

Why Church Matters

Discipline Matters: Protecting You With Discipline (1 Corinthians 5)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 15, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ This morning I'm concluding our series on "Why Church Matters". Over the past weeks we've been developing our doctrine of the church. And an important lesson to be drawn from all of our talk about the church is a lesson learned from the beginning. I mean the very beginning – in Genesis 2:28 where it says, "*It is not good for man to be alone.*" **That means we were not created for independent isolation but for co-dependent community.**

- ❖ Now the amazing thing about God describing Adam as being alone and deeming it not good is that this all occurred in Genesis 2. Before Genesis 3. Before sin entered. Before it alienated God and man. So we're talking about when Adam enjoyed perfect fellowship with God. Even in that moment, there was a sense in which he was alone and in need of community.
 - ▶ It just goes to show that it's not enough to have a vibrant personal relationship with God if you're isolated from the church. **The Christian life is designed to be lived out in community with other Christians.** Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a church to disciple a believer. You're simply not going to grow and bear much fruit without community.

- ❖ And I don't just mean showing up on Sundays. **If you're not deeply engaging and connecting with other believers, then you won't experience transformation.** You can take a handful of rough stones and line them next to each other every week. They can be in close, regular proximity. But if they're just sitting there, nothing is going to change.
 - ▶ If you want them polished, if you want the rough edges smoothed out, if you want to see noticeable change, then you have to throw those stones into a tumbler. Add some water. Add some grit. Let them tumble around with each other, rub up against each other, for a good while – and the result will be smooth, polished stones.

- ❖ In the same way, just showing up on Sunday or to small group, just being next to each other, is not going to do. **We need to be in each other's lives, smoothing out each other's edges.** At times it'll be uncomfortable, it'll be awkward, it might even hurt, but that's how we experience transformation. That's how we're polished into the image of Christ.
 - ▶ And what I tried to show last week, which we'll build on today, is that this tumbling and polishing effect of life together in the church is to be experienced through a practice known as church discipline.

- ❖ Last week, we demonstrated how discipline is simply a component of the overall process of discipleship. In our making of disciples we're not only instructing each other on what it means to bear much fruit for God. We're also confronting and correcting each other when we don't see any visible fruit or we see clear evidence of bad fruit.
 - ▶ **Church discipline can be uncomfortable and awkward. It can be painful. But it's how we experience life transformation.** It's how we're conformed into the image of Christ. Last week we covered Matthew 18 where we saw Jesus' instructions for church discipline. In today's text we see it applied to a situation in a local church.

- ❖ Now as we jump into 1 Corinthians 5, it helps to understand the larger context of his letter to the Corinthian believers. **One of Paul's primary concerns was their spiritual pride.** There were factions in the church and part of that divisiveness was due to the boasting of some of being more spiritual than others (2:13, 15; 3:1; 14:37).
 - ▶ And yet their boasts have no ground in reality since they so easily tolerate sin. In v1 Paul makes mentioned of sexual immorality in their midst that they've turned a blind eye to, which is why Paul is so baffled by their spiritual arrogance (v2).

- ❖ As we'll see, the sin in question is really serious, and the offender needs immediate correction and discipline. **But notice how Paul's gripe here is more with the congregation than with the culprit.** He can't believe they've tolerated the sin, neglected to discipline, and continue to treat the man as a member in good standing. **It's not only a failure to love him as yourself. It's a failure to protect him from himself.**
 - ▶ And what's worse, it's a failure to protect the honor of God's name. In chapter 3, Paul had taught that the church – not a building but a local assembly of believers – is the new covenant temple of God (3:16-17). We collectively are the temple. So to tolerate sin in our midst is to desecrate the new covenant temple of God and defame his name.
 - This is serious business, which is why Paul commands such a swift response. Now to go through chapter 5, I want to do it by asking three questions.

When Is Church Discipline Called For?

- ❖ The first question has to do with when. When is church discipline called for? It's a question I'm sure many of you are wondering. **Are we supposed to be disciplining members for every sin they commit whenever they commit it?** That's going to be a never-ending task!
 - ▶ Because even though God's people (by his grace through his Son) have been forgiven the **penalty** of sin and freed from the **power** of sin, we still have to deal with the indwelling **presence** of sin. The reality is we sin one way or another on a daily basis. *So am I going to be under church discipline every day for the rest of my life?*

- ❖ Yes and no. It depends on what stage of discipline you're talking about. Last week I mentioned how the first stage of church discipline is simply self-discipline. **Before correcting anybody else for their sin, we should be correcting ourselves for our own sin.** And since we're always witness to our sin and we're capable of judging our inner thoughts and motives, then all of our sin is fair game. **We should be disciplining ourselves for every sin we commit** – no matter big or small, public or private, serious or petty. Self-discipline should be happening on a daily basis.
 - ▶ But if you're dealing with subsequent stages of discipline – where you're correcting the sin of others – then there are limitations. We should reserve church discipline for sins that fit three categories. Sins that are *outward, serious, and unrepentant*.¹

¹ Jonathan Leeman; *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*; pgs. 54-55.

- ❖ First, we should focus church discipline on **A) outward sins** since we can only judge what we can see. If you're not dealing with yourself, then you can only judge a person's actions and behavior. You can't see inner thoughts and motives. Only the outward manifestations.
 - ▶ Now of course some will argue that's exactly why we should refrain from making judgments altogether. If you can't see their inner thoughts and motives, then don't judge their actions. Didn't Jesus say, "*Judge not lest ye be judged*"? (Mt. 7:1)

- ❖ Yes he did. **But the point was not to ban all judgments. The point was to warn his followers not to judge with a hypocritical spirit.** You deal with the log in your own eye before the speck in your brother's. But Jesus still expects you to point out that speck. In the end, it's the Spirit who leads the brother to turn from sin, but fellow brothers still have a role.
 - ▶ It's still our responsibility to judge. Look what Paul says in chapter 5:12. "*Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?*" It's not our responsibility to judge non-Christians. But we suppose to make judgment calls when it comes to fellow members inside the church. And that's what church discipline is for. It's for discerning outward behavior, and if it's deemed to be sin, it needs to be addressed.

- ❖ **So we're not going to be disciplining each other for every feeling of pride or conceit.** But if that inner conceit, in time, begins to manifest itself in mistreatment of others, then discipline is called for. Maybe it's just a mild disdain you have towards another person. So you begin to slander her in the course of a casual conversation with others. In that moment, it's a church member's responsibility to draw attention to that visible speck in your eye.

- ❖ So we should focus discipline on outward sins and also on **B) serious sins**. By that I don't mean to imply that some sins are more tolerable than others because they're less serious. I'm don't mean to suggest that we create a list of sins we can tolerate in our church and a list of sins we'll discipline. I'm not advocating for anything of the sort.
 - ▶ By the seriousness of a sin, I just mean we should recognize the Bible's own distinction between **inadvertent sins** and **highhanded sins** (cf. Num. 15:27-31). Highhanded sins are deliberate and intentional. In such cases, love for one another, protection of one another, calls for correction.

- ❖ But then there are sins we commit unconsciously, unintentionally, inadvertantly. It's still sin. It still requires repentance. **But in these cases, it's usually wiser to leave it to the Holy Spirit by himself to bring about conviction which leads to repentance.**
 - ▶ This is a judgment call in itself. *How do you know if the sin was inadvertent or highhanded? How do I know if I should say something to my friend about that speck?* I never said church discipline was going to be straightforward, black and white. That's why you don't rush into this. That's why you have to spend time in prayer – for the Spirit to convict your friend and for discernment on whether to speak.
 - And just because a person's sin was inadvertent doesn't automatically mean it's not serious. There are lots of serious sin in our lives that we can be ignorant of, self-blinded to. That's why there's a third category to consider.

- ❖ Let's focus our church discipline on **C) unrepentant sins**. Bottomline, if the brother is repentant, then there's no cause for discipline. And repentance means he not only recognizes what he did or said was sinful. He not only feels godly sorrow for what he did or said. He is resolutely committed to turn his back on sin and his face towards Jesus, to walk in holiness and truth. That's repentance.
 - ▶ **It's all about whether we're fighting our sin or we've made peace with it.** If a brother is fighting his sin, then we shouldn't discipline him. We should fight with him. But if a brother has made peace with his sin, then we have to continue the fight. Not fighting him but his sin.
 - **When you get to the point of church discipline, it just means the brother has given up fighting his sin, so we have to continue the fight even without his help.** I think that's the best way to understand what church discipline is trying to do. You're fighting for and protecting your fellow church members even from themselves.

- ❖ So hopefully this focus on outward, serious, and unrepentant sins is going to help you think through *when* and *in what situation* should you speak up and fight for your friends. But I won't be surprised if some of you think that, even with these qualifications, the standard we're setting seems too high. It sounds like we're expecting everyone in the church to be perfect, and if you're not then you'll be disciplined.
 - ▶ Let me just say it plainly: No one should be expecting you (on this side of heaven) to be perfect. **We should expect every Christian to struggle with sin throughout the entirety of our lives.** We're not going to discipline you for doing what's expected of you. But the key word is *struggle*. **We expect Christians to struggle with sin, but we don't expect them to give up the struggle and make peace with their sin.**
 - We shouldn't be surprised when Christians sin (even when they sin badly), but we should be surprised when they refuse to repent. Fish swim. Birds fly. Christians repent. It's in our (new) nature. The point is that Christians are characteristically repentant.

- ❖ So with this in mind, let's consider this messy situation in the church of Corinth. There was a member in this church who was persisting in sin. When it says in v1 that he "*has his father's wife*", it's probably talking about committing incest with a stepmother. So it's *outward* sin, and in this case public knowledge. It's *serious* sin in that it's deliberate and it's not even behavior tolerated among non-Christians. And it's *unrepentant* sin. He's not fighting it himself. So the Corinthian church ought to fight for him even without his help.

What Does Church Discipline Call For?

- ❖ This leads to our second question. What does church discipline call for? Paul answers that saying essentially the same thing but in three different ways. At the end of v2. "*Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*" In v7 he commands the Corinthians to "*cleanse out the old leaven.*" And in v13, Paul quotes out of Deuteronomy (13:5) when he tells them to "*purge the evil person from among you.*"

- ❖ *So what does church discipline call for? It calls for a cleansing, a purging, a removal of this man from among them.* But what is that referring to? Remove him from what? Does that mean to physically remove him? Are they supposed to ban him from their worship services? Don't let him come to church anymore?
 - ▶ **No, the way to understand "remove him from among you" is to see it in terms of church membership.** These instructions only make sense in a context where boundaries have been drawn to distinguish those *inside* and *outside* the church. Notice Paul's reference to those *inside* and *outside* in vv12-13. 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.*
 - Outside of what? It doesn't mean outside the worship service or outside the church building. **These words only makes sense in terms of being outside the recognized membership of the church.**

- ❖ Some of you might be wondering what difference that makes. Why would that be a form of discipline? Now if you banned me from ever showing my face around here again, that would feel like discipline. But if you're just talking about putting me outside the membership of the church – that's not a big deal for those who have never actually joined a church.
 - ▶ To understand the seriousness, we have to recall what we've been teaching about church membership over the past weeks. We've been arguing that joining membership is not just a way for you to say something about your church (i.e. I like the teaching. I like the people. I like the ministries.). **It's really a way for your church to exercise their congregational authority and say something about you.** By welcoming you into membership we're vouching for you as Christian, an ambassador for Christ.

- ❖ **So to remove you from membership means your church is saying they can no longer affirm your claim to be a Christian.** They can't vouch for you. That's no small matter. That's serious business. Historically, this act of removal has been called *excommunication*. It means to withhold our communion. It's most poignantly symbolized by withholding the Lord's supper (the communion table) from the member under discipline.
 - ▶ The Lord's Supper is essentially a family meal. Only sons and daughters of God are invited to partake. **So each time you eat the bread and drink the cup, the church is reaffirming your place at the family table.**
 - So to excommunicate someone – to cut them off from the communion table, from the membership of the church – is serious. **It's saying we can no longer vouch for you.** We can't vouch for your claim to be a Christian, so we can't treat you like one.

- ❖ That explains Paul's instructions in vv9-11 where he says not to associate with sexually immoral people. He says he doesn't mean sexually immoral non-Christians or any kind of non-Christian who characteristically sins with any kind of sin. No, you should definitely associate with such people, being the salt and light of the gospel to them. That's evangelism.

- ❖ Paul says in v11 he means don't associate with someone who claims to be a brother in Christ yet is characteristically unrepentant towards sin. I think the mention of not eating with such a one relates to that family meal, the communion table. **So to “not associate” doesn't mean that you socially shun him or de-friend him.** It's not about giving the silent treatment.
 - ▶ It just means you no longer associate with him in such a way as to suggest to him, to the world, and to your church that he's still a brother in Christ. But that's what you're suggesting if he remains a church member in good standing. So Paul's instructions here come down to removing his membership and his place at the family table.

- ❖ I understand if that sounds harsh. And vv4-5 won't make it any easier to swallow. *“⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵you 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.”*
 - ▶ Delivering the man to Satan sounds really mean. But you have to understand that Paul saw the world as being under the realm of Satan's influence. He's the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4). **So to deliver the man to Satan is nothing sinister. It just means putting him out of the membership of the church and back into the world.**

- ❖ It's similar to Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:17 to treat the unrepentant brother as you would a Gentile or tax collector. **In other words, treat him as you would someone who's not part of the covenant community of God** – someone of the world, a non-Christian.
 - ▶ Of course that means you should still treat him with love and respect. You still hold out hope. You still want him to be in church with you – to sit under the preaching of the Gospel since that's really the only means of grace still at his disposal.

- ❖ **Excommunication doesn't sound very pleasant or enjoyable. But when is discipline ever described that way?** Yet I have heard it described as loving. *“⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. . . . ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* (Heb. 12:6, 11)

Why Is Church Discipline Called For?

- ❖ I think our third and final question will help this sink in. Why is church discipline called for? What's the goal? What's the aim? What is the church trying to accomplish? There are three levels of concern for Paul that justifies why church discipline is called for.

- ❖ **First, church discipline is for the sake of the unrepentant member.** Notice in v5 that the church is 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.”*
 - ▶ The person's spirit, his soul, is the concern. Let Satan do his worst against the man's flesh. It's the soul we're after. Notice how even after excommunication, there's still hope for the man's soul.

- ❖ This is really a wake up call. Not a final judgment. To excommunicate is *not* to suggest you've gone too far, that you're beyond the reach of God's saving grace. In fact, it's the opposite. **The hope is that an act of discipline as jarring as excommunication will function as a means of grace – a means of deliverance for someone deep in sin.**
 - ▶ Our hope and prayer is for God to use this act of love and protection to awaken the individual from his spiritual slumber, to bring him to his senses, to lead him to repentance, so that he joins his church in the fight against his own sin.

- ❖ Friends, if you're going to make the commitment to join this church, to become a recognized sheep of this local flock, then your shepherds owe it to you to love you and to protect you, even by means of church discipline.
 - ▶ Right now you may be walking closely with the Lord, but who knows? One day you may stray and find yourself walking in the counsel of the wicked, far from God and from his flock. **Isn't it good to know you have shepherds who are willing leave the comfort of the ninety-nine to go after the one?**
 - All this talk of church discipline is not meant to intimidate you but to comfort you. To know that you won't be forgotten. That out of sight is not out of mind. Isn't it comforting to know you have church members who spiritually have your back and will fight for you against your sin even when you're too tired or on the verge of giving up? That's why we're working to build a culture in this church where discipline is practiced and seen for what it is: love.

- ❖ **Second, church discipline is for the sake of the church.** In v6 Paul uses leaven as an analogy to illustrate undisciplined sin and its effect on a church. *"Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"*
 - ▶ Leaven is fermented dough. In those days, you'd typically leave aside a little clump of leavened bread to be added later to a new lump of unleavened dough. Just that little clump gets rubbed in, spread around, and leavens the whole lump.

- ❖ **Paul's point is that sin not corrected, sin not disciplined, has a corrupting effect on the entire church.** As the body of Christ we're all interconnected. When one body part is failing, the rest feels it. Imagine you dislocate your pinky and neglect to correct it. When it's feeling fine, you could care less about that pinky. It's so small. But once it goes out of whack, you don't realize how much it effects you, how much the rest of you depends on that little finger.
 - ▶ There's no one in the church too small, too insignificant to care about. And that means there's no one in the church whose sin – if unchecked and undisciplined – will not eventually effect and hurt the rest of the body.

- ❖ **Third, church discipline is for the sake of Christ and his gospel.** Remember, Paul started off chapter 5 with his shock of the arrogance among the Corinthians. They were tolerating a sin that was considered intolerable even among their pagan neighbors.

- ❖ The early church already had to deal with accusations of incest because they were known to hold love (*agape*) feasts where they took communion between brothers and sisters. From the outside, that sounds like an incestual orgy. It's totally outlandish, but that was an actual rumor going around in those days. **So letting this church member's incestual relationship go undisciplined was simply adding fuel to the fire.** The Corinthian church was unwittingly contributing to the defamation of Jesus' name and gospel.
 - ▶ The same is true in our day. Many of our non-Christian friends and colleagues want little to do with Christ's gospel because Christ's church has left little to be desired. **We have not put our own house in order, so we've lost that gospel distinctiveness, that gospel attractiveness.** For the sake of the gospel and our gospel mission, we've got to go back to it ourselves.

- ❖ That's exactly what Paul does in vv6-7. He goes back to the gospel. Notice the connection he makes with the Passover (cf. Ex. 12:15-20; 13:6-7). Look at v7, "*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.*"
 - ▶ Each year at Passover, the Jews would recall how God redeemed them out of slavery from Egypt, and part of that celebration was to search for and remove all leaven from your household. Each family is to purge out all the leaven, and for seven days you eat only unleavened bread along with the Passover lamb.
 - So in light of that Passover lamb sacrificed in your place so that the wrath of God might pass over you – God's covenant people are to remove, to cleanse, to purge all leaven – all sin – from their midst.

- ❖ **To tolerate sin in our own lives or the life of our church is antithetical to who we are as Christians** – as those who have been redeemed from slavery to sin, who have been covered by the blood of the true Passover lamb, who have been made new, made pure in God's eyes.
 - ▶ Did you notice in v7 how Paul says to the Corinthians, "*you really are unleavened*"? That's shocking. Throughout the entire letter he's confronting them for their arrogance, their divisiveness, their immorality, etc. And yet here he describes them as unleavened, as spiritually pure!

- ❖ This is at the core of Paul's theology and the way he motivates holy living. Paul would claim, for all Christians, that we are unleavened. We have been purified and cleansed from the sin and evil that is ours by nature. **So now, Christian, become what you are in Christ!**
 - ▶ Don't fight your sin out of fear for church discipline. Don't pursue holiness in Christ because you want to avoid the shame of excommunication. No, look at what Christ has done for you. And then let's cleanse out the old leaven in our own lives as well as our life together as the church. Let's be the people that Christ has redeemed us to be.