

# 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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[ 0 : 00 ] We strategically planned for the heat to break this morning so you would stay awake through my extra long sermon. Looking at 1 Corinthians 5 this morning.

In the Pew Bible, that's page 954. And friends, as you're turning there, I wonder if you've ever considered the question, let me ask, what is the measure of your love?

How do you know when someone really loves you or when you really love someone else? I think one common way we might answer that today is that when you love someone, you allow or you affirm them in whatever path they choose.

You do, in other words, nothing to stand in the way of what they feel is best for their happiness. I recently re-watched the original three Star Wars movies.

Not the prequels because everyone knows they're not worth watching again. Sorry, you can disagree with me after the service.

[ 1 : 27 ] But it struck me that the climax of episode four, as it is now, is when Luke is sort of the last ship left in the attack on the Death Star, right?

And in that critical moment when he's got one bomb left and one chance to stop the evil empire, what happens? Obi-Wan speaks to him through the force and says, Luke, trust your feelings.

And so Luke pushes away the radar, trusts his feelings, drops the bomb right where it counts, the Death Star explodes, and the people rejoice.

And then he and Han Solo and Chewbacca get cool medals down on the planet in a neat little ceremony. Now, not to be overly analytical, but what's the message in that critical moment when freedom and happiness for the galaxy hang in the balance?

Trust your feelings. Do what you feel is right. And isn't it true that what we so often see is the real measure of love today is letting people free to do just that, not to stand in the way of the pursuit of what they feel they need to do for their happiness.

[ 2 : 45 ] I think Sting, that great songwriter and theologian, summed it up pretty nicely. In that old police song, right? When you love somebody, he said, you set them free.

But friends, is that really the best measure of love? Is that the way to know if someone really loves you and that you love them? That you set them free, that you let them alone, that you leave them be?

Our text this morning is going to show us that the real measure of our love for one another actually couldn't be more different. And in a deeply countercultural way, love is really measured not by our willingness to let someone free to follow their own feelings, but actually by our willingness to tell them when they've wandered down the wrong paths.

In other words, the measure of love is not in how readily we permit one another's freely chosen path or desires, but in how readily we pursue and desire one another's holiness.

As I've said, our text this morning is 1 Corinthians chapter 5, page 954. And let me read this for us.

[ 4 : 04 ] Paul says, It's actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that is not tolerated even among the 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 the 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.

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.  
[ 5 : 14 ] 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'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, 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 on the outside.

Purge the evil person from among you. We should pray. Amen. God, we do thank you for your mercy and for your kindness that you would give us your word and preserve it for many, many ages.

And in it, give us instruction and life-giving good news about Jesus and what it means to follow him together. So, Lord, we pray for your Holy Spirit to work among us this morning as we consider this text.

[ 6 : 32 ] And we trust that it's for our good, God. In Jesus' name, amen. So, this section of 1 Corinthians that we're now in, chapters 5, 6, and 7, that we'll be looking at, actually, between now and Easter, is all about holiness.

And this chapter, chapter 5, is about how the church pursues holiness through what is often called church discipline. And in particular, it deals with one specific expression of church discipline called, sometimes, excommunication.

Now, there are probably few things in the life of the church that are more misunderstood than church discipline. I mean, let's be honest. I say that word, and immediately you're probably already thinking of bearded Amish communities shunning their wayward neighbors.

Or if you're remembering something that you learned in Western Civ as a freshman, something about medieval popes forcing barefoot kings to confess on the snowy rocks of Kenosa.

None of you remember that, do you? I'm a history nerd. You can talk about it afterwards. If you're new to Christianity, I think, too, church discipline probably sounds like something that is judgmental at worst and hypocritical at best.

[ 7 : 46 ] And in reality, most churchgoers today have either never been in a church that practices church discipline at all, or if they have, it's often been done really, really poorly.

So our text this morning is actually very helpful. It's going to clarify some misconceptions. It's going to relieve us of some caricatures.

And it's really going to help us recover an element of our spiritual life together that is missing in so many churches today. So we're going to approach this text in a really straightforward way by just asking three basic questions.

First, what is church discipline? Second, how is it done? And third, why should we do it? What is it? How do we do it? Why do we do it?

But first, what does this text tell us about what is church discipline? In verse one, look there again, we learn of a church member in Corinth who is engaged in public, ongoing, unrepentant sin.

[ 8 : 53 ] Now, it's hard to reconstruct all the details of this particular case. It seems to involve some sort of blatant sexual immorality with this man's mother or more likely his stepmother, according to the end of verse one.

But we don't need to reconstruct all the historical details to get the point. What's the point? Here is a man who is identifying as a Christian, professing to believe in Jesus and have him as Savior and as Lord.

He's a visible member of the church, but his life is marked, characterized by open, ongoing, unrepentant disobedience to Jesus.

In other words, his lip and his life, as it were, are completely at odds. He claims to be a follower of Jesus. His actions say the opposite. And so, in verse two, Paul says, remove him from among you. That is, remove him from formal membership in your body. Now, keep in mind, the act of church membership, in the act of membership, the local church is doing what?

[ 9 : 56 ] The local church is saying, yes, with charity, and as best as we can determine, this person has genuine saving faith in Jesus Christ.

By God's grace, through faith, this woman, this man, they are a member of God's kingdom and God's family. That's what church membership, in large part, is saying.

It's the church's affirmation of someone's profession of faith for all to see. But what Paul is telling the Corinthians to do here, in light of the persistent, public, unrepentant sin in this man's life, is in essence to stop saying that.

This man's life gives us no confidence as the church to be able to make that affirmation any longer. We can no longer affirm this person's profession of faith.

Therefore, Paul says, remove him from membership. Now, as a brief aside, I think this means right off the bat that far from church discipline being a hypocritical thing to do, church discipline is actually the way that church strives to not be hypocritical.

[ 11 : 15 ] Right? We want our profession, what we say, and our actions to align. And church discipline helps us corporately to be able to do that.

Now, the actual removal of someone from membership is sometimes called excommunication.

That's one of those scary words, right? But it's quite simple, actually. It just means being removed out of the communion.

Ex out of the communion. Communication. But, you know, when we talk about church discipline more broadly, we're not talking about just that particular act. We're talking about a process.

A process of meeting with that person, asking, listening, explaining, exhorting, warning, praying.

And it's a process that may or may not lead to communication. That is, it may or may not lead to the person being formally removed from membership, depending on how the person responds.

And we're going to get to that process in a minute when we discuss the how of all this. But before we do that, let me make a couple further observations here about the what of church discipline.

First, notice in verse 11, if you see down there, that church discipline isn't just for sexual immorality.

[ 12 : 29 ] In that verse, Paul lists all sorts of things that if they were ongoing and unrepentant in a professing Christian's life would be grounds for a process of correction in church discipline.

You know, sometimes we get this strange notion that the Bible has a weird taboo against sex. And that's clearly not true. At the end of chapter 6, Paul is going to tell the Corinthians to glorify God with their bodies.

And in chapter 7, he's going to tell husbands and wives to make sure that they're having sex on a regular basis. So there's nothing prudish or repressive about biblical Christianity, and sexual sins aren't somehow worse than others.

But second, notice that church discipline is a means of dealing with unrepentant sin in a believer's life. This is really important to see.

No one is going to be removed from membership, in a healthy church anyway, merely because they sin. Every Christian, friends, is a sinner.

[ 13 : 42 ] Every Christian will sin throughout their Christian life. There is no doubt and question about that. But genuine Christians, you see, are marked by hearts of repentance towards their sin.

That is, they admit that it's wrong and displeasing to God. They don't want to do it anymore, and they seek God's help for change. This means, for example, that a Christian with a history of addiction can relapse again and again and again.

But if their heart is a heart of repentance, of softness before the Lord, they admit that it's wrong.

They don't want to do it. They're seeking the Lord's help in the battle against temptation. Friends, they're not going to undergo church discipline.

They're certainly not going to be removed from membership. That's the Christian life. Fighting and wrestling against sin with gentle hearts before the Lord and one another.

Hearts of repentance. But on the other hand, the Christian, for example, who say, cheats on their taxes every single year, sees nothing wrong with it, shows no desire to change.

[ 14 : 58 ] Well, if for some reason that became public, it very well might be in a process of church discipline. What's the difference? Well, the difference is, although one sin culturally seems kind of messier and uglier and more wrong, and the other seems sort of like white collar and okay, the difference is the heart of repentance.

And this is an important point. Jesus said, I've come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Yeah? The church, friends, is meant to be a hospital for sinners who know they need a Savior.

And, friends, none are turned away, no matter how great their sickness. The church isn't a place for perfect people, but for broken people. But if we continue to refuse Jesus' diagnosis of our spiritual condition, if we persist in unrepentant sin, it puts us in a very dangerous position, just like a patient who refuses sound medical advice, even after a second and third opinion.

And it's that dangerous position that church discipline is meant to address. And so I hope you're beginning to see that church discipline isn't a hypocritical act, and it's actually not a judgmental act. Not the way we often think of something being judgmental. Rather, it's an act of correction for the person's good. And that leads to a quick third observation under this first point here.

[16:36] It's good to realize that church discipline isn't sort of coming out of nowhere. It's not as if Paul just sort of blew a gasket and said, kick this guy out of the church.

No. Reading the entirety of the Bible, even the passage that James just read for us, we see that God is holy. And that we in the church belong to Him through Christ.

And so for our good and for God's glory, we're meant to reflect Him. God was telling the Israelites in Leviticus to be holy as He is holy, and He's calling the church to be the same.

And church discipline is a part of the process whereby we as the church pursue that calling and that holiness together out of love for God and out of a desire to resemble Him together. Okay, so that's what church discipline is.

Secondly, let's ask how church discipline is supposed to work. We're going to focus on verses 3 and 5 in our text, but first, I want us actually to turn to Matthew chapter 18.

[17:40] It's page 823 in the Pew Bible. Flip over to Matthew chapter 18 with me. Look down at verse 15 of Matthew chapter 18.

And here we see that Jesus Himself gives us a process, a series of wise and loving steps to take when a member of the church, a brother or sister, is engaged in unrepentant sin. So Matthew chapter 18, verse 15.

Here's the first step of that process. If your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you've gained your brother.

Notice that this first step is private. You do it one-on-one. You're not there to shame and blame, but you're there to gain a brother or a sister. And if the person repents, if they see, if they accept the correction, if they see what you're saying, that's it.

It's done. Jesus says you've gained your brother and sister and the church discipline process is over. Step two, verse 16. 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.

[18:51] Jesus says if the person doesn't repent after the one-on-one meeting or more likely after a few one-on-one meetings, then take some trustworthy people with you, Jesus says. Most likely this will be an elder or some other trusted church leader or someone who's spiritually mature and maybe knows the person well.

And notice how the circle's starting to get a little wider, but again, even here, it's still very private, right? And again, if the person repents at this stage, the process is over. You've gained your brother or sister.

It's done. Restoration. Step three, verse 17. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

At this point, after repeated meetings with the person, the situation is then explained to the members of the church family, those who have committed their life together to love and serve one another.

Notice how the circle of prayer and exhortation and warning gets a little bigger and a little more serious each time. But again, at this point even, if the person repents, if they turn from their sin, it's over.

[20:02] There's no shunning, there's no shame, there's forgiveness, and there's restoration. But if the person continues in unrepentance, though the whole church has prayed and warned, then Jesus says there's one more step.

Look at the rest of verse 17. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. That is, no longer consider him as a brother or sister in the family of the church.

Remove him or her from membership. In 1 Corinthians 5, if you want to turn back there, verses 3 through 5, Paul goes into a little more detail about how that final step of removal from membership should happen in the Corinthian church.

Now, as you scan those verses again, you can see that there are some pretty tricky bits here. First, I mean, perhaps first, it seems like, after we've just seen this great process that Jesus lays out, it seems like Paul doesn't follow the ordinary process that Jesus outlines in chapter 18 of Matthew. Does that mean that Paul is disregarding the teaching of Jesus? Well, no. I think it's more likely that Paul sees the situation in Corinth as so extreme, so public, and so clear.

[ 21 : 19 ] The man is so clearly unrepentant and recalcitrant. The church itself is so hardened and even proud of what's happening that moving directly to the final stage of the process, Paul sees as necessary and warranted.

Now, today, there might be times when a case is so clear that a church moves quickly through the process Jesus outlines. But friends, that would be very, very rare as it was here in 1 Corinthians 5. Next, as we look at this paragraph, what does Paul mean that he's present in spirit or my spirit is present? I don't think Paul means anything spooky or weird by that.

It's not as if, you know, he's going to be a specter haunting their next congregational meeting in the Corinthian fellowship hall or that he's going to show up like Obi-Wan speaking to Luke through the force.

Corinth, trust your feelings. I think Paul is saying, I mean, quite straightforward, I think he's saying that his heart and his mind is so engaged in what's going on here that he cares so much for this church and he cares so much for Christ's honor among them.

[ 22 : 29 ] It's as if he's there, even if he can't actually be there. He's behind them. He's for them. He's deeply engaged. I mean, we sometimes even speak this way, don't we?

I'll be there in spirit when we can't actually make it, right? What do we mean by that? We mean that our hearts and our thoughts are going to be deeply engaged with it even if we aren't actually there. Okay, the last tricky bit in this paragraph is verse five.

What does it mean to deliver this man to Satan? Golly. Well, friends, in the Bible, Satan is sometimes described as the ruler of this world in the sense that in this fallen world, that is the sphere where the enemy exercises his influence and his power.

So by saying, deliver this man to Satan, Paul's using vivid language to describe the act of removing the man from membership out of the visible church, out of the realm of Christ, and thus handing him over to the world, to the realm of Satan.

Deeply vivid, stark language Paul's using for this serious act. Now, we're going to get to the rest of verse five in a minute when we talk about the why of church discipline. For now, notice that in this paragraph, three through five, Paul assumes, just like Jesus taught in Matthew 18, that removing someone from membership is something that the whole church will do.

[ 23 : 55 ] When you are assembled, Paul says, then you are to do this. In other words, he's calling the whole church to be responsible for its members.

All of us, friends, who have committed to the local body are spiritually accountable to one another in the church. It's not just the pastors and elders who are tasked with spiritual care in the family of Christ, even though we are called to take the lead in doing that.

All of us have a part to play. In other words, when we become members of a local church, we're taking on a calling. We're taking on a responsibility. It's not like just being members of the Sierra Club where you sort of get a nice card in the mail and you get a magazine every once in a while. No! Church membership is a mission. It's a calling. It's a role to do our part to help our brothers and sisters grow in the Lord using whatever gifts God has given us.

To give and receive gifts of love and service as we say here at Trinity when someone becomes a member. Notice too, friends, that it's something that the whole church does in the name of the Lord Jesus with the power of the Lord Jesus, Paul says.

[ 25 : 18 ] And this is what we saw in Matthew 18. In other words, Paul isn't just making this up out of his head. It was the Lord's idea from the start. And that means that Jesus will be present to give us the strength and the courage and the wisdom for the task no matter how difficult it becomes.

God's idea is the need to be present Now let me just say the question of how we interact with someone who's been removed from membership after a process of church discipline is a challenging one.

As verse 5 implies and as Jesus made it clear in Matthew 18, the goal of church discipline is the restoration and repentance and restoration of the offending brother or sister, right? So on one level, we'll want to have some contact with them and we'll want them even to show up for public worship

on Sundays hoping that God's word will work a change in them.

And obviously if they're part of our natural family, if it's a husband or wife, if it's a son or a daughter, we'll obviously remain faithful to them in those roles. But our overarching aim as members of the body of Christ is to see them come back to a place where they confess and forsake their sin and seek forgiveness.

So our relationship with a former church member will, without a doubt, have a different feel. Paul says in verse 11 pretty starkly, don't even eat with such a one.

[ 26 : 51 ] Now eating in the first century meant a lot more than just getting calories into your system, right? It was a sign of solidarity and acceptance. It was a sign of wholehearted embrace.

If someone professes to be a Christian but utterly disregards the teaching and the lordship of Jesus, friends, we can't give them that wholehearted embrace. Our interactions will be loving and gentle, yes, but there will be a sobriety and seriousness to those interactions as well.

And undergirding everything will be a longing that the person experience a change of heart and come to know real repentance. I've actually had one experience of this personally.

A number of friends, a number of years ago, a friend of mine who is not a member of this church but a member of another church actually came under church discipline and was eventually removed from membership.

There was a secret sin in his life that he had nursed for many years that very few people even knew about and when it eventually came to light, when it finally sort of came out in the open, he refused to see that it was wrong, persisted in it and there was zero repentance.

[ 28 : 11 ] And of course, it was heartbreaking. He was a very close friend, someone that Beth and I knew even before we moved to New Haven. And I looked up to him in many ways actually. He was a little older than I was.

And I remember interacting with him a few times after everything had sort of gone down and after he had been removed from membership in his church. And friends, I confess, it was hard. At first, you know, we sort of had the usual friendly, oh, hey, how's it going?

How's work? But given all that had happened, our conversation couldn't just go on as usual. I'd like to say we had sort of deep, meaningful conversation about where he was at spiritually, but you know, we didn't.

It was clear from our conversation that his heart hadn't changed and maybe I just chickened out, didn't bring it up. Or maybe we both knew where the others stood and had already laid it out honestly on the table in previous conversations, so maybe there wasn't much left to say.

But either way, I told him that I was praying for him and that I cared deeply about him, but I knew that things couldn't go back to being the same. because me pretending like everything was okay, friends, it would have done him no good because everything wasn't okay.

[ 29 : 36 ] He was headed headlong away from Christ, still professing to be a believer, but rejecting everything. How about who Jesus was and what Jesus taught?

we couldn't just go back to normal because way too much was at stake for him. And friends, the reality is that each discipline situation is different.

If we as a congregation need to, at some point in the future, remove someone from membership because of a discipline issue, we'll need to carefully consider how to have a fruitful ongoing relationship with that person.

And you can look to us as the elders to give prayerful help on how to do it well. And it's not as if the elders are getting ready to do church discipline.

We're preaching 1 Corinthians 5 because it was sort of the next chapter in the series. But friends, it's going to be tricky if it comes up. But prayerfully, we'll do it together. So what do we see then about the how of church discipline here?

[ 30 : 47 ] First, we see that it's something that we do patiently and deliberately. It's not brash. It's not judgmental. There's a process that Jesus gives us and we can trust that process. Second, it's something that we do corporately.

It's a process we're all responsible for in one way, shape, or form. And finally, it's something that we do dependently. It's a process that we need Jesus' own wisdom and strength for and He promises that He'll give it to us.

If you look back in Matthew 18, there's a really famous verse at the end of that church discipline paragraph where two or three are gathered in my name. There I am in the midst. And Jesus isn't

talking about an evening service when it snows and no one shows up.

What's the context? He's talking about correction in the life of the body. And He says, in those hard moments, beloved, I'll be with you.

I'm going to be in the midst of you, leading you and guiding you. So the last question I want to ask about church discipline in this text is not just what or how, but why.

[ 31 : 58 ] Why in the world should we do this? I mean, come on. Can't we just let people figure this stuff out on their own? Are we really supposed to meddle in each other's lives to this degree? I mean, maybe for you all this still sounds a bit harsh.

You know, maybe you're visiting church this morning and you think, what in the world did I get into? This is craziness. But briefly, I want us to see that church discipline, this process of correction and approaching one another in this way is driven by love.

This process is driven by a three-fold love that compels us to do this. And we actually see them right here in our text. The first is this. We do church discipline out of a love, one, for the person being disciplined.

This is that tricky bit at the end of verse five. What's Paul actually saying there? He's saying there that the aim in church discipline, as we've said, is restoration. We want this person to be rescued from their sinful nature, from the flesh, so that they might stand before the Lord one day in confidence.

When it really counts, we want them to be there. And even the act of excommunication, formally removing someone from membership, is meant to function like a giant megaphone calling them to return.

[ 33 : 17 ] It's like a huge warning sign saying that the bridge is out ahead and that road only leads to disaster. The hope is always that the person will one day come back into membership.

Why do we want that? We want that not because we want the other person to be miserable, but actually because we long for that person's lasting joy.

Think with me for a second. underneath our common idea that to really love someone, you need to set them free and not get in the way of what they feel is right.

Underneath that is the belief that following one's feelings is the key to lasting happiness. And so we think real love, wanting the other to be genuinely happy, which is not a bad definition of love.

We think that real love must be found in letting them free to pursue their feelings. If I love you and want you to be happy, I can't stand in the way of what you feel. But friends, is that belief actually justified?

[ 34 : 28 ] That the pursuit of feeling necessarily leads to lasting happiness? Do we actually have good reason to believe that? And don't we all have a sense that our feelings and our desires aren't always trustworthy?

Yesterday, I took Jack and Claire, my four-year-old and three-year-old, to the Pez factory store in Orange. Have you been there? First time we've been there, it was actually quite fun.

I didn't realize they charge you money to go. So I said, is there anything we can see here for free? She's like, you can go to the store. I was like, okay, fair enough. So we went to the store, the Pez store, and predictably, my daughter picked out the Elsa Pez head, and my son picked out the Stormtrooper Pez head, and we got Nemo for Owen.

But you know, my daughter, left to her own devices, would have eaten those chalky little pellets of Pez candy all afternoon, all night, all morning, had I let her follow her feelings and desires.

She was begging me to let her eat Owen's Pez that we got for him. Of course, he's not going to eat them. When we first got home, she said, Daddy, let's save it for Owen. By the end of the afternoon, it was, he's not going to eat it, Daddy.

[ 35 : 49 ] Give it to me. And of course, had we let her go down that path as a result, she would have gotten terribly sick.

Our whole family would have been miserable. And of course, that's a very simple example, isn't it? But can't we extend it to nearly all areas of our life? So if the free expression of our feelings and desires isn't the key to lasting happiness, friends, what is?

There's a popular Christian book about marriage that once said, God cares more about your holiness than your happiness.

But you know, honestly, friends, if you leave it there, that's actually not true. Or at least, it's not a helpful way of putting it. The truth is, brothers and sisters, that God cares deeply about our

