

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Church Discipline I Corinthians 5:1-8

We are living in an age which despises discipline. There is very little discipline in the home and the school nor has there been for fifty years. We are now reaping the bitter harvest of indiscipline in our American society. One of the basic reasons there is so little discipline in the home or school is that through the years the Church has failed to exercise discipline in its own ranks. Consequently, the Church has had very little impact upon our society for the past fifty years. In the Church, evil is often tolerated as a private matter. Spiritual injunctions are not obeyed and scriptural principles are not applied. What then is a major key to reviving the Church so it can once again have a dynamic impact upon society? The answer is right here in First Corinthians 5. It will happen when the local churches begin to discipline their own members according to biblical principles.

In the first six chapters of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul deals with disorders within the local church at Corinth. He took the first four chapters to deal with divisions in the local church, but now he will tackle the problem of sexual laxity. Sexual immorality was running rampant in the city of Corinth as it was in other Greek and Roman cities. Premarital and extramarital sexual relationships were a way of life for most Corinthians. There was in Corinth a temple devoted to the worship of sex, the Temple of Aphrodite. Therefore, it was a common thing for Christians to be tempted in this area of sexual immorality. Many of them had indulged themselves in constant sexual affairs before they became Christians, and it was difficult for them to break these old habits. Their immature thinking led them to immoral living. Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul expected the Corinthian church to meet God's moral standards for chastity and purity, and, if they did not, they were to be disciplined by the local church.

PROBLEM WHICH REQUIRES CHURCH DISCIPLINE 5:1-2

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you. Apparently it was common knowledge in the whole church there was a particular incident of hideous sexual immorality in their midst. It was well known and the church was doing nothing about it. The Greek word is porneia from which we get the English word pornography. It is a broad term referring to any form of sexual evil. This implies other forms of sexual immorality such as premarital, extramarital, homosexuality and lesbianism were being practiced in the local church at Corinth, but the context narrows it down to one kind of sexual immorality.

And of a kind that does not occur even among pagans; A man has his father's wife. The particular form of sexual immorality which is in view is the horrible and hideous sin of incest. This was not just a "one night stand," but an ongoing lifestyle because the verb "has" expresses continuous action in the Greek. While the Gentiles (pagans) had sex as their god, they deplored the sin of incest. A man in the Corinthian assembly was sleeping with his father's wife. This man may have been a leader in the church since there was such hesitancy to bring any discipline. The woman mentioned here could have been his actual mother but most likely refers to his stepmother. According to Leviticus 18:3, "father's wife" is a scriptural paraphrase for stepmother. She may have been a widow or a divorcee, but this is not stated, so we can assume her husband was alive and married to her. This being the case, it is also a clear case of adultery for he was having an affair with a married woman. Since the woman was not reprimanded, we can assume she was not a Christian and was outside the disciplinary sphere of the local church. Whatever the specific details might be, this was clearly incest, something forbidden by the Old Testament and by Roman law. Yet, incest was being tolerated by the Christians at Corinth.

Where did this offender get off the track? How did he get into this fix? He began by defying God's command not to yoke up in any way with unbelievers. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness" (II Cor. 6:14)? An unbeliever and believer cannot have the same moral standards and the non-Christian will inevitably pull down the Christian. However, just because two people are Christian does not mean they will never have any problem with sexual lusts. Christians do, however, have the Bible and the Holy Spirit to convict them when they are tempted to sexual immorality. Notice carefully how this man went on a down hill slide unequally yoked, adultery, incest. Sin is never satisfied!

Did you know incest is on the rise in America? Sexual abuse within families is one of the major causes for homosexuality and lesbianism. There are a few perverted doctors who say that a father's incest with his daughter or a mother's incest with her son might be healthy for the child's sexual development. This sort of weird thinking shows the terrible moral degradation of modern America.

And you are proud! Paul seems to be as much or more concerned about the Corinthians attitude about this sin of incest than he is of the sin itself. They not only had a relaxed view about this sin but they tried to give a theological basis to condone it. The fact that there was sexual sin was bad enough but that they refused to take action against it was unthinkable. The Corinthian Christians were full of pride and conceit because they were operating on human wisdom rather than divine wisdom as found in the Bible. They were boasting and glorying in their tolerance. They prided themselves on their liberal thinking and broad-mindedness. They had the mistaken idea that rather than show condemnation and judgment on sexual perversion, the church ought to show understanding and sympathy for the pressures of life on the individual and say nothing about this evil action. They wrongly reasoned a person should work his own way out of his dilemma. In their intellectual snobbery, the Corinthians actually thought they were showing love and understanding by their tolerance of this sin in their midst. In their human wisdom, they really thought a libertine approach to sexual immorality would cause less hurt and allow friendships to be kept. I'm sure they reasoned something like

this: "What harm is there in a little premarital sex? What danger is there in a casual extramarital affair? Is it so bad that a man is sleeping with his stepmother, especially if there is true love between them? After all, we are all together in church; we are commanded to love one another and not to judge, so let's not rock the boat by reprimanding this person in sin." This is human reasoning.

The local church today which disciplines its members for immorality is thought of as old fashioned, archaic and out of step with the times.

One of the rules I have when marrying people is that they must not be having sex with one another, and if they are they must be willing to back off for at least two months. If they agree and then fall back into sexual sin, then I tell them I will not marry them. This happened with one couple I was counseling and I refused to marry them. The woman looked right at me and said, "Dr. Arnold, you are a dinosaur. You are a dying breed. Nobody believes like that any more!" I would rather be Biblical than "cool" and progressive because someday I will have to give an account to Christ.

Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief. When the Corinthians discovered this evil, they should have mourned and grieved over it as individuals and as a local church. Instead of being puffed up with tolerance, they should have been broken-hearted. They should have been hurt and shocked when any kind of immorality hit the church, for this kind of sin destroys the offender, pains the Lord Jesus Christ and severely hinders the testimony of the local church with the world. By tolerating this sexual immorality, they were indirectly participating in this evil deed. There should have been sorrowful prayer over this kind of thing in their local church. Why is the church's attitude toward sin so important? The answer is simple. Either we destroy sin or sin will destroy us!

A grieving spirit also indicates that discipline is not to be carried out with a harsh, negative, critical, censorious spirit but with a heart broken with grief and a concern to see the person turn from his wicked ways.

And have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? This problem demanded discipline: excommunication, the most extreme type of discipline a local church can give to a professing Christian in sin who refuses to repent. Excommunication involves a physical removal of the offender from the visible body of Christ. In addition to this verse which says the offender should be "put out of your fellowship," verse nine says, "You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral, and verse eleven says, "With such a man do not even eat" and verse thirteen says, "Expel the wicked man from among you." We may assume the offender had been warned of this sin by some Christians and the elders. Perhaps there had been some kind of nominal public rebuke because the Apostle Paul here calls for excommunication, the last step in the disciplinary process.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:15-17).

Apparently all the basic steps in discipline had been superficially taken in Corinth, but there was no real action. Paul was saying to put the man out of church and treat him as "a pagan or a tax collector" (unbeliever). Excommunication involves dropping one's name from the church roll, taking away the privilege of the Lord's Table and the fellowshiping with the saints publicly or privately. This is severe, stern discipline, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Excommunication is used only as the last resort, and the goal is to bring the offender to repentance so as to restore him to fellowship with Christ and the local church.

Apparently the only time an excommunicated brother or sister can be spoken to by the Christian is to admonish or warn him about the sin and the consequences of that sin if it is not repented of.

"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (II Thess. 3:14-15).

In a few rare cases, it might be necessary to put on a complete ban where the offender is not allowed to be talked to at all, especially if the offender continues to lie.

PROCEDURE FOR IMPLEMENTING CHURCH DISCIPLINE 5:3-5

Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. The Apostle Paul examined all the facts from the reports he received and found the man guilty. He was in Ephesus, but he could make a sound judgment based on the facts. While not present bodily, Paul passed judgment on this man, using his apostolic office and authority. He judged and the Corinthians were to comply with his declaration by carrying out the discipline on the man. Notice carefully that this man's disciplinary fate was not left in the hands of a congregation's whims. Paul told them what to do.

Today when elders get together to exercise church discipline on some wayward, professing Christian, they are not to do whatever they feel is right. Elders have been given specific instructions in scripture as to how to carry out discipline. Apostolic and divine authority has already spoken in the area of discipline in the inspired Bible. Therefore, elders are to merely follow through on what the Apostles taught.

Almost all biblical Christians would hold strongly for the need of church discipline. They are all for it until discipline needs to be exercised on them. Then they begin to squawk and howl about unfair treatment, calloused elders and an insensitive church. Such is human nature.

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present. Paul imagines himself in the presence of the Corinthian Church conducting a church court to mete out discipline on the guilty offender. He saw the elders taking no action on the offender, so he, present in spirit, presides at the church court. The court was assembled in the name (authority) of the Lord Jesus Christ. All church discipline is exercised in the authority of Jesus Christ who is Lord of the Church. Discipline is not just a group of elders making capricious judgments as human beings. It is action taken in the power, authority and name of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why much discernment must be used when discipline is meted out; it is a serious matter. One of the disadvantages of having young elders or highly critical elders is they sometimes are impetuous, quick to use the axe, ready to exercise discipline at the drop of a hat. It is possible for an elder to operate in the flesh and want to mete out discipline that may not be scriptural. While it is not impossible, it is much more difficult for a total board of elders to do this than a single pastor or bishop. An awful responsibility rests on the elders of a local church; therefore, the flock needs to pray for them. Elders must be so careful not to abuse authority delegated to them by the Lord Jesus Christ.

No one likes to be disciplined by the local church. Some folks get so upset they actually bring lawsuits against the church which is totally unscriptural. When the church meets in the name and power of Jesus Christ for meting out discipline, the Lord Jesus is present with the power to control the results and to guard and protect the elders and the church. Therefore, the church must act, regardless of what the threats may be, because the church acts in the authority of Christ.

Hand this man over to Satan. Paul made an apostolic disciplinary decision to deliver the offender over to Satan which is part of the excommunication process. This literally says, "I have decided to deliver this man over to Satan." The church was merely to carry out what the leadership had decided.

The Bible states there are two kingdoms at work in this world--the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. The kingdom of Christ is within the Church and the sphere outside the Church is the kingdom of Satan (I Jn. 5:19; Col. 1:13). To be put out of the local church is to be put into the sphere where Satan controls. In excommunication, the local church is to place the unrepentant offender back under the control of Satan. The offender's persistence in evil demonstrates he has never really left Satan's kingdom. Therefore, the church is to think of him as back under the control of Satan and publicly treat him as an unbeliever. He is, as Jesus said, to be treated like a Gentile, a tax collector, a sinner, an unregenerate and not to be considered as Christian at all (even though the person may actually be a Christian).

Excommunication does not mean a person is not a Christian. It means he is to be treated as though he were not a Christian. No pope, bishop, pastor, presbytery or congregation has the power to damn a soul so as to remove salvation. God alone has that power, but the church can put a wayward, professing Christian into Satan's kingdom for discipline. Excommunication involves an absolute loss of all Christian privileges. It does not put a person out of the invisible, universal Church but out of the visible, local church. Hopefully, the unrepentant Christian, while in Satan's realm, will find himself miserable, sensing that he cannot live without the fellowship of God's people. A true Christian will truly repent when excommunicated. If he does not repent, then he simply proves he was never in Christ's kingdom and was always in Satan's power. He proves his Christian experience was superficial and spurious with absolutely no genuineness to it. In short, he proves he was never saved in the first place.

So that the sinful nature may be destroyed. This literally says "for the destruction of the flesh." The reason the Apostle Paul turned the offender over to Satan was that there might be a "destruction of the flesh." This may refer to bodily discipline such as sickness and disease, using Satan as the instrument. Satan apparently would put on this offender his own destructive whims, for we know in the Bible the agency of physical sickness is sometimes Satan as seen in the life of Job (Job 1 and 2). However this probably refers to the destruction of the fleshly nature or the acts of carnality which caused this man's condition so he may repent. This could and probably does include bodily discipline from Satan as well. Some say only the original Apostles had the power to deliver an excommunicated Christian to Satan, but I see nothing in scripture to support this view. Authority has now passed down to the elders and they have the authority in the name of Christ to turn an excommunicated person over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. What an awesome responsibility rests on the elders!

And his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. The ultimate reason for this excommunication and the turning of the offender over to Satan was not to have a sadistic glee over a brother who has fallen but to see this brother's spirit saved on judgment day at the second coming of Christ. Hopefully, being put back into Satan's kingdom and through negative experiences in that kingdom, he will see the need for true repentance and confession of his sin, so that he will be restored to fellowship with Christ and the local church Paul wanted to see this man demonstrating the reality of his salvation so that on judgment day he would be accepted by Christ.

"Why does the church take action? Well, not just to get rid of a trouble-maker or not merely to show itself clean in this regard, but rather in order to reach the individuals involved and so deal with them that eventually they will see their wrongdoing and repent. And all judgment ends at repentance; all discipline ceases when repentance occurs. Therefore, the hope here is that when you put someone back into the world, as it were, under Satan's control, that he will learn what worldings will learn if they live long enough -- that the philosophies they are following are delusive, empty and vain, and when they find themselves drained, jaded and empty of heart, they will turn back to the living Lord and their spirits will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. When he comes or when they meet him in death, their spirits will be saved even though their lives have been wasted. This is the hope and that is the purpose for church discipline" (Ray Stedman, I Corinthians Notes).

There is very strong evidence that this offender in the Corinthian Church repented and came back into fellowship with Christ and the church

“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” (II Cor. 2:5-8).

The discipline worked, but then the Corinthian Church had a hard time forgiving the erring brother and letting him back into the church. The Corinthians went from one extreme to the other. Such is human nature which is filled with pride, smugness, prejudice and self-righteousness.

PRINCIPLES WHICH DEMAND CHURCH DISCIPLINE 5:6-8

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeasts works through the whole batch of dough? A person still might object to this action of discipline and say, “Why must the church be so harsh and judge so severely?” Paul uses several illustrations to show there are certain spiritual principles which demand church discipline. The first principle is from the nature of sin. Paul uses yeast (leaven) which speaks of evil, for his illustration. He reached back into the kitchen and brought out something which would be familiar to every woman in New Testament days. A little leaven (yeast) permeates the whole dough and causes it to rise. Paul's point is obvious: a little evil, by its very nature, defuses itself, spreading its corrupting influence so that which it contacts is corrupted also. A little sin contaminates the whole assembly. Sin can wreck the purity of the church. One spoiled apple can cause the whole barrel to rot. By keeping this incestuous adulterer in the local church, the whole body could be infested with sexual immorality and other breaches of God's law. Sin spreads like wildfire. It must be stopped to protect the congregation. Or to put this whole thought in perspective we might use the illustration of cancer. One cancer cell inside a healthy body can spread the disease to the other cells. Only radical surgery on the bad cells can save the body from dying.

To discipline an offender is painful but it does have a sobering effect upon the whole church. Christians might think twice before they get involved in premarital sex, or have an extramarital affair, or file for divorce, or fall into homosexuality or lesbianism or any other gross sin if they knew that the local church would discipline them.

Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. The second principle is that of Christian testimony. The Corinthian Church was to clean out the incestuous adulterer from their midst that they might demonstrate to the world they were holy in nature. They were to clean out evil in their own lives and the life of the local church so the world would listen to what they had to say. One of the biggest problems the world has is in the area of sexual lust. If they see the church can handle lust, sexual drives and immorality in a positive way, then perhaps the world will take notice of the church. But if the same things are going on inside the church as outside, what is the advantage of becoming a Christian? These Corinthian Christians had become new creations in Christ; therefore, they had no business tolerating sexual immorality in their church. Without discipline, the whole worship and community life of the church becomes a charade and a mockery of Christ.

"One persistent, flagrant sinner who remains accepted without discipline within the Christian fellowship taints the whole body" (David Prior, I Corinthians).

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. The third principle is that Christ's death demands that a local church be holy in nature. Paul used the illustration of the Jewish Passover Feast. This Jewish celebration commemorates the deliverance of the Jews from the bondage of Egypt. At that time, a lamb was slain and blood was sprinkled on the door posts of Jewish homes. When the death angel saw the blood, he passed by those homes. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is held for seven days after the Passover feast in which there is to be no leavened bread on the premises of the Jewish home. They go through the house with a candle searching in every corner and hidden place for leavened bread because leaven speaks of evil. Paul's point is clear: Christ is our Passover; that is, He has died for the Christian's sins and to allow for unrepented sin in the life of the local church is to make a mockery of the death of Christ. Because we Christians have been purchased by the blood of Christ, we are to celebrate this feast by walking in a holy manner before God, not giving place to evil. We are to let our lives be a sacred festival to God. We are to walk and live in sincerity and truth because we are owned by the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. Paul's point is that the Corinthians were to have lives that were pure, and to do this they must purge this unrepentant incestuous adulterer from their midst lest they too become contaminated with this sin.

We all sin as Christians but what is in view here is persistent sin with delight. All Christians sin at times; all Christians need cleansing from daily sin, but because of the death of Christ all Christians are bound to be ruthless with anything which taints their fellowship with Christ. God does not expect perfect holiness or absolute purity but He does expect the Christians to deal with their sins in sincerity and truth (openness and honesty).

CONCLUSION

Christ died for sinful people. Do you recognize you are sinful? Do you have a problem with lust? Have you fallen into sexual immorality? God has some good news and some bad news for you. The bad news is found in Hebrews 13:4 which says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." The good news is found in I Corinthians 6:9-11:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

What changed these who were guilty of premarital sex, extra-marital sex, transvestitism, lesbianism and homosexuality? It was Jesus Christ. He came into their lives with His power and authority and radically changed their lifestyles. How did Christ come in? He came in as they were convicted about their sin by the Holy Spirit and as they were supernaturally drawn by God so as to bring them to the point of decision. They came to the place where they bowed to Christ as Lord and received Him as Savior by faith. Have you bowed to Christ? Have you received Him as Savior? Trust Christ and He will change your life.