

Forgiveness and the Church



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galations 6:1, 2).

AUTHOR PHILIP YANCEY begins his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* with a true story about a prostitute who paid for her drug habit by prostituting her two-year-old daughter to whomever was willing to pay. When asked if she ever thought about going to a church for help, she replied, “ ‘Church! . . . Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’ ”—(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 11.

How ironic—the exact kind of person who had been drawn to Jesus when He was in the flesh is afraid to go to the church that bears His name. Maybe with good reason too. *After all, prostituting your own two-year-old daughter?* How should your local church respond to someone who comes to its door with such a story? This week we look at the all-important question of the church and forgiveness.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: How did Paul view the need for discipline in the local church? How did Paul balance that need with mercy? How can we as a church find the same balance? What gives the church the authority to discipline members?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 10.

SIN IN THE CHURCH: PART 1 (1 Cor. 5:1).

Jesus came to save the lost. When we read accounts like the one in 1 Corinthians 5:1, we can understand better what this idea means. Paul says that it is “reported commonly” this there is fornication in the church. In other words, it is not just some vague rumor, some nasty little gossip that fell his way. He has good reasons to believe the sordid account.

The word for fornication forms the root for the English word *pornography*. In the Greek of Paul’s time, that means some sort of illicit sexual relations. In this case, however, the kind of fornication is made rather explicit: A man is having sexual relations with his father’s wife—in other words, *his stepmother*. No details are given regarding her current relationship with the member’s father. Were they still married, or divorced? Was the father dead? Had the member married this woman, or were they living together?

Whatever the details, Paul doesn’t seem to care. He finds the relationship an abomination, a practice, he says, that is not accepted, even among the heathen.

And now it is in the church?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:2. What is Paul saying here to the Corinthian church? In what ways is the issue he is addressing here an even bigger problem than this wayward church member?

The texts themselves do not explain the reason for the church’s attitude about this blatant sin. Maybe the church member is very wealthy. Maybe the church has improper notions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Instead of mourning the situation, they are actually “puffed up,” proud, if not over the specific sin itself then perhaps over their own spiritual state. Perhaps they feel pride in their tolerant, loving, and graceful attitude toward the sinner. Who knows? What we do know is what Paul feels about not only the act but the church’s attitude toward it.

Take that same situation and apply it to your local church. What reasons could you see your church, or any church, use in order not to act appropriately in such a blatant situation?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Galatians 6:1, 2.

Teachers Aim:

1. To show that sin exists, even in the church.
2. To outline how God has counseled the church to deal with open sin.
3. To strengthen the class members’ faith in both the God-given authority and responsibility of the church to discipline and restore.

Lesson Outline:

I. Sin in the Church (1 Cor. 5:1, 2).

- A. Paul addresses an abominable relationship in the Corinthian church.
- B. To restore the member, disciplinary action was required.

II. Confirm Your Love (2 Cor. 2:1-11).

- A. The goal of church discipline is to restore the member to full fellowship.
- B. If discipline is public, restoration must be public.
- C. The church is to treat the repentant member as Christ treats each of us when we repent.

III. Church Discipline (1 Cor. 5:4).

- A. Christ has given His church power and authority.
- B. The church, not an individual, is to prayerfully deal with problems that arise.
- C. The church is to ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom and compassion.

Summary: “All heaven is interested in the interview between the one who has been injured and the one who is in error. As the erring one accepts the reproof offered in the love of Christ, and acknowledges his wrong, asking forgiveness from God and from his brother, the sunshine of heaven fills his heart. The controversy is ended; friendship and confidence are restored.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 261.

Commentary.

Forgiveness and the Church.

Much as we would like to believe otherwise, church members are human. As such, they are subject to temptation the same as other

SIN IN THE CHURCH: PART 2 (1 Cor. 5:5).

Though Paul was not in Corinth when this problem was happening, he let the church know what he thought ought to be done about it. In fact, he says in 1 Corinthians 5:3 that although he has not been there in person to witness what was going on, he nevertheless has already made a judgment about the person who “hath so done this deed” (2 Cor. 5:3).

Read 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5. What does Paul say to do to the member who is involved in this sinful and shameful relationship? In whose name are they to act? See Ephesians 5:24. Why is that so important a point? Who is the man ultimately disgracing by his actions? First Corinthians, verse 5, is an especially difficult text. What do you think Paul is saying? What is he ultimately trying to do for the sinner?

Paul’s words sound pretty harsh. Though he is talking about disfellowshipping the man, Paul talks about actually delivering him to Satan. What does that mean? Commentators generally agree that what Paul seems to be saying here is that this person, by willfully defying the Lord, has severed Himself from the Lord, and the church is to acknowledge that choice by expelling him from the community of faith. At the same time, too, Paul does not want them to give up on him. There is a remedial element to be found in verse 5. The delivery of a sinner to Satan appears also in 1 Timothy 1:20. The idea of the “destruction of the flesh” (1 Cor. 5:15) perhaps could mean that because of the chastisement the man will put away his sinful actions and as a result be saved “in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).

Read 1 Timothy 1:20. What parallel can you find there with what Paul says to the Corinthians regarding the fate of this man?

However difficult the phraseology, Paul’s point seems clear: The man needs to be disfellowshipped for this deed. Perhaps, however, he will change his ways, as a result. In other words, one could argue here that the object of excommunication was not just retributive punishment but actually an act that could lead the sinner to repentance and, finally, reinstatement. In fact, some believe that is exactly what happened.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

people. When Christians fall prey to temptation, sin enters the church and must be dealt with. The manner in which Paul deals with sin in the church is an excellent example for us.

The nature of the sin in 1 Corinthians 5 is apparently obvious and of general knowledge among church members. It is also of such a nature that even nonbelievers condemned it. That such a sin was tolerated within the church is appalling to Paul, and he believes discipline should be swift and decisive.

“The Corinthian believers should have been much concerned over the evil in their midst and should have proceeded to remove the offender from the church.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 689. Their lack of action in this situation affects the mission of the church. God cannot bless His people when they knowingly permit obvious sin to flourish among them.

Paul recommends that the church should “deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (1 Cor. 5:5). At first glance, this seems a particularly harsh punishment that is inconsistent with our understanding of the need to show love and compassion. This verse, however, is generally understood to mean the need to remove the sinner from the church community. In doing so, the church is not sentencing the sinner to a needlessly unjust and abusive punishment. It is actually recognizing the choice the sinner made for himself. “Because there are only two spiritual kingdoms in this world, that of God and that of Satan, the person who renounces the service of the kingdom of God automatically enters the service of Satan’s kingdom. The church does not actually make the transfer, but ratifies the choice already made by the offending member.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 292.

The purpose of this sentence is actually remedial, as Paul explains in the second half of 1 Corinthians 5:5. “Church discipline is intended to awaken offenders to a realization of their dangerous situation and to reveal to them their need of repentance and contrition. Having been corrected and humbled by his punishment, the sinner may be recalled to a life of virtue and faith.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 690.

God has given church leadership the authority to discipline erring members. “The leaders of the church, together with the congregation, are empowered to take disciplinary action in the name of Christ when this becomes necessary, and such action, when proper procedures have been followed, is ratified in heaven. . . . God Himself respects the authority that He has delegated to His church, and works through His own appointed agency for the conduct of His work on earth.”—Page 690.

When church leaders must discipline erring members, they must be careful to do so in the right spirit. “Successful dealing with sinners is not achieved by bitter denunciation, by ridicule or sarcasm, by making public their sins. What these harsh weapons cannot ac-

“CONFIRM YOUR LOVE”: PART 1 (2 Cor. 2:1-11).

Though commentators are not in agreement, some believe that the person referred to in the text here (vss. 6-8) was, in fact, the man who had entered into an illicit sexual relationship with his father’s wife (see yesterday’s study).

Whatever the case, this point is clear from the texts: The disciplined member was to be restored to full fellowship. Just as the church in a public session had condemned him, the church in a public way must restore him. The apostle was calling for a formal action to assure this member of the congregation’s love. In that way, no question as to his full restoration could be raised in the future. They were to confirm their love toward him.

Look at verses 7-10. Write down the three verbs Paul uses to describe what their attitude toward this person should be:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Paul’s pastoral side comes through very clearly. Whatever the offender had done, not only should he be reinstated but the church should give him love, comfort, and grace.

What he seems to be saying is that once someone has been exposed in public as a sinner and has subsequently given evidence of repentance, it is imperative that the church make clear in just as open a manner that the person involved is forgiven and accepted as a member of the family again. What is condemned in public cannot be erased in private. In other words, the grace that God bestows upon us when we repent and turn away from our sins needs to be reflected by the body that represents Christ; that is, His church.

Indeed, Paul is so adamant about this that in verse 11 he all but says that not to treat this person in such a manner would be to fall into one of Satan’s snares. What kind of snares? Look up Job 1:9-12; Zechariah 3:1, 2; Revelation 12:10.

God is a God of mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love; His people are nothing if they don’t reflect those attributes, not only as individuals but as a corporate body, as well.

Look at 2 Corinthians 2:8: “Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.” If, indeed, this is the same person discussed in the two previous days’ sections, Paul, who was adamant that he be disfellowshipped, now is just as adamant that they reaffirm their love toward him. What does that tell us about the nature of church discipline?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

comply may be done by affectionate concern, with ‘many tears.’” —Page 836. When approached in such a manner, fallen members are much more likely to return to the church after they have repented. Kindness always leaves the door open for a renewed relationship.

In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul advises the Corinthian church wholeheartedly to welcome the return of the disfellowshipped member once he came to an awareness of his sin. “Where there is genuine repentance the case should be brought to a close, with no further reference to the incident and with wholehearted acceptance of the forgiven person. . . .

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 2:1-11.

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| <p>1. Being a member of Christ’s church carries with it both privileges and responsibilities. Being a Christian means to embrace the values and attributes reflected in Christ’s own life and ministry. What, then, is our responsibility to those who have turned away from the principles of God’s kingdom? Give examples of how Jesus dealt with sinners.</p> <p>2. Using the analogy of the church being a “hospital for sinners,” how does the situation in the church in Corinth force Paul to make a statement about the immoral behavior of one of its members? What other choices did Paul have?</p> <p>3. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul urges the believers in Corinth to reinstate the fallen brother. What</p> | <p>specific things take place to change the situation? What danger do they need to guard against (vs. 7)? Do all incidents of church discipline turn out this way? What should we do when they don’t?</p> <p>4. No reading of Galatians 6:1 is complete without the reading of Galatians 6:2. Often people are only too willing to offer correction, but when someone needs help with his or her burden, there’s no one around to help. Why is it important to be involved in someone’s restoration? What is a prerequisite of that involvement?</p> <p>5. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: All church discipline is redemptive. What can you do to make certain that the discipline administered by your church is redemptive? When does justice end and mercy (forgiveness) begin?</p> |
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“CONFIRM YOUR LOVE”: PART 2.

Let us go back to Tuesday’s study. Someone did something that brought upon him corporate rebuke from the church. Whatever it was (maybe even having an illicit affair with his stepmother), he obviously did what was needed to be done in order to satisfy Paul and the church that he should be reinstated into fellowship.

However, it is clear, too, that Paul was concerned that the person not be “swallowed up” with too much sorrow (2 Cor. 2:7). Thus, he tells the church to confirm their love toward him.

On this topic, *The SDA Bible Commentaries* says: “Confirm. Gr. *kuro*, ‘to ratify,’ ‘to confirm,’ ‘to reaffirm’ (cf. Gal. 3:15). It was a legal term used of validating an agreement. Here it means to ratify or confirm by decree or vote of the church (see on Matt. 18:18). Acting in its corporate capacity, the church should revoke its former action and restore the man to fellowship. Discipline had been administered by a formal action on the part of the church; restoration to fellowship should be no less public and official. The man was to have full assurance of the favor of his brethren in the church. Thus, in the future, no question as to the validity of his reinstatement could arise.” —Vol. 6, p. 838.

While all this is fine at the corporate level, what could individuals do in order to help such a person understand and accept that he or she has been forgiven and accepted back into the body? In other words, what could we as individuals do to help this person truly feel loved and accepted? What examples can we find from the Bible that would help us know what to do?

As a church, Seventh-day Adventists have long upheld certain moral standards that help define who we are. As a church, we must. At the same time, we need to be careful we don’t become so rigid that we forget the human side of those with whom we fellowship and whom we expect to uphold and follow these standards.

We are all sinners; we are all beings weakened by sin; we have all fallen short of the glory of God. The grace that we need for ourselves (and we all need it) we should be just as willing to give freely to others who, perhaps, have not sinned as grievously as we have. Or maybe they have. Grace, remember, is unmerited favor. It is something given to those who *do not* deserve it.

In what kind of situations should a person *not* be extended the kind of grace that Paul talks about here in 2 Corinthians 2? Who should make that kind of judgment?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

“The church was to receive this returning brother as God receives a penitent sinner into His favor.”—Pages 837, 838.

Any disciplinary action taken by the church must be performed in a spirit of love and concern for the errant person’s spiritual welfare. While removing the person from church fellowship may be necessary as a last resort for someone who is adamant in refusing to turn away from sin, the focus should never waver from finding ways to redeem that person.

WITNESSING

Six-year-old Kayla knows that she must be obedient. Kayla also knows that there will be consequences when she disobeys. Sometimes the consequence is to go to her room. She is removed temporarily from the presence of her family, who loves her. But once she has learned and understands that she cannot be disobedient, she is welcomed back with open arms into the fellowship of her family.

The church is God’s family and His representatives on Earth. The standards of the church were set forth by God Himself in the Ten Commandments. The Lord wants His people, who are His representatives, to uphold and live by these standards and to teach others to do so.

When a member of God’s family lives in open sin, compromising God’s standards, it may be

necessary to remove that individual from church membership. However, when this happens, the church family must hope this is a temporary separation, and in love, seek to bring that individual back into the fellowship of the church. The Lord does not want us to turn anyone away from Him, no matter how great our sin may be. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Although our sins may not be open and deliberate, we all have sins we strive to overcome.

The people of God must continue to reach out to those who are separated from the church, witnessing to them and praying that God will help them to see the error of their ways. Those who have fallen away need to know they are still loved and wanted in the family of God.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 5:4).

The Bible makes one point very clear: Christ has established His church on earth, and it is from Him that the church has derived its authority.

What do the following teach us about the authority of the church?

Matt. 16:19 _____

Matt. 18:17 _____

Eph. 1:22 _____

Eph. 5:23 _____

Col. 1:18 _____

Notice, too, the authority that Paul acknowledges in the local church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, he tells them to act in the name of Jesus Christ in the action of disfellowshipping the one living in open and blatant sin. In 2 Corinthians 2:10, he again acknowledges the authority of the local church in dealing with its members, even to the point of saying that whom they forgive, he forgives.

The church, of course, is not made up of any single person. It is a body of believers organized for the work of, among other things, proclaiming the gospel. But the important point is that no one individual in the church has the authority to do the things that Paul tells the church as a whole to do. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, he stresses that when you are “gathered together” in the name of Jesus, then you can act. There’s wisdom in a multitude of counselors. These types of actions need to be taken on a corporate level, with the duly appointed leaders of the church under the unction of the Spirit, seeking to deal with the problems that arise within the church itself. No one person should be given free rein to decide these matters.

Christ, the Creator of the universe, has given power and authority to His church. That’s a heavy responsibility. What can we do, as individual members of the church, to cooperate in ways that will allow the church to exercise that authority in a manner that reveals the mercy and the justice of God?

LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: Make a four-piece pie chart. Above the chart write *Forgiveness*. On the outer rim of each section, write one of these labels: Physical, Mental/Emotional, Spiritual, Social. Lightly shade with red pencil the areas in which you have the most difficulty applying Galatians 6:1, 2. With a blue pencil, shade the areas in which you have the most success applying this passage. How will you use this visual to move yourself toward a totally blue chart?

Thought Questions:

1. Some denominations have a history of using accommodation, lowering Christ’s standards to win converts. What has been the result?
2. What have been the results of lowering Christian standards in the church, the school, and the home? How do lowering standards affect forgiveness?

Application Questions:

1. What is the difference between accommodating people in their sin and accepting people where they are in order to bring them to higher standards? What help

do Isaiah 40:28-31, John 1:12, and Philippians 4:13 provide? What insights do you glean from the stories of Rahab and/or David and Bathsheba?

2. Two of your unmarried friends, former church members who live in another geographic area, are living together as man and wife. In response to your recent conversations with them about Christ’s soon coming, they are willing to take time without pay from their jobs and travel a great distance with their new baby to spend a week in your home with your spouse and children to work through some of the barriers to their reuniting with the church family. In light of Galatians 6:1, 2, how do you handle the sleeping arrangements of these consenting adults while you minister to their spiritual needs? Write or role play a possible conversation with them about this issue. How will you establish common ground with them despite your contrasting life styles? How will you not allow the place where your friends are socially to keep you from “cultivating the soil” with them spiritually? How does 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 add to your understanding and your approach?

FURTHER STUDY: See the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, “Church Discipline,” pp. 175–190; Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 260, 261.

Among the more serious of the evils that had developed among the Corinthian believers, was that of a return to many of the debasing customs of heathenism. One former convert had so far backslidden that his licentious course was a violation of even the low standard of morality held by the Gentile world. The apostle pleaded with the church to put away from among them ‘that wicked person.’ ‘Know ye not,’ he admonished them, ‘that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 303, 304.

“In dealing with erring church-members, God’s people are carefully to follow the instruction given by the Saviour in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew.

“Human beings are Christ’s property, purchased by Him at an infinite price, bound to Him by the love that He and His Father have manifested for them. How careful, then, we should be in our dealing with one another! Men have no right to surmise evil in regard to their fellow-men. Church-members have no right to follow their own impulses and inclinations in dealing with fellow-members who have erred. They should not even express their prejudices regarding the erring; for thus they place in other minds the leaven of evil. Reports unfavorable to a brother or sister in the church are communicated from one to another of the church-members. Mistakes are made and injustice is done because of an unwillingness on the part of some one to follow the directions given by the Lord Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 498.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Look at Matthew 18:15-18 in the context of the week’s lesson. How does it parallel what we have studied this week about church authority, mercy, and discipline?
2. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* says that the church “recognizes the need of exercising great care to protect the highest spiritual interests of its members, to ensure fair treatment, and to safeguard the name of the church.”—(Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Pub. Assoc., 2000), p. 185. How could the principles studied this week, if followed, help bring these stated goals to pass? In what ways could showing forgiveness to wayward members help make these goals a living reality?