

COVENANT PULPIT



THE SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

GOD'S STRENGTH IN OUR WEAKNESS

May 24, 2020

COMPETING DESIGNS IN CHURCH DISCIPLINE

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

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The Battle of Antietam was the bloodiest day of the Civil War and the deadliest one-day battle in all of American military history. During the course of 12 hours in 1862, an estimated 3,650 Americans were killed.ⁱ Historians say the outcome was basically a draw, but if The South had won, they likely would've won the Civil War. So how was the mediocre Union General George McClellan able to end the tactically superior Robert E. Lee's push into Maryland? It all came down to three cigars. As Lee's army moved and McClellan agonized over what to do, an Indiana regiment stopped for a rest in a field that had been occupied by Confederates a few days earlier. Three soldiers laying out on the grass happened to notice an envelope. Inside the envelope were three cigars wrapped in paper. The soldiers excitedly split the cigars, and one of them decided to look at the paper they were wrapped in. His curiosity changed history. The paper that wrapped those three cigars was a copy of Lee's marching orders, revealing where the Confederates were heading and what they had planned. With this information in hand, McClellan promptly went on the attack and curtailed the Confederate advance.ⁱⁱ

In some respects, we are no match for our enemy, Satan, whose designs we are told to be wary of. He wants to destroy the Church by any means possible. But, as with General McClellan, our enemy's plans have fallen into our hands. Two of his preferred methods of bringing down the Church are to disrupt its purity and peace. We know his usual strategies—to entice us with lies, lust, greed, and the like and so destroy the purity of the Church. We know he seeks to sow discord and create division that destroys the unity of the church. With such knowledge, given us by God's Word, and God's Spirit within, we too can resist the enemy's advances."ⁱⁱⁱ

But the fact of the matter is that it's very hard to find a church that is concerned about both its purity and its peace.

Churches that are concerned with the purity and holiness of the church oftentimes aren't very concerned with the peace and unity of the church. Likewise, churches that are concerned with peace and unity often aren't very concerned with the purity or holiness of the church. But, if you're the member of a church like Covenant, one of your membership vows says that you promise to study the "purity and peace" of the church.^{iv} It's not one or the other, it's both. And the good news is that God has given us biblical church discipline in order to preserve both the peace and purity of the church.

**Biblical church discipline exercised in love,
preserves the purity and peace of the church
and foils Satan's designs.**

This biblical church discipline is what we see being described in our passage today and it's a topic little understood or appreciated in our cultural moment. But historically, many have seen the practice of it as an essential mark of a true church. And we believe, as a church, that it is one of God's gifts to us, and so we're going to talk about it this morning.

I. Church Discipline is Biblical When Exercised in Love.

There's a backstory to our text today; the trouble is that we don't know exactly what it is. But here's what we read in verse 5,

"Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you."

Someone in Corinth has caused pain. And despite the fact that the offence was directed at Paul, the real damage was done not to him, but to the church in Corinth.^v The million-dollar question is: What exactly is the nature of the offense that caused pain to the whole church in Corinth? From

very early on in church history there has been a consistent group of witnesses who identify the sinner here as the incestuous man who was sleeping with his stepmother and referred to in 1 Corinthians 5.^{vi} We'll look at that passage in a moment because it's instructive, but most modern scholars today reject that identification. More likely the offender was a person who was a part of the church in Corinth who in some way verbally assaulted Paul's person and his authority as an apostle.^{vii} It may have happened during his painful visit or perhaps shortly after, but the bottom line is that Paul was sinned against in a public fashion and the church didn't deal with it. As we'll learn later when we get to chapter 7, Paul wrote his tearful letter in order to grieve them into repentance over this matter and to exercise church discipline, which they did zealously (7:11).

Why is church discipline necessary? The Westminster Confession of Faith gives five reasons (numbers mine), "Church censures are necessary, for

- (1) the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for
- (2) deterring of others from the like offenses, for
- (3) purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for
- (4) vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for
- (5) preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders."

(WCF 30.3)

Notice that the first driving motivator listed in church discipline is to reclaim the sinner who has gone astray.

Biblical church discipline is about restoration. One scholar highlights this when he writes, “Paul’s disciplinary practices were intended as remedial rather than punitive measures, being infused from start to finish with the single-minded desire for the good of the offending individual.”^{viii} And that was the case here in Corinth. They exercised discipline and it had its intended effect as we read in verse 6,

“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,”

We’re not told exactly what the punishment was, but it worked. Now the danger was going too far as we read in verses 7-8,

“so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”

The aim of the discipline was to reclaim the sinner. He has apparently shown sufficient repentance, therefore the discipline needs to stop and as surely as they’ve disciplined him, they need to make their love very clear to him. You might wonder: What does the process of church discipline look like in a PCA church like ours? There are basically six steps laid out in the Bible and also in our confessional standards: ^{ix}

1. Training and instruction. The first part of discipline is that the church must know what is expected of them from God’s Word. Biblical preaching and teaching lays down a strong foundation of good doctrine along with the implications for living a Christian life. Church members must be taught and instructed, including in this matter of church discipline. But, despite great teaching and

instruction, all of us fall short of the glory of God and we sin. What happens then?

2. Private admonishment. This is the first step Jesus refers to in Matthew 18.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone...”
(Matthew 18:15)

That’s the first step, and in a healthy church most conflicts and sin should be resolved at that level of private admonishment. The offender confesses, asks forgiveness, forgiveness is granted, and on we go. Sometimes, however, we don’t listen to admonishment. If that’s the case,

3. Bring one or two witnesses. Jesus says,

“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”
(Matthew 18:16)

We may try this multiple times in hopes of seeing repentance. But if that doesn’t work, then we go to the next level.

4. Tell it to the church. Jesus says,

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”
(Matthew 18:17)

In our church, that means bringing your case to the elders. They will engage with the parties involved to discern what the issue is and what sins need to be confessed and repented of. If there’s still no repentance then,

5. The offender is barred from communion. This includes not allowing the person to partake of the communion table, but I believe it also includes not engaging in fellowship with him.^x Communion is, after all, a picture of our fellowship, and to forbid someone from the table would also imply social isolation.^{xi} An example is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Paul writes,

“...keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

And then in verses 14-15 of that same chapter he writes,

“If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

(2 Thess. 3:14-15)

So, clearly, there is a social distancing to take place from those in the church who are living in sin unrepentantly. But at this point still they are to be regarded as a brother. The hope is that the shame of this public separation and exclusion will bring them to repentance. You have to see here that still the motive is restoration and love for the guilty from God and the church. But in our world today, this kind of treatment is seen as hate, as judgmentalism, and as unloving. Eric Bargerhuff rightly identifies the issue when he writes, “...if church discipline is not rightly seen as an expression of God’s love, then it will inevitably be erroneously construed as an oppressive, intolerant, divisive, and harsh expression of human power.”^{xii} That’s how effectively Satan has shaped the thinking of the church, that we have missed the plain meaning of the apostle and turned on its head

the teaching of the Holy Spirit who says that this is how you show love to a persistent offender. You socially isolate from him until he repents. As Tom Schreiner writes, "Treating the person as usual would display one's lack of love, betraying one's apathy about the person's salvation."^{xiii} At the heart of our failure to hold one another accountable, even to the levels described in these passages, is a lack of love for one another and an apathy about our salvation. If after this barring from communion the offender is still unrepentant, then we go to the final phase:

6. The offender is excommunicated. Jesus says,

"...And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

(Matthew 18:17)

The New Testament sometimes refers to this as handing someone over to Satan. The most prominent example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul writes there,

"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. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you...When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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. "

(1 Cor. 5:1-2, 4-5)

This man was sinning in a very public manner and the church was not addressing it. Paul is shocked that they

would allow it to go on. It seems they do not understand what he says in 1 Corinthians 5:6,

"...Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"

If they tolerate this sin, its effects are going to spread through the whole church. The church was commanded to remove the offender from them and deliver him

"...to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

(Corinthians 5:5)

The discipline inflicted here refers to the expulsion (or excommunication) of this person from the membership rolls of the church. It is a declaration that they are not a part of the fellowship of Christ and are under the reign of Satan. It's possible that Paul expects this handing over to Satan to lead to some kind of grave physical affliction negatively affecting the offender's life in this world in the hopes that this suffering may turn him back to Christ.^{xiv} In this case the 'destruction of the flesh' may refer to his sinful inclinations.^{xv} But notice, the hope is still that the sinner would come to repentance. This is love! And it's very counter-cultural. And it looks very strange to most of us who are Christians. Because most of us who are Christians and most of our churches are very worldly in our thinking about church discipline. David Wells writes, "Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd."^{xvi} In no part of the Christian life is this more apparent than in our understanding and practice of church discipline. Ignoring sin looks normal, and disciplining it looks odd, but church discipline is biblical.

**We must own up to the fact that our
failure to hold one another accountable is
a failure of love.**

And for those few churches that do exercise church discipline, there must be an acknowledgement that love for God and love for the sinner are often far from the driving motivator.

II. Church Discipline Preserves the Purity and Peace of the Church. Paul writes in verse 9,

“For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.”

Paul wrote the tearful letter calling them to exercise church discipline on the offender, and he says he sent it as a test to see if they would obey in everything. In other words, disciplining people in the church who are in open sin is a matter of obedience to the Word. To not exercise church discipline in love is to sin against God and expose the church to impurity and disunity. Church discipline is given to protect against these two things particularly. And so Paul says in Galatians 6:1,

“...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.”

Here’s what this means practically. We have a responsibility to love each other by practicing the church discipline I’ve been describing. Your sin is my business, and my sin is your business. We are called to be a part of *gently* restoring one another when we go astray. Looking back to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5,

"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — 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. 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. 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."

(1 Corinthians 5:9–13)

The church has a responsibility to discipline those in its body who are living in sin including not only sexual immorality, but also greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, and being a swindler. We're not even to eat with people who are living in these kinds of sin. Obviously, this teaching creates a whole host of complicated implications. Christians are not forbidden from associating with non-Christians who are living in these kinds of sins. What is forbidden is associating with people claiming to be Christians while living in sin because they're a stain on the church and their sin will spread. So, is it okay to have friends living in homosexual sin? Not if they're claiming to be Christians. What about friends who are living together and sleeping together as though married but they're not? No, not if they're Christians. They should be called to repent of their sins. What about a greedy person? A person who loves money and has an inordinate desire to get more of it, even at the expense of others? Not okay.

How about the reviler? The word is not one we use often but it refers to a person who insults another.^{xvii} It's likely that the reviler is one who causes dissension and division in the church.^{xviii} A person who verbally attacks and abuses others, and that can happen through social media and the internet now easier than ever, that person is to be challenged about their sin and, if unrepentant, put out of the church. What about a drunkard? This refers to an intoxicated person. Of course, there are substances beyond alcohol that intoxicate, but alcohol has been an issue for a long time. We're not talking about addicts struggling to get sober; we're talking about people who aren't struggling. What about swindlers? Based on the way the word is used elsewhere in the New Testament^{xix}, we're talking particularly here about people who take advantage of others through various forms of extortion. What is clear is that this list is not exhaustive, but it is representative of the kinds of lifestyles that are not compatible with the holiness of the church. And when things like this go unchecked in the church, it's not pleasing to God. Gordon Fee writes, "Those who persist in that former way of life, not meaning those who simply struggle with former sins, essentially do not belong to this new community. By their own actions they have opted out; the community must distance itself from such people for its own sake."^{xx} There is a role for the leadership of the church to judge those inside the church.^{xxi} And it is the role of the people and the leaders of the church to put away all our sins and to live lives of faith and repentance. The point is not to make people afraid of being honest about their sins. Exactly the opposite! In the Christian community we are encouraged to confess our sins and to turn from them. But those who are not turning threaten the purity and peace of the church and are not to be ignored.

III. **Church Discipline Foils Satan's Designs.** Finally, Paul talks about the importance of forgiving the offender in verses 10-11,

"Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs."

Behind everything that's happening in his relationship with the Corinthians, Paul is cognizant of the enemy, Satan. Satan wants to destroy the Church. How he does it does not so much matter to him, but we must not be ignorant of his designs. On the one hand, he's happy to destroy the Church by encouraging us to wink at sin in our own lives and in our churches rather than keeping each other accountable. A lack of discipline in a church where sin goes unchecked is not a sign of love, but a lack of love. God disciplines those He loves, and so do good parents, and so do good shepherds. To not exercise discipline is to hate, not to love.^{xxii} Satan loves when churches don't care about purity and holiness "in the name of love." At the same time, for those churches that do practice discipline, Satan loves to take that discipline and make it merciless like he was doing in Corinth.^{xxiii} Charges are raised quickly, but there's no forgiveness, no mercy, no reconciliation.^{xxiv} That's not biblical church discipline either. The Church is a court, but it is first a family and church discipline should feel familial more than legal. Paul demonstrates for us in this passage that church discipline isn't about identifying the winners and losers in a conflict. Paul demonstrates both the courage of calling the Church to exercise discipline, but also the gospel-centered graciousness to allow his personal hurt to control his

response. At the risk of looking weak, Paul leads the way in forgiving. This kind of forgiveness looks weak to the world; it looks like you're surrendering your victory! But for Paul the victory is not winning the argument or fight; the victory is reclaiming the sinner who was lost but now is found. The celebration is over the one who has repented! As Garland writes, "His call for forgiveness changes an 'I win, you lose' situation to one where brothers in Christ win and Satan loses."^{xxv} Here is what we're after in our exercise of church discipline, not someone winning and someone losing, but the exercise of church discipline and forgiveness is about the Church winning and Satan losing!^{xxvi}

A church that is pursuing both purity and unity is a church that has grasped the gospel at its core. The gospel tells us that we were lost, hopelessly enslaved to our sinful condition and impure at every level. We were not united with God or with one another, but were at enmity with God and each other. But God, in love, stepped into this situation of impurity and disunity in the person of Jesus Christ. And on the cross, Jesus took our impurity upon Himself and died to pay the penalty of it. Not only that, but by paying the penalty for our sin, He has caused us to be reconciled to God. Now, for all who trust in Jesus, not only have we been cleansed of our sin and united to God, but we're also united to one another. As one body in Christ, we are called to live out this purity and peace that Christ has accomplished for us. And in His loving grace, He has given us church discipline to be an aid to preserving that purity and peace until all of His Church will be finally saved to sin no more. So, in light of the gospel, let us practice and submit to biblical church discipline, and together win the victory over Satan and His designs.

Sermon Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think it's so unusual to find a church that is passionate about both the peace and the purity of the church? Which do you think is harder to secure?
2. Describe some of the reasons why biblical church discipline is necessary in local churches.
3. What are some of Satan's designs we need to be wary of when it comes to practicing church discipline?
4. How does Jesus's teaching in Matthew 7:1-5 on judging others relate to this message on church discipline?
5. How would your life change personally if you took the message of this sermon to heart? How might the life of those around you change?

ⁱ <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/battle-of-antietam>

ⁱⁱ Rick Beyer, *The Greatest Stories Never Told* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 2008), 273.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Galli, former managing editor of Christianity Today; source: Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy, *The American Pageant*, ninth edition.

^{iv} PCA Book of Church Order 57-5.

^v His concern "not to put it too severely" reflects his desire not to exaggerate but to explain carefully the consequences of the offense. See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 124.

^{vi} For a relatively recent example, see Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

^{vii} Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 227.

^{viii} T. E. Schmidt, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, s.v. "DISCIPLINE," 216.

^{ix} See the Presbyterian Church in America Book of Church Order chapters 27-46 for the Rules of Discipline.

^x Westminster Confession of Faith 30.4 says, "... the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the church..."

The WCF doesn't specifically mention this social isolation, but it's clearly evident in Paul's writing and I believe it is consistent with what is being implied through barring from the Lord's Supper.

^{xi} T. E. Schmidt, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, s.v. "DISCIPLINE," 216.

^{xii} Eric J. Bargerhuff, *Love that Rescues: God's Fatherly Love in the Practice of Church Discipline* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 7.

^{xiii} Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 396.

^{xiv} Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 471.

^{xv} Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 158.

The problem with this idea is that Satan seems to be helping accomplish God's purposes and we may think it makes more sense for Satan to strengthen the man's sinful inclinations. But in my view, Satan does ultimately serve God's purposes, and in the life of one of God's elect, even Satan's worst efforts must ultimately serve God's sovereign purpose of salvation. For more on this theme, including how Paul's 'thorn' in 12:7 functioned in this way, see: Sydney H. T. Page, "Satan: God's Servant." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 3 (September 2007): 464.

^{xvi} David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 29. As quoted in Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, ed. Terry C. Muck, The NIV Application Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 96.

^{xvii} *TLNT*, s.v. “λοιδορέω, λοιδορία, λοιδορος,” 2:407. Spicq writes, “This severity is astonishing. We must remember, however, that the entire Bible similarly denounces sins of speech and that ‘most people enjoy listening to insults’ (Josephus, *Ag. Apion* 2.4). People insulted each other for the most trifling reasons. There were even “insult duels” (Philo, *Husbandry* 110; Stobaeus, *Flor.* 19.4; vol. 3, p. 530).”

^{xviii} See footnote 70 in Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery, vol. 28 of *The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2014), 140.

^{xix} Matthew 7:15, 1 Corinthians 6:10 (where it is listed in distinction from ‘thieves’).

^{xx} Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament. Revised, Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 246.

^{xxi} Fee writes, “. . . Paul is not dealing with the kind of “judging” disallowed by Jesus, where the person with a beam in their own eye condemns the one with merely a mote. Jesus was dealing with personal criticism of one’s brother or sister, which is always disallowed, even by Paul (cf. 4:3). This is dealing with persistent wrongdoing of a kind wherein someone wants to have it both ways, to belong to the Christian community without leaving one’s former behavior behind. Such persistence demands discipline for the sake of both the person involved and the community.” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament. Revised, Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 249.

^{xxii} Proverbs 13:24 “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.”

^{xxiii} “Discipline which is so inflexible as to leave no place for repentance and reconciliation has ceased to be truly Christian; for it is no less a scandal to cut off the penitent sinner from all hope of re-entry into the comfort and security of the fellowship of the redeemed community than it is to permit flagrant wickedness to continue unpunished in the Body of Christ.” Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 66-67.

^{xxiv} Chrysostom writes in the 4th century about Satan: “For he is not content with striking down by sin, but even by repentance he doth this except we be vigilant. Wherefore also with reason did he call it getting advantage, when he even conquereth our own weapons. For to take by sin is his proper work; by repentance, however, is no more his; for ours, not his, is that weapon. When then even by this he is able to take, think how disgraceful the defeat, how he will laugh at and run us down as weak and pitiful, if he is to subdue us with our own

weapons.” In Philip Schaff, eds. *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on First and Second Corinthians*. vol. XII of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), paragraph 54927.

^{xxv} David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery, vol. 29 of The New American Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 127.

^{xxvi} “Someone in Corinth who believed, as most did in this Roman culture, that one proved one’s mettle by completely demolishing any opposition, might accuse Paul of feeble vacillation by shifting from the role of prosecutor to the role of defender with a tender plea for clemency. If it is a sign of weakness, it is the weakness that comes from living out the cross. Paul has no desire to overwhelm his opponents, not even those who may have grievously injured him. When his antagonist is down, he asks everyone to join together in helping him up. He never wishes to rout those who are guilty of sin but always wants to edify (see 13:10). Paul therefore tries to prevent the affair from deteriorating into a win-lose situation.” David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery, vol. 29 of The New American Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 126-127.

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