

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Church Discipline**

*1 Corinthians 5:9-13*

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# Church Discipline

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the discipline of church members engaged in blatant and unrepentant sin. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Church Discipline."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, although my text is vv. 9-13:

<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>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

<sup>3</sup> For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. <sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

<sup>9</sup> **I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—<sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God**

**judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”**  
(1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

## **Introduction**

The ancient city of Corinth was a very important city. It was an international city that was located on the crossroads of trade routes going east and west as well as north and south.

The most conspicuous landmark in Corinth was the Acrocorinth, a mountain to the south of the city. Reaching a height of 1,886 feet, it was an ideal situation for a fortress that could control all the trade routes in and out of Corinth. The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, stood on its highest peak. The thousand female prostitutes who served there contributed to Corinth’s reputation for immorality. In fact, it is to this evil trade carried on in the name of religion that some ascribed the prosperity of the city. The degree to which Corinth was given over to sin is apparent by the coining of the word *korinthiázomai* (“Corinthianize”), meaning “practice immorality”; similarly “Corinthian girl” (*Korinthia kórē*) designated a prostitute. That the situation continued into Paul’s day is evidenced by the evils he attacked in his Corinthian letters.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways Corinth was like any western city today. In fact, I was wondering how Tampa fared in this regard. So, I Googled and discovered that Tampa is sometimes referred to as the “strip club capital” of the United States. And not to be outdone, Pasco County is known as the “nudist capital of the world.” The sad thing is that as I looked at the websites, the people were proud of being number one in each category!

Our city and our community are just like Corinth! Sexual immorality is rampant in our community, just as it was at Corinth.

The apostle Paul heard of blatant and unrepentant sin in the church at Corinth. He was shocked by what he heard. He had writ-

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988; 2002), 773.

ten a letter to the Corinthians (which we do not possess) expressing his concern over the tolerance of sexual immorality in the church. Word came back to Paul that indicated the Corinthian believers thought that they were enlightened by allowing such sexual permissiveness. And so Paul responded with another letter, the one we now know as *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in which he addressed the discipline of church members engaged in blatant and unrepentant sin.

## Review

Let's briefly review what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 regarding the discipline of immoral church members.

### I. The Need for Discipline (5:1)

First, notice the need for discipline.

Paul said in verse 1a: **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans. . . .”**

Paul indicated his shock at the situation in Corinth. He was astonished by what he was hearing, as he should have been, because of what was taking place in the church in Corinth.

He was appalled to hear **that there** was **sexual immorality among** the Christians in Corinth. But the report that came to Paul was that the sexual immorality was **of a kind that was not tolerated even among pagans**. Whatever this sexual immorality was, it was frowned upon even by the surrounding culture. What was it?

Paul said in verse 1b: **“. . . for a man has his father's wife.”**

The sexual immorality that was taking place in the Corinthian Church was that a professing believer was engaged in a sexual relationship with his step-mother.

### II. The Refusal to Discipline (5:2)

Second, observe the refusal to discipline.

More shocking than the sin itself was the Corinthian church's refusal to discipline the believer for his sexual immorality.

Paul lists three negatives regarding the conduct of the church.

First, the lack of shame. **“And you are arrogant!”** (5:2a).

Second, the lack of mourning. **“Ought you not rather to mourn?”** (5:2b).

And third, the lack of discipline. **“Let him who has done this be removed from among you”** (5:2c).

The Corinthian church should have disciplined the offender. All habitual, unrepentant sinners need to be disciplined.

It is vital that churches deal with sin in their midst. God is a holy God and his eyes are too pure to look on evil (Habakkuk 1:13). Whenever sin is not repented of and dealt with, it spreads.

### **III. The Command to Discipline (5:3-5)**

Third, see the command to discipline.

Paul ordered the Corinthian church to deal with the sin in their midst.

Paul said in verses 3-4: **“For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus. . . .”**

Apparently, the Corinthian believers were hesitant to discipline the sinning believer as long as Paul was absent. To counter their hesitation, Paul told them that **though he was absent in body, he was in fact present in spirit. He had already pronounced judgment on the one who had done such a thing.**

Ultimately, all the authority to discipline a sinning brother came for the **Lord Jesus** himself.

Now, see what the church is to do.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“. . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. . . .”**

This is the final censure that is imposed on a believer for bla-

tant and unrepentant sin. He is ex-communicated and he is delivered **to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.**

**Satan** is the ruler of this world, and so delivering a man to Satan is simply putting him back into the sphere of Satan. He no longer is under the shepherding oversight of the elders and he is outside the fellowship and care of the church.

**The destruction of the flesh** may refer to death. More likely, however, is that Satan will be allowed to torment him, like Satan tormented Job. He may experience excruciating and painful physical ailments, but he will not ultimately be cut off from salvation if he is a genuine believer.

And also, see why the church is to do it.

Paul said in verse 5b: “. . . so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

The man will hopefully repent and be restored to fellowship. Nevertheless, if he is a true believer, **his spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord**, that is, when he meets Jesus.

#### **IV. The Reasons for Discipline (5:5-8)**

Fourth, notice the reasons for discipline.

First, to bring the offender back to God.

Paul said in verse 5b: “. . . so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

Second, to keep the offense from spreading in the church.

Paul said in verses 6-7a: “**Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.**”

Again Paul states that their **boasting is not good**. Their attitude toward serious, scandalous sin was wrong.

**Leaven** is not the same as yeast (which was uncommon in the ancient world) but fermented dough. **A little leaven** would be left from the previous week and added to a new lump of dough.

By analogy, when publicly known sin in the church is not

subjected to church discipline, it will silently spread its destructive consequences throughout the whole fellowship.<sup>2</sup>

Blatant, unrepentant sin is like a cancer and must be cut out.

Paul said in verse 7b: **“For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”**

The reason for removing the old leaven of the sinful person from the church is rooted in the significance of Christ’s death. He is **our Passover lamb**. The Passover lamb was the lamb slaughtered by the Israelites in Egypt. They put the blood of the lamb on their doors, and the angel of death passed over their houses and spared the firstborn child from death. **Christ has been sacrificed** and his blood is sprinkled on believers and protects us from the wrath of God.

And third, to keep the celebration of Christ, the Passover Lamb, pure and true.

Paul said in verse 8: **“Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”**

Paul challenged the believers in Corinth, as he does us too, to live the Christian life in **sincerity and truth**, and to have nothing to do with **malice and evil**.

## Lesson

And so, today we conclude our lesson about the discipline of immoral church members by looking at the extent of discipline (5:9-13).

### V. The Extent of Discipline (5:9-13)

And fifth, notice the extent of discipline.

There are two points that I want you to notice about the extent of church discipline:

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<sup>2</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2197.

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1. The Discipline Involves Only Church Members (5:9-11)
2. The Discipline Involves All Church Members (5:12-13)

### A. *The Discipline Involves Only Church Members (5:9-11)*

First, notice that the discipline involves only church members.

1. The Church Has No Right to Discipline Unbelievers (5:9-10)

First, the church has no right to discipline unbelievers.

Paul began by clarifying what he had written in his previous letter (now lost to us) in which he said in verse 9: **“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.”** His instruction had been misunderstood or, more likely, purposely twisted to mean that believers should avoid all contact whatsoever with unbelievers. But that is not at all what Paul meant.

So Paul ridiculed the misunderstanding of the Corinthians in verse 10, **“. . . not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.”**

Christians are to live *in* the world but not be *of* the world. We are to live in our community and reach out to those who are **sexually immoral, greedy, swindlers, and idolaters** with the good news of God’s grace. These people are our mission field. We remember that at one time we ourselves were among the **sexually immoral, greedy, swindlers, and idolaters** of the world.

Paul’s point is simply that the church has no right to discipline unbelievers. Unbelievers are simply acting and behaving in accordance with their unregenerate natures. And so we cannot discipline them for acting in accordance with their nature.

However, the situation is entirely different for someone who professes to be a believer in Christ.



2. The Church Has a Responsibility to Avoid Unrepentant Believers (5:11)

And second, the church has a responsibility to avoid unrepentant believers.

Paul was very clear that believers must not associate with anyone who professes to be a believer. He said in verse 11: **“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”**

Is this **brother** a true Christian? Paul does not say, although he seems to extend the benefit of the doubt to him: he **bears the name of brother**. So long as a person professes to be a Christian, then believers have a responsibility to avoid such a person.

Paul makes it clear that church discipline is not reserved only for those who are involved in extremely immoral behavior, such as **sexual immorality**. No, in fact, church discipline should be administered to anyone who **is guilty of greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler**. In other words, church discipline should be administered to anyone who is engaged in blatant and unrepentant sin.

Paul said that when discipline is administered to an unrepentant church member, the rest of the church should **not even eat with such a one**.

Christians are not to include in their fellowship **anyone who bears the name of brother** who persistently practices sin and will not repent of it. If the offender will not listen to the counsel and warning of two or three other believers and not even to the whole church, then he is to be put out of the fellowship of the church (Matthew 18:15-20). He is thereby excommunicated, meaning that he no longer is allowed to participate in the Lord’s Supper.

Furthermore, John MacArthur states of such offenders:

They should not be allowed to participate in any activities of

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the church—worship services, Sunday school, Bible studies, or even social events. Obviously, and most importantly, they should not be allowed to have any leadership role. They should be totally cut off both from individual and corporate fellowship with other Christians, including that of eating together (v. 11; cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15).

No exceptions are made. Even if the unrepentant person is a close friend or family member, he is to be put out. If he is a true believer he will not lose his salvation because of the sin (v. 5), but he is to lose contact with fellow believers, in order not to corrupt them with his wickedness and to suffer the consequences of his sin. The pain of such isolation may drive the person to repentance.

A church that does not discipline a sinning member is like a person who has good reason to believe he has cancer but who refuses to go to a doctor—because he either does not want to face the problem or does not want to face the treatment. If he waits too long his whole body will be permeated with the disease and it will be too late for treatment to do any good. No church is healthy enough to resist contamination from persistent sin in its midst, any more than the healthiest and most nutritious bushel of apples can withstand contamination from even a single bad one. The only solution in both cases is separation.<sup>3</sup>

And so, although it may seem harsh and extreme, the church has a responsibility to avoid unrepentant believers.

### *B. The Discipline Involves All Church Members (5:12-13)*

And second, notice that the discipline involves all church members.

Paul said in verses 12-13: **“For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”**

There are four short sentences in verses 12-13. Verse 12 has two questions, and verse 13 has two answers. The first question in

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 130-31.

verse 12 is answered in the first statement in verse 13, and the second question in verse 12 is answered in the second statement in verse 13. So, if we rearrange the verses, it looks like this:

- Question: “**For what have I to do with judging outsiders?**” (5:12a). Answer: “**God judges those outside**” (5:13a).
- Question: “**Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?**” (5:12b). Answer: “**Purge the evil person from among you**” (5:13b).

So, Paul repeated that the church has no right to discipline unbelievers. It is **God** who **judges those outside** the church.

However, Paul also made it clear that it is **those inside the church whom we are to judge**. He quoted the Old Testament legal language of Deuteronomy 17:7; 19:19; and 24:7 when he stated, “**Purge the evil person from among you**” (5:13b). In the Old Testament **the evil person** was purged by being executed (Deuteronomy 21:21). In the old covenant, God ordained death as the means by which the people of God were to purge themselves of blatant and unrepentant sin.

In the New Testament, with the inauguration of the new covenant, one can see how gracious God is. Blatant and unrepentant sin is still significant and must be dealt with seriously. However, the penalty for blatant and unrepentant sin is no longer *execution* but *excommunication*. In other words, the offender has an opportunity to repent and be restored to fellowship, whereas in the old covenant there was no such opportunity.

## Conclusion

The church has a responsibility to discipline of church members engaged in blatant and unrepentant sin.

It must do so for the glory of God and for the good of the church. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, the apostle Paul teaches us about disciplining immoral church members who are guilty of blatant, unrepentant sin. Help us to keep watch over our own lives so that we keep short accounts of sin. And help us, when necessary, to carry out discipline for the glory of your name and the good of your church.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, go and be the spiritual children that our heavenly father calls us to be!