



Church Discipline

No. 13
Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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Text

5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ 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.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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."

Introduction

Nancy is a non-Christian who lives here in the UIC Area and works at a company downtown. She's nice, but lives like you'd expect a non-Christian in the city to live. She makes money to buy nice things – nice furniture, nice restaurants, nice club memberships, nice vacations... She lives in a nice condo with her boyfriend and her dog.

Nancy has a coworker named Frank who's also nice. He has nice things – nice clothes, eats out at nice restaurants, works out at a nice gym, takes nice vacations. He's married with nice kids. And it comes up in conversation after a year of working together that Frank says he's a Christian. Nancy is somewhat curious – "Oh so what does that mean for you?"

"My faith is very important to me."

"So what church are you part of?"

"Oh, we've gone to this church in Old Town for a while, never really felt connected there. Then after this church started up in the West Loop we went there a bit, our kids like the children's programming there. Right now we're checking out some

other places, when we're around. We have a cabin in Wisconsin we're at a lot in the summer and on long weekends."

Frank isn't a meaningful member at any church. He's a floater. Nancy thinks – "Hm! That's interesting. I guess Christianity works for him."

But then Nancy meets a neighbor named Hank. Hank lives down the hall at University Commons (you know those long hallways?). He has a cross on his door. On Sunday mornings Nancy regularly sees him coming or going nicely dressed with what looks like a Bible under his arm. Hank has a shirt that says the name of his church on it that Nancy has noticed a couple of times. But Hank is known to be a bit of a jerk at HOA meetings. He plays video games loudly late at night. He posts some offensive stuff on the University Village Facebook Group from time to time. And one Friday night Nancy notices Hank in the corner of a club she was at, drunk and making out with somebody. Hank is a hypocrite. And Nancy is really confused.

But then one day Nancy meets a woman named Rebekah through a Chicago Sports & Social volleyball league. After playing volleyball one night a group of people go grab dinner together and Nancy and Rebekah find themselves talking at the restaurant. Rebekah somewhat awkwardly but genuinely turns the conversation to deeper things and turns out Rebekah is a Christian! She says she's a member at a local church in the UIC Area with two other people there at the table.

Over the next few months, Nancy and Rebekah strike up a friendship. Nancy watches Rebekah and can see that Rebekah's not perfect, but she apologizes for things. Nancy is intrigued when Rebekah shares that the message of Christianity is not "Be a good person," but that Jesus came to die in the place of sinners and he rose again in time and space and history to prove it's not just another philosophy. And Rebekah says such grace has changed her life and brought her into community with a group of misfits who don't all play volleyball, but who have all experienced that same amazing grace. Rebekah invites Nancy to come check it out, hear more about what they believe, and see how they love each other. Nancy has come a few Sundays and even to a Midweek Small Group and she's currently reading the Bible and talking with Rebekah about what it would mean for Nancy to repent of her sin and trust Christ and become a member of the church too. Rebekah is a real Christian.

Non-Christian Nancys aren't helped spiritually by Floater Franks. Hypocrite Hanks and the churches that don't confront and care for them only confuse Nancys about what Christianity is all about. Nancys need Rebekahs and the churches that demonstrate and foster such real faith.

In our Sundays together as a church we've been going through the book of the Bible called '1 Corinthians.' Today we come to a passage that really gets at the kinds of issues brought up in this hypothetical scenario. In short, what we're going to see from this passage today is simple and it's just this: **the world needs churches that are distinct.**

The world needs churches that are distinct, that have clear boundaries. Only then is there something to come in to, something that's not just private opinion based on personal preferences. And part of having distinct lines is that sometimes some people need to be put out, to keep the lines clear. Today's passage is about that, and about how that doesn't create an exclusive, legalistic club, but is the only way to have an evangelistic church that invites people into salvation and eternal life.

Here's how I want to try to tackle this text today. First, I'm going to go through it and provide some basic commentary, so you can understand what this passage is saying. Then I want to step back and draw out 7 conclusions this text teaches us about the topic of church discipline. Commentary and then several conclusions.

First, let's pray, then we'll get started...

Commentary

1 Corinthians is a first century letter from an Apostle, that is, someone who saw Jesus risen from the dead and was personally commissioned by him to represent him. The writer's name was Paul. And he's writing to a particular church he helped establish in the Greek city of Corinth. He begins by saying – "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2). There we saw that there is this large, global movement of Christians. We call it the universal church. But it's made up of smaller, tangible assemblies of real people bound together in community – the local church. The assumption is that every true Christian will find his or her way into a local church to be nurtured in the gospel and learn to live in light of it.

Now the Apostle Paul heard there were some problems, some fault lines forming in this local church in Corinth. So he writes them to admonish them about the pride that was behind these divisions in the body. Paul states at the end of ch. 4 that he's planning, Lord-willing, to come visit them to bring to bear the power of the kingdom of God on this issue.

But before Paul gets there, there's something else that he's heard about, a problem that must be dealt with immediately. It can't wait. You see it right away in the first verse of ch. 5 – "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you." Actually, in the Greek, the first word in the sentence for emphasis is the word 'actually'. "Actually?! *Actually*?! Are you kidding me?" There's outrage in Paul's voice... shock, dismay. In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus he writes – "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality" (Eph. 4:3; NIV). Sexual immorality among God's people of any kind is a sad and alarming thing.

But in this case it is of a very scandalous and sordid variety. Paul adds – "...and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans [the word is the word for 'Gentiles']." This statement reflects the fact that there is a natural law, a basic moral code that all people everywhere are cognizant of at some level innately, even non-Christians. There are certain things that most people know are not right.

In this Corinthian church there is a case of egregious sexual deviancy going on – "a man has his father's wife." *Has* is a term that implies a sexual relationship. And it's *has* not *had*, which indicates that it's not a one-time thing but an ongoing relationship. "Father's wife" almost certainly refers not to a man having sex with his birth mother, but probably a step-mother, perhaps his father was a widower and remarried a younger woman later in life. And now this son, who is a member of the Corinthian church (presumably the woman is not a member because she's not addressed), is in a known relationship with his father's wife. There were laws against this not just in the OT (Leviticus 18:8 specifically forbids it), but also in Roman law at the time. Everyone

knew this was sketchy. It's the kind of stuff that would get you jeered at on a day-time television talk show still today.

And Paul is appalled that the Corinthian church is not dealing with this. They are ignoring it. He says, "And you are arrogant!" Same word we saw last week in 4:6, 18, and 19, sometimes translated "puffed up." Their pride prevented them from seeing the seriousness of this situation and kept them focused on other things like which preachers they liked best and how wise they were perceived to be in the world's eyes. They may have thought that they were somehow doing the right thing by being so tolerant and non-judgmental. Others have suggested that maybe the man in question had some prestige or wealth himself and so they turned a blind eye to his sin because his presence in the church boosted their sense of importance. Either way, their inaction was indicative of arrogance.

Instead, the church at Corinth should have been deeply humbled and broken and saddened by the whole thing. Paul says, "Ought you not rather to mourn?" This is grievous. There are several examples in the Bible where the covenant community discovers sin among them and the gravity of it hits them and they mourn (e.g. Ezra 10), they cry out with grief, they rend their garments, they may fast, call a solemn assembly, lament, repent. That's what should have been happening in the church at Corinth because of this affair. But at this point the Corinthian church seems to be complacent. Their hearts are hardened in their pride. They are not torn up as they should be about a member of their church living in sexual sin in a way that even most non-Christians around them know is wrong. Paul says, "You should be in mourning because of this. It's so sad." How about us? Does sin still bother you?

That's how they should *feel*. Then Paul tells them what they should *do* to address this blatant, persistent, publicly known sin. "Let him who has done this be removed from among you." This is what's called church discipline, removing someone as a member of the church, taking him or her off the roll, the list of those who are part of the body. Sometimes it's called excommunication. It's a church collectively saying to someone, "Because of what you're doing we can no longer affirm your faith. As things stand, we can no longer let you think or let the world around us think that you're one of us."

So that's what Paul is calling for the Corinthian church to *do*. Next, he tells them a little of *how* to do it. Paul says, "For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing." In other words, Paul's saying, "I'm not there, but if I were, I know what I'd do. And I'm telling you what to do. You have my Apostolic authorization." Verse 4 – "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan." So the church is supposed to have a meeting and take official action to cast this man out of the church and therefore back into the realm of Satan, that is the world. His name is to be taken off of this column and put back into that column. He can no longer officially bear the name of Christian.

The phrase – "...assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus..." – shows that Paul has in mind Jesus' teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18. Yes, church discipline wasn't just Paul's idea. He got it from Jesus. Jesus taught that when there is sin in the church, there should be confrontation – first, one-on-one; then with two or three others; and if he refuses to listen, then the matter should be brought before the whole church. And if at that point it's clear that the person is unwilling to repent, then Jesus says, "[L]et

him be to you as a Gentile or tax collector.” In other words, “deliver him over to Satan.” Then in that context in Mt. 18:20 Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” “[G]athered in my name.” That’s exactly what Paul says here in 1 Corinthians 5:4 – “...assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Paul’s instructions here in 1 Corinthians 5 are in line with Jesus’s in Matthew 18.

A local church that has the keys of the kingdom, has divine authorization from Jesus and his Apostles to represent Jesus on earth, to make binding decisions on these matters. It’s not an authority to be used willy nilly. It must be obvious to the majority of the body that this person is recalcitrant and uncooperating. But once that has been established, the church has the authority, yea the obligation, to pronounce judgment, to remove the person from being a member.

So that’s the procedure of church discipline. The last phrase of v. 5 talks about the purpose of church discipline. It’s not arrogant or mean-spirited. It’s remedial. “[D]eliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” Paul is hopeful that this judgment is not final, but rather a means to an end of waking somebody up before the Final Judgment. Church discipline isn’t a way to say, “Good riddance!” It’s a way to say, “We want your repentance!” We love you too much to say nothing and avoid the uncomfortability of confrontation. In 1 Timothy 1:20 Paul talks about two guys named Hymenaeus and Alexander being “handed over to Satan [*so*] *that they may learn not to blaspheme.*” The goal of church discipline is to teach a lesson, so that people learn. Removing someone from the church isn’t meant to be a final verdict. Its aim is restorative, not punitive. Let them see if the world really satisfies and pray that they come to their senses and return.

Let’s continue with the commentary. In vv. 6-8 Paul gives reasons for this course of action. He starts with a common-sense aphorism. “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” It just takes one little pinch of yeast to permeate a whole pan of dough (cf. Gal. 5:9). Maybe you’ve heard the adage – “One bad apple can ruin the whole bunch.” It’s the same thing. Paul’s concern is that when a church community looks the other way and balks at dealing with brazen sin, it has a corrosive effect. It corrupts the whole community. It spreads. People get more lax with their own lives. The spiritual temperature of the whole church goes down. The witness of the whole church is compromised. That’s what it means to be part of a community – you’re no longer an isolated individual; sin in one part has ramifications and affects the whole. Do you not know that a tiny little virus in the lining of your nose can affect the whole body? So Paul’s not *just* concerned for the individual doing this and his soul; he’s concerned for the whole church and its health.

Paul then moves from a common-sense rationale to a more explicitly biblical-theological one. “Speaking of leaven,” Paul says, adapting the metaphor, “[c]leanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” What’s Paul doing here? It’s actually profound, if you’re familiar with the OT.

You see in the OT there’s this foundational story of God delivering the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. Israel was not God’s chosen people because they were better than anyone else, but simply because of God’s gracious promise. Egypt was evil, but Israel was idolatrous. God was going to save Israel, in a dramatic way. I don’t

have time to recount all the details. You can read about it in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible. But it culminates in the plague of the firstborn. God says that he's going to show his judgment and strike down the firstborn of every household in the land – Egyptian and Israelite. But if the Israelites will slaughter a spotless lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts of their houses, that night when the angel of death passes through the land he will *pass over* the houses with the blood of the lamb. Interesting image, right? There's so much there.

But this is the determinative act of deliverance that brings Egypt to its knees and allows the Israelites to finally leave. All the Egyptian homes experienced God's wrath that night. The Israelite homes that took God at his word and applied the blood of the lamb were spared. And in the hubbub the Israelites packed up and got out in a hurry. They didn't even have time to add yeast to their dough and let it rise, they left so fast.

And so God instituted an annual remembrance of this deliverance. Every year at the same time on the calendar that the original Passover happened, the Israelites would slaughter a lamb and eat it and celebrate their freedom. And then for the next seven days there would be festivities, but there would only be unleavened bread (flatbread) to eat, to remember how they had to leave Egypt in haste before their bread could rise. On the first day of the festival all the yeast in the house had to be removed and for the full seven days there would be no leaven anywhere in the house. The observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the heels of the Passover meal pictured the fact that God's deliverance through the death of a substitute brought about a new reality, a new life of freedom. Yeast became symbolic for sin, which can infect one's life and community and is unfitting for people that had been saved from the penalty for their sin at such a cost. God's redeemed people were to be different, seek to eradicate sin, not in order to be saved, but because they had been saved. That's the picture.

And Paul takes all that OT imagery from the nation of Israel and applies it to the church in Corinth. In this chapter we see Paul very clearly indicating that local churches of believers in Jesus Christ are the new covenant people of God akin to the old covenant nation of Israel. We see it all the way back in v. 1. "The use of the term 'Gentiles' for unbelievers is fascinating since the Corinthians were mainly Gentiles [that is, genetically non-Jews]." Tom Schreiner notes, "Paul no longer conceives of them as Gentiles, but as sons and daughters of Abraham[, by faith]."¹ And then you see it here in the application of Passover practices to the church. And throughout the next section of this text, OT laws for Israel are being cited or alluded to and then applied to the church.

This is profound stuff. It has several theological implications. First, it validates reading the OT typologically. The whole Bible is about and leading us up to Jesus. That Passover lamb was really a pointer to Christ and his substitutionary death on the Cross to ultimately save us.

Secondly, it drives home the point that sanctification is subsequent to justification. We are living the fulfillment of the Feast of Unleavened Bread because "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed!" And so now we seek to get rid of sin. "The call to remove the leaven... is grounded in Christ's redeeming work, and thus grace precedes demand."² This is amazing. People don't get into the church by cutting things out of their life and then qualifying. They get in by faith in Jesus as their sin-bearer. But then out of gratitude, motivated by grace, encouraged by community, they seek to ruthlessly cut sin out of their lives, get rid of malice and wickedness, value sincerity and

truth. You don't clean yourself up to come to Jesus and come into his church. He cleans you by his blood. But those who are in by grace seek to become who Christ made them to be, a new lump, a new loaf.

In vv. 9-13 Paul addresses a misunderstanding that the Corinthians had about something Paul had said in an earlier letter (the real *First* Corinthians). Paul had been urging them to take action, but they were disregarding his counsel because they thought he was saying something ridiculous. Interesting how when you're in sin or excusing sin, you hear what you want to hear. Paul clears it up – "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world." Paul's adamant that he's not calling for Christians to form communes, isolated ghettos where Christians wouldn't work, live, and play with non-Christians. No, Christians are supposed to be right there in the world, rubbing shoulders with pagans, having friendships, making common cause for the good of the city with non-Christians.

This is an important point to press. Members of Immanuel: are you engaged with non-Christians? Are you involved in the city? We can often create all kinds of ways for Christians to avoid being with non-Christians. Craig Blomberg writes, "We promote all kinds of separatism via Christian alternatives to secular institutions and activities. Thus we can comfortably spend most all of our lives in Christian schools, church meetings, Christian sporting leagues, church-based aerobics; in short, in fellowship groups for virtually any significant human activity, so that we need not interact in any intimate way at all with non-Christians."³ That's not the way. Paul doesn't want church people to abandon their non-Christian friends and neighbors. He doesn't want the church to be distant.

But he does want the church to be **distinct**. "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. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside." So "[t]he church's jurisdiction is restricted to its own membership."⁴ Be in the world, but what **the world needs is churches that are distinct**. And so if there is someone who bears the name of brother, that is – he's a member of your church, but he's also bearing the name of idolater or reviler or drunkard or swindler (notice how Paul is not listing sins, but persons who are characterized by their sin; not 'got drunk' once but 'is a drunkard'), then the church should not associate with them, not allow their name to be connected to them. Also notice how Paul expands this beyond just a crazy case of sexual perversion. It can be applied in situations of other kinds of sin.

He says, "[Do not even] eat with such a one." What does that mean? It could seem mean, like if I go to a restaurant and someone who's been discipline by my church is there I have to turn around and walk out? Can my disciplined child come to a family birthday party? It means to eat in such a way that would communicate that everything is fine, that you're still one of us. And so the most obvious application is to debar someone from eating at the Lord's Table, what's sometimes called communion. And so to excommunicate is to not have communion with someone, as brothers and sisters in Christ. If you've been removed from membership by a church, it means you cannot eat at the Lord's Table anymore until you repent and are reinstated. That's the significance.

But, as John Calvin said, “[T]he authority of the Church [in excommunication] would count for nothing if individuals were allowed to invite to their own tables those who have been debarred from the Lord’s table.”⁵ Being removed from membership and banned from the Lord’s Table changes how everyone interacts socially with that person. It’s not that you shun them. Christians are supposed to rub shoulders with those in the world, right? But you don’t just chum with them as if nothing happened. You make the most of every opportunity to talk with the person about his or her soul. How do Christians treat Gentiles and tax collectors? They evangelize them! If someone has been transferred from the church roster to the world’s roster, that is serious, something has changed, but it just means we treat that person like someone we want to see repent and trust Christ and become part of the church.

I’m sure I could say more on these verses, but let’s end this commentary section with the last line, Paul’s final summary of what he’s saying – “‘Purge the evil person from among you.’” That’s in quotation marks because it’s a quote from the OT book of Deuteronomy, where the phrase is found about 7 times. Again, Paul is saying that the church is the fulfillment of the nation of Israel, God’s representative people in the world among the nations.

But there’s something majorly different. These passages in Deuteronomy about purging the evil person from among you are about capital punishment. Do you see what Paul is doing? The death penalty in theocratic Israel is now applied to excommunication. Why? Because the church in this age is not to be confused with the state. This has profound implications for political theology. The church isn’t supposed to try to take over government and rule the world according to biblical standards. It’s supposed to exist within the world, bringing people in through conversion, not coercion. And putting people out when their conversion is called into question, not putting people to death. Tom Schreiner explains it this way – “Under the new covenant... the church of Jesus Christ is not a political or state entity. Hence, believers who sin egregiously and fail to repent are not put to death by the church, but are excommunicated from the congregation, which means they are not permitted to take the Lord’s Supper and enjoy fellowship with the church as they did previously.”⁶

Conclusions

Okay. So that is the commentary on the text. Hopefully it helped you grasp what is going on in this passage. Now I want to step back and draw out 7 conclusions from this text about church discipline.

Church Discipline Is Necessary

First, church discipline is necessary. We live in the already, but not yet. Sin is prevalent. People can make their way into the church who aren’t regenerate. Jesus anticipated the need and gave instructions for church discipline. 1 Corinthians 5 is all about it and is our Apostolic authorization to do it. We don’t have to have a letter written to us by Paul about a particular situation we are facing. We have what we need in 1 Corinthians. This is what Paul teaches everywhere in every church (4:17). We should expect that we will have to enact church discipline from time to time. It’s biblical.

So don’t shy away from it or try to avoid it. A good church will do it. If you’re a member of this church, you need to be engaged in it. That means, if you know

something, say something. Not to other people at first. But if there's a fellow member of this church who is living in sin, you have a responsibility to go to that person and seek to rebuke and restore him or her. Hypocrite Hanks need to be held accountable. Hopefully that is happening all the time in our church. You're doing it. And other people are doing it for you. And 99% of the time it stops there at the one-on-one level. Sometimes it may need to involve other people. And sometimes it may escalate to the level of the whole church getting involved and removing someone from membership. But at every level, church discipline is necessary.

Church Discipline Assumes There Are Two Realms

Second conclusion: church discipline assumes there are two realms. There is the kingdom of God that Paul mentions in 4:20. And there is the kingdom of Satan that he references in 5:5. Every person is born into the kingdom of Satan, loving sin and resenting God. Those who are born again have "crossed over from death to life" (Jn. 5:24; NIV). They "are delivered... from the domain of darkness and transferred... to the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). Church discipline assumes this binary distinction. Every person is in either one or the other of these two realms.

Church Discipline Presupposes Church Membership

Third, church discipline presupposes church membership. Very simply put: you can't put someone out, if they've never been put in. People say, "I don't get this emphasis on church membership. It seems so formal. I don't see it in the Bible." Well it's all over the Bible, but one place is here where the Bible talks about church discipline. How do you remove someone from among you if you have no way of knowing who is among you? It's impossible, nonsensical. You can't put someone out of the church unless there is an in the church. That is church membership. You can't be disciplined if you've never joined.

Floating Frank can't be disciplined. He's not a member anywhere. And so the assumption should be that he's not a real Christian. We can never know for sure, but we should be trying to make sure that the membership list of the local church lines up with the Lamb's book of life in heaven. Calling all genuine Christians to come in. Seeking to the best of our ability to only admit those who give evidence of true faith. And if that profession of faith becomes no longer credible at some point, then that person should be removed from the membership list. The whole enterprise presupposes the practice of church membership.

Church Discipline Is to Be Done by the Congregation

Fourth, church discipline is to be done by the congregation. Every member of the church is involved in this. No members are passive but active participants in the church. The entire church is supposed to assemble in the name of Jesus to make these calls, not just the elders. Quoting Tom Schreiner again: "It is noteworthy that Paul does not call upon the leaders of the church to make the decision about excommunicating the offender. Instead, the entire church is to render a judgement to exclude him."⁷ Some people say, "Okay, so maybe there's a time for something like this, but not everyone should have to know about it. I don't want to be involved. The pastors should just take care of it." But

no, Jesus says, “Tell it to the church.” And Paul says, “When you are assembled.” Removing someone from church membership is done by all the church members.

Church Discipline Is for Unrepentant Sin

Fifth, church discipline is for unrepentant sin. Unrepentant sin. This is key. This is not a call for a witch hunt. This is not a nit-picky culture of catching people in any misstep. This is the last step in a process that is set on determining if people are repentant or not. One commentator writes, “Paul is not suggesting that at the first evidence of sin, or of falling into temptation, the only way forward is to be banished from the community. Rather, he is writing about those whose sin is known and whose sin continues. What one might expect of many of this world cannot be allowed of those within the church.”⁸

This guy *has* his father’s wife, and he’s not remorseful. It’s not that he’s struggling and slipped up and feels horrible and is seeking help. He’s smug in his sin. Listen: the church is a hospital for sinners. We’re all struggling and failing. There is infinite grace here for those who are fighting sin. As long as you are working on things with honesty in the community, church discipline is off the table. It’s only an issue when someone is insisting on sinning without consequences. It’s only when someone resists help and refuses to try to change. If you’re acutely aware of your sin and hate it then church and the Lord’s Table is the perfect place for you. If you’re hiding sin and harboring it in your life, making excuses, thinking it doesn’t matter, flaunting it, then you need to be stood up to. Real Christians repent.

So church discipline is only for unrepentant sin. It’s observable sins like living together with someone you’re not married to, habitual non-attendance, embezzling money... that when confronted you continue right on doing. If you repent at any point in the discipline process, it is halted. Even after you’ve been removed from membership!

Church Discipline Is Loving

Which leads us to the 6th conclusion: church discipline is loving. It’s never vindictive. It wants to believe the best all along the way. It’s sad. Sin should always be shocking among Christians. We should never be comfortable with it. But it’s also hopeful. It wants to see contrition and is eager to extend grace. The goal is restoration, not damnation. Like a good father disciplines the child he loves, so a good church that truly loves people will not be indifferent to sin that destroys. Love gets messy, gets involved, has hard conversations, and is willing to be tough. But the goal is always to win back a brother. It’s not for certain, but check out 2 Corinthians 2:5-10. That very likely could be referring to the man mentioned here in 1 Corinthians 5 that the church disciplined, but it worked – it resulted in repentance and Paul tells them to quickly forgive and comfort him and bring him back into fellowship. That’s the spirit in which church discipline should be done. And when it is, it is the most loving thing to do.

Church Discipline Is Grounded in the Gospel

Finally, church discipline is grounded in the gospel. It’s not anti-grace. It’s because of grace. An amazing grace that can transform the most hardened sinner at home in the world and bring him or her into a life-changing encounter with Jesus and into a church of other redeemed sinners helping each other keep their eyes on Christ. It says,

“Christ, our Passover lamb, has been slain! Because of this we are new creatures, a new community. Sin is no longer our master. We want to get rid of the remaining vestiges of our old lives.” When people act out of character, we confront and point them back to the grace of the gospel. If they refuse to repent, we take their name off our list. But the goal, the goal is always to see people, whether Nancys or Franks or disciplined Hanks, come into right relationship with God through faith in Christ and to come into fellowship with his people. **The world needs churches that are distinct.** It protects and showcases the message of the gospel, the good news for sinners that there is a Savior who rescues people from their sin.

The Lord’s Table

There’s another way that the Passover picture is applied in the church. On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he celebrated a Passover meal with the disciples who would make up the first church. And he instilled it with new meaning. He took bread and said, “This is my body.” He took wine and said, “This is my blood.” He told us to do this in remembrance of him. He is our Passover Lamb. His death secured our exemption from wrath and forgiveness of sin and freedom. We are his people.

I hope it makes more sense now why every week we say that you must be a member in good standing of this church or another gospel-preaching church. If you’re not in a position to be barred from the table through church discipline, then you should not be eating at it in the first place. So if you’re not committed to a specific church that has taken responsibility for you and is keeping tabs on you, don’t eat with us at this meal... yet! You can join our church. Come talk to me afterwards about how to do that.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, September 14, 2025. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 109.

² Ibid., 113.

³ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 114.

⁴ Blomberg, 107.

⁵ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), 114.

⁶ Schreiner, 117.

⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁸ Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 238.