

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Church Discipline - Loving and Strong

(1 Corinthians 5; Matthew 18)

Introduction: Oxymorons we love...

Oh, how we love oxymorons! (actually *oxymora*), those wonderful jarring combinations of words that really don't belong together.

“Act naturally”

“Jumbo shrimp”

“Military intelligence”

“Legal ethics”

“Airline food”

“Country music”

You've probably got your favorite oxymorons. So how about this one: “CHURCH DISCIPLINE”

“Church pot-luck” works. So does “church work day” and “church building.”

What is it about “church discipline” that might seem to be as jarring a combination of words as “pretty ugly” or “hot chili”?

A first century Christian would be very puzzled by references to a “church work day” or to a “church pot luck” or to a “church building.” But He would not be puzzled by a reference to “church discipline.”

Today, I'm going to be teaching about a topic that might not be on your radar. We'll deal today with something that might not even seem to fit or be called for in a setting like a Sunday morning worship service.

Last Sunday, in our final study of Jeremiah, we highlighted God's disciplining ways in the Old Testament. This morning, we're going to take another look at His disciplining ways, zeroing in on a particular means of His discipline, that which is exercised by the church.

Today we'll think about what the Bible says a church should do when faced with a situation where a member is involved in sinful behavior, continues in it, and is unrepentant about it.

Life in the IMPERFECT (i.e. - real) Church

Grace Abounds!

The church - a place of love

Before saying anything else, I want to affirm that the church is to be a community where love abounds and where love and acceptance flows.

All the way through the New Testament we find this emphasis on love.

Jesus said it when speaking to His disciples on His last night on earth. **[John 13:34] A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. [35] “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**

Paul said it over and over again in his letters, as in Romans, **[12:10] Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor** and Colossians, **[3:14] Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.**

Peter said it when writing to persecuted Christians, **[1 Peter 1:22] Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.**

And the apostle John said it in his first letter, **[1 John 3:11] For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.**

Love is to be shown in tangible acts of generosity when there is need, in warm greetings, in tender words, and in genuine acceptance. I desperately hope that you are finding love here at Northwest AND that you are finding ways to show love to others here.

Love is what we are to be all about!

Another way to look at the church is as a healing place. The church is a hospital for the care and cure of souls.

The church - a hospital for souls

Paul tells us that in the church we are to *[1 Thessalonians 5:14].... encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

Despite the press some would have us swallow, the reality is that this and every church is comprised of people who are very imperfect “works in progress.”

The secret is out. The pastor of this church is a redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, justified in the sight of God, struggler who sins. But then, so is every other staff member, Elder, Deacon, Ministry Coordinator, Sunday School teacher and pew sitter.

This church is comprised of and for wounded people, scarred people, damaged people. In this community, people are being rebuilt and transformed by the power of God and by the love and care they receive.

There is no question but that the church is to be a place where broken lives are put back together with great tenderness. The images of the church as a community of great tenderness and love abound in the Bible.

BUT, there are other ways to look at the church, too.

Holiness Calls!

The church is also to be a place of radical holiness.

When, for instance, Paul says that the church is the “bride” of Christ, there is an implicit call to be a “pure” bride. (Ephesians 5) When Peter says that the church is a “temple” he means that we are to reflect the glory of God by the holiness of our lives. (1 Peter 2)

So, in addition to being a radically loving and accepting community, the church is also called to be a radically holy community.

We are God’s people, a light on a hill, the salt of the earth, come together to proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

So... what is a church to do when a member of a church called to holiness is involved in sin and has no intention of ceasing?

The apostle Paul had to deal with just that situation in the church in the city of Corinth. We read about what he had to say about it in 1 Corinthians 5.

Discipline in the IMPERFECT (i.e. - real) Church

Unrepentant in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5)

Sin in the Corinthian church (v. 1)

The city of Corinth was a famous and a famously *immoral* Greek city in the first century.¹ Given that, we aren’t really surprised that immorality had worked its way into the church there.

Well, Paul found out about a particular immorality that was going on in the church. He found out, not because the church told him about it, but because he somehow had heard about it through the effective evangelical grapevine of the first century.²

Paul doesn’t name names here. That wasn’t necessary, as everybody in the church knew who he was talking about! But he does name the sin.

[1] It is actually reported that there is immorality³ among you and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife.⁴

¹ Corinth was a favorite recreation and vacation spot for the mighty and the noble. It was notorious as a place of both wealth and indulgence. As a seaport, it was a meeting place for many nationalities and it offered all of the attendant vices.

² The rumor mill of the church evidently worked as well in the first century as it does in the twenty-first, even without the Internet.

³ Immorality = *πορνεία* = can refer to prostitution, but generally came to be used of any sexual sin.

The way this is best understood is that there was a man who was having sexual relations with his stepmother.⁵ This kind of immorality explicitly violated Old Testament commands and the lifestyle expected of a Christian.⁶

Regarding this situation, there is a lot that we don't know. We don't know if the woman was currently married to the man's father or if she was divorced from his father.

All of that is irrelevant. What is relevant is that this is not a one time event or a slip up. There is an on-going, immoral relationship.⁷

And Paul faults the church for the way in which they have [not] dealt with the situation.

Arrogance and inaction (v. 2)

[2] You have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.

Trade pride in - choose grief

That a member of their church had entered into such a relationship should have prompted mourning. In Corinth, it prompted pride. How so?

- Perhaps they were proud of being such an open church that anyone could play an active part, regardless of lifestyle.
- Maybe they were proud of their accepting attitude, to such an extent that sins were winked at.

Paul says that a better response than boasting would have been to have wept and mourned.

⁴ Not exactly incest, since the man and the woman in question are not related by blood.

⁵ "His father's wife" almost certainly doesn't mean "his mother" or Paul would have said so.

⁶ "***You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.***" (Leviticus 18:8) Stoning was the punishment for this crime.

⁷ We can assume that the woman was not a member of the church, for she is not judged for her involvement in the activity.

They should have mourned for a brother who had fallen into sin, mourned for the evil that had infiltrated the church, mourned over the loss of a pure witness!

And they should have done something else. They should have removed the man from the church. Or, the term I'll use today, they should have dis-fellowshipped him.

Trade acceptance in - choose dis-fellowship

As I've already made clear - and, as is crystal clear, anyway - sin is not unusual in the church. It happens. But sin is not normative.

Holiness is to be the norm. And when a member of a church persists in unholy behavior, refuses to repent of sin, and defends disobedience, a church must take action.

In the same way that a skilled surgeon must ruthlessly cut out a cancer, the church is to remove the person who is guilty of unrepentant sin.

This will seem to be - and, in fact, is, extreme. But for a church to take this action is not hard-hearted and it's not mean-spirited.

The church is the temple of God, the bride of Christ. The reputation of Jesus in a watching community is at stake in the lifestyle of the believers who make up that church. What were people in Corinth to think about Jesus if His people live immorally with no consequences?

Paul told the church that they needed to take action. And just in case they were sort of on the fence with regard to how to deal with this man caught up in unrepentant sin, Paul provided a bit of apostolic leadership.

Paul's authority and action (vv. 3-5)

Call a meeting (v. 4)

[4] In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus...⁸

⁸ Read these words carefully and you'll see that Paul is both calling the church at Corinth to take action AND that he is also personally taking action.

He begins the verse with these words, ***“In the name of our Lord Jesus.....”*** That is a sober invoking of Jesus’ name and power.

It reminds us that a church gathered is more than a few Christians sitting together. The power of Jesus is present when the church comes together to carry out the business of the church - be it worship, instruction, fellowship, ministry, or, as here, discipline.

Paul tells the church to call a meeting. He won’t actually be present at this meeting - he is hundreds of miles away as he writes - but it’ll be as good as if he was there.

At this meeting the church is to come to a decision to act in a certain way. From a distance, Paul has already taken this action.

Take action (vv. 3-5)

[3] For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

When he says that he has judged this man it does not mean that Paul has made a decision that what the man did was wrong. That judgment was not necessary. The Bible had already done that!

No, when Paul says that he has judged the man he means that he has declared a judgment against this man.

[5] I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan⁹ for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

THE ACTION CALLED FOR

That is a mouthful. And what does it mean?!

⁹ See 1 Tim. 1:20, ***“Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.”***

It means that the man is to be dis-fellowshipped (or, cast out of the church). Up to this point, this saved man has enjoyed the fellowship of the church ALONG WITH the pursuit of unrepentant immorality.

He thinks he can have it both ways. Paul says, ***“No, you can’t.”***

At the meeting in Corinth, this man will be delivered from the realm of church membership and fellowship among fellow Christians into Satan’s realm (Satan is called ***[2 Corinthians 4:4]...the god of this world.***)

Practically, this man will be excluded from participating in the church’s worship and fellowship. He will not be welcomed at worship services. He will not be invited to church socials. He won’t be welcomed at home Bible studies. People in the church won’t be hanging with him like they did formerly.¹⁰

TIME-OUT!!

Think about this.

Does that action sound mean? Is it even oxymoronic to think that a church would deal with someone in this way? Well, it is strong, but it is not mean.

As Paul makes very clear in the remainder of the passage, he is urging that this action be taken against someone who is an active, participating part of the church, a believer in Jesus.

This is NOT the action to take with someone who does not know Christ as Savior!

When it comes to interaction with a person who has not placed his or her trust in Jesus for salvation, sinful behavior is not a show-stopper. She is welcomed at worship services. He is welcomed to show up for fellowship events. How else will outsiders see the beauty of the Gospel, if they are excluded from access to the church?¹¹

¹⁰ Most believe that taking the Lord’s Supper as well as social fellowship is in view in 1 Corinthians 5:11.

¹¹ The remainder of the passage makes this point. ***[1 Corinthians 5:9] I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people. [10] I did not at all mean with***

Nor is this dis-fellowshipping action to be taken against a Christian who struggles with sinful behavior. At one level or another, every Christian still wrestles with sin. Hey, we applaud the wrestling match! A Christian who is struggling, failing, confessing, failing, and struggling some more with sinful behavior is welcomed in this church.

But the believer who is thoroughly committed to sinful behavior, rationalizing it, explaining it away, protesting that it is his or her right to behave sinfully, is to be disciplined.

And for what purpose? Paul lists two purposes in verse 5.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ACTION

First, he will be delivered to Satan *“for the destruction of his flesh.”*

Here is what I believe this means.

The eternal spirit of a believer is off limits to Satan. When a person places trust in Jesus for salvation, he or she is saved forevermore. Satan can't break God's promise of eternal life.¹²

But, by removing someone from the protection provided by fellow Christians in a church, Satan is freed to harass in all sorts of other ways.

In this case, the devil will be given freedom to attack, even as far as the destruction of the man's flesh. Satan will have permission to harass, inflict suffering, bring calamity, even kill (*“destroy”*) him.¹³

the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. [11] But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. [12] For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? [13] But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

¹² How do we know that the man who had his father's wife was a Christian? Because Paul judged him, delivering him over to Satan. Had that man not been a Christian, Paul would not have judged him. But it is the role of the church to judge and discipline those who are in the church.

And what possible rationale could Paul have for taking this action?

Listen to the end of verse five - *“so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”*

The ultimate purpose of this church member's discipline is redemptive.¹⁴

This Corinthian brother will be buffeted by Satan for the purpose of bringing him to repentance for his sin, so that when he stands before Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ, he will be *“saved”* - not in the fullest sense, as if he were in danger of Hell, but in the sense of receiving reward.

Church discipline is not, ultimately, punitive. It is ultimately restorative. It's not hard to see - it is ultimately loving!

The reason Paul takes this action, though, is not ONLY because he is concerned for the eventual welfare of the man who is sinning. He is also deeply concerned for the health of the church.

The danger of a little leaven (v. 6)

[6] Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?

Often in Scripture, leaven (or yeast) is a symbol for an infiltrating force. Usually, that infiltration is negative. So, leaven is frequently associated with sin.

The man who “has” his father's wife in Corinth is leavening the church with his sin. His presence in the church threatens to poison the whole. It will pollute the whole lump/church.

¹³ In 11:30, Paul references physical consequences of spiritual failings connected with participating in the Lord's Supper.

¹⁴ God is going to “use” Satan for His own ends, a strategy He has employed before! Paul himself was given a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12), which he called *“a messenger from Satan”* which had the effect of prompting Paul to rely more on God's grace.

Very little leaven is required to leaven a whole lump of dough. And very little blatant “*in your face*” sin is required to poison a whole church.

As I mentioned earlier, the best way to deal with a cancer is often to cut out the tumor before it grows and infects the whole body. In the same way, the best way to deal with the toxic leaven of sin in the church is to get rid of it. It must be cleaned out.¹⁵

And, if the individual sinning believer is not willing to clean out the leaven himself/herself, then the church itself must make the decision to clean out the leaven.

So, Paul addressed the situation of a follower of Jesus who won’t turn from his sin. But he wasn’t the only one or the first to do so. Paul was just taking a page from Jesus’ playbook.

Once, when speaking with His disciples, Jesus addressed the situation of a believer continuing in unrepentant sin, and what was to be done about it when it happened.

Straight from the Mouth of Jesus (Matthew 18)

Jesus is present when two or more are gathered in His Name

In the passage in question are some very familiar words.

¹⁵ In picturing the removal of leaven, Paul wants us to recall the Jewish custom of house cleaning just prior to the observance of Passover every year. At the original Passover, when God redeemed His people from Egypt, the Jews were forced to eat unleavened bread because of the haste with which they had to leave Egypt. And every year, at the feast of the Passover, they relived that event right down to the detail of removing leaven from the house a full week prior to eating the Passover meal to insure that no leaven would be present when they ate their sacrificial lamb. Eating the meal of that Passover lamb, and spreading the blood of the lamb over the doorway of the house was what caused the death angel to “pass over” the Israelites homes as he moved through the land of Egypt. Sacrificing the Passover lamb was the means by which the Jews escaped the judgment of God. They were delivered from Egypt and the slaves emerged to a new life as the people of God! The ridding of the Jewish house of leaven prior to Passover became a symbol of moral purification, of having rid themselves of the sins of Egypt.

[Matthew 18:19] Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. [20] For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.

These verses are often quoted as a reminder of Jesus’ presence when we are praying. And it is certainly true that Jesus is present when Christians (even 2 or 3!) gather to pray.

But, in studying the Bible, it is always important to check the context. You’ve got to see what Jesus is talking about to see what He is saying! And He was not talking about His presence at a prayer meeting.

Let’s look closely at the immediately preceding context in which those two well-known verses occur.

Jesus teaches about how to deal with a sinning brother (vv. 15-18)

[Matthew 18:15] If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. [16] But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Jesus is lining out a progressive series of actions that are to be taken to call a brother (or a sister) to repentance.

First, there is to be a private encounter: *mano a mano*. You are to show your brother his fault. You hope and you pray that your brother “listens” - REALLY listens. The point of this get-together is that he admits to wrong-doing, confesses his sin - to you and to God. If that happens, praise the Lord! The matter is closed.

But if there is no “listening” there is a next step, and the next step ramps up the intensity. You are to take a friend or two from the church and visit your brother again. And again, you hope and pray that your brother will listen. That he will repent. If he does, all is well.

If the sinning brother still doesn’t repent, though, the broader community, the congregation, is to hear about it.

And if even bringing the brother before the church doesn't suffice to bring about repentance, then the man is to be regarded as an outsider (Jesus says "*as a Gentile and a tax collector*").

Now, this last comment doesn't mean that the church is to hate the unrepentant brother, for Jesus repeatedly loved on Gentiles and tax collectors. But he is to be excluded from the community of the church (which probably sounds reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 5).

Now, listen to what Jesus says as He concludes this teaching.

A binding decision when the church acts

[18] Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. [19] Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. [20] For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.

The living Lord Jesus Christ is present with the church when it dis-fellowships an unrepentant believer. His authority is invoked when such a decision is made.

That well-known comment, "*where two or three have gathered in My name*" was not made while Jesus was discussing prayer meetings, but church discipline.

So, when it comes to the theme of church discipline, Jesus started the ball rolling. Paul taught about it in 1 Corinthians 5. And, truth be told, the theme pops up repeatedly in the New Testament.

Other Pertinent Passages...

- Acts 5 - God actually took the lives of Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit. (not church discipline, but discipline, nonetheless)
- Romans 15 - Paul expressed confidence that the Christians in Rome were well equipped to admonish one another.
- Romans 16 - Paul urged the church to stop those who cause dissensions

- 1 Corinthians 11 - Paul told the Corinthians that God would discipline those who ate and drank at the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.
- 2 Corinthians 3 - Paul reminded the Corinthians that the purpose of discipline is, ultimately, repentance, restoration and forgiveness.
- Paul disciplined Barnabas and Simon Peter with a scathing rebuke for being guilty of hypocrisy. (Galatians 2)
- 2 Thessalonians 3 - Paul urged the church at Thessalonica to stay away from brethren who led unruly lives.
- 1 Timothy 5 - Paul told Timothy how to discipline Elders who were caught in sin.

Now this morning, we've seen how the 1st century church was to deal with a situation in which a church member was involved in unrepentant sin.

And since we believe that the Bible is the living Word of God, we believe that what was valid for the first century church is valid for us, too. And that applies to the issue of church discipline.

So how does Northwest Community Church, in 2010, apply the Bible's teaching about church discipline?

Discipline in the Church Today

Level One: Genuine Relationships

The first and best line of defense against sin is quality relationships among people in the church.

"Discipline" can and should occur before it ever approaches the strong action Paul told the church at Corinth to take.

Discipline of the softer variety occurs when Christians are engaged in frequent, genuine, loving interaction with each other. When that's happening, the church becomes a safe community where we are able to speak truth into each other's lives.

In an accepting environment, I'll be more likely to volunteer that I'm struggling with something. If you know that you are loved, you'll be more likely to admit to a friend that you've failed - and will be that much more likely to gain victory after the admission!

It is my hope and prayer that you are finding these kinds of relationships here at church. When we are, more and more, a safe place to be real about what is actually going on in our lives, we will become, more and more, a healing place.

Church discipline, at its most basic level, happens when we deal with each other genuinely, no masks, no pretending, no faking.

But, if you know that someone in the church has become involved in sinful behavior, it will eventually come to the point of your taking the initiative to speak to them about it.

Level Two: Passionate Exhortation

The second level of discipline is loving exhortation.

This is where you take a step toward your friend and lovingly confront her or him. This is not a condemning action. It is a loving action.

Your friend already knows that he or she is in the wrong. They may well have been hoping someone would have the courage to confront them!

They are sick of their involvement with pornography, their addiction to alcohol or drugs. They know that they should control their tongue, but can't seem to keep from angry outbursts, or gossip.

Your approach to your friend doesn't have to be a blast. It can be an even-handed, honest, loving, invitation to help. Point your friend to a recovery ministry (such as we offer here or one that is available elsewhere). Offer to walk with your friend on a healing path.

Church discipline's second level involves loving exhortation and rebuke from a friend in Christ when we are caught in sin.

If your friend admits his fault and turns from his sin, case closed. Mission accomplished. Praise the Lord!

But what happens if your brother or sister in Christ does not admit wrong-doing, defends actions that are clearly sinful, and refuses to repent?

Level Three: Loving Confrontation

This is where you, a faithful follower of Jesus, ramp up the intensity of your engagement with your friend and get with your friend and one or two others.

This meeting is not for the purpose of being mean. It is to affirm to the brother or sister the seriousness of continuing on a sinful path.

The meeting should be a frank and earnest conversation about the specific, problematic behavior, be it sexual immorality, gossip, dishonesty, addiction, or something else.

The meeting should call for the repentance of the brother in clear terms.

And if that brother or sister does not repent, but continues in sin, even defends the sin, then the matter is to be brought before the church.

Level Four: Sobering Dis-Fellowship

As Jesus and Paul both line out, the final step would be a decision by the congregation to remove the brother or sister from fellowship in the church.

This is a most sober step for a congregation to take.

It is the equivalent of *“delivering [a member] over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”*

It would involve removing a member from the membership roll. It would mean that this believer would not be welcomed at church worship services, church fellowship events, or church Bible studies or Sunday School classes.

And when a church - ours or another - exercises discipline to this extent, it does so with the authority of the Lord of the church, Jesus, who told us that He would be present whenever action of this sort was carried out by an assembly in His Name.