

## **The Other Side of Church Discipline**

### **2 Corinthians 2:5-11**

We're back to 2 Corinthians today and the passage we're going to get into has to do with church discipline. I'm not sure how familiar you are with this topic or what you think of it. For some it might be a new thing. Others might be familiar. You might have visions of a 4-hour Puritan church service with a person holding a long stick to whack people falling asleep. You might think of the Scarlet Letter and a church that shuns one of its members. Church discipline often comes with negative connotations and feelings of legalism, condemnation, guilt and shame.

My impression is that most modern churches avoid it because it's really uncomfortable and unpopular. We want everyone to get along and for there to be peace and unity. We don't like ruffling feathers and we know most people just want people to mind their own business. We feel awkward confronting someone else's sins when we have sins of our own. Attempts at church discipline can get messy and feelings can get hurt, friendships broken. So a lot of churches avoid it.

You might have gone through it at some point and had a bad experience. Or heard about it with someone else and felt like it was overboard. So I realize it can be a touchy subject. But we do find it in the Bible, including our passage for today, so we're going to look at what Paul has to say about it and hopefully come away with a much better view and attitude toward it than what I've been describing. Church discipline can be done poorly, but it can also be done well and be very helpful for everyone involved.

There's an interesting and helpful backstory to the verses we're going to study, so I want to start with that and then we'll get to the verses themselves. Colin Kruse, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, looks at several passages in both 1 and 2 Corinthians that deal with someone that comes up in our passage for today who made a personal attack against the Apostle Paul on one of his visits. And he pieces together several clues from both books to come up with a plausible storyline that connects all the dots. It's impossible for us to know whether or not this is exactly right but it does fit the evidence

given and provides us with some good answers for why Paul writes what he does.

In 1 Corinthians, one of the things Paul writes about is how the church was handling a situation where one of their members was committing blatant sexual immorality in a way that not even the promiscuous Corinthian pagans would do. He was sleeping with his father's wife... Now, that probably wasn't his mom, or I'm sure Paul would have made that clear. Apparently, his father was married to another woman and this man was sleeping with her.

Now, what should a church do in a situation like that? Should they just mind their own business and not ruffle any feathers? Here's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5: *"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. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> 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."*

That's what they were supposed to do. Remove him from the church – cut off his social network and spiritual support with the hope that he will hit rock bottom and repent.

This falls in line with what Jesus taught in Matthew 18 regarding situations when a fellow believer is sinning against you. Jesus gave his disciples a 3-step process to go through. Matthew 18:15-17 says: *"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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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."*

This process started small and privately and gave ample opportunity for someone to repent. But if they didn't, it provided the basis for church leadership to make a fair judgment and remove the unrepentant person from the fellowship.

I'm sure Paul had this in mind in the situation in Corinth and that attempts had been made to confront the unrepentant person, but it had reached the point where Paul was pronouncing judgment on him, and it was time for the church to remove him. He went on to tell them in 1 Corinthians that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" and they were to "cleanse out the old leaven." They were to "purge the evil person from among them." He would have a spiritually toxic effect on them, so he was to be removed. And, God would hopefully use the painful experience to bring him back to repentance.

That's church discipline and that's what they were supposed to do. But Kolin Cruze surmises that when the church in Corinth received those instructions, they failed to obey them and allowed that man to remain in the fellowship. So they failed to practice church discipline. He believes that later on, when Paul sent Timothy to check on them to see how they responded to his instructions, he found out that the man was still in the church, still unrepentant, and even stirring up dissension against Paul. So when Timothy returned to Paul and delivered the disturbing report, Paul immediately went to Corinth to deal with the situation, making the emergency trip that I've mentioned in previous sermons.

When he got there, the biblical evidence indicates that he was personally attacked by someone, possibly this same man, and instead of standing beside him and supporting him, and following through on church discipline, the church again did nothing. That meant they had to even be questioning Paul's calling and authority as an Apostle. This was devastating to Paul, so he left Corinth and went back to Ephesus, from which he wrote them a severe letter that we no longer have, likely calling them to repent and instructing them of their responsibility to discipline the unrepentant man.

Upon receiving that letter, 2 Corinthians tells us the church took it to heart, repented of their sin of neglecting to practice church discipline, and they removed the unrepentant sinner from their fellowship. Titus heard about this

and brought word to Paul who was still in Macedonia and he was greatly encouraged which is why he wrote 2 Corinthians (or at least the first 9 chapters). They had obeyed, they had removed the sinner, they had purged the evil from their midst...

And that brings us to our passage for today. Up to this point we've mainly seen the severe side of church discipline which includes confrontation, lack of repentance, and removal from the church – things which we probably most often associate with church discipline. But now we will see the other side, which is actually the goal for all church discipline. So this guy had been confronted and removed from the church, and here's what comes next...

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup>For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup>so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup>Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, <sup>11</sup>so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.*

So first Paul acknowledges the pain this guy caused, especially pointing out the fact that he had caused pain for the whole church family – one member, unrepentant, unwilling to be held accountable by his brothers and sisters in Christ, caused pain for everyone. When that happens to me, my natural response is “Good riddance!” “Don’t let the door hit you where the good Lord split you.” Or maybe let it!

It's easy for an attitude of bitterness to set in – a hard heart. And I'm sure Paul knew that would be the tendency for the church in Corinth because of what they had been through. But Paul, having experienced God's amazing grace and forgiveness in his own life, though he was the worst of sinners, knew that it was time for the church to extend grace and forgiveness to this man. I do believe this indicates that he was finally broken and repentant – no longer belligerent or defending himself. Having had the relationships with his church

family severed, which was his critical network of support, and having been handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, he finally reached a point of brokenness and repentance. So the first part of church discipline did its work.

And now it was time for the second part... restoration. Paul says the punishment by the church family was enough and now it was time to forgive and comfort him, so he wouldn't be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. He begged them to reaffirm their love for him.

This is the side of church discipline that doesn't get a lot of attention, but this is what church discipline is for! It's not just to purge the evil from our midst, but to bring about repentance and restore that person to all the blessings of being connected with the church family. The goal is restoration. And when that happens it's a powerful demonstration of God's grace and the gospel.

So forgiveness needed to happen. Paul told them that if they forgave the man, he would also forgive, even though this man had personally attacked him and caused so many problems. But Paul would also forgive the Corinthian church for not obeying his instructions and supporting him. By forgiving them, Paul says Satan would not outwit them in his attempts to drive a wedge between him and the church.

So this second part of church discipline is just as important as the first. Satan can destroy a church through the toleration of unrepentant sinners, or he can destroy a church through bitterness and unforgiveness toward those who repent. Therefore, church discipline that aims at restoration needs to be practiced by every church family.

And it's something that all of us need to take part in – it isn't just for elders and church leaders. Most of church discipline should take place before things even get to the point of involving church leadership. It takes place in conversations between Christian friends. If you see something going on in someone else's life that is disobedient to God's Word and they keep doing it, it's actually your responsibility to go talk to them. Don't call the pastor to go do it for you – that's second hand information, calling the pastor is a step that's down the road... but the first thing that needs to happen is a

conversation between you and that person out of love and concern for what you see happening in their life.

*Galatians 6:1-2 “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

*James 5:19-20 “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”*

*Hebrews 3:12-14 “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”*

God uses Christian accountability across the whole church family to bring about wonderful blessings in each of our lives and we all need it. Do you have the kind of Christian friendships where you can talk to someone about concerns you may have, or they can talk to you? Those friendships are a tremendous blessing and we need to cultivate them. If a church family does that, it will almost entirely eliminate the need for church discipline to go any further.

But if it does need to go further and the person you've spoken to brushes you off and continues to live in sin, then you bring in another trusted friend, or maybe a pastor or elder to talk with them. And if even that doesn't work to bring them to repentance, it's at that point where church leadership needs to get involved and talk to them and draw a line in the sand – it's either repentance or removal. Nobody's looking for perfection or we'd have an empty church, but we are looking for repentance and the willingness to join one another in fighting against remaining sin.

This is the pattern we see in Scripture and we all need to be willing to take the first step. And then, if it comes down to it and a person repents at any point in the process, even if after leaving the church, there needs to be forgiveness – a reaffirmation of love and acceptance, and a warm welcome back into the fellowship of believers.

There may be trust issues that need time for healing, and some friendships may never be quite the same, but we must not hold it against someone who truly repents of their sin. As God has forgiven us, we also must forgive.

I don't know what kind of thoughts or feelings this kind of sermon might stir up in you, but if you need to talk to someone to further process your situation, feel free to talk to one of the elders or pastors and we will seek to give biblical counsel.