

Understanding Church Discipline

“Reproof is unavoidable. God’s Word demands it when a brother falls into open sin. The practice of discipline in the congregation begins in the smallest circles. Where defection from God’s Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured. Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy, an ultimate offer of genuine fellowship, when we allow nothing but God’s Word to stand between us, judging and succoring. Then it is not we who are judging; God alone judges, and God’s judgment is helpful and healing. Ultimately, we have no charge but to serve our brother, never to set ourselves above him, and we serve him even when we must speak the judging and dividing Word of God to him, even when, in obedience to God, we must break off fellowship with him. We must know that it is not our human love which makes us loyal to the other person, but God’s love which breaks its way through to him only through judgment. Just because God’s Word judges, it serves the person. He who accepts the ministry of God’s judgment is helped.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Matthew 18

Please listen our first lesson, where we unpacked this more fully in its surrounding context.

1 Corinthians 5

With regards to how Paul’s commands seem to bypass the process laid out by Jesus in Matthew 18, Jonathan Leeman’s words are helpful:

In [1 Corinthians 5-6] Paul is laying out two categories of people: those who are characteristically repentant and those who are not. The characteristically repentant belong inside the church; the characteristically unrepentant do not because they will not inherit the kingdom of God...On the unrighteous side, Paul does not simply describe particular sins, he describes people who are *defined by* those sins. He doesn’t use adjectives, he uses nouns. Thses

sins *characterize* these people. It's what they *are*. This man in chapter 5 is characteristically unrepentant. He must be handed over to Satan...Paul's assumptions about the man *begin* just short of where Jesus's process *ends*. Paul begins with the assumption of an unyielding unrepentance. Jesus's process exists for the purpose of determining whether or not a person is unyieldingly unrepentant – for determining what Paul takes for a given.¹

ESV SB: “Deliver this man to Satan” (5:5) probably refers to removing him from the church, since those outside of the church are in Satan's realm (Luke 4:5–6; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19). “His spirit may be saved”: The purpose of the discipline was not to punish the man for punishment's sake but to effect his restoration to the church and eventual salvation (see 1 Tim. 1:20).

“Leaven” (5:6-7) – Not yeast (which was uncommon in the ancient world) but fermented dough, a little of which would be left from the previous week to be added to a new lump of dough. By analogy, when publicly known sin in the church is not subjected to church discipline, it will silently spread its destructive consequences throughout the whole fellowship.

“Not to associate” (5:11) – One purpose here, as in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15, is redemptive with respect to the person committing the sin. But another purpose is to avoid giving the appearance of approving sinful conduct, lest reproach be brought on the church and the gospel.

“Purge ... from among you” (5:13) – As the newly constituted people of God (10:32), the Corinthians are to follow God's instructions to Israel for preserving its holiness when flagrant, unrepented-of sin is in its midst (Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21–22, 24; 24:7). In this case, they are to do so by excommunicating the man committing incest.

Titus 3:10-11

CEV = “Warn troublemakers once or twice. Then don't have anything else to do with them.”

CSB = “Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning.”

¹ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 59-60.

NLT – “If people are causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with them.”

AMP – “...reject a divisive man – ban him from your fellowship and have nothing more to do with him.”

Hairetikos (αἱρετικός) – from Greek lexicons, “a heretic” is not simply someone who promotes or teaches wrong doctrine, but rather someone who promotes themselves (and not Christ) – though often using [false] doctrines to gather disciples to themselves.²

- Danker: “causing division”, “self-promoting”
- Strong’s: “disposed to form sects, factious”
 - From the verb, “to have a distinctive opinion,” “to win others over to their own personal opinion, while creating harmful divisions.”
- Friberg: “denoting loyalty to a separatist group”
- BDAG: pertaining to causing divisions, “factious, division-making”

Paraitomai (παραίτομαι)³

- BDAG: “to decline, refuse, avoid, reject”
- Strong’s: “to beg off, reject, decline, shun, avoid”
- Friberg: “to decline, reject, not accept someone, refuse to listen to someone, shun, avoid association with, have nothing to do with someone, refuse to pay attention to, avoid”

² Cf. **Jude 17-19** (RC) – “But you, beloved, must remember, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They kept telling you, “In the end time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.” It is these who cause divisions [or, “those who set up distinctions”; KJV = “separate themselves”], worldly people [NIV = “who follow mere natural instincts”], devoid of the Spirit.”

³ Note that the imperative is in the present tense, highlighting the continuing process/aspect (i.e., “keep having nothing to do with those who cause divisions”).

Acts 20:28-31⁴

Because the church is under constant threat, the elders must keep a constant guard⁵ over (ESV = “pay careful attention to”) the flock entrusted to them.

This is necessary, as these wolves often are those who are themselves⁶ in, or seek, leadership [i.e., prominent] positions. Often, these wolves arise from “within the ranks” of the congregation to “draw away disciples after themselves.”⁷

- They do by speaking “perverse things”
 - This usually happens through teaching things that “deviate” or “stray” from the gospel.
 - E.g., NIV, NRSV, CSB, NLT = “distort the truth”; NAB = “pervert the truth”; NET = “teaching perversions of the truth”
 - BDAG includes the definition “to mislead someone”, “to cause to be uncertain about a belief.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Unfortunately, a faulty eschatology being taught by false teachers had caused some within the church to live as though Christ had already come,⁸ and that therefore how they lived in the body was irrelevant and mattered not.

- Amongst the believers were some who were “living an undisciplined life, not doing their own work but meddling in the work of others.” (3:11a, NET)
 - Because such a lifestyle was “disobeying” Paul’s teaching (3:10-11b, 14), as well as rejecting the example he left for them to emulate and imitate (3:10), it was bringing public reproach upon the gospel, something Paul did not take lightly to.

⁴ See Leeman’s excellent example of this in *Church Discipline*, pp. 109-113, where “the wolf” may not necessarily be a false teacher, but “the faithfully-attending and divisive non-member” [the name of the chapter] who often feeds on the “younger, more immature members in their search for allies” against the leadership of the church.

⁵ The imperative (προσέχω) given to the shepherds/pastors here is in the present tense.

⁶ Hence the command to also “pay careful attention to yourselves.”

⁷ As in, for e.g., Galatians 4:17 (cf. 5:13b); 2 Timothy 3:5-9; Jude 12-13, 16

⁸ See especially 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:7b-10; 2:1-12.

The solution?

- **3:6** – “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”
- **3:14b-15** – “Take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he might be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

Galatians 6:1-4, 7-10

Again, church discipline is not merely a ‘job for the pastors.’ It is for all who have the Spirit,⁹ and is a practical application for the church in Galatia to walk in the Spirit and therefore fulfill the law of love [see 5:16-26].”¹⁰

However, as Leeman notes,

Paul knows that younger sheep can be easily deceived, tempted either to join the sinner in the sin or at least to be persuaded by the sinner’s arguments for why the sin is acceptable. Therefore, Paul entreats the “spiritual” to lead in the rescue. Paul’s reference to the “spiritual” does not necessarily mean the church’s elders, or he would have said “elders.” It does suggest that members do well to involve older and wiser brothers and sisters in the faith when an initial one-on-one encounter goes nowhere. Generally speaking, it probably will be the church elders who are consulted and then called upon to lead the process of discipline, particularly when the process expands to broader and broader circles...Before any sin is taken before the whole church, it should first go to the elders.¹¹

⁹ NIV = “live by the Spirit.” The word *pneumatikos* refers to people who are controlled and directed by God’s Spirit. In *this* light, “spiritual” is an acceptable translation, though it is easy to misunderstand and misinterpret.

¹⁰ See, for example, Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* in Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, book 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2010), pp. 353ff.

¹¹ Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 70.

The goal for such action, like Matthew 18, is “to restore”¹² the brother or sister who has been “caught”¹³ in, or “overcome”¹⁴ by, some sin.¹⁵

- *This* is what it looks like for “the Israel of God”¹⁶ to live out – by the Spirit – doing “good” to one another (cf. 6:8-10).

The manner this restoration is to be carried out “in the Spirit” is gently and humbly¹⁷ (6:1ab), as well as soberly (6:1c, 4-5) and fearfully (6:7-8).

- **Proverbs 11:30** (LSB) – “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls.”

Soli Deo Gloria!!

¹² The Greek verb *καταρτίζω* (*katartidzo*) means “to put in order, restore to a former condition, mend, repair; complete.” It is used, for example, in Matthew 4:21 of James and John “mending” their fishing nets. It was also used of setting a broken bone. The imperative is in the present tense: “keep restoring”.

¹³ So ESV, LSB, CSB, NIV.

¹⁴ So NLT. The NKJV (cf. KJV) translates the phrase “overtaken in any transgression” [KJV = “fault”].

¹⁵ The Greek is literally “trespass/transgression.” However, the sense and context allow for the more general English word “sin” (so NET, NIV, NLT; CSB = “wrongdoing”).

¹⁶ Like Schreiner, I would interpret “the Israel of God” as the church – the new covenant, new creation, Spirit-empowered community who “walks in step with this rule” (cf. 5:25), whether Jew or Gentile (v.15). See his *Galatians*, pp. 380ff. The “and” is often translated exegetically as “even” or “that is.” See Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 669ff.

¹⁷ See 5:25 for what the “fruit” of the Spirit looks like in community.

Church Discipline (9 Marks, Jonathan Leeman)

There are, no doubt, some sins that are so deliberate (like a long pattern of a use or murder) or repugnant (like sexual predatory behavior or extortion) that any quick words of apology would be unbelievable. It's not that such sins cannot be forgiven, or that a person might not be immediately repentant. But some time needs to pass and the fruit of repentance displayed before a church can responsibly pronounce forgiveness (see the example in Acts 8:17-24). A church cannot responsibly believe the words of a member who has been willfully living in a habitual sin.¹⁸

[Sometimes] the church must choose to test one's repentance not *before* the act of excommunication, but *after*.¹⁹

Church leaders should instruct and shepherd the congregation on how to view possible or actual acts of excommunication. Young Christians are often susceptible to naïve and misplaced sympathies. Leaders help keep them from stumbling by explaining the pertinent biblical texts and by modeling what a heart-broken, truth-loving compassion should look like. Along these lines, leaders should also instruct members on how to interact with an individual who has been excluded (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:9, 11; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10). Generally, the tenor of one's relationships with the disciplined individual should markedly change. Interactions should not be characterized by casualness but by deliberate conversations about repentance.²⁰

Leaders must lead their congregations toward being prayerful and hopeful of repentance, ready to receive and be reconciled to the sinner.²¹

¹⁸ Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76. Leeman notes that family members should continue to fulfill family obligations within the context of these deliberate conversations.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 76.