

Truths about Church Discipline 2:5–11

One of the most difficult experiences in the life of a church occurs when it has to impose church discipline on a member of the church. We've had to do that just a few times in the almost 19 years that I've been here, and it's always been a huge source of concern. Church discipline is difficult, but it's sometimes necessary, and when we have to do it, we must do it the right way.

In today's passage, Paul refers to a situation in which the church in Corinth imposed some kind of discipline on one of its members. The church likely asked Paul for his thoughts regarding this situation, and in our text today, Paul tells the church what to do. His instructions here are helpful for any church as it faces the potential of church discipline on a member.

Let's see what Paul tells us about the matter of church discipline.

- I. Church discipline is imposed for unbiblical conduct.
 - A. Someone caused “grief” or sorrow/sadness (*λυπέω*) by his behavior—“if anyone has caused grief.” And if we skip ahead to chapter 7:12, we find out that Paul identifies the man as “one who had done wrong.” Whatever this behavior was, it caused grief/sorrow for the members of the church.
 - B. It seemed not to have bothered Paul that much—“he has not grieved me.” Paul had a very thick skin; he was not easily offended. However, it caused a problem for the church. This offense had had an impact on the whole church—“all of you.”
 - C. It's not exactly clear what Paul means at the 2nd half of vs. 5. The language seems to show that Paul didn't want to exaggerate the offense or treat it too severely. It was an offense, but Paul did not want to blow it out of proportion.
 - D. What was the offense? What was the cause of pain/grief for the members of the Corinthian church?
 1. 1 Corinthians mentions a man who was guilty of gross immorality. The church had to put out of its membership. But this is probably *not* the same situation and not the same man, although some commentators think that it is. I doubt it.

2. Paul doesn't exactly say what the situation was, and he does not identify the man. By this time, the man had repented, so Paul doesn't further humiliate the man by calling him by name.
3. In vs. 10, we have a hint about the nature of the problem (read vs. 10). Paul says that he forgives the offender. If the church has forgiven him, then Paul has no problem forgiving him.
 - a) What that seems to imply is that the offender may have opposed Paul's apostolic authority. Perhaps he treated Paul with hostility and opposition during his last visit. Perhaps he insulted Paul or opposed him publicly. There may have been an ugly confrontation between the man and Paul. Remember that Paul's previous visit was unpleasant, and this man might have been the cause.
 - b) He apparently did something quite offensive against Paul, and the rest of the church thought that the behavior was worthy of some kind of punishment/censure/rebuke. The man's behavior caused grief/pain for the whole church.
4. Paul had instructed the church to deal with this man, and the church had followed Paul's instructions. They had affirmed their loyalty to Paul and had dealt quite severely with the offender.
5. However, it looks like the man has repented, and Paul tells the church to reinstate the individual (vs. 7—forgive and comfort). It sounds like he truly repented and was sorry for his behavior. Paul doesn't hold a grudge against the guy.

In this case, church discipline had its intended results—the church imposed some kind of penalty on the offender. The man felt guilty for what he had done and had repented. So now the church can reinstate the man to fellowship with the church. That's how it's supposed to work.

App: In the early church, if someone were under church discipline, he couldn't find another church down the block or across town. If you were disciplined out of the church, then you had no access to the life of the church. You couldn't hear the preaching of God's Word, you had no access to the Lord's Supper, and you could not enjoy the fellowship of the saints. In those days, if you were not part of the church, you were considered to be an unbeliever.

So it would make sense that, if the man were a genuine believer, he would be very unhappy about being kept away from the church. Any Christian should feel very sorrowful and unhappy if he could not go to church.

One of the problems in modern Christian life is that a person can be under discipline in one church and find a warm welcome in another church. The church that welcomes such a person usually comes to regret it; but initially, all they care about is another person or family attending their church.

Many professing Christians today have virtually no commitment to the local church. It doesn't bother them at all that they are not a part of a local assembly of believers. People like that are seriously out of order.

- II. .6 Church discipline normally requires the imposition of some kind of “punishment.”
 - A. The punishment should be appropriate; i.e., it should cause pain.
 - 1. .6 The word “punishment” (ἐπιτιμία) means “rebuke, reproof, assessment of damages.” The church imposed some kind of punishment or penalty on the man, and this caused him pain or sorrow. It was a rather unpleasant and difficult experience.
 - 2. Some people can't imagine a church ever imposing any kind of punishment, rebuke, or correction upon anyone. Church is supposed to be all about unconditional love, grace, mercy, and tolerance. Many churches never rebuke people for their ungodly behavior. They never exercise church discipline.
 - 3. Church should be a place of love, grace, mercy, and tolerance, but it's also a place that takes the teaching of Jesus seriously. And Jesus himself requires the church to impose church discipline when necessary.
 - 4. The NT tells us what to do when a member of the church violates the clear expectations of NT Christianity. If a person has behaved himself badly and is unrepentant, then the church must impose some kind of disciplinary measures on the offender—Paul calls it “punishment” – i.e., rebuke, correction, penalty.
 - 5. A church must maintain purity in doctrine and in behavior; and when a member steps out of bounds and will not repent, then the church must act.

B. .6end The punishment should fit the misbehavior. The punishment “is sufficient (ικανός) for the man.”

1. The NT gives us a couple of options regarding church discipline.

a) In some cases, church discipline results in excommunication. That is, the person is ejected from the church; he loses his membership; he cannot attend the church.

In fact, after excommunication, we regard the individual as an unbeliever—a “heathen and a publican” in Jesus’ words. The offender is acting like an unbeliever, and so we have to assume that he is.

b) But in other cases, we impose church discipline on someone we believe is a genuine believer, but who is living in sin and who not willing to repent. In that case, we withhold some privileges from the individual until he repents and seeks reconciliation. But we don’t consider him to be an unbeliever.

2. In any case of church discipline, the punishment/rebuke/assessment should fit the offense. The man in view had been sufficiently punished/rebuked, and now the church should reinstate him.

C. .6 The punishment should be imposed by “the majority/the many.”

1. The church met together to decide what to do about this man, and the majority viewpoint was that he needed to suffer some kind of punishment/penalty. The church agreed that it was necessary to do this, probably by a vote of the church.

2. When we have to impose church discipline, it is done by the entire church; the whole body/congregation is involved. It’s not just the pastor and the deacons who impose church discipline. The church votes, and the church does what the majority decides to do.

3. The NT teaches congregational church government. That is, the church body itself determines what it’s going to do. When church discipline is necessary, the whole church body determines to impose some kind of penalty on those who are violating biblical guidelines.

4. The goal of the church is to call the offender to repentance and to reconciliation with God and with the church. So we can't pretend that everything is just fine between church members and the person under church discipline. Our relationship with the offender changes until he repents.

III. Church discipline is intended to bring about reconciliation.

A. Reconciliation with the church

1. .7 forgive and comfort the man. Paul urges the church to be gracious and forgiving now that the man has repented.
2. .8 reaffirm your love for the man

In other words, remove the church discipline and welcome him back into the congregation.

App: Reaffirmation/reconciliation is the goal for every church discipline situation. Our goal should always be that the rebuke and punishment would lead to restoration. The goal is not punishment or rebuke. The goal is reconciliation of the guilty person with God and with the church.

When someone under church discipline repents, the church is obligated to forgive and reinstate the person to full fellowship. That's the goal—we want to see those under discipline repent and be restored. Those who have been disciplined out of membership should be welcomed back into membership after they have repented.

3. .7 Danger—"swallowed up / overwhelmed with too much sorrow." If the punishment continued, it would be excessive. Paul felt compassion for the man and didn't want him to continue to suffer for his sin.

App: We must avoid two extremes in church discipline: being too lenient and being too severe. We must not ignore flagrant sin, but we also don't want to blow things out of proportion. We want to apply just the right amount of pressure to get the person's attention and help him repent and change his behavior.

Our response to an individual as a church depends on the person's repentance or lack of it. If a person—like the man in this text—repents of his sin and changes his behavior, then the church can extend mercy and grace. We can reaffirm our love for the repentant offender and reinstate him into the church.

But without repentance, we cannot reinstate the person. Jesus tells us to regard the person as an unbeliever if he fails to repent. We dare not ignore that biblical expectation.

Whatever the case, the church must be balanced and gracious in its approach to discipline and be always ready to forgive those who repent.

B. .10 reconciliation with church leaders

1. Whatever the man had done against Paul, Paul didn't hold it against him; he was willing to forgive the man if the church was willing.
2. It seems likely that the man had insulted Paul, made accusations against him, and criticized him. Yet Paul is more than willing to forgive the man.
3. "If indeed I have forgiven anything..." It seems like Paul had not taken this offense very seriously. It didn't bother him too much.

App: Paul sets a good example for us here. It seems likely that the man in question had seriously offended Paul, yet Paul doesn't seem to be angry or upset about it. He's more than willing to forgive.

We should be like that—not easily offended. We should be willing to forgive people's faults and failures, even when we have been offended. We should not be overly sensitive or easily offended. If people apologize, we should grant forgiveness and carry on without bitterness.

C. .10end reconciliation with God

Note the words "in the presence of Christ." The sense is that Christ is looking at this situation and approved of this forgiveness and reconciliation.

App: Everything the church does should be done "in the presence of Christ." The church belongs to Christ; he is the head of the church. Jesus promised to be with us always (Mt 28:20). Any kind of church action like this should be done under the authority of Christ.

In fact, all forgiveness in any relationship is done through the work/ministry of Christ. We love others because he loved us, and we forgive others because he forgave us. We don't love and forgive others because we feel like it. We love and forgive others "in the presence of Christ," i.e., because of his work in our lives and in the church.

BTW, we should be very careful *not* to reinstate anyone back into the church if it would compromise Christ's presence in the church. If Christ would command us to exclude someone from the church, we cannot tolerate that person in the church. If we want Jesus to be present with us in the church, then we must at times impose church discipline on those who damage the church. Whose presence would we rather enjoy—Jesus or the offender?

In fact, it's because of Christ's presence in the church that church discipline is necessary. We must maintain the moral and doctrinal purity of the church. We must not tolerate in the church anything or anybody that would corrupt Christ's church. The church operates in the presence/before the face of Christ, so we have to do things his way.

IV. .9 Church discipline is a matter of simple obedience.

- A. Paul had apparently discussed this issue with the church previously. He had directed them to impose church discipline on this man. The fact that they followed Paul's directions proved their loyalty to him; they were obedient to his commands, and that was a good thing.
- B. And now, they could show their loyalty to Paul again by ending the church discipline and reaffirming the man.

App: Our primary responsibility is to follow the biblical guidelines when we have to impose church discipline. We must obey the biblical model taught in the NT.

If we fail to do so, we will fail the test; it would amount to disobedience and compromise. We don't want to be disobedient in these matters.

V. .11 Church discipline hinders Satan's purposes within the church.

A. Satan's purpose is to "take advantage of" us.

1. The name "Satan" literally means "the adversary." Cf. 1 Pet 5:8. He stands against the church; he opposes the church.
2. "take advantage of" (πλεονεκτέω) means "to exploit, to overreach, to take more than you deserve." To take advantage of someone is to defraud or outwit him.
3. Satan is a great fraud, the great exploiter of the unwary/gullible. If you give him an inch, he'll take a mile.
4. That's why a church has to be very careful and diligent not to allow Satan any opportunities to bring corruption and compromise into the church. We don't want him to have any advantage over us.

B. Satan's purpose is that we would fall for his evil schemes/devices.

1. The word "schemes/devices" (νόημα) literally means "mind/thoughts," but the sense is evil schemes, evil plots, evil purposes. Paul encourages us in Eph 6:11 to stand against "the wiles/methods (μεθοδείαι) of the devil."
2. What would be Satan's scheme/purpose against the church?
 - a) He would want the man to commit the sin, and he'd want the church to hold it against him, even though he'd repented.
 - b) Satan would want the man and the church to be unreconciled, for the pain and disunity to continue.
 - c) He'd want the church to be excessive in its punishment so as to drive the man away from the faith.
 - d) Satan would want to promote bitterness and disunity in the church.

These are all Satan's "schemes/devices."

3. To avoid falling for Satan's schemes, the church must be gracious and forgiving to those who repent under church discipline.

App: Church should not be a harsh, graceless, unreasonably strict place. When we have to impose discipline, our goal should be that we also want to extend grace, forgiveness, and love. We want the offender to be reconciled to God and to the congregation.

Quote: Christian discipline certainly includes punishment administered in love, but it is not simply retributive or punitive; it is also remedial or reformatory (cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 11:32; 2 Cor 7:9, 10; 13:10). It aims at reinstatement after repentance, through forgiveness and reconciliation.¹

If we fail to reinstate/forgive those who repent, then we are falling for a satanic scheme.

In summary, the text shows us six stages of successful church discipline²

1. wrongdoing—someone commits a serious sin, misbehavior, or error;
2. punishment—the church rebukes or penalizes the offender;
3. pain/sorrow—both the wrong-doer and the congregation suffers because of the sin involved;
4. repentance—the offender turns from his sin and seeks reconciliation;
5. forgiveness—granted by the congregation as well as by the one harmed;
6. affirmation—restoration to full fellowship within the congregation.

That's the way church discipline should play out. Unfortunately, in many cases, the second half of this plan does not happen. The offender never repents, the church is not able to grant forgiveness, and restoration does not happen. So the church and the offender are stuck after wrongdoing, punishment, and pain. That's an unfortunate way for the process to end, but when the offender refuses to repent, that's where it often ends—the offender is put out of the church, and he's considered to be an unbeliever.

¹ Murray J. Harris, "2 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 330.

² Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 234.

But that's not the intent of the church. Our intent in all cases of church discipline is that the offender repents, enjoys forgiveness, and be restored to God and to the church.

It's our obligation to follow this biblical pattern no matter what the consequences might be.

This text should also warn us that we should avoid being the cause of church discipline.