

(3) Transforming church discipline

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[0 : 00] First reading is from Matthew chapter 18, which is on page 993 of the Bibles, starting at verse 15. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 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. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. This reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 1 to 13.

[1 : 16] That's on page 1149. 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. 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 Christ, 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.

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.

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 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.

[2 : 32] 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, reveler or drunkard or swindler, not even to eat with such 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.

Great, thanks very much Sophie for reading. Do please keep the Bibles open at 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Now we are continuing our series of talks this morning, entitled Transforming Grace. The Christian Life is not about rules and regulations. The Christian Life is about following Jesus Christ, who then changes our attitude, our thinking, our mindset.

[3 : 44] So a whole variety of different things. And over the past couple of weeks, we have seen how he does that in relation to money, wealth and contentment. And today we are looking, just for today, at church discipline.

Now it's worth saying that if you're new to Grace Church, then our normal practice through the preaching program, if you've picked up a copy of our sort of term card, things that are going on at Grace Church up until Easter, you'll know that our normal practice on Sundays is to work through a book of the Bible part by part.

By doing that, of course, we make sure that God is the one who is setting the agenda for our teaching program. It means that we can't simply focus on our favorite parts of the Bible. It means we can't miss out the bits of the Bible which we don't like, or which are less attractive to us.

But occasionally we take a break from that, and we do a topical series like this, where we focus in on what the Bible has to say about a particular area of the Christian life. Next week we resume our normal practice, and sorry, the week after we resume our normal practice with a series on the book of Ruth.

But for today, we are thinking about church discipline. Church discipline is something which we discussed as a church council last year, and it's important, I think, that as a church family, we all of a sudden understand what it is the Bible teaches.

[5 : 04] May I say, just right up front, that if you're here today, not a Christian, looking in on the Christian faith, then at one level, of course, this talk does not apply directly to you. But I trust that nonetheless, what you will see is how very important it is that all of us take Jesus seriously.

So then what do we mean by church discipline? Well, it is the action which the local church takes in response to continued and unrepented sin in the life of its members.

Have a look at 1 Corinthians 5, verse 1. And where we can see, I think, from this particular case in the church in Corinth, it's clear in verse 1 that here is a man who is cohabiting in an ongoing sexual relationship with his stepmother.

And you'll notice that it's a scandal even in the immoral world of the first century Roman Empire. Notice, will you, that apart from this particular verse, neither the man in particular nor his sin are directly addressed in this passage?

Because as the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, his primary aim is directed towards the church as a whole. He wants them to get their thinking, their mindset about church discipline right.

[6 : 29] You can see in verse 2 that their attitude is one of complacency or arrogance. In fact, throughout the letter, one of the characteristics which this particular church seems to demonstrate is a kind of spiritual pride, sort of sense that we know better than everyone else, even perhaps knowing better than God himself, which is why Paul has to address the issue here.

Now, there are three points which come out of the passage, three principles which come out of the passage, which I put on the reverse of the notice sheet, and as usual, we shall take questions afterwards. First of all, church discipline is a God-given responsibility of the local church.

Church discipline is a God-given responsibility of the local church. Have a look at verses 3 and 4 with me. 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. And we'll just stop there for the time being.

Now, the facts are clear, aren't they? This man has clearly sinned against God, and the apostle Paul, as an apostle, has judged that to be the case. Verse 4. Sorry, verse 3.

[7 : 55] But in verse 4, we see the action that now needs to be taken. when the church assembles, and it is when the church assembles, which of course demonstrates, doesn't it, what a high view of the church the apostle Paul has in verse 4.

The presence and power of Jesus himself are behind the decisions which a local church makes when it comes to church discipline. It's actually exactly what Jesus himself taught back in Matthew 18, so keep a finger or your service sheets in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, and turn back to Matthew 18 on page 993.

We're going to flick a little bit between the two passages, so it's just worth making sure they're both easily accessible. Now, here is Jesus speaking in Matthew 18, and again, I'm going to read verses 18 and 20 and see, really, what a high view of the church Jesus has.

Verse 18, Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Verse 20, Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Now, I guess verse 20 is a very familiar promise to many of us. We often quote it, don't we, perhaps when there's a small group of Christians who meet to pray together, and we remind ourselves that the risen Jesus Christ is with us, even though there may just be two or three who have gathered, and he is.

[9 : 29] But notice that when Jesus first says this, he does so in the context of church discipline. It's a surprising thing, isn't it? In other words, as the church exercises discipline over its members, so the Lord Jesus himself is with that church, and so to speak, gives his heavenly stamp approval on what the church is doing.

Church discipline is the God-given responsibility of the local church. Now, I take it that as such, it challenges our view of church, doesn't it?

Because, of course, if we see the church as a kind of voluntary club, then it's the kind of teaching here in Matthew 18 from the lips of Jesus, and 1 Corinthians 5 from the Apostle Paul that will come as a shock to us.

But actually, throughout history, the willingness of a local church to exercise discipline has always been one of the marks of a genuine church, of a biblical church.

So, for example, it's mentioned in the 39 articles, which are part of the core statements of belief of the Church of England. I've put Article 33 there on the outline, which makes provision for church discipline and clearly expects it.

[10:50] In 16th century English, it says, that person, which by open denunciation of the Church is rightly cut off from the unity of the Church and excommunicated, ought to be taken of the whole multitude of the faithful, in other words, treated by, as a heathen and publican, that is, as a pagan or a tax collector, as Jesus would say, or as an unbeliever, as we would say.

We don't tend to talk about heathens and publicans much, do we? Certainly not in Dulwich. Until he be openly reconciled by penance and received into the Church by a judge that hath authority thereunto.

Church discipline is the responsibility of the local church. Now, I think it's easy to lose sight of this in our culture. A culture, of course, which so resists discipline and so wants to assert the right of the individual to live as they please.

A culture in which our only sort of moral framework that we speak about is my right, my prerogative to work, to live as best pleases me.

But, of course, as Christians, we're not a collection of individuals this morning. We're members of God's Church, not just of Grace Church Dulwich, but of God's universal worldwide church, the worldwide community of all Christian believers.

[12:28] Now, that is something which other cultures find very easy to grasp and identify with. Something I suspect in our individual privatised culture we find much harder to come to terms with.

But it means, of course, that if we fall into sin, then under God we are accountable to the Church and we should anticipate that at that point we will not be left on our own.

Now, I, for one, welcome that. Our hearts are easily deceived. We need one another, don't we, if we are to keep on following Jesus and if we're not to stray away from following Jesus.

And I take it if we've grasped that then we'll be willing to risk friendships and say hard things at times with tears for the sake of the spiritual health of others.

After all, loving parents discipline their children. every parent knows that the opposite of love is not discipline but neglect.

[13:36] Good discipline is an expression of love within the family context and it's an expression of love within the church family context as well.

So then, church discipline is the God-given responsibility of the local church. But notice back in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 what this doesn't mean. It is the discipline of believers and not of unbelievers. Have a look at 1 Corinthians 5 verses 9 and 10. 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 squindlers or idolaters since then you would need to go out of the world.

In other words, Paul says, look, this is not about Christians being judgmental of a non-Christian world. Rather, verse 11, it is about discipline on those who bear the name of a brother.

In other words, those who call themselves Christians. Which I think just highlights a danger which we can find ourselves slipping into which it is possible to be tolerant of the sin that God hates within the church but that's actually to be judgmental of sin outside the church.

[14:54] It's a danger I think which church leaders sadly often fall into as they kind of tut-tut over fair trade or carbon emissions or as they kind of wag the finger at the ethical practices of particular countries or companies while all along tolerating sin and false teaching within the church.

So when we think about church discipline this is not kind of being judgmental on unbelievers and their lifestyles and may I say again if you're not a Christian here this morning we are delighted you're here and please do not think we or the Bible are pointing the finger at you this morning.

Church discipline is a God given responsibility of the church. Secondly church discipline demonstrates a loving concern for the salvation of the individual a loving concern for the salvation

of the individual.

Have a look at verse five. Let's go back to verse four. 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.

Now what we see here is that the exercise of church discipline is a sign of grace and love and not a sign of intolerance. We see very clearly in verse five the aim is to restore the individual to spiritual health.

[16:25] It's there isn't it in article 33 of the 39 articles the purpose of discipline is reconciliation the confession of sin and being received back into the church which reflects exactly what the apostle Paul says here at the end of verse five that the purpose of church discipline is that the individual may be saved on the final judgment day.

Now when Paul talks there in that verse about delivering the individual over to Satan I think that's best understood as handing him over to the realm where Satan rules in other words treating him as an unbeliever and doing so for the destruction of the flesh meaning for the destruction of the sin which is opposed to God's purposes.

Notice 1 Corinthians 5 is not calling us to express kind of moral outrage at sin rather it is calling us to work out how we can act so as to encourage each other on the way to heaven.

For this man in Corinth whose sin is so flagrant so public and clearly doing such damage to the gospel why he should says Paul be treated as an unbeliever so that he might see the seriousness of his actions come to his senses and crucially be in right standing with God on the judgment day. That is always the loving goal of church discipline. But it's important for us to see that to be expelled from church membership like that should be the last step and not the first step in thinking about church discipline.

[18:09] So turn back to Matthew chapter 18 for a moment on page 993. Matthew 18 helps us I think to see that there should be a sort of clear process at work.

Have a look at verses 15 to 17 with me. If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you you've gained your brother.

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. If he refuses to listen to them tell it to the church and if he refuses to listen even to the church let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Well I wonder if you can see the process that is at work. First you go to the individual alone. If they don't listen two or three go and talk to the individual and so on.

And if they still don't listen you come before the whole church as has happened at Corinth. It's a process which means of course that knowledge of the sin is kept to the smallest group possible.

[19:27] It's a process which means of course that repentance is easier, that less harm is done to the individual, less harm is done to the reputation of church, less harm is done to the honour of Jesus.

And it's a process note whereby the discipline increases in strength until there is a point of resolution. But notice too that Jesus' clear hope is that discipline will stop at the very first step. You see the point is that if as a church all of us take church discipline seriously, in other words if all of us are involved in gentle loving words of warning and encouragement and praying for each other perhaps when we see someone straying away from Jesus then actually very little formal church discipline will be needed.

I take it the danger comes when as individuals we say and do nothing when we allow sinful habits to be ingrained because then of course repentance is much harder.

So I want to ask this question which is do we love people enough to act and to say something and to do something when we see another Christian in spiritual danger?

[20:53] Or do we just turn a blind eye and hope that everything will work out in the end? I remember a couple at the previous church who were not married but were sleeping together both professing to be Christians both involved in a Bible study group.

You'll know that in the Bible sex is a good thing but its rightful place is in lifelong heterosexual marriage. So their Bible study group leaders spoke to them on an individual basis just as Jesus tells us in Matthew chapter 18 and they did nothing about it.

I was leading their Bible study group evening where there were a number of different Bible study groups and I had responsibility for the evening so the Bible study leader then spoke to me and he

and I together went to talk to them again following the process in Matthew 18.

We looked at 1 Corinthians 5 together, we looked at the steps that we have to take to show them how serious their sin was. Wonderfully, a few weeks later, they moved into separate flats until they got married.

And what's so interesting talking to them now is that they say how grateful they were that someone said something. Because it was at that point that it marked a real turnaround in their Christian lives.

[22 : 15] Because they were faced with the question, will we continue to drift away from Jesus or will we live with Jesus as our King? And they were very grateful for that Bible study group leader being so concerned for them that in the first case he went to speak to them.

So then what sort of sin should be the subject of church discipline? Well, look back to 1 Corinthians 5 because Paul gives us a list. I'll take it this list isn't exhaustive, but we have some of the things there, don't we, in verse 11.

But now I'm 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.

Now I think in our highly sexualised culture our tendency may be to think only of sexual sins, but Paul mentions other things, doesn't he? Greed, idolatry, putting something else in God's rightful place, dishonesty.

And the implication with all of these is that they are ongoing activities. As I said, clearly this is not an exhaustive list. Elsewhere the Apostle Paul mentions other things, those who are lazy and refuse to work, those who disobey what the Apostle Paul writes, those who themselves are false teachers.

[23 : 38] But notice the principle in 1 Corinthians 5 is that these things are publicly known or out with the evidence. They've continued over a period of time. there's been no repentance. Action is then required where patience and counsel bears no fruit.

Church discipline demonstrates a loving concern for the salvation of the individual. Thirdly, church discipline demonstrates a godly concern for the holiness of the whole church.

Have a look with me at verse 6. your boasting is not good. Do you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Now here we see that church discipline is necessary not only for the individual but also for the sake of the church as a whole.

Now in verse 6, Paul uses an everyday first century illustration which I think can be a bit lost on those of us who get our bread from supermarkets or who use bread machines. It's an illustration about leaven or yeast as some versions call it although they are two different things and actually the original word is leaven.

In the first century when you made bread you kept back some of last week's dough which was the leaven. You added it then to this week's dough. It had yeast in it and so when you put it in this week's dough and you left it and then baked it eventually your bread would rise.

[25 : 06] Each time you made bread you would add some of the old mixture to the new mixture. If you're not into leaven and bread don't worry about it. The principle is you add the old to the new. You bring them together both old and new.

And Paul's point is that mixing the old and the new like that makes great sense if you're baking but is bad news in the Christian life. In verse 6 he uses leaven as a picture of sin and says it easily spreads.

After all how are we to live as Christians? Verse 7 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.

We're to live as those who are unleavened. In other words as those who are living without our old lifestyle before we came to Christ.

In other words he's reminding us that as Christians there's no place in our lives for our old sinful way of life. There's no place for sin that is persistent and not repented of.

[26 : 13] After all says Paul remember verse 7 Christ has died for us and so we're to live lives that celebrate that. Lives of gratitude not living the old way of life but living instead for Christ as the kind of people that Jesus has made us.

Forgiven belonging to him as his people standing in right relationship with him. You see his point is that if church discipline isn't taken seriously it makes it much harder for all of us to throw off that old way of life and live for Christ.

Imagine for a moment what would have happened in Corinth if nothing had been done about this particular individual. Why it would compromise wouldn't it the attitude of the whole church family to

sexual sin and gradually I take it it would begin to be seen as acceptable Christian behaviour. Or imagine what would happen if a dishonest businessman wasn't disciplined. It would mean that others would begin to think that such practice is acceptable and they can do the same. Or imagine if a persistent gossip wasn't disciplined.

Why others would think it doesn't matter how we use our tongues. Can we see the point? You see the attitude which says it's not serious it's okay spreads.

[27 : 41] If not checked it undermines the whole body. It's no longer just one person who's in spiritual danger but others too. It makes it much harder for the rest of us to put the old way of life behind us and to live for Christ.

So church discipline is a God given responsibility of the church. It demonstrates a loving concern for the individual and a godly concern for the holiness of the church.

Now let me say that I've deliberately focused on the principles this morning because I think it's important that we understand the principles. Clearly the principles need to be applied to different people in different situations.

And I take it there'll be times when we feel the principles are not being applied well. When perhaps we feel that action hasn't been taken which should have been taken or has been taken or the other way around whichever.

I can't work it out whichever it is but you get the point. I'm conscious of ways in the past in which perhaps if I had my time again I'd have done things differently.

[28 : 51] But I take it that Paul's point is it's much better to act and to occasionally wish we had done things slightly differently than it is not to act at all.

Why don't I pray and then we can have time for questions. For where two or three are gathered in my name there am I among them.

Heavenly Father we praise you for this wonderful verse. thank you that wherever two or three Christians are gathered together whether it's to pray together or whether it's gathered together on a Sunday like this we praise you that the risen Lord Jesus is with us.

And what a wonderful awesome privilege that is to have him with us this morning as we meet. And we pray therefore heavenly Father as we think about church discipline we pray that in our thinking about one another that we would have this great concern for each other that on the final day we would stand before the Lord Jesus Christ.

Please help us to love each other and to be concerned enough for each other to speak and to act when we see others in danger of drifting away. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

[30 : 20] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.