

## Lesson: Accountability: The Role of Church Discipline

### Lesson Overview

#### Biblical Passage

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

#### Supporting Passages

Matthew 18:15-20, Galatians 6:1, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

#### Memory Verse

Galatians 6:1

#### Biblical Truth

In an effort toward redemption, the Church must discipline those who dishonor Christ and who dismantle the purity of the Church with their sin.

#### Context

In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus gave His disciples a pattern for dealing with issues within the Body. Paul addressed this issue of accountability within the Church in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Specifically, the apostle dealt with unchecked sin in the Corinthian church. While at first glance this passage appears to have some difficult teachings, the motivation for such action is out of love in order to save a true believer from the sin controlling his or her life.

### Commentary

#### Investigation

[Paul] was in [Ephesus] on his third missionary journey when he received word of the problems that had arisen in the church he had started in Corinth. Paul's time in [Corinth] had been quite remarkable. Paul first met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 18:1-2), and he saw great success there in converting the Gentiles (Acts 18:7-8). There the Lord reaffirmed Paul's ministry in a vision, which resulted in Paul staying in Corinth for more than a year (Acts 18:11). It was a fruitful time in Paul's ministry. But after his departure, problems seemed to have arisen in the Corinthian church.

Since he could not immediately travel to Corinth, he wrote to address the problems. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul addressed the issue of divisions in the church. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addressed a very specific, very profane sin by a church member. The Corinthian church was proud of the fact that they had been accepting of this particular member, almost as if this sort of tolerance was somehow exemplary of Christian grace or love. Paul would have none of it and wrote to advise them in how to deal with this sinner. Paul's writings serve as an excellent model for us on how we as members of the Church are to be accountable to one another and to our local congregations.

#### Importance

This lesson drives home the Essential Truth that [The Church is God's Plan]. As believers, we belong to the universal Church, the global Body made up of all believers in Christ. However, the primary physical expression of the Church on earth is in local congregations of believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel. One of the purposes of the Church is to build its members up in the likeness of Christ. And one of the ways this is done is through accountability and discipline. It is not an easy topic, but it is one that is essential in maintaining the purity and unity of the Church and the growth and effectiveness of the individual.

This lesson also teaches the Essential Truth that [Jesus is God and Savior].

#### Interpretation

**1 Corinthians 5:1** According to Barclay, sexual immorality plagued the Gentile churches because the Gentile culture placed very little, if any, social stigma on illicit sex: "In sexual matters, the Gentile world did not know the meaning of chastity. They took their pleasure when and where they wanted it" (Barclay, 2002). But for the new Gentile believers, it was crucial to rid themselves and their congregations of any hint of sexual immorality.

Do not miss Paul's absolute shock at the rumors that he had heard coming from the Corinthian church. "By saying 'it was actually reported,' Paul indicated his astonishment at the situation that he was about to address" (Pratt, 2002). Most commentators agree that the phrase "father's wife" refers to the man's stepmother, not his biological mother. But this does little to lessen the depravity of this sinful situation.

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1 Corinthians 5:2 "And you are proud!" Imagine Paul's disbelief! The Corinthians were proud of their acceptance. Halley uses the phrase, "proud of their broadmindedness" (Halley, 2000). Modern society holds up "universal acceptance" as an ideal. In the world's eyes, those who tolerate everything are open-minded. Christians, on the other hand, are viewed as closed-minded. The Corinthians, however, were guilty of the worldly line of thinking, believing that their acceptance of this man's sin showed them to be enlightened. But see Paul's directive: "Shouldn't you rather have been [filled with grief] and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"

With the phrase "filled with grief," Paul urged the Corinthians to mourn for this man's sin as they would the death of a family member. Oh, how we should hate sin! Tolerance of sin undermines Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. When framed in this context, Paul's insistence that the man be "put out of [the Corinthian's] fellowship" is not such a harsh command. Indeed, the Old Testament penalty for this licentious act was death for both parties involved (Lev. 20:11).

**1 Corinthians 5:3** The prevailing interpretation of this verse is that the Corinthians were evidently hesitant to address this issue without Paul being present. Paul was essentially saying, "I've got your back! I'm with you in spirit! Let's get on with taking care of this business."

1 Corinthians 5:4-5 And here we come to the hard teaching of this passage. This teaching may seem harsh, but it should not. This teaching is in line with Jesus' own words about handling accountability within the Church (Matt. 18:15-19).

The vividness of Paul's phrasing may be part of why this verse sounds so cold—"Hand this man over to Satan." Who among us wants to hand a brother over to the devil? But this verse should be viewed as temporarily removing the man from God's sphere of influence, the Church, and surrendering him to Satan's realm of influence, the world.

Paul's reason for this was "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord." A man who is living in this kind of sin should not be allowed to fellowship with a church. But what Paul was suggesting is discipline for the sake of future redemption. Barclay notes that this punishment was not "vindictive" and was "exercised not solely to punish but rather to awaken. . . . Always at the back of punishment and discipline in the early Church there was the conviction that they must seek not to break but to make the person who has sinned" (Pratt, 2000).

Pratt stated this position very clearly: "Although a true believer under discipline may endure hardship, the goal of that hardship is repentance that will lead to salvation on the day of final judgment. Discipline should ultimately be redemptive" (Pratt 2000).

**1 Corinthians 5:6-8** Paul again mentioned his displeasure over the Corinthians' pride. Then he used a metaphor to drive home the point that, left unchecked, this one person's sin could very well negatively influence the entire church.

In the original text, the word *yeast* is not used, but instead the word *leaven* is used. Leaven was actually a piece of old dough that had started to ferment and sour. People in that time period who did not have or could not afford a lot of yeast would simply take a piece of leaven and mix it with their flour. The leaven would act like yeast, causing the bread to rise. But the leaven was impure in itself. In fact, the leaven was seen as a symbol of an invading sinful influence.

When Jesus died on the cross, He symbolically took on the role as the Passover lamb, a once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Recall that the Passover was celebrated by eating unleavened bread. This was in memory of the haste in which the Jews had fled from their Egyptian captors; they literally did not have time to put leaven in their loaves of bread. What do you see when you combine these images?

Paul's message was a fairly simple one: Get rid of the old, decaying "leaven" and be pure. Paul was reminding the Corinthians that Christ had ushered in a new way. To follow Him meant ridding their congregation of the sin that permeated it.

### Implications

Many if not most Christians have lived their entire lives without ever witnessing the process of Church discipline carried out. The result is that Christians are afraid of implementing something that the New Testament clearly teaches. Since [The Church is God's Plan], His desire is for the Body of Believers to be accountable to each other in the Church and to Him. When a church does not fulfill this obligation, the result is that Christians think less and less of sin until it is really not a big issue. How sad when the Church shirks its responsibility to the extent that that happens!

Church discipline helps ensure that the Church is truly being the Body of believers who are accountable to God and to each other. Just as discipline is for the good of the individual being punished, Church discipline is not meant to harm but to heal; it is not for the purpose of being mean-spirited but for the purpose of healing an individual's spirit.

**Why is it necessary to discipline those who are already Christians?**

**What is the criterion for handling Church discipline?**

**How can we play a part in disciplining others when we are sinners as well?**

**Are there repercussions for the Church if it does not discipline a wayward member?**