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1 Corinthians 4 – 5

“Church Discipline”

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There are times in the course of studying straight through the Bible (cover to cover the Cornerstone way!) that we come upon difficult and sensitive subjects; and today is one of those times. In [1 Corinthians 5](#), Paul deals with the painful but necessary subject of church discipline, which is a teaching that everyone needs to hear at least once in their lives.

In last week’s teaching, Pastor Gary pointed out that the Corinthian church was made up of immature Christians. Paul said that he wasn’t able to call them spiritual believers because they were worldly and still mere infants in their Christian faith. He was disappointed with the people in the church because, after all, the church was five years old and should have been way beyond where they were. The issue was that they were not growing up and going on into Christian maturity because, in part, they had allowed the wisdom of this world to shape the way they thought and behaved inside and outside the church. As a result, these born-again, spirit-filled believers looked more like the world than the church.

One of the major issues in the church was their tolerance of sexual sin in their fellowship. In fact, it was more than just a quiet tolerance, because [1 Corinthians 5:2 and 5:6](#) indicates they were proud and boastful of the fact that they had a sexually immoral man in the church!

Why would they be proud and boastful? The reason is that they actually thought that it was a loving gesture to make this guy feel accepted. It’s important to point out that under normal circumstances it is a loving thing to welcome sinners into the church, because the church should be a place where people who have messed up their lives can come and find grace, forgiveness, and the love of the Lord Jesus. The church is to be a place where lives can be transformed by the power of God. However, the church is not to be a place where Christians can live in compromise or unrepentant sin and expect to find shelter and acceptance.

It’s been said that the church is to be a hospital for sinners, but it is not to be a hiding place for sinners. This man was not some off-the-street new visitor to “Corinthian Chapel” who didn’t know better; he was a

familiar face in the church, a guy who was referred to as a “brother” (1 Corinthians 5:11). He was living in known sexual sin and the church did absolutely nothing about it!

What God shows us in this chapter is that it’s not a loving thing to tolerate on-going, sinful behavior in the church, because a terrible disservice is done to the person and to the church. As awkward and uncomfortable as it is, the loving thing to do is to put the person out of the church, which is the purpose of Paul’s outline regarding the proper steps for church discipline. He addresses four important questions about church discipline in this chapter, and in this study we’ll see that a proper understanding includes knowing the answers to the following questions: On what basis? – In what manner? – With what authority? – For what purpose?

Church Discipline – On What Basis?

1. Church discipline is required when there is on-going, unrepentant sin.
2. The man in question was involved in a sexual relationship with his stepmother!
 - a. 1 Corinthians 5:1 indicates that this is not a one-time thing.¹
3. This is such a bizarre situation that Paul wrote, *“it’s a kind [of thing] that does not even occur among the pagans,”* and he was talking about the Romans, who were into every imaginable sinful sexual behavior.
4. The stepmother does not appear to be member/believer in the church because Paul does not indicate any disciplinary action toward her is necessary.

Church Discipline – In What Manner?

5. Church discipline should take place with a sorrowful heart.
 - a. 1 Corinthians 5:2 – *“Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief...”*
6. There should be no pride or arrogance associated with the exercise of church discipline; it should be done with a heavy heart, in meekness and humility because it is a sad time for everyone involved.
7. Galatians 6:1 – *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”*
8. Ephesians 4:15 – *“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”*
9. Church discipline should be done privately and discreetly.

¹ The word “has” is in the present infinitive, which indicates an on-going situation.

Church Discipline – With What Authority?

10. Paul speaks of his own authority over the church when he says, *“I have already passed judgment.”* (1 Corinthians 5:3)
11. He speaks of the authority of Jesus Christ when he says, *“in the name of the Lord Jesus”* and when *“the power of the Lord Jesus is present.”* (1 Corinthians 5:4)
12. Church discipline is handled by the leadership of the church on the authority of Jesus Christ and his Word.
13. There is an implied built-in safeguard and benefit for those who are connected to the church.
 - a. They were to turn the man over to Satan for the purpose of *“destroying his sinful nature,”* which is better than the destruction of his soul. (1 Corinthians 5:5)
 - b. In other words, when a person in sin is denied the shelter, the comfort and the consolation of the church, he/she becomes more exposed to Satan’s attacks, who will take advantage of that person’s sinful nature until they come face to face with their miserable condition.

Church Discipline – For What Purpose?

14. Church discipline is undertaken for the purpose of correction, salvation and restoration of the person.
 - a. The ultimate goal is that the person becomes sick of their sin so that their spirit can be saved on the *“day of the Lord.”* (1 Corinthians 5:5)
 - b. It is better for a person to experience temporary pain than eternal consequences.
 - c. The purpose is not to kick someone in the church to the curb just to rid the church of sinful people; it’s for the purpose of correction to preserve salvation with the goal of restoration.
 - d. The only time public church discipline is necessary is when someone is preying on people.
15. Church discipline is undertaken for the purpose of admonition, protection and purification of the church.
 - a. In a physical sense, it’s a healthy thing for the body to purge itself of whatever is contaminating it, and so it is with the church.
 - b. A healthy church should seek to purge itself, which is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:6, referring to yeast as a symbol of sin: *“Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?”*
 - c. The benefit of having a reputation for dealing with on-going, unrepentant sin is that others are warned and put on notice that the church will not be a place where an individual can choose to remain in sin and find shelter, which is a good thing!
16. Hebrews 12:11 – *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*
17. G. Campbell Morgan – *“The church pure, is the church powerful.”*

18. While it seems like this is a harsh thing to do, the Biblical model of church discipline works!
- Fortunately, this man wanted restoration, although many don't and simply move on to another church.
 - 2 Corinthians 2:5–11** – *“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. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now 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. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”*

Discussion Questions

- Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
- Read **1 Corinthians 5:1–13** to provide an overview for this study.
- Allow the people in your group to share their experiences and provide examples of church discipline.
 - In your opinion, was the discipline dealt with according to the Biblical model as outlined in **1 Corinthians 5:1–13**?
 - Was there reluctance on the part of the pastor/church leadership to initiate the process of church discipline?
 - Was it the case that the individual or individuals involved repented and received the forgiveness of the Lord, as well as the blessing of restoration in the church?
 - Was the discipline done in a private and discreet manner or was it made public?
 - If it was made public, what were the circumstances?
 - Are you aware of a recurrence at this church?
 - Was there any evidence of damage in the church that was caused by going through the process of church discipline?
 - Was there any evidence of damage in the church that was caused by a failure to address the situation properly?
- Do you think most churches practice a “don’t rock the boat” policy regarding known sin in the life of a professing Christian?
- Do you think some Christians believe church discipline is really a form of legalism and heavy-handedness on the part of pastors/leaders?
- Spend time talking about other areas of known, on-going sin that would be included in a list of situations that require church discipline.

7. Read and discuss [Galatians 6:1](#) – “*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*”
8. Read and discuss – [Ephesians 4:15](#) – “*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*”
9. Read and discuss [Hebrews 12:11](#) – “*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*”
 - a. Spend time talking about the fact that practicing real Christian love sometimes requires being involved in the painful and uncomfortable process of church discipline.
10. Read and discuss the quote from G. Campbell Morgan: “The church pure, is the church powerful.”
 - a. Read and discuss the account of Ananias and Sapphira in [Acts 5:1–11](#).
11. Read and discuss [2 Corinthians 2:5–11](#), which provides details about the restoration of this man to the church.
12. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: ask the Lord to help the pastors and leaders of Cornerstone Chapel know when and when not to initiate the process of church discipline; ask the Lord to continue the process of spiritual renewal in the lives of the people at Cornerstone Chapel; ask the Lord to do his work at Cornerstone Chapel so the church would be spiritually healthy; ask the Lord to help the people of Cornerstone Chapel to make sure the church is a welcoming place and a “hospital for sinners” so people can find the mercy, grace, love and forgiveness of God; commit themselves to living a life that would be God-honoring.