



Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

Lesson 21: Church Discipline: Dealing with Sin

INTRODUCTION

1. What do you think the average evangelical church attender would you do if they discovered that a member of their church was committing a sin so serious it would even shock non-Christians in your community? _____

In some ways, confronting sin in others' lives—what we've referred to as "corrective discipline"—is like surgery. It's painful. It takes a skillful hand. No one looks forward to it. Yet the health of the whole church requires it. And when we obey God and discipline one another in this way, it can bring great blessing for everyone involved.

MAIN IDEA

God calls us to lovingly confront and restore our fellow church members who are caught in sin. However, if the person doesn't repent even after being confronted by two or three others and then the whole church, the church is to exclude that person from its membership. If a professing Christian's sin is so serious that it renders his or her claim to be a Christian no longer believable, the church should exclude that person from their membership and not associate with him or her until it can observe the fruits of repentance. In this lesson, we are going to look at some passages that address these issues.

DIGGING IN

In Galatians 5, Paul points to the freedom we have in Christ and the power we have in the Spirit to obey God. In Galatians 6, he explains how we are to deal with each other's sin in the church.

Galatians 6:1–5

1. Do you think Paul's instructions here were just for one specific situation in the churches he was writing to, or are they general guidelines for the church's life? Explain. _____

2. Who does Paul say should do something when someone is caught in a transgression (v. 1)? _____

3. Read Galatians 5:16–25. According to Paul’s teaching earlier in Galatians, what does it mean to be “spiritual”? _____

4. What responsibility does Paul give to those who are spiritual (v. 1)? Why is this important for the health of the church? _____

5. In what spirit are we to restore those who sin (v. 1)? _____

6. What does Paul tell those who are restoring another to do for themselves (v. 1)? Why do you think that this kind of work could lead to temptation? _____

7. What does Paul instruct us to do for one another in verse 2? What do we accomplish by doing this (v. 2)? _____

8. Do you think that Paul’s teaching in this passage means that we have to rebuke someone every time they ever commit a sin? Why or why not? (See 1 Pet. 4:8.) _____

9. What are some obstacles that get in the way of our caring for one another in this way? By God’s grace, how can you seek to overcome them? Give specific examples.

In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches us to become like children in order to enter God’s kingdom (vv. 1–6), to not cause any others in the church to sin (vv. 7–9), and to rejoice with God over those who repent of sin (vv. 10–14). In verse 15, he tells us how to respond if a fellow church member sins against us.

Matthew 18:15–20

1. How should we respond when a fellow Christian sins against us (v. 15)?

2. What's the goal of this confrontation (v. 15)?

3. What would it mean for the person to “listen to you” (v. 15)? How should you treat someone who repents of their sin when you confront them?

4. What does Jesus say we are to do if the person does not listen and repent (v. 16)?

5. What kind of people do you think you should involve at this stage in the process?

6. What does Jesus say to do if the person does not listen to the two or three others you bring along with you (v. 17)?

7. In verse 17, Jesus says, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church...”—what does this teach us about what the church is to do in this situation?

8. What does Jesus say the church is to do if the person does not listen even to the church (v. 17)?

9. What does this teach us about who has the final responsibility in matters of church discipline?

Traditionally, this step in the process of church discipline has been called “excommunication”. Since communion, or the Lord’s Supper, is the visible sign of someone’s ongoing participation in the fellowship and membership of the church, to be excluded from membership is to be excluded from communion.

Thus, in a situation in which an individual does not repent after being confronted privately, by two or three others, and by the whole church, Jesus instructs the church to exclude that person from the membership and fellowship of the church. They are no longer to regard the individual as a brother or sister, but as an outsider.

10. After an unrepentant individual has been excluded from the church, what should you do if the person contacts you and wants to hang out? _____

11. Do you think Jesus means for us to go through this process for any sin anyone ever commits? _____

The point of Jesus’s teaching in this passage is not that we must be perfect or else we’ll be kicked out of the church, but that we must continually repent of sin. Even as Christians, we still sin in many ways (James 3:2)—the question is, what do we do about it?

After addressing the Corinthians’ division-causing attitudes toward church leaders in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, in chapter 5 Paul takes on a massive moral failure on the part of the whole church.

1 Corinthians 5:1–13

1. What does Paul tell the Corinthians to do about this situation (vv. 2–5)? _____

2. With regard to the immoral man, what’s the goal of this act of church discipline (v. 5)? _____

What does Paul mean when he commands the church to “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh”? Simply that in being put out of the church’s fellowship, the man would be, as it were, back in Satan’s kingdom, the sphere where Satan rules. And the goal of this exclusion, as we’ve seen, is that this judgment by the church would cause the man to come to his senses, repent of his sin, and show himself to be a genuine disciple of Christ in the end.

What should this look like practically?

- It means the individual should be removed from the church’s membership and instructed not to partake in the Lord’s Supper.
- It also means that members of the church should not continue to have Christian fellowship with this individual or interact with them in a casual, friendly way.

In these passages, there are a number of reasons for why the church should exclude from its membership someone who claims to be a Christian but lives in continual unrepentant sin.

First, it's good for the person who is excluded. Someone who claims to be a Christian but lives in immorality is deceiving themselves. They need a loud, clear reminder that those who live in that way will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10). It is a loving act, therefore, to exclude such an individual from the church in the hope that it will lead them to repentance.

Second, it's good for the church. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 5:6, sin is like leaven, or yeast: it keeps spreading until it permeates the whole church. In order for the church to be pure and holy as God calls it to be, the church must cut off someone whose life is characterized by sin.

Third, it's good for the world. How? Because a church that is marked by godliness portrays a vivid, compelling picture of the gospel to the world. But a church that is filled with people who live just like the world broadcasts the lie that God isn't holy, that he doesn't care about how we live, and that the good news about Jesus doesn't really have power to transform our lives. Christians bear God's name before the world, so our conduct must reflect God's character, not the ways of this world.

Remember, the goal in church discipline is never exclusion, but repentance and restoration!