

“Withdrawal of Fellowship”

1 CORINTHIANS 5

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Madison, Wisconsin
April 21, 2013**



If you have been with us over the past two weeks, then you know that we have been looking together at a number of passages that are ultimately related to the subject of church discipline. We started two weeks ago by looking at the importance of being connected to a local congregation. And then last week, we looked at God’s plan for handling conflict between Christians. If someone sins against us, we have an obligation to go to that person one-on-one to try to work things out. As the Lord said, our goal is to win our brother. We learned last week that probably 90% of all conflict in the church can be cleared up with that one very simple step – a private conversation. So, if you have a beef with another member of the congregation, don’t take it to me, don’t post it on Facebook, don’t go telling your best friend, but take it directly to the person involved. This is what the Lord has told us to do. In the rare circumstance where that first one-on-one meeting fails to resolve the issue, we are then told to take one or two others with us and to have a second meeting. And then, if the person still refuses to repent, we are to take it to the church, and if they refuse to listen to the church, they are to be removed from the congregation.

As I mentioned last week, I would like for us to spend some more time this morning on this final act of discipline, the removal of a Christian from the fellowship of God’s people. This is a subject we have not studied for many years (since 2003), so we need to go back and look very carefully at what God’s word has to say. As unpleasant as it might be, discipline is absolutely necessary in just about all parts of our lives. As parents, we discipline our children. We look at our government, and we understand that one of the primary roles of government is to discipline those who do evil. Teachers must exercise discipline in the classroom. Several weeks ago, I disciplined my fruit trees. I pruned them for their own good. They are about 1/3 smaller, but they are stronger. And perhaps in the same way, discipline is also necessary in the Lord’s church. As we learned last week, there are a number of steps in the process, in a vast majority of the cases those steps will work, but when those efforts have failed, we are commanded to remove the one who continues in sin from the congregation. We are to withdraw our fellowship from that person.

As Christians, the fellowship that we have with each other is one of the greatest blessings of our Christian faith. I am thankful, especially, for the fellowship that we have here at this congregation. I love how so many people stay so long after the closing prayer. I love the low roar of conversation that takes place between Bible class and worship every Lord’s Day morning. I love seeing members help each other through difficult times. In my lifetime, I have seen Christians buy cars for each other. I have seen Christians pay each other’s rent. I have

seen Christians spend the night with each other in the hospital. I have seen Christians watch each other's children during difficult times. The fellowship that we have with each other is truly amazing. It is no surprise, then, that the cutting off of that fellowship is the Lord's final and most severe act of discipline here on this earth. It is this final step that I would like for us to focus in on this morning.

We will start with just a brief summary of some sins that can lead to this final act, and then we will move on to consider the purpose or the goals of such discipline.

I. **But first of all, let us please consider THE SINS THAT MIGHT LEAD TO THIS FINAL ACT.**

Last week, of course, we looked at what we might refer to as unresolved personal offenses. If someone sins against me and refuses to listen to me, or to the mutually respected witnesses, or to the entire congregation, that person is to be removed from the congregation. That, however, is not the only situation that might cause someone to be cut off from the fellowship of the congregation.

In the New Testament, we are also told to turn away from those who cause division within the congregation. In Romans 16:17-18, Paul said, ***"Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting."*** So, as a congregation, we are to ***"turn away from"*** those who disturb the unity of the congregation, and the reason is, these people ***"deceive the hearts"*** of those who might not know better. It spreads like gangrene. So, we are to protect the church from division.

We read something similar in Titus 3:10-11, where Paul said that we are to, ***"Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned."*** Notice how this is different from having a personal problem with another individual. The process is shorter, there is no reference to this being private. In fact, this can be very public. We remember the passage in Galatians where Paul referred to opposing Peter to his face.

Related to these passages in Romans and Titus, we have the words of John in 2 John 9-11, referring (literally) to those who are progressive in their doctrine, ***"Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds."*** This is primarily directed to those who may come to us, but it would certainly apply to those who would try to change the church's doctrine over time. If they ***"go too far,"*** if they progress beyond the teaching that Christ delivered to us in the New Testament, we are not to ***"receive"*** them. They are to be rejected.

We will look at this passage in more detail (as a case study) in just a few minutes, but we are also told to remove anyone who continues in any sin and refuses to repent. The sin in 1 Corinthians 5 is sexual in nature, but in the same context, we will find that Paul also refers to ***"any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler – not even to eat with such a one."*** So, we are not necessarily talking about someone who may sin against us personally (as was the case in Matthew 18), but this is for any sin that a person continues in and refuses to turn away from.

We have another category outlined in 2 Thessalonians 3. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul says, ***"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an***

unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. He goes on to say (in verse 14), ***“If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.”*** Up in verse 6, when Paul refers to living an ***“unruly life,”*** the word he uses there was often used in the military to refer to someone who was ***“out of step”*** with the others who were marching in formation. The word refers to being ***“disorderly,”*** or ***“undisciplined,”*** or ***“out of order.”*** I know sometimes people will object and say, “Well, if a person just stops attending, we don’t really need to do anything; after all, you cannot fire somebody who quits.” In a sense, that is true, but in another sense, consider this: Biblically speaking, would it be more accurate to say that God is our employer, or is he our commanding officer? In the military, what happens if a soldier just stops showing up to work one day? What happens when a soldier goes AWOL? I would imagine that steps are taken to bring that person back. I might compare it to what happens if I don’t show up to the dentist. Several years ago, I got a “Friendly Reminder.” The card said, “We’ve missed you and are concerned about your dental health.” They didn’t just let me go, they didn’t just ignore me, but they took steps to bring me back. So, the reference here in 2 Thessalonians 3 is to someone who is out of step with the rest of the congregation.

So, these are some reasons that might bring us to the final step of church discipline – unresolved personal offenses, divisiveness, teaching something that is false, any sin that continues without repentance, and living an unruly life that is out of step with the congregation.

- II. **With this in mind, I would like for us to use the remainder of our time together this morning to look at an example – we might refer to this as being a case study in church discipline. I am referring to the man who was living in sexual sin with his own stepmother in 1 Corinthians 5. And as we look at this example, I would like to point out THREE GOALS THAT WE WOULD LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH WITH ANY ACT OF DISCIPLINE.**

So that we are on the same page, I would like for us to actually turn to the same page! Let us please look together at 1 Corinthians 5 (p. 1786):

¹ It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. ² You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. ³ For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? ⁷ Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰ I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. ¹¹ But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler — not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with

judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? ¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

Again, as we look at these 13 verses, I would like to point out three goals, three objectives, that we need to keep in mind when it comes to removing someone from the congregation.

A. First of all, one of our most obvious goals is to save the person's soul.

In verse 5, Paul referred to, ***"...deliver[ing] such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."*** Just a note here: ***"The destruction of his flesh"*** is not a reference to killing the guy! Instead, I believe Paul is making a reference similar to putting to death the old man of sin (in Romans 6:6). The flesh being ***"destroyed,"*** then, would be the fleshly desire that led to this particular sin in the first place. The man, therefore, was to be removed from the family of God and turned back over to the world, ***"so that his spirit may be saved."***

Of course, at this point, some may object, "Well, that really sounds mean! And besides, that will never work! How in the world can we win somebody back by kicking them out?" To the objection that this will never work, I would respond by saying that I have seen it work! I was blessed to grow up in a congregation where the elders took their responsibility seriously and where they took this command seriously. We have also seen it work here, but since I don't want to embarrass anybody, I will share an example from my childhood. As I remember it, a young woman (the daughter of one of the faithful members) began to slip back into a life of sin. As I remember it, she moved in with her boyfriend, she stopped attending the services of the church. After a period of time trying to encourage her, it was obvious that she was not coming back, so the church took this step of removing her from the congregation. We were not allowed to have any kind of social contact with her, we were not to even to eat with her, until she changed that behavior. It was a painful experience, because we had all grown up with her. After a period of time, though, she came back. She came out of that life of sin, and this morning I have a copy of the note that she had read to the church when she returned,

I am coming forward today to ask God to forgive me of the terrible sins I have committed and to accept me again as one of His children. I am also asking all of you to pray for me and give me strength to follow His word and to accept me once again as a member of this church. I thank you for all of the prayers you have prayed for me and for all of the support you have given me during the past few years. I hope now to have a chance to live eternally in heaven with Him.

Church discipline works. No one can argue that with me, because I have seen it work in the life of a friend. It is not pleasant at the time. If this young woman's mother were here this morning, she would also testify that it was incredibly painful at the time, but the ultimate purpose of church discipline is to save the soul of the person involved. And because the discipline was carried out as the Bible instructed, the young woman returned to the Lord and her faith was restored.

Now of course, there are many times when the discipline will not bring the person back. Often, people are so far gone and so deeply swallowed up by sin that they will never return – the Bible warns us about this – but I would point out: At this point we have only discussed one of three objectives for church discipline. The person may not be restored, but that does not free us from doing what Paul tells us to do here; instead, we need to think about two other goals here.

- B. And the second reason Paul gives for removing a sinful or rebellious person from the congregation is to keep the sin from spreading within the congregation. A second reason for discipline is to instill some level of fear in the rest of us so that we also will be fearful of sinning.

In verses 6-7, Paul said, ***“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump....”*** In verse 2, we find that the sin had already spread to the point that the church had become ***“arrogant.”*** I am assuming that they were doing some of what we hear churches doing today, “Oh, we are tolerant of this lifestyle. We are open. We are accepting. We are an inclusive congregation. We are a church of love. We believe in the grace of God.” Had they been in Madison, the church in Corinth would have been flying the rainbow flag from their sign out front. So Paul calls them out on it, ***“You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead.”*** They were bragging about their tolerance, and acceptance, and love – when they should have been weeping! And in this context, Paul warns about the sin spreading like yeast in a batch of bread dough. Instead of bragging about it, the church was to remove the sin from the congregation so that it would not spread. The man had to be removed, just like we would remove a bad apple from the bushel basket. The bad apple may never get better, but at least we have saved the other apples. We think of those old war movies where a ship is hit, and they have to seal off the watertight doors leading to that compartment. It might seem harsh, some people might be lost, but it is absolutely necessary for the good of the others on the ship.

Jesus had a similar message for the church in Thyatira in Revelation 2:20, ***“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.”*** Jezebel sinned, but the church also sinned by not removing Jezebel from the congregation.

Paul had a similar message for the young preacher Timothy in the city of Ephesus, ***“Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning”*** (1 Timothy 5:20). The public rebuke may or may not help the individual in sin (hopefully it will, but it might not), so the public rebuke is also intended to show the rest of the church how serious sin really is. Years ago, we started heading down this road with some people in Janesville, this all played out in the business meeting minutes, and a short time after that I got an interesting phone message from a tender-hearted middle age woman who had just recently obeyed the gospel. Her message was such an encouragement that I listened to it several times and wrote it down word for word, “I really like those letters of encouragement for people who haven’t been coming lately. I think that’s really good. Now that’ll just keep me on my toes even more, even if I do want to want to fall away sometimes. I just really wanted to thank you for that. That’s a really good idea. I like those.” Very interesting! Here we were taking steps toward disciplining some members who were in the process of falling away, and this brand new Christian sees the process and is encouraged by it. That is what Paul is talking about here, ***“...so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning.”***

- C. And speaking of fear, we come to the third goal of church discipline, and that is: The process is also a testimony to those on the outside that we here at this congregation are serious about sin.

In the opening words of 1 Corinthians 5, notice how Paul is basically shocked, ***“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles....”*** As I see it, Paul was saying, “That’s not good! You guys are even worse than the world! There are people OUTSIDE the church who wouldn’t even tolerate this!” And we know that the Roman Empire was known for its immorality. They had gods that you worshiped by going in to a temple prostitute. Paul, then, was shocked that the church had become just as immoral as the world. But, as was read in our Scripture reading

this morning, we are to be ***"lights to the world."*** And so Paul was saying that the church in Corinth had to get back to that. They had to get back to being salt and light. The church had to show the world that they were serious about sin.

I am thinking about the very first act of discipline in the history of the Lord's church. Are you familiar with it? What is the first time anybody was disciplined for sin in the early church? The way I look at it, God handled the first one, just to show us how serious sin is and to kind of give us a little nudge. The first case of church discipline is found in Acts 5 when a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira came in and lied to the leaders of the church concerning their contribution. Ananias came in first, told the story, and dropped dead at the apostles' feet. Sapphira came in a short time later, told the same story, and also dropped dead right there on the spot. We might think, "Well, that's not too conducive to church growth, is it? I mean, that's not really a good way to grow a church is it? To kill two of your most generous members right there in front of everybody?" I would point out, though, what the Bible actually says concerning what happened next. In Acts 5:11-14, as a direct result of the very first case of church discipline, the Bible says, ***"And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number."***

So here we see a third reason for church discipline: Even among outsiders, it shows that the church is serious about sin, and people will be attracted to that in the long run. And this, I believe, is why Paul makes an interesting distinction at the end of 1 Corinthians 5. In verses 9-12, Paul clarifies. He is not telling us not to associate with the immoral people of this world; otherwise, we would need to leave the world. Sometimes people ask me to join some kind of a boycott. And I guess there might be some short-term good that might come from that, but really, if we want to avoid interacting with evil people, we would have to leave the world. The emphasis, here, though, is on avoiding a ***"so-called brother"*** who stubbornly continues in a life of sin. As Paul says in verses 12-13, our job is to judge those in the church – God will judge those on the outside. The point for us is: We cannot let things slide to the point where there is no difference between the church and the world; otherwise, the church will lose its influence.

So, even if the person who sins is not saved by the discipline, we still have two other very valid goals that are accomplished when we do what the Lord tells us to do here: We keep the sin from spreading, and we protect our influence with outsiders. Before we say it doesn't work, we need to look at all three goals we are trying to accomplish.

Conclusion:

As we close, I want us to just wonder for a moment: What ever happened to this guy who was living in sexual sin with his own stepmother? If we were to read Paul's next letter to this congregation (written about 6 months after this), we have an interesting little paragraph in 2 Corinthians 2:6-11, where Paul said,

⁶ Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, ⁷ so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. ¹⁰ But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven,

if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

It seems that the church followed Paul's instructions. In fact, Paul described it as a **"test"** of their obedience. Not only that, but it also seems that the man got out of that relationship and was in the process of being restored to the congregation. Because Paul was so severe in the previous letter, it's possible that some were a little scared to let the guy come back ("Paul was really mad last time! What will Paul think of this?"), so Paul has to tell them to forgive and comfort the man, and that they are to reaffirm their love for him. The man is forgiven, and Paul wants him back in the congregation so that Satan does not take advantage of that situation.

I would make one closing observation here, and it goes back to where we began: The value of the fellowship that we have with each other here. The only way this final step makes any sense is if we have quality fellowship with each other in the first place. The only way we can ever discipline each other effectively is for all of us to be deeply involved in each other's lives. We remember how the process begins and ends with loving care. How much sense would it make to go up to someone we have never eaten with and to say to that man or woman, "If you don't stop sinning, we're not going to be able to eat together any more." That is ridiculous! If we do not truly love each other and care for each other and spend time together (outside the one or two hours on Sunday morning), we need to start there. In your own mind, I would invite you to answer the question: On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the quality of fellowship in our congregation? How would we rate on that scale? With that number in mind, consider another question: What can you personally do (starting this week) to make that number a 10?

Discipline is necessary in the home, it is necessary in society, it is necessary in the classroom, it is necessary with the fruit trees in my front yard, and it is also necessary in the Lord's church. The fellowship we have with each other in the church is one of our most precious blessings. As we go back into the world this week, let's think about this blessing and let it be an encouragement to keep us from falling away from the faith.

If you would like to be a part of the fellowship of God's people, the Bible requires repentance and baptism. We must turn away from sin, and we must allow ourselves to be briefly immersed in water so that our sins will be forgiven. If you have any questions about this morning's lesson, please let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can come to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com