

Sermon 15: 1 Corinthians 5:1-5: Church Discipline

OUTLINE

Rebuke for not doing church discipline
Instructions for applying church discipline

INTRODUCTION

At the time of the Reformation they were debating a lot of theological matters, one of the questions that came up was, when is a local church a true Church? Do you need a Pope over you to be a Church; did you need the 7 Sacraments to be a church; do you need to be able to trace your ministers through an apostolic succession to be a church? Here was the answer of the Reformation, a true church is that church which preaches the gospel; faithfully administers the sacraments, and practices church discipline. Church discipline has been viewed as being essential to the definition of the church. I think we must all agree with this statement, that every church in order to be biblical faithful; healthy; and a good witness must be committed to practicing church discipline.

In an age of no corporal punishment and no capital punishment, church discipline is going to seem like an outlandish, judgemental, antiquarian, barbaric, and harmful process. In an age of political correctness, hate speech laws, conversion therapy bans, where people are getting arrested for preaching the gospel, or even praying silently outside an abortion clinic, to insist on church discipline only looks like doubling down on insanity. In an age of pressure to celebrate someone's self-identity; forced pronoun hospitality; safe spaces; a self-esteem based definition of sin; where love is defined as unconditional positive regard; and where the golden rule is don't judge, church discipline is not just seen as crazy and out of touch but dangerous and harmful.

As someone else has put it, we practice church discipline because we are commanded to love. Church discipline loves the sinner as they are confronted by their brethren who love them and who call them to repentance and from the sin that will destroy them. Church discipline shows love for the church because it removes the leaven which could leaven the whole lump. Church discipline is necessary because we love a watching world who need to see that we are saved from sin, that we are salt and light. And church discipline is part of how the local church loves God, as we serve Him in the beauty of holiness, as we obey His commands, as we display the glory of His gospel and the wisdom of His ways.

The Corinthian church was not a healthy church, but being full of pride they were full of all sorts of problems. They think that they are spiritual and doing well, but Paul thinks otherwise. They think they are spiritual because they have good theology and know that idols are nothing and have the informed freedom to eat meat offered to idols, Paul tells them they are wrong because knowledge puffs up but love builds up the body, and without love we are nothing. The Corinthians think that they are spiritual because they have so many spiritual gifts, but Paul shows how they have allowed confusion in the worship service, how performance and the spectacle are of no benefit to the building up of the church. The Corinthians pride themselves in their gifted teachers with their attractive teachings, but Paul has shown how this man-following has led to divisions. The Corinthians have emphasized and excelled in those things that have fed their pride but not those things that love their brethren and honour God. Paul has just

had a tender moment in 4:14-21 where he has had to remind them of his fatherly love for them, but this is a calm before the storm. Paul continues to talk about their pride, and bringing up some very serious matters. It appears that he has left these off because he first needed to establish his authority and love for them. Paul begins a section where three concerning sins are raised, the case of incest; the problems of Christians taking each other to court; and the problem of those who frequent temple prostitutes. Paul is confounded that they could think they are healthy when sin is abounding, that they would brag and think they are doing well when such glaring faults abound. He continues to put them in their place, v2, 'And you are arrogant!' v6, 'Your boasting is not good.' 6:5, 'I say this to your shame.'

Today we will look at verses 1-5 where Paul rebukes the Corinthians for tolerating a certain sin in their midst. We will look at his rebuke, and then his instructions.

Rebuke for not doing church discipline

V1, 'It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.' The Corinthians had written a letter to Paul to ask for advice on certain matters, Paul takes these up in chapter 7. The Corinthians had not told Paul, nor asked him about this matter, Paul had to hear it second hand from those who travelled from Corinth. It may have been those from Chloe's household 1:11, or someone else. But Paul is up to speed with the details of the situation. There is a man who would have been baptized and is part of the Corinthian church who is sleeping with his step-mother.

Firstly, it should be noted that Paul is shocked that a sin that even the world does not approve of is not being addressed, and that he has come to hear about it. Paul hopes to present a spotless bride to Christ in the church, and encourages the churches to shine as light in the darkness and here the Corinthian church is failing on both counts. We do not concern ourselves when the world falsely accuses us of things like lovelessness because their value system is not built on the truth of God and how it defines sin. But we are concerned that the world see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. We do recognize that the world is watching and by our love and holiness they will be able to tell whether we are His disciples. The charge of hypocrisy has been laid at the feet of the church in every age, and in part this is because so many are falsely called believers, but in part we are guilty because as a church we have not been a holy community faithful in watching for one another's souls, bearing one another's burden, being accountable and confessing our sin to one another, and confronting those who bear the name of Christ who live in sin.

Secondly, we must note that Paul uses the word 'sexual immorality.' Paul along with all the other NT writers and Jesus Himself use the OT sexual ethics code. The OT laws about adultery, the OT laws about sex outside of marriage, the OT laws about marriage and sexuality and incest. In Lev. 18:7-8 God forbids relations between son and mother, or sin and step-mother. That is in the background of what Paul is saying here. In our age of open sexuality it is good to remember that this is the assumption in scripture. Many go around saying, 'oh where in the Bible does it say you can't do this...?' The OT teaches a positive view of sexuality of sex on marriage and upholds its definition of sexual sin in the

NT. Jesus intensified this teaching when He taught that sinful lust even in the mind is to be avoided.

V2, 'And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.' In the world we live in today the motto is live and let live, there is no mourning over how people conduct their lives unless it hurts others. In the church our standards are God's standards. We mourn all sin. God is Lord, He is to be obeyed, His rule is law and to disobey Him is high treason. Sin hurts ourselves, other people but most importantly it is against God Himself. Christ was the One who had to die, because sin is so serious. So when sin is in our midst, we do not turn a blind eye, that is not loving to the Christian sinning, the world that is watching, the church that could become infected and God whose glory we are called to magnify not stain. We are our brother's keeper; their sin is our problem, we are called to bear one another's burdens.

The Corinthians were a blind church who valued the wrong things and did not see sin in their midst as a deep and problematic thing. Perhaps it was because this person was a man and not a woman and the culture did not frown upon men committing sexual sin. Perhaps this man was rich and had a high position in society and you just did not humiliate important people. It does not matter why they failed to do their duty. Paul is no respecter of person because sin is no respecter of persons. We do have to test ourselves at this point. Have we become blind to sin, hardened to sin, do we see sin and are to cowardly and uncaring to say anything. Will we be faithful and offer the bruise of a friend or wicked and give the kiss of an enemy?

Paul challenges the Corinthians to do what they should have done and what Jesus commanded in regard to church discipline, and put the person out. Paul because of their failure to do their duty steps in as an apostle and gives them instruction.

Instructions for applying church discipline

V3-5, 'For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.' To understand what Paul is talking about here we first need to listen what Jesus said about church discipline. The best point to begin is with Christ's teaching in Matt. 18:15-20, "'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.'

Jesus lays out instructions for restoring a brother from sin and begins by telling us who we should be addressing, a 'brother'. This would include all those who

confess Christ and claim to be Christians. We are dealing with a credible confession of faith not those outside the church. The particular grievance mentioned is one where you have been sinned against and your brother has not repented and sought to correct the sin or be reconciled. This would imply that you have not rushed to confront someone that has sinned against you but you have let it sit for a while giving space to the Holy Spirit to convict and stir them to repentance.

I would add that we should not only consider brothers that have sinned against us, but any brother who has sinned and does not appear to be repenting. The interest of the text is not predominantly my own personal justice but my brother's spiritual wellbeing. We may know of someone in the church who has sinned, and you may be the only one who knows, I would include these amongst those who should be addressed.

Let me say a few words about motive here. Self-righteousness is one of the sneakiest of our sins for it is able to find its way into almost all of our behaviour. And in the instance of you seeing another person's sins, the foremost temptation you are going to face is a legalistic and pharisaic spirit. This is a spirit that gets on a high horse and does not see its own sin, but only the sin of others. It fixates upon the sin of others and draws out the guilt of others in ways that it would never do for our own sins. We are not to see ourselves as the conscience police in the church and should never be on the hunt for sin in others. We should shoulder this responsibility with a sense of inadequacy because the sins we see in them are the sins we could easily do ourselves. We find no delight in it. We are to seek to be our brother's keeper not judge. Not yet anyway.

Now what type of sin are we talking about here? If someone exaggerates and indulges their gift of hyperbole is this the sort of offence that Jesus is talking about? No, Jesus is not trying to make Pharisees of us where we constantly monitor each others lives for the smallest fault. Someone has suggested that the sin in question should be outward, serious and unrepented of. We are not seeking to pretend to be able to read people's minds, the sin in question has to be evident and undeniable where more than one witness with claimed mind reading powers is can attest to the sin. All sin is serious and can kill but there is a difference between someone who exaggerates and someone who lies in their employment in order to get their money. And there must be impenitence, an unwillingness to repent. If someone who was once addicted to drugs becomes a Christian and falls, but confesses it, seeks accountability, my even fall again but commits himself to overcoming it, that is weakness not an unwillingness to repent. We are called to support those who are waging war against their sins. We do not want our brethren to fear to confess their sins to their brethren because we need each other to help overcome them in many instances.

Notice how we are to begin handling this issue, 'go and tell him his fault, you and him alone.' We are not to broadcast a person's sins in a prayer meeting, to friends. The way to alleviate your concern is not to mouth off but to go to that person in private and seek to confront them in a loving fashion. This allows the person to repent with dignity, sin is a shameful thing and public embarrassment is only going to want to cause the person to dig in their heels. For although you may be doing something that appears outwardly correct you have disrespected the person by broadcasting their sins in public.

When confronting a true Christian in a loving manner we would expect to see them own their sin and repent. Like David who had been squirming in private pain on account of his sin, he repented immediately when confronted by Nathan. So Jesus goes on to say, 'If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.' So far we have not done church discipline we have simply acted in responsible love seeking to carry one another's burdens and keep each other close to the Lord.

V16 tells us what to do if the individual refuses to repent, 'But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.' A refusal to repent privately changes the ball game. Since the person who claims to be a Christian is refusing to act like one, and since we are family and are called to be pure and united as a people, in order to preserve our purity, unity and witness this has to now be pursued publicly. Sin is not a light matter, impenitence is a terrible thing, wallowing in sin is unacceptable, this step highlights for us the intolerance that we should practice with those sins that others do not see in our lives. Here Jesus advises us to take along witnesses, but we still keep the circle small. This is a legal word and implies official proceedings being taken. It is at this point that I would suggest that an elder would be the best person to take as a witness. You are looking for someone who is unbiased, who is seeking the good of the person and the church, and a person whose testimony before the church will not be questioned. Your personal history with the person who is refusing to repent will cause people to doubt your motives and the account you give, so you need someone whose integrity is trusted. Notice that the window for repentance is continuing to remain open, that God is not making us rush to judgement but is making many overtures towards the person through the faithfulness of the church.

V17 outlines the next step if he still refuses to repent. 'If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.' Finally, the whole church should get involved in the discipline proceedings, for it is not only the responsibility of the elders but the whole community to uphold the holiness, unity and witness of the church. And only once he still refuses to repent once the seriousness of his sins have been made known to him through repetitious, public and united calls for repentance. Only then do we pronounce that he is not a Christian on account of his behaviour and treat him as such. Jesus uses the example of a Gentile being someone who is outside of the covenant community, and a tax collector who was a traitor to his own people.

Church discipline is a scary thing, this pronouncing of a person as an unbeliever Paul calls handing over to satan by the power of the Lord. The following verses imply that something serious happens spiritually, 'Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.' Now it must be stated that if someone has been mistreated in a church discipline proceeding, someone who was innocent, and who has been conspired against, we would say that God would not hear the prayers of the church in that instance, for it is not the church but God who has the power of the keys, and He only blesses the proper use of them. God has not given the church a weapon that can be used to actually accomplish evil, the power resides with Him and will not be present in illegitimate cases. The point I want to make is, you do not want to be

on the receiving end of a legitimate instance of church discipline. In 1 Cor. 5:4, Paul warns that the power of the Lord is present to accomplish this handing over, 'When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus.' To be handed over to satan is to be excluded from the people of God and put back in satan's domain. Can a Christian be subject to this? Yes, Job shows us that God can lower His hedge around us, and allow satan to aggravate the situation with the hope that the sinner will be woken up from his slumber and repent, this is a kindness where things may get seven times worse before the sinner will repent. If it is God's will to do so He will use the discipline of the church as the means of bringing about this state. If a person is wrongfully disciplined nothing will happen. We don't force God's hand. The keys of the kingdom, that is the authority to baptise, or in Jesus words, to bind people to the visible church; or to affirm their fellowship and standing in the church by their coming to the table; or their being visibly being put out of the church through church discipline. The keys of the kingdom regulate the visible church not the invisible. In other words, we do not see ourselves as wielding a magic power that opens and closes heaven for people, we do not see the exercise of the keys like the Roman Catholic Church that could call for an interdict and stop souls entering heaven.

So returning to our portion what is Paul saying? Paul is absent in body, but present in spirit. It is unlikely that Paul means that he has an apostolic gift of astral travelling, but rather that he is in supportive approval of an act of church discipline and is present in a moral and supportive way, as well as in an authoritative and authorizing way, as he gives consent and instruction. He has evaluated the testimony of 2 or more witnesses; he has heard about the specifics of this sin that continue unrepented of in their midst, and he has had to take action where the Corinthian church have not. Where ordinarily there would be a process of taking it to the church and going through progressive steps of seeking to turn this person from their ways, Paul has enough info to come to a conclusion and push things forward to the next step. The sin is festering it needs immediate amputation and Paul calls them into action.

But let me focus on v5, 'you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.' Here we see the hope of discipline. By the power of the Lord through the means of church discipline someone is handed over to satan, and they are sifted by him. We see a wonderful demonstration of God's sovereignty in this because God uses the devil despite himself. Through whatever action the devil takes either for suffering or deepening the sin, etc, God's purpose is the destruction of the flesh, this is not death but the death of the sinful person we were in Adam. The goal we see is salvation of our spirits on the day of the Lord. Church discipline is redemptive, it is a strong measure employed by God to separate us from our sins, to draw us to repentance and bring us back to Himself. To be left in an unrepentant state is a sign that someone is not saved.

There is more that needs to be said on these matters we cannot say all that needs to be said in one message. Perhaps I have raised more questions I hope to answer those in the coming messages.