

Forgiveness and the Church



MEMORY VERSE: “My [Paul’s] brothers, if someone is caught in any kind of wrong doing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too. Help carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ [Jesus]” (Galatians 6:1, 2, TEV).

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AUTHOR PHILIP YANCEY BEGAN HIS book *What’s [What Is] So Amazing About Grace?* with a true story. This true story was told to him by someone who worked with poor people in Chicago. The man told Yancey that a prostitute¹ was paying for her drug habit by renting out her two-year-old daughter for sex. Shocked at this terrible situation, the man asked if the prostitute ever thought about going to a church for help.

“‘Church!’ she cried. ‘Why would I ever go to church? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They would just make me feel worse.’ ”—Adapted from Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 11.

How strange—the same kind of person that had been drawn to Jesus when He was on the earth (John 8:1-11) is afraid to go to the church that carries His name!

Maybe with good reason too. After all, selling out your own two-year-old daughter for sex? How would your local church answer someone who came to its door with such a story? How *should* your local church answer?

This week, we will look at the all-important question of the church and forgiveness.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: How did Paul see the need for discipline² in the local church? How did Paul balance that need with mercy?³ How can we as a church find the same balance? What gives the church the right, or the power, to discipline members?

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

¹prostitute—a person who gets paid for having sex.

²discipline—things that help a person to have a good mind and a good character; when you do or say something to a person to help that person have a better mind or character.

³mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

SUN SIN IN THE CHURCH—PART 1.

“Now, it is actually being said that there is sexual immorality [impurity] among you so terrible that not even the heathen⁴ would be guilty of it. I am told that a man is sleeping with his stepmother!” (1 Corinthians 5:1, TEV).

When we read Bible verses like 1 Corinthians 5:1, we can understand better what it means that Jesus came to save lost people.

Paul says that it is “reported commonly” that there is fornication⁵ in the church. It is not just some rumor, some dirty little gossip that Paul happened to get. He has good reasons to believe this story.

The word for fornication forms the root for the English word *pornography*.⁶ In the Greek of Paul’s time, that means impure⁷ sexual relations. In this case, the kind of fornication is made rather clear: a man is having sexual relations with his father’s wife, or his stepmother. (Read Leviticus 20:11.) No details are given about her current relationship with the member’s father. Were they still married or divorced? Was the father dead? Had the stepson married this woman? Or were they just living together?

Whatever the details, Paul does not seem to care. He is disgusted with the relationship. Paul says that this practice is

not accepted even among the heathen. And now it is in the church?

What does Paul say to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 5:2? In what ways is this event⁸ a deeper problem than this backsliding⁹ church member?

First Corinthians 5 does not explain the reason for the church’s attitude¹⁰ toward this sin. Maybe the church member was wealthy. Maybe the church had wrong ideas about what it means to follow Jesus. Instead of being sad about the situation, they were proud. Perhaps they felt proud over their understanding, loving, and graceful attitude toward the sinner. Who knows? What we do know is how Paul felt about this act and the church’s attitude toward it.

Compare¹¹ the situation in 1 Corinthians 5 with your local church. What reasons would your church give for not acting properly in such a situation?

MON SIN IN THE CHURCH—PART 2.

“You need to condemn this man’s actions because, in doing so, you

⁴heathen—people who do not believe in God.

⁵fornication—having sex with a person you are not married to.

⁶pornography—dirty pictures or writing showing sex.

⁷impure—not pure.

⁸event—thing that happens.

⁹backsliding—no longer doing what God wants you to do.

¹⁰attitude—how the church thinks or feels about something.

¹¹compare—show how things are the same.

may be able to wake him up, turn his life around and save his soul” (1 Corinthians 5:5, CW).

Paul was not in Corinth when the event in 1 Corinthians 5 happened. But he let the church know what they should do about it.

What does Paul say to do to the member who has been involved in this sinful and shameful relationship? 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5. In whose name are they to act? Ephesians 5:24. Why is that so important? Whose name is the man destroying by his actions? First Corinthians 5:5 is a very difficult verse. What do you think Paul is saying? What is he trying to do for the sinner?

Paul’s words are rough. Paul is talking about disfellowshipping¹² the man. He is also talking about delivering (giving) him to Satan. What does that mean? Bible scholars (experts) agree that Paul seems to be saying that this person has rejected the Lord. By so doing, he has separated himself from the Lord. Then the church should accept that choice by removing him from the church. At the same time, Paul does not want them to give up on him. The delivery of a sinner to Satan appears also in 1 Timothy 1:20. The idea of the “destruction of the flesh”

(1 Corinthians 5:5) perhaps could mean that after the man is punished, he will put away his sinful actions. Then he will be saved “in the day of the Lord Jesus”¹³ (1 Corinthians 5:5).

What comparison¹⁴ can you find in 1 Timothy 1:20 with what Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 5:5?

Paul’s point seems clear: The man needs to be disfellowshipped for his action. Perhaps he will change his ways, because he is disfellowshipped. So being disfellowshipped was not just punishment but an act to help the sinner repent¹⁵ and rejoin¹⁶ the church.

TUE “CONFIRM [SHOW] YOUR LOVE” —PART 1.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:1-11. Some Bible scholars (experts) believe that the person in these verses was the same man who had entered into an impure sexual relationship with his father’s wife (read yesterday’s lesson).

The point is clear: The disciplined member was to be restored¹⁷ to full fellowship. Just as the church in public meeting had disciplined him, the church in a public way must restore him. Paul was calling for a formal action to show this member the church’s

¹²disfellowshipping—when a church says one of its members can no longer be a member.

¹³Lord Jesus—another name for Jesus.

¹⁴comparison—to show how things are the same.

¹⁵repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and that you want to stop sinning.

¹⁶rejoin—join again.

¹⁷restored—to have made something as it was in the beginning.

love. They were to confirm their love toward him.

Write down the three words Paul uses to describe the church's attitude toward the disfellowshipped person. 2 Corinthians 2:7-10.

Paul says that when someone has been exposed in public as a sinner, but has repented, the church should make it clear in public that the sinner is forgiven and accepted as a member of the church again. When a person is disciplined in public, he must be forgiven in public. The grace that God gives to us when we repent and turn away from our sins needs to be shown by the group that represents Jesus. This group is the church.

Paul feels so strong about this that in 2 Corinthians 2:11 he warns the church not to treat this sinner in such a way that will cause him to fall into one of Satan's traps. What kind of traps? Job 1:9-12; Zechariah 3:1, 2; Revelation 12:10.

God is a God of mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love. God's people are nothing if they do not also show mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love.

The man in 2 Corinthians 2:1-11 is probably the same man in 1 Corinthians 5. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul said this man should be disfellowshipped. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul says the church should show this man



**We must be loving the same way
Jesus is loving.**

love and forgiveness. What does this tell us about how church discipline works?

WED "CONFIRM [SHOW] YOUR LOVE"—PART 2.

Let us go back to Tuesday's lesson. Someone did something that brought discipline upon him from the church. Perhaps it was having an impure sexual affair with his stepmother. But he repented, because Paul thought he should be restored to full church fellowship.

It is clear, too, that Paul was concerned that the person not be "swallowed up" with too much sorrow (so discouraged as to give up) (2 Corinthians 2:7). So Paul tells the church to confirm their love toward him.

The word *confirm* was a legal word used to make an agreement work. In 2 Corinthians 2:7, confirm means to ratify (approve) or confirm by agreement or vote of the church (Matthew 18:18). Acting as a group, the church should drop its action against the man and restore him to fellowship. The church as a group had disciplined the man. So restoration¹⁸ to fellowship should be public and official too. The man needed to know he had the full support of his church. In this way, people would not ask questions about his church membership again in the future.” —Adapted from *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 838.

What could each church member 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 moral¹⁹ standards²⁰ that help explain who we are. This is good. But at the same time, we need to be careful we do not become so strict that we forget people who are weak and fail to follow these standards.

We are all weakened by sin. We all have fallen short of God’s glory. We all need God’s grace. But we also should

be just as willing to give this grace freely to other people who have sinned. Remember that we cannot earn grace. Grace is something given to people who do not deserve it.

When should a person not be given the kind of grace Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 2:7, 8? Who should make that kind of judgment?

THU CHURCH DISCIPLINE

“As you [the Corinthian church] meet together, and I [Paul] meet with you in my [Paul’s] spirit, by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ²¹ present with us” (1 Corinthians 5:4, TEV).

The Bible makes one point very clear: Jesus has established (put) His church on earth. It is from Him that the church has received its power.

What do the following verses teach us about the church’s power?

Matthew 16:19 _____

¹⁸restoration—making a disciplined person a full member of the church again.

¹⁹moral—having to do with right and wrong.

²⁰standards—laws of moral conduct.

²¹Lord Jesus Christ—another name for Jesus.

Matthew 18:15-17 _____

Ephesians 1:22, 23 _____

Ephesians 5:23 _____



The church is the body of Christ.

Colossians 1:17, 18 _____

Notice, too, the power Paul says the church at Corinth had. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, Paul tells the church to act in the name of Jesus when they disfellowship a member living in open sin. In 2 Corinthians 2:10, Paul again announces the power of the Corinthian church in dealing with its members. Paul even says he will forgive the person they forgive.

The church is not made up of any single person. The church is a group of believers organized to spread the gospel. The important point is that no one person in the church has the power to do the things Paul tells the church as a group to do. In 1 Corinthians 5:4, Paul points out that you can act when you are “gathered together” in the name of Jesus. There is wisdom in a group of many counselors. Disfellowshipping and restoring a person to church membership are types of actions the church needs to take as a group. The leaders of the church, under the leading of the Holy Spirit are to deal with the problems that arise within the church. No one person should have the freedom to decide these matters.

Jesus, the Creator of the universe, has given power to His church. This power is a serious responsibility. How can individual members of the church cooperate so the church can use that power to show both God’s mercy and justice (fairness)?



Jesus, the Creator of the universe, has given us power to show mercy and justice to sinners.

FRI **ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Read 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 done by the Corinthian believers was that they returned to many customs of the heathen. One member had backslidden so far that he broke even the low standard of morality held by the heathen world. Paul pleaded with the church to put ‘that wicked person’ away from them. ‘Know ye [you] not,’ Paul warned them, ‘a little bit of yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise. You must remove the old yeast of sin so that you will be entirely pure’ (1 Corinthians 5:6, 7, TEV).” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 303, 304.

“In dealing with backsliding church

members, God’s people are to carefully follow the teaching given by the Savior in Matthew 18:15-17.



If someone sins against you, talk to him alone first.

“Human beings are Jesus’ property. They were purchased by Him at a price without limit. They belong to Him by the love that He and His Father have shown to them. Then we should be very careful in our dealing with one another. We have no right to invent evil about other people. Church members have no right to follow their own feelings in dealing with fellow members who have made mistakes. They should not even share their likes and hates about people who have made mistakes. If they do, they place in other people’s minds the leaven (yeast) of evil. Reports against a brother or sister in the church are communicated from one to another of the church members. Mistakes are made and injustice²² is done because someone is not willing to follow the directions given by Jesus.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 498.

²²injustice—not being just or fair.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Matthew 18:15-18 compare²³ with what we have studied this week about church power, mercy, and discipline?
2. If possible, look at the section (part) in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* on “Church Discipline.” How does the manual repeat the principles²⁴ we studied this week?
3. *The Seventh-day Adventist Church*

Manual says that the Church “needs to use great care in protecting its members’ highest spiritual interests. The Church also needs to make sure its members have fair treatment and to safeguard the Church’s name.”—(Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publ. Assoc., 2000), p. 185; adapted. How could this week’s lesson help us reach these goals? In what ways could showing forgiveness to weak, backsliding members help us reach these goals?

²³compare—show how things are the same.

²⁴principles—rule of action or conduct.