any further would have led to its spreading throughout her body, and would eventually kill her. Unrepentant sin in the body of Christ is the same way. It is a spiritual cancer that, if left unchecked, will infect the whole body until it destroys all spiritual life. And so if there is a member of the body of Christ that is infected with the cancer of unrepentant sin, and they refuse to do anything about it—they prefer another less drastic treatment!—the church nevertheless needs to take the drastic but necessary action, and amputate. Paul said it in 1 Corinthians 5:6:

“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump.”

Friends, none of us lives or dies to himself. We are part of the same body; if a member is sick, the body is sick. And that means there is no such thing as *merely*-personal sin. Some of you have your private sins that you’ve nursed and managed to keep in the dark, hidden away from your brothers and sisters in Christ and the light of the Word of God—sins that you think don’t harm anyone but yourself. “Victimless crimes,” the world calls them. Victimless crimes do not exist in the church. Sin even against your own body—sin that you would say involves nobody else—involves *everybody* else, because if you’re a member of the body of Christ, you are vitally connected to all of your brothers and sisters in this place. Pastor John has said a number of times, “The church is only as strong as its weakest member.”

And so when one of your brothers or sisters is faithful to come to you and to bring your sin to your attention, and to lovingly make you aware of the consequences, and to graciously call you to repentance, don’t tell them to mind their own business. Dear friend, they *are* minding their own business. The spiritual health of the body of Christ *is* our business. Sin is so serious. And so it must be confronted and dealt with.

## II. Corporate Discipline (vv. 6, 9–10)

That brings us to the **second stage of faithful church discipline**. And that is, the discipline itself. Stage number one was harmful sin. Stage number two is **corporate discipline**. Look at verse 6: “Sufficient for such a one is this *punishment which was inflicted by the majority*.”

Now this word that gets translated “punishment,” is the word *epitimía*. It is a technical, legal term that refers to an official disciplinary act in secular Greek (Kistemaker, 78; MacArthur, 56). And note, Paul says that this official act of discipline was carried out “by the majority.” That is to say, the church had a formal gathering, and deliberated upon this matter, and rendered a verdict. This is none other than the outworking of the process of formal, organized, official church discipline.

Now there are a number of texts in the New Testament that shed light on the church’s duty to discipline sin. We’ve mentioned the “ground-zero” text for this already, which is Matthew 18:15–20. Again, there was an offense, followed by a private rebuke, followed by a plural rebuke, followed by a public rebuke. After these three steps, if the person in question refuses to listen to the church and remains unrepentant, Matthew 18:17 says, “Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, consider him as one who is outside the fellowship of the people of God. This is excommunication.

And there are some cases that are so serious that this four-step process is expedited. This is especially the case for those who are advocating different doctrine, as would have been the case in this situation—since to reject Paul’s apostleship would have also been to reject his Gospel. Titus 3:10 says, “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.” See, for a factious man—someone who causes division and creates factions by drawing others away to believe false teaching—it’s not necessary to go to him privately because his error is by nature a public offense. And so Paul says, “There doesn’t need to be private, plural, and public rebuke; there simply needs to be a first and second warning. If he refuses to repent, you must *reject* him.” *Paraitéomai*: this is that same concept of excommunication. The ESV translates the word, “have nothing more to do with him.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6 says, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” And then down in verse 14: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” He needs to be made to feel the error of his ways, and though it may be painful, excluding him from the life of the church may be the only way to induce that godly sorrow that leads to repentance. In 1 Corinthians 5:13, Paul quotes the Old Testament as he deals with the case of the incestuous man. He commands them, “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

And so this punishment that is inflicted by the majority is excommunication. The sinner who refuses to repent after repeated confrontation is not permitted to associate with the church. In a form of spiritual tough love, they would not be admitted to the Lord’s Table, and they would be excluded from social relations with other church members. Before I became Pastor of Local Outreach at Grace Church, I was an intern in the Membership department under Tom Patton. And Bill Zimmer, one of our beloved elders who is now in heaven, used to come every month to the membership class to give the talk on church discipline. And he would always talk about this—about what the extent of our conversations with one would be who has been put out of the church like this. And I’ll always remember it. He’d say it may be to such a limited extent as, “Have you repented yet?” No shooting the breeze, no “Hey, how are you doing?” but a solemn, grieved, “Have you repented yet? Has the Lord Jesus Christ made His hand heavy upon you yet?” This is serious business.

Back in Matthew 18, in verse 18, Jesus explains how serious these issues are. He says, “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” And He says something very similar in John 20:23. He says, “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” What does this mean? It means that when the people of God follow this process of confrontation of sin and plead with sinners to repent, their deliberation on



earth reflects the reality of things in heaven. If the sinner repents, the church can say with confidence, “Praise God! Your sins have been loosed. You are not bound in them or to them. You are forgiven. Welcome back to the fellowship.” And those pronouncements reflect the reality that God sees from heaven. Because He knows the heart, He knows that repentance has taken place. And when repentance *has* taken place, there is forgiveness in heaven. When evidence of that repentance is shown on earth, the church is given the authority to ratify what has been done in heaven. On the other hand, when a sinner does *not* repent, and is removed from the fellowship of the church, the church can say with confidence in that moment to that person, “You are bound in your sin. You are not forgiven, but your sin remains with you.” And *those* pronouncements reflect the reality that God sees from heaven just as well. He knows that there *hasn't* been true repentance in the heart. And so the church, seeing the evidence of that lack of repentance, ratifies what has been done in heaven.

Those are really amazing statements! *God Himself* is working through the deliberations of His church! So many today speak about the church as if it's just some informal gathering of believers. They think “church” is just the plural word for “Christian.” You hear this all the time: “The church is not an organization, it's an organism.” But that's a false dichotomy. The church is an organism; it is a body of believers bound together by the divine *life* that flows through their spiritual veins. But it is *also* an organization. It is *also* an institution. Your Bible study is not a church. Your men's group or women's group is not a church. Friends, even GraceLife is not a church! The church is a body of believers who are submitting to a plurality of qualified, God-ordained elders, who faithfully teach the Word of God, who administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Table, and—based on these texts—who practice church discipline, who sit in the weighty seat in the binding and loosing of things on earth. You say, “Wait, I thought that where two are three are gathered, there Christ is also in their midst.” Yes, exactly! That's Matthew 18:20, conveniently located immediately after this text on church discipline that requires everything be confirmed by two or three witnesses, verse 16! Jesus is saying, “When the church binds or looses the sins of its members after having established the facts on the basis of two or three witnesses, according to this process of church discipline, then there I am in their midst, ratifying that decision.” That's why Paul says, down in verse 10 of 2 Corinthians 2, “But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also.” Even he, as an Apostle, submits to the church's ruling regarding church discipline! Now of course in his heart, he has a settled disposition that he's already chosen not to hold this sin against this man. But what he's saying is, “Even I, as the Apostle of Christ, don't have authority to make the pronouncements of binding and loosing. That is relegated to the autonomy of the local church. So I plead with you: *I've* forgiven him, now you also forgive him.”

So do you see the responsibility that falls to you as the people of God? The church that fails to carry out its duty with respect to dealing with sin in the body is unworthy to be called a church. Paul made it an issue of *obedience* with the Corinthians! He says in verse 9, “For to this end also

I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.” “In my severe letter, I instructed you to discipline this man who was unrepentant. I know it was a difficult command, and that it would make you uneasy to have to do something so uncomfortable. But that’s why I wrote! To test whether you are obedient—not only in the *convenient* things, not only in the things that the world looks upon with approval—but to test whether you are obedient in *all* things!”

The church which fails to obey the commands of Christ to properly confront and deal with sin in its congregation—especially in the name of *love*—has absolutely no idea what love means! In 2 Corinthians 2:4—the passage we looked at last time—Paul says it was out of his overabundance of *love* for the Corinthians that he wrote his severe letter rebuking them for their folly! It is not love to pretend that someone who is dying of cancer is doing just fine, because the fact that they need surgery, or chemotherapy, is going to be unpleasant for them to hear! That is not love! It’s hate! And it’s hate born out of your own cowardice! Oh, it is easier to avoid conflict. It is easier to ignore sin. But it is *not* loving. Love, dear friends, is willing to suffer whatever consequences it must suffer, in order to truly bring the greatest benefit to the object of our love. And that means that love is willing to confront sin, because our greatest benefit is to have our communion with Christ be unhindered by unrepentant sin in our lives. And so one line of application from this principle is that churches who fail to lovingly confront sin in the lives of their members—churches who fail to practice church discipline—are by no means faithful churches. The *true* church cares for the *purity* of the church. And if you outlive every one of the elders here, I want you as the people of God to hold this church accountable to that standard. And if Christ should lead you away from Grace Church, the church that you would join yourself to must be faithful to this practice—to protect the purity of the body by dealing with sin in its midst.

But a second line of application is that you, as the individual members of the church, must be faithful in your responsibility to deal with sin in your own lives, and in the lives of your brothers and sisters. And the order there is important. There is nothing more repugnant than someone who is outwardly zealous for the purity of the church and prides himself on being the agent of correction in his congregation, but who is nowhere nearly as engaged in fighting sin in his own life. So often a man or woman in this situation is so keen to rebuke others for their sin precisely because they feel guilty over their own sin, but refuse to deal with it biblically. It may be that we’ve heard Jesus’ word picture in Matthew 7:3 so often that it’s lost its shock value, but zealously pursuing the sin in others’ lives while ignoring your own really is as bizarre as trying to remove a speck of sawdust from your brother’s eye while not even noticing that you have a Redwood growing out of your own. That’s why Paul, in Galatians 6:1, as he gives instruction about how to restore a man caught in a trespass says, “...*each one looking to yourself*, so that you too will not be tempted.” In other words, as you propose to deal with sin in others’ lives, be constantly looking to yourself—be constantly reminded of your own sinfulness—so that you

don't become puffed up and treat that man with an undue severity, and so that you don't become a hypocrite by focusing on his sin and ignoring your own.

So be faithful to check your own heart and deal with your own sin before the Lord. But once you've done that, friends I plead with you, be faithful in carrying out steps one and two of Matthew 18. Love your brothers and sisters in Christ enough to have a difficult conversation with them. Now, I'm not saying put your heresy-hunter hat on and go around meddling in everyone's lives. But I *am* saying that you ought to cultivate the kind of relationships with your brothers and sisters in which you're vulnerable enough with one another that you know each other's character. And when you discover something in their lives that they may not see—despite the awkwardness and despite the fear of being thought arrogant or judgmental—gently bring that issue to their attention so they can confess it and forsake it. I don't know about you, but I want somebody to tell me. I really do. My biggest concern is not to be making a good show of things before people. My biggest concern is that I am right before God. And if somebody else has to give me a harsh word—even if it's not entirely correct—for me to see just a little something that's true about my character that needs revision, I'm going to *treasure* that! Because I need to see Christ clearly. I need to be in communion with Him. I need to not have sin blocking and clouding my vision of Him.

Notice what it says in Matthew 18:15: “If your brother sins,” go and tell the pastor. No. “If your brother sins,” go and “get counsel” from three other friends before discussing it with the person. No. “If your brother sins, *go* and show *him* his fault *in private*.” Before discussing it with anyone else, you are to go to that person, face-to-face, and do your best to demonstrate to him from Scripture where you believe he's sinned. And by the grace of God, if you can be gentle in giving correction, and if your brother can be humble in receiving it, church discipline succeeds at step one, before any more than two people know about the issue. In a healthy church, step one is happening all the time, and hardly anybody knows about it.

Let me give you a few passages to meditate on with regard to this duty. In terms of our responsibility to do the hard work of correcting our brothers and sisters, note Proverbs 27:6: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of the enemy.” And then Proverbs 28:23: “He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.” And in terms of our responsibility to humbly *receive* correction, hear Proverbs 15:32: “He who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding.” You see, to despise discipline is to hate your own self, because you are inoculating yourself against the correction that would expose and remove sin in your life. And probably my favorite proverb in all of Scripture is Proverbs 12:1, which says, “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.” Friends, in all seriousness, don't be stupid. Invite the watchful, caring gaze of your brothers and sisters into your life.

And so this passage teaches us that, when it comes to steps three and four, your elders must be faithful to our responsibility to carry out church discipline on those whose unwillingness to repent casts a shame upon Christ's name and damages the purity of the church. That is our responsibility, and we pledge to do that. And we invite you to hold us accountable to that responsibility. But when it comes to steps one and two, you must be faithful to your responsibility: to deal with sin in your own life, and to labor alongside *one another* to help each other put off sin and put on righteousness.

Prayer: Father, we do thank You for Your word—a hard word, a difficult word, but a word that we need nonetheless. A precious word, like a medicine that perhaps doesn't go down easy and is bitter, but is so healthy and so salutary to our spiritual state. It may be bitter on the way down but would You make it sweet when it's there. I think of that statement, "Your words were found and I ate them." And I pray Your people would digest this portion of your teaching—to understand the severity of sin in the body. The reality that none of us lives and dies to himself—that our sin affects all of us. And so what a motivation to be diligent and vigilant in putting off our sin and battling our flesh! Because we don't sin to ourselves; we sin unto the Lord who is united to us, and we sin unto one another who are also united to Him. And as we see the seriousness of sin, I pray that we would appreciate the protocol of church discipline, even if it sounds so formal, so official. I pray that we would recognize that it is in place for the sake of the repentance and restoration of Your people—that what You desire is the spiritual health of Your people—that Christ would receive to Himself a Bride whom He is worthy of. And going to one another and sharpening one another with correction, and receiving correction and reforming ourselves by the grace of God—that's part of presenting You what You're worthy of. So I pray that you would work in the hearts of these people, even that GraceLife would be an example to the rest of the church—that they would outdo one another in showing honor, that they would care for the souls of their brothers and sisters so much to have difficult conversations. And give us wisdom, give us tact. Give us a love and a gentleness that goes and does this, not because we're itching for a fight, but because we really do love one another, and want to have one another see Christ clearly with the eyes of our heart, and not be cut off from a relationship with Him that is the very meat and drink of our lives. Lord, we pray that You would apply Your Word to Your people for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.