

United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
The Subjects of Church Discipline

Intro: In our last two lessons, we saw Paul turning his attention to other behaviors of the church, in this case the toleration of a brother guilty of incest.

In the first section we find the actions of church discipline.

The church at Corinth had responded improperly, being puff up rather than having mourned the spiritual death of this man. Paul urged them out of genuine sorrow to remove the sinful man from among their association in order to destroy his fleshly desires and save his spirit. Such an action may seem extreme in our tolerant world; but for God the action is necessary.

In the second section we see additional reasons for church discipline.

The sin of this man would have an impact upon others in the group. In addition, the toleration of leaven of sin is incompatible with the Holy Feast that we observe in view of the sacrifice of Christ, our Passover.

Now in the third section we see the subjects of church discipline.

What people and what behaviors call for the decisive action of the church in refusing association with them? Let's hear Paul's answer: *I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; 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. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be 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. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. (1 Cor. 5:9-13)*

Those not subject to church discipline

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; 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.

It appears that Paul had already corresponded with the church about their attitudes toward those living in sin. He had already urged them not to associate with immoral people.

The word “associate” translates a word meaning “to have or keep company with.”

The words “immoral people” translate “ pornos ” (i.e. those guilty of sexual immorality including adulterers and homosexuals).

To refuse association with the immoral would require the church “go out of the world.”

Such a statement suggests that Paul expected Christians to have meaningful contact with non-Christians in order to reach them with the gospel.

We can see a similar association between Jesus and “sinners.”
Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”
(Luke 15:1-2)

And so, like the Lord, we too can’t “go out of the world.”

The church is not called to monasticism. We cannot be salt and light to the world if we are withdrawn from it.

However the church must maintain moral distinctiveness. Someone once suggested that the church is like a ship in the water. The ship cannot serve its purpose unless it is in the water; but the ship cannot serve its purpose if water is in the ship!

Those subject to the church discipline

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be 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.

First it is important to note that the subjects of discipline are erring “brothers” not the people of the world.

Second the subjects of discipline are “brothers” who have resorted to walking according to the flesh rather than according to the Spirit.

Paul does not mean to make every brother in Christ who sins a subject of discipline. His list defines a spirit of rebellion against the holiness taught in the gospel.

He appears to be describing those who have reverted to the old way of life they lived before becoming Christians.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Note the remarkable similarity of this list to the one Paul uses in 1 Cor. 5. The people Paul commanded the church to discipline were people who knew the truth and had turned away from it by fleshly living. Remember Paul said, “*and such were some of you!*”

Interestingly, the church at Corinth was itself guilty of many errors that did not call for the church’s discipline. We should read with sensitivity to this distinction. Withdrawal is for the wicked, not the weak or untaught.

Third we again get clarity on what actions are to be taken toward such brethren.

We are not to “mingle” with them.

We are not even to “eat” with them.

Eating with another is universally a symbol of acceptance.

Refusing to even eat with someone sends a clear signal of our disapproval of his actions.

Does this prohibition include the Lord’s Supper? I think it does; what eating would more clearly declare our acceptance of another than sharing in the bread and cup? However, the application should not be limited to only the Lord Supper but all meals where the sinning brother might be given a message of acceptance.

“What if the sinning brother is also a family member?”

Certainly the text seems to discuss those associates that are voluntary that grow out of our common decision to serve the Lord. Perhaps it would not be necessary for a wife to refuse to eat with her sinning husband; but if she so chooses, surely it would send a very powerful message to him.

The distinction between God’s judgment and the church’s judgment

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

Paul’s final word involves a careful distinction between who is to judge whom.

Paul recoils at the prospect of functioning as a judge of the world as a whole. Such a role properly belongs only to God.

However, the church as a body of believers can surely monitor and judge itself and protect its reputation and purity. Therefore Paul on this basis urges the church to act decisively: “*Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.*”

Paul’s language here is reminiscent of similar commands to Israel to purge evil out of its community by capital punishment (Cf. Deut.

17:7). The church has no authority to execute those who sin physically; but it does have authority to remove the spiritually dead.

Church discipline today

We’ve made no attempt to bring all the texts on church discipline into one systematic arrangement. However, what we see taught in this text thoroughly harmonizes with both what Jesus taught about sin among brethren and what Paul taught in other similar circumstances.

What becomes clear is that the subjects of church discipline are those who:

Seek to maintain some continued association with the church either through their attendance to meetings and/or social connection with the church. It does not become necessary to remove from one’s midst the

person who has removed himself—who seeks no association with the people of God.

Live in rebellion against known truth. Are we permitted to generalize Paul's list into other areas where Paul has not specified?

First we should note that Paul urges discipline upon “such a one” as described with the various terms. This would lend itself to the idea that any person rebelling against known truth would also be subject to the same response.

In other NT texts we see that other sins of a similar nature demand similar action. For example, in 2 Thes. 3:6ff Paul urges the church to refuse association with those who do not work.

Conclusion: This is teaching I hope we never have to practice. But if there are those who attempt to maintain a relationship with this congregation while living a lifestyle comparable to the unbelieving, then such a person must be disciplined, not only for his sake, but also for the sake of the purity of the whole body.