

Church discipline is a very difficult subject. If there are no small groups that study the Scriptures together, most people are not involved in others' lives. Leaders often avoid dealing with sinful behavior unless it is among the leadership. And in many cases, a church's goal is increasing the number of attendees regardless of their behavior. But most churches are small and church leaders are aware of much of the behavior within the congregation. Under what circumstances are the elders expected to point out sinful behavior? Are the elders supposed to be behavior police checking on and exposing sin of every member?

The New Testament gives us several cases in which public exposure and punishment are necessary. We are beginning a section of this letter that deals with issues that are to be publicly addressed. The first we have been studying for the last month, division (1:10<sup>i</sup>). The factions that were formed around preferred leaders were destroying the unity of the church. This letter would have been read to the whole congregation. Paul made a firm demands. Don't boast in man (3:21<sup>ii</sup>)! We should only boast in the Lord (1:31<sup>iii</sup>). He pointed out how worldly and immature their divisive behavior was (3:1<sup>iv</sup>).

The second issue that required public church discipline was a sin that became known to the whole congregation that was so egregious that even the unbelievers would have been shocked by it (1 Corinthians 5:1<sup>v</sup>). We will get to that next week.

A third issue that requires public discipline is false teaching. If someone is spreading an unbiblical teaching that is leading people away from the truth, it needs to be addressed (2 Peter 2:1<sup>vi</sup>). In every case the goal is reconciliation and restoration (Galatians 6:1<sup>vii</sup>). Over the years we have had a few of these cases. We try to address the issue without calling out the individual unless it continues.

In most cases we speak with the individual in private, and if they are repentant all is well. But if the behavior continues or they justify their sin, that is another matter. Even then, if the congregation is for the most part unaware, we try to deal with it privately. **The goal of the elders is your spiritual growth.** We are aware of how the enemy can bring condemnation (Romans 8:1<sup>viii</sup>). I always find it amazing that as issues arise the passage for the sermon we happen to have come to addresses it. Who could coordinate that but God? We all are disciplined by the Holy Spirit because we are God's children (Hebrews 12:6<sup>ix</sup>). He does most of the correcting that is needed. We are more likely to receive it in that manner, though loving correction can also come from others in the church.

Today's passage addresses the flock in Corinth as the spiritual children of the Apostle Paul. He led them to Christ. He established the church with a year and a half of teaching and preaching (Acts 18:11<sup>x</sup>). They should have honored Paul for his investment in their lives and held him in esteem for the role God had given him (1 Thessalonians 5:13<sup>xi</sup>). But some were apparently downplaying his authority and speaking against him and perhaps against some of the things that Paul taught.

*<sup>14</sup> I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.* 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 What Paul had just written was some stinging irony of how worldly the Corinthians were behaving. While professing themselves to be wise, they were acting foolishly (4:10<sup>xii</sup>). While thinking they were so mature, their

immaturity was on full display. While the apostles laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel, the Corinthians were trying to fit in with the world. But Paul goes on to explain that this bold spiritual slap in the face is not to shame them. Instead, it is meant to be an admonishment to the spiritual children he loves. Like a father wanting the best for his children, he is pointing them in the right way. Later in the letter he *will* shame them for behavior that is inexcusable (6:4-6<sup>xiii</sup>; 15:34<sup>xiv</sup>). It is one thing to be spiritually immature and another to blatantly excuse what is obviously sinful behavior.

*<sup>15</sup> For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.* 1 Corinthians 4:15 Paul is reminding them of the fatherly relationship he has with them. Who led you to Christ? Don't you have a tender heart toward that person? In the Greek text we read that "even though they had ten thousand guardians..." A guardian was like a nanny who oversaw a child and saw to their education. Paul is comparing the teachers they have had to that household position. But a guardian was not the father. The guardian was to see that the child became like the father. Now, that is not always the case today because we are not led to faith by someone whom God appointed to be an apostle. But if the person who led you to faith has continued to mature and follow Jesus with their whole heart, then it is just as applicable, with a caveat I will explain in the next verse.

*<sup>16</sup> I urge you, then, be imitators of me.* 1 Corinthians 4:16 For some reason the ESV left off starting this verse with "therefore" which is found in most manuscripts. Because Paul is their spiritual father, therefore, they should imitate him. In the pre-industrial era, boys almost always followed their father's trade. In the Roman world, the child was to grow up to be like their father in almost every way. Certainly, Paul is not saying that they are to be apostles and travel to unreached areas to plant churches, but rather to imitate his zeal for Jesus and his reliance on the power of the cross (2:2<sup>xv</sup>).

He repeats this in the second letter to the Corinthians (11:1). *Follow of me as I follow Christ.* That is the caveat: *as I follow Christ.* He had set an example while he was among them of living to follow Jesus. **Dare we ask the same of others?** Let that sit for a moment. Would you ask people to follow you as you follow Christ? We certainly should live in such a way that we could ask the same. But are there habits in your life that you would not wish others to follow? That tells us we should end those habits. I believe we disciple people more by our example than our words. Would you want someone you lead to Christ to live with you and see your way of life as an example to follow? If not, there are things you need to change.

I had to deal with this when the Lord told me to have Michael move in with us. I had to back off on how much news I watched, because I didn't want him to follow that example. I read more because I wanted him to read more. I made sure my prayers together with him even at meals were from the heart and not just routine for the same reason. What would you change if a new believer came to live with you and learn of the Christian life from you? Is the Holy Spirit bringing things to mind? Then why not begin now? That is the gentle correction of the Holy Spirit from our heavenly Father who wants to bless us with being more like Him.

*<sup>17</sup> That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.* 1

Corinthians 4:17 When Paul couldn't go, he sent Timothy to keep the church on track with Paul's teaching and his way of life in Christ. Just what was Paul's example? We can glean it from his letters.

Paul obeyed God's call to be a missionary to the Gentiles, though he was steeped in Jewish culture. He reasoned with the Jews until they would reject him (Acts 17:2<sup>xvi</sup>; 18:4<sup>xvii</sup>). As we saw in the preceding verses, he was willing to be a fool for Christ, weak, held in disrepute, hungry, poorly dressed, buffeted, and homeless. When there was no support from churches, he kept on serving by laboring with his own hands to support his mission. When reviled he blessed, persecuted he endured, and when slandered he entreated (4:10-13<sup>xviii</sup>).

He taught in demonstration of the power of the Spirit, not relying on man's wisdom or eloquence (2:4<sup>xix</sup>). He knew the Word of God and continued to study it (2 Timothy 4:13<sup>xx</sup>). His heart was burdened to see the churches mature (Colossians 1:28<sup>xxi</sup>). He exhorted them to hold fast to the Word of life, and he knew if they didn't, his efforts were in vain (Philippians 2:16<sup>xxii</sup>). He kept his body in subjection and ran all out to win the prize (9:24-27<sup>xxiii</sup>). He felt the daily anxiety for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:28, 29<sup>xxiv</sup>). He did not let affliction stop him but relied on the grace of God (2 Corinthians 12:9<sup>xxv</sup>). Foremost in his mind was Jesus crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2<sup>xxvi</sup>).

While many of those things were unique to his calling, the obedience and passion are for *all* to follow. How are we doing following that example? We aren't called to follow his apostolic ministry, but we are called to be dedicated, sold out, 100% in, focused on Jesus and our relationship with Him. We are called to what is perhaps Paul's defining declaration, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me*" Galatians 2:20a! We are called to live for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31<sup>xxvii</sup>). Paul's way of life was to be dead to self and alive in Christ while following the Holy Spirit's leading.

*There are two stunning elements in this commission (in verse 17). First, Paul is not sending Timothy simply to lay out doctrine, but to remind the Corinthians of Paul's "way of life in Christ Jesus." Biblical Christianity embraces both creed and conduct, both belief and behavior. Sometimes the elementary truths of Scripture are not understood or believed, and it is necessary to go over the basics again. Here, however, Paul gives the impression that the biggest problem with the Corinthians is that they are not living up to what they know. Judging by these first four chapters of his epistle to them, many of the Corinthians were not even making the connections between what they believed and how they should live. They would be the first to insist that Jesus died for their sins and rose again, but they could not grasp how this historical reality, this supreme moment in God's redemptive purposes, not only achieved their salvation but must shape the way they live. So Paul sends Timothy to remind his readers of his "way of life"—a way of life that agrees with what Paul teaches.*<sup>xxviii</sup>

This is why preachers add application to doctrine. If we just have a head full of lessons without being challenged to live out what we know by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, then we will always be a poor witness of Christian life. Already in this sermon I have given you the application of changing habits or routines that you would not want a new believer to follow. That is application, and it is as essential as the doctrine

(James 1:22<sup>xxix</sup>). That is why Paul tells the Corinthians that Timothy is going to remind them of his way of life.

Are we living in pursuit of holiness, or are we just satisfied that Jesus credits us with His holiness? He credits you with His holiness so that by His life in you, you may live out that holiness (1 Peter 1:16<sup>xxx</sup>). May the Lord help us not be complacent with what has been done for us so that we turn from our pursuit of holiness. Become that example you can invite others to follow. It is not just a routine of rising to a time of devotions and prayer, though that is certainly a place to start. It is living to respond to all of life from the life of Christ in us (Matthew 16:24<sup>xxxi</sup>).

Verse 17 also tells us that the teaching was consistent throughout the churches. They all believed the same teaching. What was revealed to Paul is the same as the Apostles' doctrine. Bible believing churches have the same core beliefs in who Jesus is and what He has done for us. If they do not share those core beliefs, they are not the church and bride of Jesus Christ.

*<sup>18</sup> Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.* 1 Corinthians 4:18 Paul is defining the problem for us. There is a segment of the church Corinth that was arrogant. They taught something they know Paul would disapprove of “*as though I were not coming to you.*” In other words, they know their teaching is different from what they received during that year and a half Paul was with them. It is probably something about words of wisdom that Paul addressed earlier. It may be their eloquent way of speaking or some insight they claim to have received from the Spirit. Whatever it was, if they knew Paul was coming, they would wait until he left to start teaching it. That means they know they are contradicting their spiritual father who was appointed by God as an apostle!

*<sup>19</sup> But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.* 1 Corinthians 4:19 Paul knows that the Lord sends us in His time. He agrees with James that we cannot say exactly what tomorrow will hold for us (James 4:15,16<sup>xxxii</sup>). We are dependent on the Lord's will. But he knows that in God's time he will go there and find out exactly what this arrogant teaching is all about and whether it has the power to transform lives (1:17<sup>xxxiii</sup>). That is the power of the true gospel. When we stray from it, lives change very little. But when the gospel of grace takes hold of a heart, when we truly realize we are called out of darkness and into the light, because Jesus paid our sin debt on the cross, the worst of sinners becomes a saint (2 Corinthians 5:17<sup>xxxiv</sup>).

There are all kinds of teachings that can change behavior, but only the gospel of Jesus changes the heart from self-seeking to living for the glory of God. That is the power of the gospel. That is what turned Paul from being a Christian killer to an apostle of Jesus Christ. When Paul arrives, he will ask them about the lives that have been changed. Paul can point to most of the church of Corinth as the effect of the power he proclaimed. What can they point to that shows the power of what they proclaim? Charisma, eloquence, worldly wisdom, don't have the power of the gospel. They might attract followers, but they won't change hearts for the glory of God.

Periodically we have people come to the church and see what God is doing here. In their arrogance they try to draw people away to follow them. They think they have some superior wisdom, or unique insights, or revelations and are doing a good thing by

drawing people away from this biblically grounded fellowship (Galatians 5:19,20<sup>xxxv</sup>). I have never seen that result in the power to change a heart to live for God's glory. In fact, division is a work of the flesh (Galatians 5:20<sup>xxxvi</sup>). That is what was happening in Corinth, and Paul would have none of it. He was calling them out.

*<sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.* 1 Corinthians 4:20 The kingdom of God is not based on rhetoric. It is not about eloquence. It is not about how long you can talk or how much you know or how persuasive your arguments. The kingdom of God is in power. It is the power of the Holy Spirit to grip our hearts and change the way we think and behave. Sometimes it is even manifest in miraculous power. But most of all it is in the power of the cross to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west and fill us with the Holy Spirit (Psalm 103:12<sup>xxxvii</sup>; Acts 1:8<sup>xxxviii</sup>). It is the power that puts a song in our hearts and helps us joyfully endure the trials of life (James 1:2,3<sup>xxxix</sup>).

*<sup>21</sup> What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?* 1 Corinthians 4:21 This was Paul's warning to the arrogant. He left his coming response in their hands. They could repent and back off from their aberrant teaching, or they could remain and face a public confrontation with him. My guess is that just reading this letter to the congregation ended their efforts to attract followers to themselves. They had a choice to humble themselves or leave. Sadly, it is most often the case that when the arrogant cannot have their way or are confronted, they do leave and try to take as many people with them as possible to justify their behavior. That grieves the hearts of the elders. The elders will try to help them stay with the flock, but they will not compromise the truth. Paul certainly would have preferred to come to them in a spirit of love and gentleness. Like Jesus, shepherds do not want to lose a single sheep (John 17:12<sup>xl</sup>), and yet only Jesus can humble the arrogant and help them remain.

May we remain faithful to God's Word, keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3<sup>xli</sup>), and love one another as Jesus has loved us (John 15:12<sup>xlii</sup>)!

Benediction:

<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Romans 15:13 To Him be glory forever and ever! Amen!

Questions:

- 1 What are the three sins that must be exposed before the whole congregation?
- 2 What is the difference between a guide and a father?
- 3 What did Paul want them to imitate?
- 4 What would you change if a new believer moved into your home?
- 5 Why did Paul send Timothy to them?
- 6 What was Paul's example?
- 7 Why is application important?
- 8 Are you pursuing holiness?
- 9 Who was Paul warning?
- 10 What were their options?

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<sup>i</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

<sup>ii</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:21 (ESV)** <sup>21</sup> So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,

<sup>iii</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:31 (ESV)** <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

<sup>iv</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:1 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

<sup>v</sup> **1 Corinthians 5:1 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

<sup>vi</sup> **2 Peter 2:1 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

<sup>vii</sup> **Galatians 6:1 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

<sup>viii</sup> **Romans 8:1 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

<sup>ix</sup> **Hebrews 12:6 (ESV)** <sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

<sup>x</sup> **Acts 18:11 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup> And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

<sup>xi</sup> **1 Thessalonians 5:13 (ESV)** <sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

<sup>xii</sup> **1 Corinthians 4:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.

<sup>xiii</sup> **1 Corinthians 6:4-6 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? <sup>5</sup> I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, <sup>6</sup> but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

<sup>xiv</sup> **1 Corinthians 15:34 (ESV)** <sup>34</sup> Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

<sup>xv</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:2 (ESV)** <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

<sup>xvi</sup> **Acts 17:2 (ESV)** <sup>2</sup> And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

<sup>xvii</sup> **Acts 18:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

<sup>xviii</sup> **1 Corinthians 4:10-13 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

<sup>xix</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

<sup>xx</sup> **2 Timothy 4:13 (ESV)** <sup>13</sup> When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

<sup>xxi</sup> **Colossians 1:28 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Philippians 2:16 (ESV)** <sup>16</sup> holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (ESV)** <sup>24</sup> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup> Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

<sup>26</sup> So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **2 Corinthians 11:28-29 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. <sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

<sup>xxv</sup> **2 Corinthians 12:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

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<sup>xxvi</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)**

<sup>31</sup> So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Carson, D. A. (2004). *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (pp. 110–111).

Baker Books.

<sup>xxix</sup> **James 1:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

<sup>xxx</sup> **1 Peter 1:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

<sup>xxxi</sup> **Matthew 16:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

<sup>xxxii</sup> **James 4:15-16 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” <sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

<sup>xxxv</sup> **Galatians 5:19-20 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,

<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,

<sup>xxxvi</sup> **Galatians 5:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,

<sup>xxxvii</sup> **Psalms 103:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> **Acts 1:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

<sup>xxxix</sup> **James 1:2-3 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

<sup>xl</sup> **John 17:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

<sup>xli</sup> **Ephesians 4:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

<sup>xlii</sup> **John 15:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.