

Intro

In recent weeks we've encountered judgment the Bible forbids. In Matthew 7 we saw that it's wrong to judge a brother or sister for minor sin when major sin is present in our life. In Romans 14 we saw that it's wrong for those who feel freedom to eat meat to despise those who abstain from eating meat. And it's wrong for those who abstain from eating meat to pass judgment on those who eat meat.

This morning we encounter judgment the Bible requires: when sin is so flagrant it hinders our witness, when sin endangers a person's soul, when sin could corrupt the local church, God requires the whole church to take action.

God's concerned for the one in sin. And God's concerned for the purity of the church. So we have church discipline. Why? Because of love. In love we confront the sinner. In love we prevent the spread of sin.

This morning we learn that...

BIG IDEA: Church discipline is an act of love

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

A local church that fails to do church discipline. Paul explains why discipline is necessary and holds the congregation accountable. Paul's primary concern is the church's failure to act when a church member was committing flagrant, unrepentant sin.

Church discipline: when the church removes someone from membership because their lifestyle calls into question their profession of faith

Unrepentant sin: refusal to turn from a sinful behavior and refusal to seek the church's help in fighting sin

Point 1: Remove unrepentant brothers for their salvation (5:1-5)

Explanation

There's a man in the Corinthian church who's committing sexual immorality with his father's wife. She's not his mother implying she's his stepmother. This is disastrous for the church's reputation. Church members committing sins non-Christians despise.

The problem's that they knew what was happening and did nothing. They ought to be mourning (5:2). Grieved over sin in their church body. They were indifferent, apathetic, didn't care. No grief. No anger.

How does Paul respond?

Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Paul has already decided on the matter:

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ 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. – 5:4-5

When the church gathers together they must deliver this unrepentant member to Satan. Immediately.

Delivering to Satan sounds confusing but it's really quite simple if we look at the passage. In verse 2 Paul says: *Let him who has done this be removed from among you.* And in verse 13 he says: *"Purge the evil person from among you."* Delivering a person to Satan means removing them from the church body. He's delivered to Satan in the sense that he's removed from the church and sent into the world where Satan and sin rule.

Why is he removed? So that he may be saved in the day of the Lord = when Jesus returns. The man's sexual immorality calls his conversion into question. Is he really saved? When the church removes someone from membership for unrepentant sin they are regarding the person as an unbeliever. The church can't in good conscience call him a fellow believer. When a person repeatedly refuses to repent and listen to the church, Matthew 18:17 says, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, regard him as an unbeliever.

This is an act of love. The church says, "Your behavior no longer allows us to call you a brother in Christ. Your actions leave us no choice but to remove you from our fellowship. But we're doing this for your good. In hopes that your removal will lead you to repentance and salvation." We remove to restore. Lord willing removal will show the erring brother the severity of their sin and they will come to their senses and repent. Considering the possibility the man's an unbeliever, Paul says remove them so that they will repent and be right with God when Jesus returns. **It would be spiritual malpractice to let this man go on sinning and assure him he's right with God.**

Dealing with sin is loving on several fronts. We love the sinning member by not casually allowing them to sin. We confront because we care. We love one another by preventing the spread of sin in our congregation. We love the world by providing a salt and light witness that encourages belief. And we love Jesus by ensuring his honor in his church.

To Unbeliever:

One reason we remove people is for you. We want you to have a right idea of God's holiness and what it means to follow Jesus. We want you to understand the gospel. That God sent his Son Jesus to die for us so that we could be saved from the penalty of sin and the power of sin. When a person claims to be a Christian, yet refuses to turn from sin, they signal to you that God isn't powerful enough to change human hearts. God calls us to repent and believe. This man refused to repent. We don't want to communicate to you that Christianity is merely a club to join. Or a box to check off. Christianity is heartfelt devotion to Jesus, the one who died in our place.

Illustrations

I've encountered numerous instances where the church was forced to deal with sin:

- 1) 1999: First service → public announcement of worship leader removed for unspecified immorality
- 2) 2003: Elders learned a member was working in the country illegally → didn't know what to do but concluded lying to employers and falsifying employment status was unchristian → the church pleaded with the man for months to be honest with their employer and offered financial assistance → the man dug in and refused to repent → sadly the church removed him from membership → the man continued to attend services but was excluded from the Lord's supper → the church maintained contact seeking to encourage repentance → sometime later the man went back to Indonesia
- 3) 2015: It's discovered the Youth Pastor's wife had slept with a deacon's son a while back → the Youth Pastor (an elder) had to step down and the deacon's son who led worship had to step down
- 4) 2018: After what appeared like a year-long process a woman in the church is removed from membership → she was removed from membership because she committed adultery against her husband with a married man → the man who she committed adultery with went to another local church → pastors from both churches encouraged both parties to repent and return to their spouses → fellow members were encouraged to reach out and help the woman to repent → after a long period of refusal to repent she was removed from membership

Sin exists in the local church and Paul says it must be dealt with.

Application

Our constitution says in Article III, section 3:

“Members who show evidence of a doctrine or a lifestyle that calls into question their Christian faith (2 Tim. 2:17-19, 3:1-5, 1 Corinthians 5:11-13) shall be in danger of forfeiting their church membership. It shall be the duty of the Elders to seek to reclaim those members who disregard their Biblical obligations. When in any case, the Elders are satisfied that the member cannot be reclaimed, they shall present to the Church a recommendation that the name of the delinquent member be removed from the membership roll.”

This occurs after a period of time where we seek to follow the principles of Matthew 18:15-17 and help the person repent. The goal is restoration, not punishment. But repeated unrepentance requires the church to act.

Paul teaches congregational authority and responsibility. It isn't the elders who deliver to Satan. It's the congregation. Writing to the whole church, not its elders, Paul tells the congregation when they are gathered together to remove the unrepentant brother. 2 Corinthians 2:6 speaks of “*this punishment by the majority*” = a congregational decision by majority vote. The elders might approach the sinning member and seek restoration and recommend removal, but the congregation makes removal official.

It's church members who are subject to removal. The church has no formal jurisdiction over non-members. Delivering to Satan is removal from the privileges and protection of church membership. A removed member is encouraged not to take the Lord's Supper because they're living an unexamined and unworthy life.

This isn't to discourage church membership. One of the blessings of membership is built-in safeguards to ensure your spiritual well-being. Removal is intended to benefit the erring member.

Point 2: Remove unrepentant brothers for the spiritual health of the congregation (5:6-13)

Explanation

The Corinthians are ignorant of the effects their apathy:

“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” – 5:6

Leaven was made by keeping a little dough from the previous weeks’ batch and fermenting it in storage. The leaven would then be added to a new batch of dough. Leaven could go bad and contaminate the new batch. The picture is one sin that multiplies and spreads throughout the congregation. So get rid of the old leaven (the sexually immoral brother) that you may be a new lump (a people shaped by the Spirit). Get rid of the practices of your former life (malice and evil) and replace them with fruits of the Spirit (sincerity and truth).

One Coronavirus case can multiply and spread throughout a town without caution. So it is with sin.

And they’re ignorant of their responsibilities to each another and the world.

“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler- not even to eat with such a one.” – 5:11

Don’t associate with professing believers who live like they’re unconverted: sexually immoral, greedy, idolaters, revilers (verbally abusive people), drunkards, swindlers. But do associate with outsiders who are sexually immoral, greedy, swindlers, or idolaters (5:10).

- 1) Duty to immoral brothers: judge, remove, and don’t even “eat with such a one”
- 2) Duty to immoral unbelievers: don’t judge, don’t separate from them, and implied eat with them

*For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to **judge**?¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” – 5:12-13*

Engage the world

We have a duty to help our fellow believers repent of sin. So we judge them, we remove them, and we cease fellowship with them. But we don’t have these same duties to unbelievers. We fellowship freely with them, refrain from judging them, live in purity, and engage non-Christians in gospel conversations. God wants us in the world. We’re not called to retreat, hide, or shelter. We’re called to engage the world with the gospel.

Do we condemn the outside while going easy on ourselves? We paint a bad picture when we rail against the world on Facebook and yet we fail to examine our own lives. God wants us focus on the purity of the church, not conforming the world to God’s standards. Paul assumes the world will be immoral, but he’s shocked the church is tolerating sin. Deal with sin in the church. Expect sin outside the church.

Shunning?

What about Paul’s instruction “*not to eat with such a one?*” How can we faithfully obey this instruction? I wrestle with it. Not easily explained.

What it isn’t: It’s not hatred and it’s not lack of concern.

What it is: It’s a changed relationship. The unrepentant brother is removed from membership, no longer regarded as a believer, and encouraged to refrain from the Lord’s Supper. Church members continue to reach

out and maintain loving contact. But they don't engage the person like a brother in Christ. We aim to show them the seriousness of their sin so they'll repent.

The spread of sin

Indifference to sin endangers the entire congregation. Churches that don't deal with sin in their midst subject themselves to the spread of sin. The loving thing to do is to make judgments and deal with sin. For the good of all.

Illustration: like an infected COVID-19 patient is quarantined so the disease doesn't spread.

We all battle our sinful nature, so we all sin, so how can we know which sins to address with severity? When do we remove? When do we bear with each other's faults?

Paul says don't eat with the sexually immoral, greedy, idolaters, revilers, drunkards, and swindlers in verse 11. Elsewhere in the NT unwillingness to reconcile with a brother after sinning against them (Matt 18:15-17), idleness (2 Thess 3:6-15), false teaching (Rom 16:17-18; 1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17), and divisiveness require removal from the church (Rom 16:17-18; Titus 3:10-11).

Principles:

- 1) Is it stumbling (Jas 3:2) or a practice (Gal 5:19-21)? → stumbling = needs help not removal but practice = removal is under consideration
- 2) How frequent?
- 3) How long has the sin been going on? → entrenched sin with refusal to repent = removal
- 4) How heinous is the sin? → some sins are so dangerous to the church's reputation that they need to be dealt with swiftly (Matthew 18 a three-step process but 1 Cor 5 immediate removal)

Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People*

"Years ago I worked with a young man who struggled with serious sexual immorality, including the use of prostitutes. It was heartbreaking. There were moments when the elders of the church seriously considered church discipline. What held us back was that he was genuinely struggling. Every time it happened, he came to us to confess, and he invited us further into his life. It would have been easy for him to hide and lie to us, but he didn't. So the church walked with this weak, struggling brother. We didn't say, 'You don't belong.' We said, 'We're going to walk with you in your weakness and in your struggle.' Hypocrites who hide and lie are not hoping in Christ, even though outwardly they look fine. It's the open, honest struggle that demonstrates true hope in Christ." →

Some sins are so dangerous that removal and separation are required. Other sins can be handled with a slower process. Stumbling believers we bear with, we encourage, we challenge, but we don't remove. Brethren who are entrenched in sinful practices and refuse to repent must be removed. The NT is not uniform and situations should be handled on a case by case basis.

Sometimes church discipline achieves its intended effect.

The individual who was removed from membership for lying to employers and falsifying his employment status:

a year after returning to Indonesia he wrote to a church elder, confessing sin and seeking reconciliation (the church continued to maintain contact even after he went back to Indonesia) → the elders called for a motion

at a members meeting to extend forgiveness and renew fellowship with the man → as of 2012 the man was serving as an evangelist among Muslims in Indonesia (sometimes discipline ends well!)

Conclusion

Church discipline is an act of love. We love the sinning brother by confronting them and not allowing them to go on ruining themselves. We love the local church by preventing the spread of sin. It's a problem when fellow believers don't hold us accountable and show no concern for our soul. Calling us to repent and concern for our soul isn't a problem.

We, your elders, don't confront sin because it's our delight. We want things easy and without conflict. But we confront sin for your good and the good of everyone in this church. Love requires action. Love for you. Love for the church body. Love for those in our community who don't know God. And love for Jesus who died to save a purified people for himself.

We don't want people removed. We want everyone cared for, growing, and doing the work of ministry. No one wants to deal with a youth pastor's wife committing adultery with a deacon's son. No one wants to deal with a brother committing sexual immorality with his stepmother. But God requires it. Love requires it.