

Dealing With Sin God's Way
A Plea For Church Discipline
By Steve Lehrer

In your small group Bible study you notice that there seems to be a lot of tension between John and his wife Lisa. Every time they come to Wednesday night Bible study they seem angry at one another. The one time you dare to ask John how he's doing he simply smiles and says "everything's fine." The next thing you know, John has separated from Lisa. Should you say anything to him?

Evelyn experienced a series of setbacks in her job and then her mother died, all in the same year. She began to drink and withdraw from people. She quit going to the weekly Bible study and simply attends church, arriving late and leaving early. Her husband Fred sympathizes with her pain but is not sure what to do. He talks to you, his closest friend, telling you that he has decided that it would be unloving to confront Evelyn about her behavior because she is going through so much right now. What should you tell him?

Christy has been a believer for 5 years. She seems to be a wonderful Christian woman who loves the Lord and His Word. One day she shares with you that her father molested her. Her mother knew about it and did nothing. She says that she has never been able to forgive him or her mother. She has not spoken to them in several years. Should you push the issue?

Sadly, situations like these and the questions that arise from them are common. As Christians, we need to know how to care for people who are hurting. But worldly wisdom is not enough. Dr. Phil and the world of psychology need to step aside. We need to find out what the God of heaven and earth has to say about dealing with sin.

Putting a Bandage on Cancer

Everyone knows that cancer is serious business. If you put a bandage over skin cancer you might be able to briefly hide an unsightly blemish. But how foolish is it to do this? As you go about your life as usual, the cancer that is hidden by your little bandage multiplies and invades. The cost of "keeping up appearances" will be your life. That is why nobody in his right mind puts a bandage over cancer. Instead, the moment you find out there is a possibility of having cancer you do whatever you have to do to take care of it. Most often it involves a doctor with a knife cutting something out of you. But it's worth it because you know that if you don't go through the unpleasant and painful process of cutting the cancer out, you could die. But today the world and much of the church handles sin like the fool who puts a bandage over cancer. They pretend it isn't there and it slowly but surely eats them alive.

The warnings in Scripture to those who continue in their sin are so severe that they take your breath away. Consider these passages:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ^{but} only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood

of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:26-31).

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ^{nor} thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Sin is serious business and it cannot be ignored. If we love those around us, we must embrace God's way of dealing with sin, which is church discipline.

Living With Sin is Not an Option

Living in a situation where sin goes unchecked can be like hell on earth. Perhaps you grew up in a household where sin was just swept under the rug. In such a situation bitterness and anger take root and you never quite know when you will say the wrong thing and get caught in the middle of an explosion. But if sin is handled God's way, it actually gets resolved rather than compounded or swept under the rug. The believer is not forced to live with sin in the church on an on-going basis. In fact, the believer is forced to deal with it if he is going to remain faithful to Christ. Resolving sin is one of God's commands, not one of His "suggestions". Church discipline is God's loving rescue plan for sinning believers. God instructed His people about church discipline to help his children who are stuck in sin turn from their sin and once again live God-honoring lives. Church discipline is also His perfectly holy plan for keeping the church pure and uninfected by unbelievers who want to claim Christ but live in sin. If professing believers living sinful life styles are left unchecked, Christ's name will be dragged through the mud and our witness to the world will be injured. Church discipline is the only way that God has revealed for His people to deal with those in the church who are stuck in sin. Matthew 18 is the primary passage explaining the church discipline process:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:15-20).

Here is a summary of the process laid out in steps:

- 1) If you have been sinned against or you witnessed the sinful act,¹ you alone should confront the one who has sinned.

2) If he does not repent, then you need to confront him again, but this time with one or two more believers.

3) If he still does not repent, the offense is reported to the entire church.

4) If he does not repent after being confronted by the church, then the church should not associate with him, except to urge him to repent of his sin.

5) If he repents at any point in this process, the church must forgive him and they can all rejoice together.

Figuring out the process of church discipline is not difficult. The Lord has explained the process in very clear terms. What is difficult is putting church discipline into action. It is trying on our emotions because people who are in sin can be irrational and confusing. Despite these difficulties, church discipline is a command and existing in church with folks who are in unrepentant sin is not an option. So, what follows is what I like to think of as a field manual for the Christian soldier who wants to be faithful to Christ in dealing with sin God's way.

You Are Your Brother's Keeper

If you are a believer, you are commanded to be part of a church (Hebrews 10:24-25). I am aware that most evangelical churches are big auditoriums full of people who don't know each other and who come together to hear an easy-to-listen-to speaker. But if you are a part of the church, it should mean that you know people intimately and that they know you in that same way. Church discipline is an act of love that requires an enormous sacrifice from all that are involved. /For this reason, Scripture assumes that the people in your church are close to you and that they mean the world to you. Notice the end-stage of church discipline: the church is not to associate with the brother who refuses to repent. If you are in a church where you have no close friends to share your life with, who cares? What if I said that there is a small group of people who you don't know and whom you have never met before that refuse to associate with you? You might think it strange, and even be slightly hurt. But since you don't know them and they are not important to you, would you really lose any sleep over it? The people in the church are supposed to mean far more than that to us.

I am a husband and a father. As a husband, I am concerned about my wife's welfare. I try to know her whereabouts and what she is doing. I study her, I ask her questions, and I try to care for her by helping her to grow in Christ. As a somewhat new dad (my son is almost 2 years old) I watch my son carefully. I am up to speed about his sleeping and eating habits. He is never long out of my sight. When he has a cold I am monitoring him closely. But this is all rather expected from me. After all, I told you right in the beginning that I was a husband and father. Knowing what is going on with my wife and my son is part of my job. But, if I tell you that I am part of a local church, we don't naturally think that the people in that church body are part of my job. But God clearly says that they are:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).

The believers that are in your local church are your business. Most of us don't share our business or our burdens with total strangers. There is a command implied within this command. You must get to know and love those in your local church. You have an obligation to know what their burdens are and to help them to carry them. You also have an obligation to allow them to know what your burdens are. When God asked Cain where his brother Abel was and Cain answered with the rhetorical question "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain assumed the answer was "Of course not! You are only responsible for yourself." But Cain was wrong. You are your brother's keeper. You have a God-given responsibility to care for those believers around you.

Confrontation

Fulfilling this responsibility is not always easy, often it is painful, and sometimes it is downright frightening. Confronting a person stuck in sin is tense and unpleasant for everyone involved. As an excuse we often say that we want to love others and not cause them pain, but in reality we don't want to experience the wrath of the person we confront, so we say nothing. Nobody in their right mind enjoys confronting people about their sin. But giving into the fear of man is not an option for a Christian. In Scripture, fear of man is in direct conflict with trust in and fear of the Lord: "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Fear is a natural response to a difficult situation. But your fear of man must be smaller, much smaller, than your fear of God. Your fear of the way others react must never stop you from being faithful to God.

How you confront others is just as important as being faithful to actually confront. There is no excuse for you to be the proverbial "bull in the china shop," needlessly upsetting and breaking things. You must have a heart filled with compassion for the person who is stuck in sin. This means that before you go to confront your brother about his sinful behavior, you should take time to reflect on your own life and your own sin. Perhaps you need to repent. Don't be a hypocrite! This is Jesus' point in Matthew 7 when He says:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (vv. 3-5).

Consider how close you are to committing the worst of sins and how much mercy and grace God has shown you. Think back to those sins that you weren't caught in, but if you had been caught how embarrassed and ashamed you would have been. Take time to

make an honest evaluation of your own struggle with sin. This will cause you to overflow with compassion for your brother who you must confront.

Expect the best from the person you confront. That is not to say that you do not prepare for the worst, but an expectation that God will be merciful and grant repentance is absolutely crucial. A true believer is a God-lover and will never be content in his sin. We are to approach other professed believers with the hope and even the expectation that they will respond like true believers. We do this until the evidence overwhelmingly proves otherwise. This is neither naïve nor foolish. It is biblical love: “(love) always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Although you are expecting the best, when the worst comes, don't be too surprised. When I teach people about confronting others in a way that honors God, the final thing I always leave them with is that they need to be ready to figuratively “get their heads bitten off” because when someone is confronted with his or her sin, it can get ugly. A true believer will eventually respond to God's truth and repent from his sin, but the first defensive response may be difficult to deal with. This should not discourage you from being faithful and continuing to lovingly pursue your brother or sister who is caught in sin. Always wait for the second and more rational reaction from the person you confront.

When you do get a bad reaction from someone you confront, watch out! You are now in danger of falling into sin yourself. God has just served you up another opportunity to honor Him by responding faithfully. He has not only given you this opportunity to show patience and love to the person who has attacked you, but to be thankful and joyful to God Himself: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). The temptation is to become angry and bitter when someone lashes out at you. But God's will for you, that is God's command for you, is to see that this person's reaction came from the hand of a God who loves his children dearly and is using it in your life for your good. That person's sin is custom-made for you as a loving gift from God! In other words, God is using the sin of the person you confronted to make you more like Jesus Christ. If you are a believer that should make you unbelievably thankful and should bring you true and lasting joy because becoming more like Christ is the ultimate life-goal of every believer. You may have had to suffer verbal and even physical abuse in the process, but surely following God, pleasing Him, and being conformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ is worth the pain.

A Supernatural People

Christianity is supernatural. God has changed the heart of every true believer in such a radical way that he cannot continue to live in sin. The person whom God has saved is transformed from a God-hater into a God-lover. When church discipline is faithfully practiced and a professed believer refuses to repent, he is put out of the church. This is tragic but necessary. When this happens, the person who has been put out of the church is giving evidence that he is not a believer. He is choosing to love sin rather than Jesus Christ and therefore he is denying that Jesus Christ is his Lord. It does not matter if he says he loves God, because his actions deny his words. The Apostle John addresses this very issue when he wrote: “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). But when church discipline is faithfully practiced and a professed believer does repent, there is a very different result.

The believer is restored to the church and restored to living a life that is pleasing to God. This is wonderful. When this happens, the repentant brother is giving evidence that God is at work in His life. He is choosing to love Jesus Christ more than sin and is therefore showing that Jesus Christ is his Lord.

The world does not understand church discipline because unbelievers cannot fully grasp that the church is not simply made up of people who hold a number of the same beliefs. The church is not simply a social club. It is a body of people who have been transformed by the God of heaven and earth. His power makes us into a radical people who are willing to lay down our lives in order to follow Jesus Christ. Church discipline is the way in which our Lord has ordered us to love and purify this gathering of people who have changed hearts. Those who practice church discipline take this supernatural work of God in salvation seriously.

What Should I Do If...?

Many, if not most, Christians agree with church discipline. What they really mean is that they believe in the theory of church discipline, but that in the real world it doesn't really work. In my experience it is because they have many unanswered questions that leave them in spiritual gridlock when it comes to obeying God by exercising church discipline. There are a bunch of "What should I do if...?" questions that they do not know how to answer so they simply decide to avoid the whole difficult issue. The following are answers to some of the most common questions about church discipline:

· What should I do if my church doesn't practice church discipline?

Raise the issue (gently) to the leadership of the church. If they do not respond to Scripture (after giving them time for a second response), consider going to a church that does practice church discipline instead. It is for your own spiritual health and the health of those you love. Also, since it is crystal clear in Scripture, why would you want to go to a church that is not faithful to God's Word?

· What should I do if the person says he is repentant but it's not true?

Scripture speaks to the issue of worldly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:8-12). If you have evidence that there has not been true repentance then it is your responsibility to bring up the issue again in the manner specified by Matthew 18. The second time around the process moves much more quickly. If you do not have evidence of unrepentance but you are suspicious, pray for the person and pray for God to reveal the truth. In the meantime you will have to live in a situation where a person seemingly gets away with sin. But remember, they never actually do (Psalm 73, Galatians 6:7-8).

· What should I do if the person denies that he sinned and I have no hard evidence?

You must let the matter drop until you have actual evidence that the person sinned. It is just a practical necessity that when you practice church discipline you must have a "smoking gun" in order to be able to proceed in most cases. This means that only external sins (sins you can see) can be dealt with. If you do not have this evidence, the process usually degenerates into a "he said, she said" disagreement and the truth becomes nearly impossible to discern. If the person who sinned is truly stuck or an unbeliever, then the sin or some related sin issue will present itself at some later date. But perhaps

the person will be able to avoid leaving behind a “smoking gun” all of his or her life. Don’t worry. God is not mocked. He sees everything and He settles all scores. Your suffering and being sinned against can only last a lifetime:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

· **What should I do if the person is unrepentant and has been excommunicated but he is part of my own family?**

Well, if it is some dependent in your nuclear family like a child or a spouse, then you are in a unique situation. You cannot “not eat” (that is not have a close relationship) with that person. You are obligated to live with him and continue your God-given role in that person’s life (father, mother, husband, wife, child) unless he chooses to leave. In that case you must seek to show the love of Christ to this person and when you have opportunity you should share the Gospel. You must, of course, make it clear that you do not consider him a believer unless true repentance takes place and then of course his relationship with the church family would then be restored. In such a case your longsuffering love for the sinning family member will be crucial and you will need other strong believers to regularly encourage you.

Endnotes:

¹ Galatians 6:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 5 make it clear that it is not just when I am personally sinned against that I am responsible to care for fellow Christians. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul commands the Corinthians to practice church discipline on a fellow believer who has been engaged in unrepentant immoral behavior. Even though the believers who are told to confront him were not personally sinned against, Paul still commands them to come to his aid in the form of church discipline. When I see that someone in the body is caught in sin, I cannot ignore it. I am commanded to care for him God’s way.