

130. Church Family Discipline (1 Cor. 5-6)

Study Guide

Overview

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"Church discipline" is an important, but often misunderstood and ignored, aspect of Christian congregational life. Dealing with a specific situation in Corinth, the Apostle Paul laid down principles which can help us deal with a variety of contemporary church situations—and can guard us from interfering in situations which are *not* subject to church discipline.

In brief, your group members will discover in this two-chapter passage that:

- professing Christians who practice immorality are to be expelled from fellowship;
- disputes between Christians should be settled within the church rather than by law;
- sexual immorality is *never* right, for we are to honor God with our bodies.

Sexual Immorality

◆ "Sexual immorality" encompasses all sexual intercourse outside of marriage. The serious nature of adultery and fornication (intercourse between *unmarried* persons) is seen in this powerful Corinthians passage as well as throughout the Scripture. There are two basic reasons: first, sex is sacramental, intended to bond two people together in the most intimate of human relationships. Second, marriage is a covenant, a commitment of mutual loyalty which is to reflect the commitment of God to His people. Within the context of covenant and sacrament, sex is beautiful and right. In any other, it is destructive and wrong.

Commentary

recently talked with the pastor of a church I serve as an elder. One of the women in the local congregation, who for a time was growing rapidly in the faith, recently went through a painful divorce. At one point she had an affair with a neighbor, a situation about which we had confronted her, and had been assured it was over.

Just two days before the phone call, we discovered that she was living with her paramour. And as members of the family of God, we realized we were responsible to discipline her.

It wasn't an easy prospect.

We naturally drew back from this kind of confrontation. In the family of God, our deepest desire is to support and love, so discipline seems harsh and unloving. Can we really *care*—and at the same time deal decisively with sin in the fellowship, even passing judgment on sin and sinner as Paul did in [1 Cor. 5](#)? How, after Paul had spoken out in [1 Cor. 4:1-5](#) against judging him and other leaders, can we judge a fellow Christian? Why, Paul had just written that he is not even competent to judge himself ([1 Cor. 4:4](#)).

Yet, in a society like first-century Corinth, there was a sure need for discipline. Immorality was an accepted part of the Corinthian lifestyle. The old passions and desires, the old way of looking at sexuality, were sure to crop up again and again in the church.

We have many parallels today, when the Playboy philosophy reflects the attitude of so many. Today in our individualism and relativism, many stress "freedom," and demand that each person be allowed to do his own thing without criticism. Today too many insist that what may not be right for you is not necessarily wrong for them. The modern label of the pornographic as "adult" and "mature" duplicates the mindset of the Corinthians and their culture. The sophisticated of Corinth were as adept as the sophisticates of today in pretending that evil is good and good evil.

In a world like ours and theirs, in which the "rights" of the individual are stressed, while old distinctions between right and wrong are blurred, there are sure to be times when immorality and other kinds of sin infect the church. The old ways of thought die hard. Transformation, while real, is gradual and progressive. On the journey to Christian maturity, both individuals and local congregations can falter.

That's what happened in my own congregation. And that's what happened in the Corinthian church. Facing the issue head-on, Paul helped the Corinthians—and us—to think through a number of difficult questions. In the process, Paul helped us learn more about God's mind and heart. And more about what it means to truly love one another.

Paraphrase

If your group members are studying this passage inductively, using the 5-step approach explained in study guide 129. A United Church Family, let your group members compare their sentence summaries and paraphrases with each other. The paraphrase may look something like this one, which highlights central issues.

Discipline Is Essential

[\(1 Cor. 5-6\)](#)

Deal decisively with that case of sexual immorality you've been tolerating—put the man out of your fellowship! How can you have been proud of your toleration? Don't you realize such old taints can spoil the new person you are in Christ? Earlier, I told you not to associate with the sexually immoral, and I meant specifically those who call themselves brothers. I don't judge non-Christians; it's those within who are to be judged—and in this case expelled.

Even such things as lawsuits and disputes are to be settled within the family. Why, the continued existence of such things is a tragic spiritual defeat. People practicing sin have no place in God's kingdom; you *were* like that, some of you, but after being washed and sanctified and justified in Jesus, all that is to be put behind. Don't misuse the, "Everything is permissible" principle. This is subordinate to the fact that Jesus is Lord. You can never take that body of yours, a member of Christ, and unite it with some prostitute! Utterly reject sexual immorality, for, as the temple of God's Holy Spirit, you belong to Him now.

At first glance, this summary does not seem to help much in answering the difficult questions about church discipline, and the necessary dimension of judgment. Yet as we examine this passage in our Bibles, we do find answers—and we learn what the right questions are!

● **Link to Life 1: Youth / Adult**

Write the "right questions" on the chalkboard. Ask your group members to work in pairs, reading [1 Cor. 5-6](#) and jotting down any answers they find. This activity should take up to 15 or 20 minutes.

The questions:

1. How dare we judge others?
2. What kinds of things are to be disciplined?
3. Why must we discipline within the church family?
4. How do we discipline?
5. Doesn't discipline violate others' rights?