

INTRODUCTION

This is one of those passages when, if I was ever attempted to just commit kangaroo exegesis and hop over passages you don't like, this would be one of them. In fact, I was talking with a pastor in Amarillo, and I just asked him, "I understand you've been preaching through 1 Corinthians. What did you do with chapter five?" And he said, "I skipped it." He really did. He was serious because it is not a very popular topic.

I'm a fun kind of guy. And I enjoy living for the Lord in the joy of the Lord. But this is a very serious but necessary topic. In 1983 in a church outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma, a lady by the name of Maryland Gwen, who was a professing member of this church, was openly living in sin with a man who was not her husband. He was also a member of the church. One of her friends went to see her to confront her and ask her to change her lifestyle and repent of that sin. And she refused. Then this lady in the church got a couple of the elders/deacons in the church to go and confront her lovingly.

And they did that. She refused to repent. And so the church in official action voted to expel her from membership because she would not respond to those attempts to cause her to repent. Well, this incensed Ms. Gwen. So she brought a lawsuit against the church for \$1 million, claiming invasion of privacy. The whole point of her case against the church was that what we do privately is absolutely no business of the church. They had no business sticking their nose into her personal life. The lower court did not award her a million dollars, but they did award her \$400,000 claiming that she was right. The church had invaded her privacy. The case of course, was appealed and was sent to the Oklahoma State Supreme Court. And thankfully in a very important church state decision, the Oklahoma State Supreme Court overturned the lower court's decision, and she was not awarded any kind of damages.

They ruled that the government should not infringe upon what a church says ought to be done. Now that brings up an interesting issue. Does the church have a right and a responsibility to deal with members of the church who are openly, continually living in sin? I talked with a charter member of our church who's been very faithful all these years. And I asked him if our church ever voted anybody out of membership. And he told me to his knowledge that they'd never had to do that. And that's wonderful. I've served a number of churches, and I personally have never been a part of a church that had to disfellowship a member.

It's a very painful thing to do, but it is the scriptural thing to do as absolutely the last resort. First Corinthians 5:1-13 says:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife.

2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? **3** For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. **4** So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, **5** hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. **6** Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? **7** Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. **8** Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. **9** I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—**10** not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. **11** But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. **12** What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? **13** God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”

Now let's talk about this question: Should we ever kick anybody out of church? I don't think the word “kick out” is the right phrase. If it's ever required, it's an action of grief and an action of love and compassion. Let's notice three things about this passage.

I. THE REPORT OF SIN

1. The persistent problem

There was an ongoing problem. What was it? There was a man in the church who claimed to be a Christian and he was living in sin. He had a sexual relationship with his stepmother. The Greek language here indicates several things. First of all, it indicates that he was doing this continually. It is present tense action, meaning he has been doing it and he's continuing to do it right now. He's openly flaunting it without any kind of fear of retribution. Also, the woman was not a member of the church. How do we know that? Because Paul doesn't say anything about kicking her out of the church or expelling her...only the man. He's only directing this instruction toward those who claim to be believers.

Paul says that what they are doing is something so awful that even the pagan world prohibits it. Indeed, there was a Roman law against a man living in sin with a family member such as this. This is not something the man had done one time and had repented of; it was an ongoing relationship.

2. The attitude of acceptance

Everybody in the church knew what was going on. This was not just gossip whispered behind the doors of the church. The church had accepted him, thereby accepting his wicked behavior. Paul even says you folks are boasting about it. What does that mean? My guess is that the church felt like that they were so open and inclusive that they could even boast about the fact that you could come to their church and live in sexual immorality. Paul said they shouldn't be boasting about it. They should be upset about it. They should be angry and brokenhearted over it. Paul said to the church, "You need to do something about it."

II. THE RESPONSE TO SIN

How should a church respond whenever there is open, continual, evident sin on the part of a member of a local congregation? This is often called church discipline.

1. The process of discipline

How do you go about this? If our church ever has to do this, this will be the exact process that we should follow because it is the scriptural procedure. In Matthew 18:15ff the Lord Jesus Christ himself gives us a very rigid procedure that we're to follow. Now this relates to personal reconciliation, but you'll see that it also relates to how we discipline people in the church if that ever become necessary. He says in verse 15, if a brother sins against you go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. That's step number one. Number two, but if he will not listen, take one or two others along. So that every matter may be established in the, by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Number three, if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, to the gathered Body of Christ. And if he refuses to listen, go to step four: treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. These are the steps, the rigid rules that ought to be followed for any kind of church discipline or any kind of reconciliation.

Let's say that there's somebody in our church, and it is openly reported that they are continually living in sin. The best thing for you to do is what Jesus said. You go to that person privately one-on-one and lovingly confront them. Say, "My friend, this is evident. Is it true? I want to lovingly admonish you that you need to repent of this sin and get right with God." And if that person denies it or they refuse to repent, the Bible says that you take two or three other people with you. You need to choose those people very, very carefully. They need to be godly people, Spirit-filled people who will not go and accuse this person. You need to choose people who will not at all break the confidentiality of that situation. And then the three of

you lovingly and prayerfully confront the person. I've never been a part of a church that actually had to expel somebody from the membership. But on several occasions, I have been a part of step number two. Thankfully, each person was willing to turn from their sin and repent at that stage. And it never had to be brought before the church.

But Jesus said if you go with a group and that person does not respond, take it before the church. Does that mean that you announce their name and air all the dirty laundry? You give all the gory details of the sin? No, not at all. I believe you do it as a matter of prayer. Let's say there's this individual in our church and this person is reported to be living in sin in certain areas. And we followed the steps in Matthew 18. They've been privately confronted. They've also been confronted with a small group. And they have refused to repent. And so, as Jesus told us, the next step is bringing it before the church.

We should say, "Let's pray for this brother. Let's pray for this sister" But according to the word of God, we are going to be withdrawing fellowship from them. And what does it mean to withdraw fellowship from somebody? Does it mean you literally kick them out of the church? Does it mean that you take their name off the membership roll? Does it mean that you have a restraining order brought against them legally so they can't enter the church property? You do what Jesus said for step number four; you treat them as a publican or as a tax collector. Now, who were they? Sinners. You know what Jesus is saying? You basically treat them as you would treat a lost person. You relate to them no longer as a brother and a sister. You relate to them as a non-believer. How do we relate to non-believers? Do we tell nonbelievers they can't come to this church? No, in fact, we try to bring them to Christ. We try to love them to Christ. We're going to learn later that you don't fellowship with that person, but you do treat them as an unbeliever and try to bring them to Christ. Those are the rules, the process for reconciliation and discipline.

But there's this interesting phrase that really troubles a lot of people that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 5:5 where he says to hand this man over to Satan. That's part of the process also. When you are disfellowshipped them, that's basically what you're doing. You're handing them over to Satan. It's like you're putting them back out into the world where they were before they became a Christian. Now that phrase, hand them over to Satan is also in 1 Timothy chapter one, verse 19. Paul practiced what he preached because there were a couple of occasions where he actually had to do this. He had to hand a brother over to Satan. He talks about some people who have rejected the teachings and shipwrecked their faith, among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander. He says he has handed them over to Satan. What does it mean to hand somebody over to Satan?

It's the opposite of an intercessory prayer for protection. It is something that is accomplished in the realm of spiritual warfare, where you turn that person over to Satan by prayer. And you say, "What a cruel thing to do!" No, Paul says, I did this to teach them a lesson, not to blast them. First Corinthians chapter five says the reason you do this is so that the sinful nature can be destroyed, but their spirits will be saved on the day of the Lord.

To hand someone over to Satan means to be excluded from the protective atmosphere of the Body of Christ.

Did you know that there is a protective atmosphere that you enjoy as part of the Body of Christ? It's a painful thing to do, and I hope to God I never have to participate in this, but when you hand the believer over to Satan, you're removing them from that umbrella of spiritual protection. It's almost like God allows Satan to do to them what he did to Job. God said to Satan about Job: "I will allow you to hurt him, not kill him. You can hurt him so that he can learn the lesson." And that's a sad thing to do. But Paul says that's what you have to do to this brother.

2. The purpose of discipline

Why should a church even do this? Two reasons.

A. The purification of the Body

The Body of Christ is the church; the church needs to stay pure. Now Paul uses the example here of yeast. He says you get a little bit of yeast in the dough, and it's going to infect and influence the whole lump of dough. And he says a person who is continually, openly boasting about living in sin in the Body of Christ is like yeast. It's going to infiltrate and infect and damage the entire church. It is like the old saying "One bad apple can ruin the whole barrel." And so the church needs to stay pure. There's an example of this in the book of Joshua. Do you remember when Joshua led the children of Israel to fight against Jericho, the most heavily fortified city of the ancient world? They didn't even draw a sword. They just marched around it. And on the seventh lap, the Bible says the walls came tumbling down.

God said when they went into the city of Jericho, they were to be very careful not to steal any of the silver, gold, linen, etc. All of that was to be dedicated to the Lord. One man, a soldier by the name of Achan, saw a wedge of gold, some silver, and some very valuable linen. And so he just picked it up and confiscated it and took it back to his tent. He dug a hole and buried it thinking, "I got away with it! Nobody knows!" But the Bible says that the next day some of these soldiers who had just whipped up on Jericho lost in a battle at a little town called Ai. Many of them were killed, and the injured came running back into the Israelite camp saying, "What happened? We were victorious against the most heavily fortified city in the world. But here this little town, of Ai has conquered us. What's the problem?"

They came complaining to Joshua, and Joshua got on his knees and began to complain to the Lord. He said, "Lord, what's happened? Why have you taken your hand off us?" God said, "Get up off your knees. Don't pray. There's sin in the camp, and I'm not going to bless you until you get that sin out of the camp." Achan's sin was the reason that some of those men were killed in that battle. And it's why they suffered. So God had to bring the sin to light. They gathered all the families, and Joshua isolated one tribe. Everybody else went home. Then they isolated one family. Everybody else went home. Then they isolated one clan. And I imagine Achan's getting more scared every time it's narrowed down. Finally, they pointed at Achan, and he confessed. They put him and his entire family to death, and only after that did God bless Israel again.

Sometimes we get on our knees and we cry out to God and say, "What's wrong with my life?" And it could be God is saying to get up off your knees. He may say, "There is sin in your life; get rid of that sin and I'll start blessing you again." And it could be sometimes we ask God what's wrong with our church. And God says, "Hey, there's sin in your church. And it's not until you purify that sin that I'll bless you once again." So that's one of the main reasons for this process: for the purification of the church.

B. The restoration of the believer

If our church ever has to practice church discipline, it is not to be mean and ugly and antagonistic toward any individual. It is not to hurt them. Our goal is always restoration. Have you ever heard it said that the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded? Sometimes we're so harsh and hard toward those who have failed and fallen. This is the goal that we ought to seek in Galatians 6:1. It says if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently, but watch yourselves or you also may be tempted. But don't stop there. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

The purpose of church discipline is not to just hurt this person and ruin their reputation. The purpose of it is so that they will be restored to fellowship. And if they're living in sin, they refuse to repent, and they refuse to confess it, the very best thing we can do for them spiritually is to exclude them from fellowship, hoping that it will restore them to fellowship. I came from a church in Alabama that was over a hundred years old, and I enjoyed so much reading the minutes of the business meetings from 70 and 80 and 90 years ago. They did this process, and they would talk about somebody who got "churched." That was the word they used. It was like a verb. People got churched for some amazing reasons...card playing, dancing, gossip, etc.

And it was interesting to read that maybe a year or so later, some of them would come back to the church. They would publicly ask forgiveness, and they would apologize to the church because they had danced or they had played cards or

something like that. And the church would restore them openly to membership. There are some churches I think that are overly legalistic who have taken this biblical process and run with it. And a lot of people have been hurt. That's one mistake you can make. Most churches probably err because we tolerate too much. And we just let some things pass. I was teaching on this at a Howard College extension course that I used to teach in Alabama. A man came to me who had been a prominent Sunday school teacher in a local Baptist church. And he said, "I got churched." This local church had actually disfellowshipped him because he was teaching some very strange doctrine in Sunday school and refused to change. Now what he was teaching was not all important, but he was teaching that Jesus committed suicide, which is blasphemy. But he was just convinced in his own mind that that's what the Bible taught him. And the church went through this process and they had churched Him. He came to me and he said, "I realized now I was wrong. I was going through a lot of emotional problems. And I can't believe that I would teach that. Number two, I can't believe that I would be so stubborn that I would not apologize for that. And so this church kicked me out. But I realize now I was wrong, and I want to go to that church and apologize. Would you help me?"

So I did. I contacted the leaders of that church and talked to them. And I sort of acted as an intercessor between the two as an arbitrator. One Sunday night we designed what they called a restoration and reconciliation service. That man, who was a very prominent deacon in that church, came back and publicly asked that church to forgive him for what he had taught. And I wish you could have seen it as he was down there at the front of the stage. So many of those members in this little church came and just hugged him. And there was weeping and there was great joy as this person was restored. That's the whole goal of church discipline.

III. THE REMOVAL OF SIN

How do you deal with it? How do You remove it from your midst?

1. Church discipline is for Christians

We cannot judge non-believers. Paul says, "I'm not telling you don't associate with people who are sexually immoral and who are greedy and swindlers out in the world. Church discipline is only for those who claim to be believers, only those who claim to be Christians." But then Paul gives us six examples here that are grounds for disfellowship. What about card playing? What about dancing? What about telling a lie? What about gossiping? This list I believe is not exhaustive, but I think we can use this list to help us see some of the specific things he said that are grounds for disfellowship.

Grounds for disfellowship:

Sexual immorality

It is that word “porneia,” which is a umbrella term that covers all kinds of sexual immorality, like adultery, homosexuality, premarital sex. Any sexual sin falls under that umbrella. Remember it is something that is continually practiced, where the person refuses to repent.

Greed

Paul uses the example of a Christian who openly continues to practice greed. Now that word “greed” means covetousness, always wanting and stepping over people to get it.

Idolatry

Don't think of idolatry as building a statue and bowing down before it and worshipping it. Idolatry is when you set up anything in your life that you love more than God. And for us, it's not usually statues; it's possessions, things, a job, etc.

Slander

Slander is an act that you commit against another Christian by saying unkind, damaging things about them. Paul says when that happens constantly in the church, that could be grounds for church discipline.

Drunkenness

Continual drunkenness, Paul says, is grounds for disfellowship.

Swindling

This is a business word. If someone who claims to be a Christian continually cheats in business and they refuse to repent of that, Paul says that's grounds for disfellowship.

Church discipline is to be directed toward a Christian when they continually commit certain sins. And as I said, I do not believe this list is exhaustive. You need to look at each situation individually.

2. Church discipline is the removal of fellowship

Say that there is a member of our church who has to be confronted, and they refuse to repent. And it has to be brought before the church. And we pray for that person. And we announce that that person is disfellowshipped. Let me tell you what that means. That means you no longer go out and have a sandwich with them. You no longer invite them into your home for the same kind of fellowship that you enjoy when they were walking in the Spirit. You and I both know that when you invite somebody into your home and into your circle of fellowship when they are openly living in sin, you are tacitly putting your stamp of approval on their wicked lifestyle.

Now it doesn't mean you don't love them. Of course you love them. It doesn't mean you don't pray for them. Of course you pray for them, but you cannot continue business as usual. The status quo is no longer acceptable with a person like that.

And you must lovingly tell them, “My friend, I love you. And I wish I could fellowship with you. But the Bible says that we've gone through all of these steps, and because you're not willing to repent, I cannot fellowship you.” Now, does that mean that we take them off the church rolls? Well, frankly, that really doesn't matter because in the Early Church they didn't have church rolls. We do it to keep up with people and get names and addresses. They didn't do that. The way you were accepted was by the matter of fellowship. A lot of people smarter than me have studied this and have come to this conclusion. The way you really practice church discipline is through the refusal of the Lord's Supper. The Early Church could not call up a person's name on the computer and push “delete.” They couldn't do that. So how did they practically express the church discipline? Well, they publicly brought it before the church, asked the church to pray for that person, treated them like a publican or a tax collector, and they no longer had personal fellowship with them. So when the Lord's Supper was served, they came to this person and they evidently and intentionally skipped over that person. That was the way church discipline was practiced. Why? Because church discipline is only directed toward those who claim to be believers.

CONCLUSION

Does church discipline work? Second Corinthians two, five through eight is a passage that most New Testament scholars believe is a follow-up of this one case with this individual. Paul writes, “If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent, not to put it too severely.” In other words, this person who is in sin felt that the punishment inflicted on him by the majority was sufficient for him. “Now,” Paul says, “instead you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you therefore to reaffirm your love for him.” Many Bible scholars believe that Paul is writing about the same man in 1 Corinthians five that he said to expel!

Church discipline is not a pleasant subject. You probably won't feel like jumping up and clicking your heels after this sermon. But when the people of God obey the word of God, only then can the Spirit of God continue to bless us. So would you join me in making a commitment that we will obey the word of God in a spirit of meekness and a spirit of compassion? And let's pray God that we never have to practice church discipline. But if we do, we'll follow the instructions in God's word.

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