

1 Corinthians 5: A Case Study in Church Discipline

Objectives

- To lead participants to a greater understanding of God's holiness and the holiness which He requires of the local church.
- To warn participants concerning the destructive impact of sin.
- To prepare participants to deal with sin in the church in a biblical manner.

Text

- 1 It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.
- 2 And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.
- 3 For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed,
- 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,
- 5 To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.
- 6 Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?
- 7 Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:
- 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.
- 9 I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators:
- 10 Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world.
- 11 But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.
- 12 For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?
- 13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

Discussion Points

How should church members respond to sin in the congregation?

- Not in pride, but in grief (v. 2)
- Turning offender over to Satan (vv. 3-5)
- Refraining from company with offender (vv. 9-11, 13)

Why is sin in the church so serious a matter?

- Sin can spread quickly throughout the church body (vv. 6-7).
- Sin among Christians denies the reality of redemption (vv. 7-8).
- Sin makes the church indistinguishable from the world (vv. 9-13).

Behaviors That Warrant Disciplinary Action

Objectives

- To lead participants to recognize behavior that warrants disciplinary action on the part of the church.
- To demonstrate the consistency of Old Testament and New Testament teaching on the subject of community discipline.
- To prepare participants to deal with sin in the church in a biblical manner.

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul called on the church at Corinth to deal severely with a sinful member--removing him from their fellowship and turning him over to Satan for destruction. Since this kind of drastic action seems out of place in an era of tolerance, it is necessary for us to discover just what kinds of behaviors warrant disciplinary action.

1 Corinthians 5 concludes with a quotation from the Old Testament: "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (v. 13). This statement appears six times in the book of Deuteronomy (17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7). We can learn a lot about church discipline from the contexts in which the statement appears in Deuteronomy.¹ In addition, other portions of the New Testament give us further insight, enabling us to understand the kinds of behaviors that are incompatible with church membership.

Denial of the Faith

The Law commanded Israel to stone those who violated Jehovah's covenant and worshiped false gods (Deut. 17:2-7). The New Testament is no less serious about fidelity to Christ and the gospel. Paul warned Timothy about the dangers of jeopardizing his faith, noting that he had released blasphemers such as Hymenaeus and Alexander into Satan's domain (1 Tim. 1:18-20; cf. 2 Tim. 2:16-18). In addition, he instructed Timothy to separate himself from those who taught a message that was contrary to Christ (1 Tim. 6:3-5). John cautioned his followers not to entertain those who preached false doctrine concerning Christ (2 John 9-11).

When New Testament churches failed to exercise discernment and discipline, God Himself judged unfaithful believers. Some Corinthian believers suffered illness or death because they took lightly the symbol of the gospel, the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:27-32). And 1 John 5:16-17 refers to sins that lead to death. Clearly God does not take doctrinal infidelity lightly.

Sexual Immorality

One of the New Testament's most prominent incidents of sin in the church, recorded in 1 Corinthians 5, involved sexual immorality. The emphasis on sexual purity in the age of grace merely continues the principles set forth in the Law, which prescribed stoning those guilty of fornication (Deut. 22:13-17, 20-21) or adultery (22:22-24). Churches should not turn a deaf ear to the presence of sexual sin in the pew or pulpit.

¹ Deuteronomy almost always prescribes execution as the means for removing evil from the Israelite community. The only possible exception to this rule is when someone launches a false accusation against someone else. In this case, the false witness is to be subjected to the punishment appropriate to the crime of which he or she accused the innocent party. By this standard, New Testament injunctions to sever fellowship appear quite merciful.

Deceit

The Law also recognized the importance of integrity in speech, thus condemning anyone who falsely accused someone else (Deut. 19:15-20). The book of Acts reinforces this emphasis with the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who were struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). While there is no explicit New Testament command to discipline deceitful believers, the fact that God judged such behavior so severely is an indication of the seriousness of the sin.

Divisiveness

The New Testament also utters stern warnings against Christians who sow division in the church. Paul instructed Titus to shun those who persisted in spreading divisive, heretical doctrines (Tit. 3:9-11). Similarly, he told the church at Rome to consciously avoid those whose false doctrine would divide it and obstruct its growth (Rom. 16:17).

Criminal Activity

The Law commanded Israelites to remove the evil of kidnapping from their midst by stoning those who committed this crime (Deut. 24:7). It seems reasonable to conclude that churches are responsible to judge criminal behavior on the part of those who profess to be Christians.

Persistence in Disorderly Conduct

A final behavior that warrants church discipline is persistence in disorderly conduct. This is perhaps the most inclusive category discussed here. The church must judge those who persistently make choices that bring reproach to Christ's name and show no willingness to repent of their sin.

Judgment on disorderly conduct has a precedent in the Law. When an Israelite son persisted in rebellious living (including gluttony and drunkenness), his parents were instructed to deliver him to the elders of the city to be stoned (Deut. 21:18-21). At least two New Testament passages demonstrate that this principle applies to the church as well. Christ instructed His disciples to reject those who sin against a brother and fail to repent despite repeated confrontation (Matt. 18:15-17). Paul instructed the Thessalonians to separate themselves from those who led a disorderly life and disregarded the teaching they had received (2 Thess. 3:6-15).

Conclusion

The Old and New Testaments speak with one voice: The believing community is responsible to scrutinize the doctrine and practice of its members. The church must take action when it finds one of its members to be at odds with its values. Such action can include avoidance, confrontation, and severance from fellowship. If the church fails to exercise judgment, and if sin is persistent or grave, God is willing to judge, even to the point of death. The church can only maintain a pure testimony before the world when it is willing to clearly define the parameters of Christian belief and conduct.