

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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When Pride Chokes Out Repentance

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:4-8)

My decision to write on the topic of the New Testament church grew out of lingering observations that many in today's Christian culture, including a growing number within my own fellowship, have all but excluded any serious study of the New Testament's teaching on the doctrine of the church from their personal faith. My focus attempts to explore New Testament teaching on various points that seem to be most neglected, ignored, or even contradicted in our day. Our present study deals with what is often referred to as "Church discipline." I fear that a more accurate description would be "Failed discipleship." One of the most painful decisions a church ever faces is to realize that a believer who became a part of a church and seemed full of zeal and love grows cold and drifts away, or, far worse, slips into some sinful habit that brings dishonor onto the Lord and His church.

As I approach 1 Corinthians 5, I do so fully knowing that the idea of "Church discipline" has been abused and misused on occasion. I have no respect for any abuse of Biblical teaching. I've spent many hours with wounded sheep whose wounds were inflicted by "Sheep abusing" pastors or other people in the church. Given Jesus' powerful and consistent teaching on His requirement that His children always treat each other with kind grace and tender love, I admittedly must guard my own emotions not to be too harsh against a "Sheep abuser." However, every believer should respect Jesus' words regarding His own judgment against anyone who offends one of His little ones, a mill stone tied to the neck and the person cast into the sea. It is not my divine assignment to inflict punishment onto sheep abusers. The Lord reserves that judgment for Himself, and it is indeed a fearful judgment.

Often when this topic comes up for discussion someone will report hearing about a past case in which anger or some other sinful motive drove a failed church to strike out against a likely failed member. As the reasoning goes, since that error occurred, we must wholly ignore any form of church discipline whatever. This thinking exemplifies the

logical fallacy, "Excluded middle" formerly called "Horns of dilemma." "A" is an extreme and highly objectionable idea. "B" is the mirror opposite and is typically depicted as the ideal. Either you must agree with my ideal view, or you hold to the highly objectionable "A" proposition. The fallacy is superficial and utterly false. There are seldom only two ways of thinking about any particular idea. Often the balanced and reasonable solution lies in the "Excluded" middle ground, not in either of the two extremes. Because someone teaches that salvation is by human works, are we therefore to forever avoid preaching on salvation by grace at all? This question highlights the illogical falseness of the fallacy. The correct answer in this case is not to imitate any past abuse, as well as not to wholly ignore Scripture's teaching on the question. The right course is to study Scripture to learn what Scripture teaches, and to prayerfully seek to follow Scripture's teaching.

Like others, I have witnessed excessive abuses in the name of "Church discipline." And like many of them, I reject these excesses as fully as I reject a blind acceptance of sin similar to the situation that Paul confronted in First Corinthians 5. Let us prayerfully **seek Scripture's guiding principles alone.**

We will seek to study this chapter with the intent of rejecting both the abusive excesses that have at times occurred in the name of godliness and righteous "Discipline," as well as the conscious and willing ignorance and neglect of this clear Biblical teaching. As we study this chapter, we should keep a vital principle in mind. Our choosing to ignore or to contradict a Bible teaching means that we elevate our personal opinion above the teaching of Scripture. Are any of us that spiritual or enlightened? No! In fact, the conscious decision to ignore or to contradict Scripture is the opposite course to spirituality or true enlightenment. It is the personification of spiritual rebellion and sinful pride, pride that magnifies our personal opinion above the light and authority of Scripture. Has the Holy Spirit appointed any of us in our day to correct His revealed and preserved word in Scripture? No, a

thousand times no. A common attitude that rejects 1 Corinthians 5 and Scripture's teaching on correct church discipline reasons, "I am a sinner, so I can never agree with a church voting to put a sinning member out." Think about the comment. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, not based on vacuous emotions, Paul described himself as the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), so Paul, who directed the Corinthian Church to take this action was indisputably a sinner. Despite himself being a sinner, Paul directed the Corinthian Church in quite specific terms to take certain steps regarding this man who had so egregiously and in public dishonored the Lord and the Lord's church. Secondly, there is no church described or mentioned in it than the Corinthian Church. Would any sensible, thinking Bible student suggest that the Corinthian Church was above sin? Never! Therefore, the argument posited is wholly invalid. It contradicts the facts revealed in the New Testament regarding Paul, the Corinthian Church, and definitely the man whose sin brought this issue to the forefront of Paul's letter to this church. Faulty arguments are no grounds for ignoring Scripture, much less openly contradicting Scripture. If we so magnify our private personal opinions over Scripture in one point, I suggest that we shall soon find other areas in which we feel justified to follow our personal opinion over Scripture. Then where is the real authority and integrity of Scripture? Why not just write our own Bible and create our own fantasy religion. In following our opinion over Scripture, we have already started the process. For the believer who seeks to please the Lord, Scripture rules in all things, or in fact it rules not at all.

Let's examine this chapter to determine how much information we can gain regarding the whole situation.

1. Verse 1. A member of the Corinthian Church had engaged in a sinful affair with a woman who was apparently either his mother or his step-mother. That Paul uses the term "*his father's wife*" leads me to believe that the woman was his step-mother. Paul defines the dark character of this sin quite clearly. Even Gentile non-Christian cultures frowned on such conduct.
2. Verse 2, "*And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.*" Rather than show disapproval or alarm at the sin of this man, the Corinthian Church apparently felt a smug pride that they were so forgiving and full of grace that they could accept and tolerate even this man and his sin. For Paul, the question was not a matter of forgiveness or toleration of the sin, but the disgrace that sin brought upon the Lord and upon the church. According to the clear and simple words of the chapter, both the man and

the church had forsaken the Lord and fallen into sinful, prideful error.

3. I observe further in Verse 2 that Paul's description of expected and acceptable behavior by the church as she faced this situation started with grief, "*And ye...have not rather mourned...*" Whenever someone voices their objection to any form of church discipline, they often refer to some past occasion when a church, controlled by an ungodly spirit, applied its disciplinary power with anger or with a certain twisted glee to finally "Get rid" of that undesirable person. We cannot ignore the obvious point that Paul makes here. To face the necessity to deal with this man and his sin should be a matter of grief, of mourning, to the church. I have often observed the obvious relative to this point. When public and egregious sin occurs in a church today, the reality of the situation cries out that failure has invaded the church culture and the individual's life who fell into the sin. Do not ignore the point; "Discipline" and "Discipleship" come from the same basic word. When a church is faced with the necessity of discipline, it does so with the sad awareness that "Discipleship" has failed, either in the sinning member's life, the church's culture that should constantly nudge its people to live the life of true "Discipleship," or both. Such failure is a matter for deep spiritual grief, never glee or celebration, or vengeful anger, itself a grievous sin against the Lord. A church that approaches a disciplinary issue with any mindset other than profound grief fails her divine assignment and grieves the Lord by her conduct. Angry discipline never honors the Lord and never recovers the erring sinner. The church should mourn the failure of the erring member, as well as her own failure to avoid the sin that caused the spiritual wound. Above all, the church's specifically directed action in this chapter had at least two major objectives; 1) to prevent the church's sinful reputation both in the community and before the Lord, and 2) to urge the sinning member to repentance.
4. Given Paul's language throughout this chapter, we cannot deny that some form of separation was required by his inspired counsel to the Corinthian Church. Consider these terms; "*...deliver such an one unto Satan,*" "*Purge out therefore the old leaven.*" And the closing note of the chapter underscores the specific action that the Holy Spirit directed Paul to convey to the Corinthian Church. "*Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.*" I suggest that Paul's teaching in verses 9-11, concluding with the counsel, "*...with such a one no not to eat,*" refers to eating the Communion in the church, not to sitting down with the erring member over a hamburger at McDonald's. This view follows the context far better than the

unrelated idea of a common meal. See verses 6-8 for the reference to Passover, the religious "Meal" that celebrated symbolic redemption in the Old Testament as Communion celebrates our real redemption in the New Testament.

5. I further note that Paul wrote these words to the whole church at Corinth, not to her pastor, to her deacons, or to some fantasy ruling class in the church. The error occurred in the church, and the whole church is directed to take the prescribed action.
6. We must go beyond the context of this chapter, but I believe Paul specifically references this situation in his second letter to the Corinthian Church. *"Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. (2 Corinthians 2:6-8)* In all the errors that Paul addressed in First Corinthians, this error alone involved only one man. And in all of Paul's follow-up in Second Corinthians, this passage alone deals with the restoration of only one man. I suggest that Paul was writing about this situation and this same man in this passage. The action to be taken in 1 Corinthians 5 was indeed intended to be a form of "Punishment," albeit inflicted in mourning and with love and with the strong and prayerful desire that it produce repentance and restoration, not revenge. Clearly in some form or another, the Corinthian Church maintained contact with this erring man and worked to encourage him to repent and to find healing from his sin. Otherwise how would they know so much about the man's repentance? Supposedly 2 Corinthians was written around 18 months after 1 Corinthians. Within less than two years in this case, both the church at Corinth and even Paul at his remote distance became aware of the man's grief over his sin and his repentance. As soon as this knowledge surfaced, Paul urged the church to take the initiative and restore this man with love and forgiveness. In this course of action, the Lord's church follows the Lord's own conduct, apply chastening or some form of loving but stern disapproval of the sin, and, in the form of a loving gracious family, immediately upon indication that the man repented, to reach out to him with loving restoration. Although temporary separation is directed in this passage, the ultimate objective of Biblical "Church discipline" is not to cut someone off or make him pay for his misdeeds, but to lovingly nudge him to repentance and restoration.
7. Given that Paul used the analogy of a human body to describe the church in 1 Corinthians 12, let's apply that symbol to this passage. Suppose you discover a painful growth on your

right arm. For a while you may try to ignore it and hope it will simply resolve itself and go away, or you may apply "Home remedies," hoping they will heal the problem. Instead, it grows and becomes increasingly painful. You eventually go to your doctor for help. The doctor examines your arm, orders some tests, and tells you to come back next week when the test results are known. Next week you walk into his office for the news. By the look on your doctor's face, you know the news is not good. He explains the tests to you, tells you what is wrong, and then you hear words you never wanted to hear, "The only remedy is amputation. If we do not amputate your arm, this disease will spread, and you will die." What is your reaction? Alarm and grief! Do you even remotely think about celebrating? No! Several members of my family are presently facing a similar situation. Because of a genetic mutation, they must either have their thyroid removed or risk having an aggressive life-threatening form of thyroid cancer. I can tell you from the front line. There is no celebration in our family at the moment. We are thankful that this mutation was discovered and that we can take steps to avoid this cancer. However, the process of securing this avoidance of cancer is painful and significant. We approach it with grief and concern. A church following Paul's simple and clear directions in this chapter must deal similarly with occasions when godly "Discipleship" fails, and a member strays so deeply into public and disgraceful sin as to require such extreme action from the church. You do not ask your doctor to amputate your arm because you got a rose thorn in your finger. You only amputate in the most extreme case when you face the danger of loss of life. A church should never practice overly aggressive discipline, exclusion, against every sin of every member. Given the example of this lesson, it is my personal belief that such action is appropriate only when the sin itself is so great and becomes public knowledge, so that the reputation of the church—and the Lord—is destroyed or sadly damaged by the church's tolerance of the person and the sin. In lesser cases, personal attention and loving exhortation should seek to extract the little thorns and heal the scratches of life in the church body of believers. This is the only example in the New Testament that deals in such detail with the problem. Obviously, it was not a common practice to be applied to every little infraction or sin in a member. It is my view that the action required by Paul in this chapter is appropriate only when two conditions exist; 1) the sin is so blatant and so contradictory to Biblical Christian morality as to bring severe disgrace onto the whole church and onto the Lord, and 2) the sin is public, that is, known by people inside and

outside the church, so that the church's reputation is in jeopardy.

8. In the case of a diseased arm or other body part, restoration of that part is not feasible. However in the case of the Lord's church, the primary goal should be the prayerful longing for restoration of the erring member. And 2 Corinthians 2 reminds us that such restoration can occur. Obviously in this case, the New Testament example for us in similar cases, the church's conduct toward the man who so sinned was such that he longed for restoration to their fellowship—and to the Lord's fellowship, for such sins always break fellowship with the Lord.
9. My last point should go without saying, but it is sometimes needed. The sinning member was part of the Corinthian Church. Paul wrote the corrective instructions to the Corinthian Church, not to Ephesus or another church. And he also wrote the restorative directive to the Corinthian Church alone, not to Ephesus or another church. One church has no Biblical authority to invade another church's membership and attempt to impose its wishes onto that church. Membership and discipline, as well as restoration and forgiveness, all belong to the one church of which the sinning member is a member.

This situation lays a heavy burden indeed on a church, and well it should. Whatever a church finds appropriate to do in the case of a sinning member whose sin has become shameful public knowledge should be done so that even the sinning member knows the depth of the church's love for him/her and sees the grief felt by the church for his/her loss and failure of faith. The objective should be so clear as to leave no question in anyone's mind that the strongest desire in the church is restoration, not permanent amputation.

Perhaps an Old Testament law might serve to make the needed point. When I first started reading the Bible, I encountered the many "Quarantines" in the Law of Moses regarding various diseases or events in a person's life. Touching a dead body required washing and a brief quarantine of the person from interacting with others in the tribe. Illnesses or infections required similar isolation of the ill or affected person. My first thought was that this quarantine was some form of punishment, and I simply could not understand the practice or even make sense of it. However, over time a different thought came to mind. The purpose of the quarantine had nothing whatever to do with punishing the affected member of the tribe. God gave these rules to promote sound health, and specifically to prevent the spreading of possible infectious diseases throughout the people. Though given by the Lord some fifteen hundred years before Jesus came, this practice has been repeatedly affirmed by medical research and

practice over the last hundred years. Think. It took human medical research literally thousands of years to learn what God knew and taught His people over three thousand years ago! God's people were the glorious beneficiaries of His wise grace long centuries before man discovered this information. Perhaps if we as His people today followed His teachings in Scripture instead of convincing ourselves that Scripture is wrong and our personal, emotional ideas are better than Scripture, we would likewise find the surprising blessings of the Lord in our lives and in our churches. As the Lord's people, and especially as a people who hope to be part of His church, we should always think of ourselves as being in the healing, helping business toward our brothers and sisters; never in the slashing demolition business.

If we follow this Biblical teaching, perhaps we might save more erring sheep. Our present practice, observable in many churches of diverse fellowships or denominations, of ignoring sin and hoping it will self-correct, has miserably failed. If what we do has failed, why not do what the Lord teaches us to do in Scripture—and why not do it in the spirit of mourning that the Lord teaches in Scripture? Do you think? Perhaps His way just might work a lot better than our demonstrably failed ways.

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Worship service each Sunday
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10:30 A. M.
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