

Olive Branch Baptist Church
Mid-Week Bible Study 08/13/2025
CHURCH FAMILY DISCIPLINE

1 Corinthians 5–6

“Church discipline” is an important, but often misunderstood and ignored, aspect of Christian congregational life. Dealing with a specific situation in Corinth, the Apostle Paul laid down principles which can help us deal with a variety of contemporary church situations—and can guard us from interfering in situations which are *not* subject to church discipline.

professing Christians who practice immorality are to be expelled from fellowship; disputes between Christians should be settled within the church rather than by law; sexual immorality is *never* right, for we are to honor God with our bodies.

Sexual Immorality. “Sexual immorality” encompasses all sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The serious nature of adultery and fornication (intercourse between *unmarried* persons) is seen in this powerful Corinthians passage as well as throughout the Scripture. There are two basic reasons: first, sex is sacramental, intended to bond two people together in the most intimate of human relationships. Second, marriage is a covenant, a commitment of mutual loyalty which is to reflect the commitment of God to His people. Within the context of covenant and sacrament, sex is beautiful and right. In any other, it is destructive and wrong.

Commentary:

I recently talked with the pastor of a church I serve as an elder. One of the women in the local congregation, who for a time was growing rapidly in the faith, recently went through a painful divorce. At one point she had an affair with a neighbor, a situation about which we had confronted her, and had been assured it was over.

Just two days before the phone call, we discovered that she was living with her paramour. And as members of the family of God, we realized we were responsible to discipline her. It wasn’t an easy prospect.

We naturally drew back from this kind of confrontation. In the family of God, our deepest desire is to support and love, so discipline seems harsh and unloving. Can we really *care*—and at the same time deal decisively with sin in the fellowship, even passing judgment on sin and sinner as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 5? How, after Paul had spoken out in 1 Corinthians 4:1–5 against judging him and other leaders, can we judge a fellow Christian? Why, Paul had just written that he is not even competent to judge himself (v. 4).

Yet, in a society like first-century Corinth, there was a sure need for discipline. Immorality was an accepted part of the Corinthian lifestyle. The old passions and desires, the old way of looking at sexuality, were sure to crop up again and again in the church.

We have many parallels today, when the Playboy philosophy reflects the attitude of so many. Today in our individualism and relativism, many stress “freedom,” and demand that each person be allowed to do his own thing without criticism. Today too many insist that what may not be right for you is not necessarily wrong for them. The modern label of the pornographic as “adult” and “mature” duplicates the mindset of the Corinthians and their culture. The sophisticated of Corinth were as adept as the sophisticates of today in pretending that evil is good and good evil.

In a world like ours and theirs, in which the “rights” of the individual are stressed, while old distinctions between right and wrong are blurred, there are sure to be times when immorality and other kinds of sin infect the church. The old ways of thought die hard. Transformation, while real, is gradual and progressive. On the journey to Christian maturity, both individuals and local congregations can falter. That’s what happened in my own congregation. And that’s what happened in the Corinthian church. Facing the issue head-on, Paul helped the Corinthians—and us—to think through a number of difficult questions. In the process, Paul helped us learn more about God’s mind and heart. And more about what it means to truly love one another.

Discipline Is Essential:

1 Corinthians 5–6

Deal decisively with that case of sexual immorality you’ve been tolerating—put the man out of your fellowship! How can you have been proud of your toleration? Don’t you realize such old taints can spoil the new person you are in Christ? Earlier, I told you not to associate with the sexually immoral, and I meant specifically those who call themselves brothers. I don’t judge non-Christians; it’s those within who are to be judged—and in this case expelled.

Even such things as lawsuits and disputes are to be settled within the family. Why, the continued existence of such things is a tragic spiritual defeat. People practicing sin have no place in God’s kingdom; you *were* like that, some of you, but after being washed and sanctified and justified in Jesus, all that is to be put behind. Don’t misuse the, “Everything is permissible” principle. This is subordinate to the fact that Jesus is Lord. You can never take that body of yours, a member of Christ, and unite it with some prostitute! Utterly reject sexual immorality, for, as the temple of God’s Holy Spirit, you belong to Him now.

The questions:

1. How dare we judge others?
2. What kinds of things are to be disciplined?
3. Why must we discipline within the church family?
4. How do we discipline?
5. Doesn’t discipline violate others’ rights?

Answers to Our Discipline Questions 1 Corinthians 5

How dare we judge others? This is an important question, especially in view of Paul’s statements in 1 Corinthians 4 about being judged by a human court (vv. 1–6). If we go outside this letter, we find more warnings. Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matt. 7:1). And James asked, “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” after pointing out that God alone is “Lawgiver and Judge” (James 4:11–12).

Yet when we look at 1 Corinthians 5 we find that Paul had “already passed judgment” on one member of the Corinthian fellowship (v. 3). He commanded the church to assemble and “hand this man over to Satan” (v. 5). He told them “not to associate” with sexually

immoral persons, which necessarily calls for an evaluation of who is and who is not immoral!

While on the surface this may seem contradictory, it is not when we make a simple distinction. *There are some things which we Christians have no right to judge. But there are other things which we must judge!*

This is really quite an obvious principle. I'm not a nuclear physicist, so I wouldn't be called in to judge the safety or danger of a new atomic power plant. I have no criteria or skill for making such an evaluation. On the other hand, I am a Christian educator. As such I'm often invited to churches or schools to evaluate their curriculums and programs. So in areas where I am not competent to judge, I refrain. In areas where I am competent, I should speak up.

We are not competent to judge another's motives or service (1 Cor. 4). Both Christ and James were speaking of critical evaluation of others who, while perhaps different from us, are not subject to us but to Jesus as Lord (see also Rom. 14–15). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul was talking about *sin*.

And this, as we shall see, is one area in which we must accept our responsibility, and judge!

What kinds of things are valid causes for discipline? As we look at the Corinthian passage, it becomes even more clear. *God has made us responsible to judge those things that He Himself has declared to be sin!* We have not taken the judge's robes and declared "immorality is sin." Not at all. God has already spoken. When we act to discipline a brother who is practicing sin, all we are doing is agreeing with God in the judgment He has already pronounced!

It is understandable that the other things Paul mentioned in this chapter are things which Scripture also clearly identifies as sin: idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, drunkenness. God has announced His judgment on all of them. In these areas, the church must speak with God's voice. Our judgment must agree with His.

But note two things. First, the text speaks of "idolaters" rather than idolatry. It says "homosexual offenders" rather than homosexuality. This wording is important, not because it indicates a *person* rather than a sin, but because it indicates *a person who is habitually practicing the sin!* Paul is not saying that an individual is to be disciplined by the fellowship for a single act or failure. After all, transformation is not instantaneous; we need to give each other room to grow. But when a person habitually practices sexual immorality or thievery or homosexuality, *then* the family is to accept its responsibility and is to discipline.

Second, our judgment is limited to those who are professing Christians. Paul makes it very clear that his instruction not to associate with the immoral was given, "not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral," for it is no business of the Christian to "judge those outside the church" (1 Cor. 5:10, 12). But those *inside* "must" be judged, and the "wicked man" must be expelled from the fellowship.

What church discipline involves, then, is judgment (1) of a practice which God's Word has unequivocally condemned as sin; (2) when that sin is habitually practiced; (3) by one who claims to be a member of the family of God.

Why must we discipline within the family? One answer is given in this passage. The family of God is to reflect the Lord's own purity. Permitting sin in Christ's body will taint the whole and will spread (vv. 6–8).

This point is particularly significant when we remember that the church is God's chosen agency for transformation. Within the fellowship of the family we find our examples, our support, our encouragement, our instruction, our admonition—all those influences God uses to help us enter into the great realities we are called to experience in Christ. A church family torn by disputes or soiled by the presence of those committed to habitual sins loses its power to transform. For the church to fulfill its purpose, holiness and discipline are necessities.

There's one other point, not made here but in 2 Corinthians. Discipline is also the *loving* way to deal with the sinner. The goal is not to cut him off, but to work for his restoration by helping him sense the seriousness of sin, and respond to God's call to holiness. When the Corinthian church obeyed Paul's demand, the result was restoration of the sexually immoral brother to fellowship with God and with the congregation (see 2 Cor. 2:5–11).

How do we discipline? In the case of habitual sin and continuing immorality, we know that Paul had earlier given them instruction in a now-lost letter (see 1 Cor. 5:9–11). We can assume that Paul's instruction included an explanation of the process which Jesus outlined in Matthew 18:15–17.

In that pattern, Jesus called for loving admonition from a Christian friend. If this failed, the leaders of the local congregation were to meet with the sinning believer. If he or she still refused to repent and give up the sin, then that person was to be cut off from fellowship. In Jesus' words, "Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." In Paul's restatement, which captures the meaning of those words exactly, he said, "With such a man do not even eat" (1 Cor. 5:11).

What about Paul's reference to delivering the sinner up to Satan? The thought is that the sinner who has not responded to the church must now suffer affliction and perhaps even physical death (cf. 10:10; 11:30, 32 with 1 Tim. 1:20 and 1 John 5:16).

Doesn't discipline violate others' rights? This question reflects an individualism characteristic both of Hellenistic times and of our own. Then, as now, people claimed personal freedom and privilege, insisting "everything is permissible" (1 Cor. 6:12). In our day this arrogant attitude has been expressed in lawsuits brought against churches which have expelled members for immorality.

But the argument from personal rights is an empty one. We Christians no longer belong to ourselves; our "rights" are no longer paramount. For we belong to the Lord. "You are not your own: you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Our bodies are now the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in us (v. 19). Our bodies, as well as our hearts and minds, are God's. It is *His* right to be Lord, not our right to do as we please.

While we are free from external bondage, we are to exercise our Christian freedom within the limits imposed by God's purpose in our lives. When it comes to discipline in the church of Christ, we are not to hesitate to act because we feel we might violate a brother's rights. Instead, we *must* act because God has charged us to uphold *His* rights.

And, of course, we discipline because we love the sinning brother or sister. He will only discover the meaning of his life, and we of ours, as we remain in full fellowship with our

Lord. Because we love we discipline, and through discipline we invite our straying brother or sister to return.