

I. Read II Corinthians 2:1-11

- A. Read I Corinthians 5:1-13 as background for Paul's concern expressed in II Corinthians 2. A man had been involved in gross immorality. It was notorious (publicly known). Paul had encouraged the Corinthians to discipline him by excluding him from the fellowship of the church. Now he has evidently repented. Yet the Corinthians, who may have been reluctant to discipline him initially, refuse to forgive him. What does Paul give as the reason the Corinthians ought to forgive him? (v 6-7)

Note to teachers: There are some who question whether or not Paul is writing about the same man and sin in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Complicating this is the possibility of another letter Paul may have written to the Corinthians (2:4) and an apparent discontinuity between chapters 10-13 with chapters 1-9. An additional factor is the recognition that Paul has been personally offended, perhaps by the sinner in question, but has forgiven him. It is the opinion of the pastor that Paul is writing primarily about the manner in which the church has dealt with and should deal with a particular man and the same sin. Consideration regarding lost letters, discontinuity of later text, etc. should not impact this since this is the most straightforward way of understanding Paul's intent.

The disciplinary process worked—the man repented and now seeks re-admittance to the church. Paul fears their refusal to do so might actually embitter him, driving him away from the church forever.

Why do you suppose the Corinthians might have been taking this sort of hard line against the penitent man?

Self-righteousness and pride. Many folks think they would *never commit that particular sin or do thus and so*. Of course, no one can say what they would or wouldn't do definitively until faced with a particular set of circumstances, pressures, or temptations.

- B. Read Galatians 6:1-2 and explain how the attitude toward a brother caught up in sin described in the passage contrasts with the attitude of the Corinthians.
First of all, they are told in Gal. 6:2 to bear one another's burdens. To do this, one must empathize to some degree with others. It is also made clear that the discipline described in Galatians is motivated by love. The Corinthians' first inclination was to ignore the sin, demonstrating they did not really care about the man. The discipline described in Galatians is offered in utter humility (*there but for the grace of God go I*). The approach to the one who has stumbled into sin is to be made "in a spirit of gentleness" (NAS). One can only imagine what spirit the Corinthians demonstrated once they finally applied the discipline of the church to the man.
- C. It is important to note that Paul (in II Corinthians 2) *is not* rebuking them for applying discipline initially. He is admonishing them to apply it wisely and compassionately, which in this case means forgiving the man and re-admitting him into the fellowship of the church. The reformers of the 16th and 17th century believed that proper discipline was one of the marks of the true church. Recall that in the Roman Catholic Church of that time, immorality among the clergy and particularly in Rome was rampant. Why do you suppose churches in our day are reluctant to apply discipline when needed?

Note: "... Luther...was in Rome in the year 1511, being then an ardent young man of twenty-eight. His own words describe his emotion and the eager expectancy that

*thrilled him as he gazed upon the Eternal City. Falling down on his knees he cried aloud: 'I greet thee, Holy Rome, thrice holy from the blood of the martyrs that has been shed in thee!' But presently his dreams were rudely shattered. He found in Rome not the city of his devout and ardent hopes but a cesspool of corruption. He was impressed and appalled. As he afterwards said, 'I would not for a hundred thousand florins have missed seeing Rome. If I had not seen it myself, I might have been troubled lest I had been unjust to the Pope.' Thrilled with eager expectations he had entered the city: he departed from it a sadly disillusioned man. 'Adieu! Rome,' he said, 'let all who would live a holy life depart from Rome. Everything is permitted in Rome except to be an honest man.' The scales had fallen from his eyes, though we must not take too literally Lindsay's rhetorical statement that he went to Rome 'a mediaeval theologian; he came back a Protestant.' It is sufficient to say that Luther's visit to Rome made an impression on him that he never forgot." (William Stevenson in *The Story of the Reformation*)*

There undoubtedly are many reasons. People in our contemporary culture don't like to be held accountable for their behavior (consider recent politicians), so for a church to take a firm stand regarding discipline would be extremely unpopular. Also, discipline can only be effective in the context of a loving community of believers. When there is no real sense of community (mutual love and accountability) in the church, any discipline seems harsh. Some churches simply don't care what the bible says about discipline or anything else for that matter. They make up their own rules. Further, most churches know that, should they excommunicate someone, that person could simply go down the street and be accepted by another church with open arms. Hence discipline (exclusion) may not be an effective means of bringing a sinner to repentance. There is no question that even when folks claim to believe in discipline, they don't like when it is their ox that is getting gored. People chaff at church discipline so the likelihood that it will be well received in our day is remote.

- D. What should the two-fold *purpose* of discipline within the church be?
(1) To maintain the purity, peace, and reputation of the church and (2) to restore a believer who has stumbled into sin back into fellowship with God and with the church. In other words, both the need of the church collectively and the need of the individual believer ought to be considered. Both have in view the glory of God.

Should discipline be punitive? (a means of punishment)

No, it should be restorative and positive in purpose. (Recall Gal. 6:1-2.) Discipline ought to be administered as a tender and loving mother might discipline a child.

- E. Read Matthew 18:15-20 and describe the proper steps of biblical discipline within the church.

Step 1:

The one aware of the sin shall go in private to the man overcome by sin and confront him, asking him to repent.

(If he repents, it need go no further. If he doesn't, go to Step 2)

Step 2:

The initial person should take one or two others and repeat the process.

(If he repents, it need go no further. If he doesn't, go to Step 3)

Step 3:

The initial person and the witnesses take the matter to the church, typically an elder. The elder (and perhaps witnesses) then confront the man, explaining the gravity of the situation, calling him to repent forsake his sin.

(If he repents, it need go no further. If he doesn't, go to Step 4)

Step 4:

The session is informed and personally meets with the accused. The session or leaders of the church may apply some sort of restorative measures at this point, which may include suspension from the sacraments, mandatory counseling, excommunication, or whatever measures the elders deem best.

Step 5:

If the process is successful, the repentant man is restored and assured of forgiveness. The sin is forgotten, yet the session would be mindful of the need to care for the penitent brother and help him avoid similar temptations.

Note to teachers: There could be other variables involved, depending on circumstances. Public confession is not necessary in the majority of instances and may make restoration more difficult. This may be determined by whether or not the sin is publicly known (notorious) or not. Also, in instances of theft or fraud, monetary restitution may be required. Finally, it should always be kept in mind that discipline should be applied at the lowest level possible and with the least amount of people knowing, assuming the sin is not notorious. If the goal is restoration, this is best accomplished with the use of discretion, unless the sin's notoriety makes discretion (privacy) impossible.

- F. Is there a *proactive preliminary* step in church discipline which may reduce the instances in which discipline is necessary?

Yes, the proper teaching and preaching of the Word of God (instruction). The genuine believer hears the truth, and God the Holy Spirit will convict through the Word of God (Psalm 119:11). Many who are on the verge of stumbling are warned, encouraged, and strengthened through biblical instruction. Yet, some with stubborn hearts and stiff necks may choose to sin, hence the need of the steps described above.

- G. What are some *isms* in our contemporary culture that militate against even the mildest form of accountability in churches?

Subjectivism, relativism, hyper-individualism, egalitarianism.

Note to teachers: Be prepared to define the terms above for your class.

- H. Is there a rule of thumb that believers who take the Word of God seriously could apply to each and every circumstance in which the application of discipline might be considered?

Yes, it's called the Golden Rule! Treat others as you would want to be treated in the same circumstances, while yet remaining within the clear parameters of Scripture.

- I. In II Corinthians 2:11, Paul mentions the "schemes" of Satan. What does he mean?

Satan is the accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:10). He is more than capable of using the bible to justify his accusations (Matt. 4:3-10). This means that believers should be very careful, even reluctant, to believe an accusation and even more reluctant to repeat it to another, lest it be used by Satan to damage another's reputation. Make no mistake about it, Satan is at war with believers and the Church. He is especially anxious to destroy a man's fruitful ministry. Hence, the leaders of a growing church are likely to be the target of all manner of accusations. This means that wise leaders should be careful not to be put in compromising circumstances in so far as they are able. It also means that other believers should not believe every accusation they hear. When listening to such negative talk, one should inhale deeply and check out the air for sulphurous fumes! If what you smell stinks, it's probably coming from the pit!