

The Obedience of Forgiveness**Introduction**

Last time the notes were entitled “The Joy of Obedience.” What was taught there is that Paul did not come to Corinth so as to spare them disciplinary action, and to avoid the pain that it would be in light of that action. He wrote a letter instead to straighten out the church’s affairs, and so that they would recognize his love for them. He did not write to make them sad, but to achieve a corrective in which they could take joy. In 2:9 he says that he wrote in order to test their obedience. Thus, “the joy of obedience.”

But this raises the question, obedience to what? The present passage sheds light on that very subject (in addition to chapter 7, which picks up after a long digression).

From what 2 Corinthians says, it can be pieced together that the so-called “severe” letter purposed to sway the Corinthians to exercise the necessary discipline toward the one “who had done the wrong.” They had not done this up to the point of receiving the severe letter, but when they received it, they repented and did the discipline that Paul commanded.

The precise nature of the sin is not known from what we can see in this letter. Some say that it is the incestuous relationship of 1 Cor. 5. But the sin here seems to involve Paul personally which that one does not (7:12, “the sake of him who suffered wrong,” that is, Paul; 2:5 “he has not grieved me;” and 2:10, “if I have forgiven anything.”)

Whatever the nature of the sin itself that precipitated the whole chain of events, it is clear that the church was not properly handling the problem. They needed to repent of their ways and do what they were directed to do, i.e., discipline the individual.

Now it is apparent from 2 Corinthians that they had corrected the situation after receiving the severe letter. But in the meantime, the offender has repented (2:6-7). Now what? Well, the next step is to receive him back into the church (2:7-8). Paul directs the church to do so in the passage we are studying.

1. The sin has affected the whole church, v. 5.

What God points out here is that the sin has not impacted Paul so much as it has the entire church. Paul may have been greatly insulted or offended, but you can sense that he is minimizing the effect that the incident has had on him.

The qualifying phrase regarding not overcharging or being too severe has to do with the fact that Paul is trying to say, “the insult didn’t hurt me too much, though it did hurt you, but I don’t want to exaggerate the case too much or make too big a deal about it.”

Other passages in the Bible make it clear that sin affects the church, not just the individual. Consider 1 Cor. 5:6-8 and Rev. 2:12-29 as well as the illustration of Achan in Joshua 7. And so we can say with certainty that we are not islands unto ourselves, but our sin does affect the body. Certainly some sins are more public than others, and they need to be dealt with at their level of outgrowth.

2. The punishment has achieved its goal, v. 6.

The discipline has resulted in the offender’s repentance, so it is “sufficient.”

Restoration to proper fellowship, not incidentally, is the goal of disciplinary action. Discipline is not purely punitive. See Matt. 18:15 (“gained your brother”) and 1 Cor. 5:5 (“that his spirit may be saved”) and Gal. 6:1 (“restore...in the spirit of meekness”).

The mode of discipline is by a majority consensus of the local assembly (“inflicted of many” or “inflicted by the majority”). It is not the act of one man in the church. 3 John 9-10 gives us an example in which a single individual, Diotrephes, was putting people out of the church. He cherished the place of power in the church.

If it be asked what are the subjects of church discipline, the answer is members of the church (note the “inside” and “outside” distinction in 1 Cor. 5:12-13). Even erring believers sometimes need correction (2 Thess. 3, particularly verses 6, 14-15; Matthew 18:17).

3. Full restoration must now happen, v. 7-8.

The brother has expressed his repentance over the sin and so the church must reciprocate.

This is not an optional part of the process. If the discipline was public (which it should be, 1 Cor. 5:4, “when you are gathered together”) then the restoration must be also public. There are three items that the church is to demonstrate, followed by a reason why:

- A. Forgiveness. As Christians, we are to be ready to forgive as God has forgiven us in Christ. Immediately upon the repentance of the offender, this should happen.
- B. Comfort. The offender must not only be forgiven, but must be comforted, encouraged, assured of the fact that he is back in the good graces of the church.
- C. Love. Yes, that is LOVE, to be exercised *genuinely* toward the offending brother. Actually it is not that the distance created by the discipline reflects a lack of love—it should be just the opposite, that *loving* discipline is exercised. A real love desires that which is best.
- D. So that he not be overwhelmed by sorrow. The act of the church serves as a demarcation point indicating to the erring brother that he has indeed properly repented and done what he should. The church must not leave him wondering if the people still love him and have forgiven him, lest he fall into spiritual depression.

The requirement of restoration ought not to surprise us. If the man has truly turned away from sin, then this act of the church simply reflects that reality of restored fellowship that has already happened between the offender and God.

4. The church is being tested as to its obedience in discipline and forgiveness, v. 9.

God’s testing is by letter from Paul, both the “severe” letter and this one. The severe letter tested their obedience as to the exercise of church discipline; this letter tests their obedience as to forgiveness and restoration, that is, to see if they will complete the job and bring the man back into the fellowship.

5. Assembly forgiveness assures all that Paul also has forgiven, v. 10.

Paul recognizes that if a Spirit-led church acknowledges the forgiveness of a man, then he can do the same also. He agrees with their decision. Note Paul’s initiative in forgiveness—he is ready *already* to forgive the man—and his attitude in forgiveness—once again he minimizes any personal damage. He says, “if indeed I have anything to forgive.”

This forgiveness comes in the “face” of Christ, that is, in his presence. He can say that before Christ, he has truly forgiven.

One VERY IMPORTANT note should be made here. Both of the last uses of the verb to forgive (omit the italicized ones) are in the perfect tense. Paul has exercised a real and permanent forgiveness in this matter. It is not a temporary thing—it is that he forgave once with ongoing results. It is to forgive and make sure it stays forgiven. The offense is not used against the person, it does not come up again as a basis for punishment, etc. It is a “perfect” forgiveness. How easy it is for us to forgive in a grumbling way, only to bring the offense back to the front burner again. Does God do this with us?

6. Forgiveness avoids Satan taking advantage of the situation, v. 11.

Satan would be happy to get in the middle of things and drive the offender away, cause the church to not receive him, and so multiply sin on top of sin.

The Bible tells us that we are not (ought not!) be ignorant of Satan’s schemes. What are these? He sows discord among brethren (which God hates, Prov. 6:19), he lies (John 8:44), he slanders, he accuses (Rev. 12:10), etc. See also Eph. 6:11.

Conclusion

If it be objected that church discipline usually runs amok, that it is difficult to apply, or that it is hard to tell what cases to apply it to, those difficulties still do not gut the Bible’s teaching on the subject. Sometimes we have to do things that are not pleasant. Whatever your view as to where “the rubber meets the road,” we have to agree that cases such as 1 Cor. 5 demand the church to eliminate the offending brother and not arrogantly allow him to continue in the church, lest the sin-cancer spread. Furthermore, repentant folks must be restored to fellowship, no matter how hard that might be!

With regard to the nature of the sin itself, it could be that someone at Corinth is opposing the instructions of 1 Cor. 5 to discipline the incestuous man. Or it could be some other area in which Paul was being opposed.

For your perusal: FBC Constitution, Article V, Section E on Discipline

1. If a member of the Church finds himself at any time out of accord with the Doctrines of Faith or the purpose of the Church, as stated in this Constitution, or unable for any reason to live in peace among the other members, he shall quietly withdraw from this fellowship. If he does not voluntarily withdraw, he shall be dealt with according to Section E, 2.
2. If a member walks in a manner unworthy of a Christian, he shall be lovingly admonished in accordance with Matthew 18:15-17 by the member gaining knowledge of the same. If repentance does not follow or the case be not settled, it shall be reported to the Pastor or to one of the Church Council. The Church Council shall call upon such to account in an effort toward adjustment. If any member, following such action, persists in following his sinful course, it shall be within the powers of the Church Council to recommend dismissal by the Church body in closed session. The Church Secretary shall thus notify him in writing of his dismissal. No one shall be so dropped from the roll without a fair and impartial hearing before the Church Council. If a member refuses to meet with the Church Council for such consideration, the Church Council may, after the third written notification to appear, take action as if he were present. In case accusations are made against another, among the membership, both accused and accuser shall appear before the Church Council for an impartial hearing and solution as may lie within the province of the Church Council.
3. A person may be restored to membership by vote of the Church membership on recommendation of the Pastor and the Church Council after said person has given satisfactory evidence of renewed interest and spiritual restoration.