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Failure to Discipline an Immoral Brother

5: 1-13

Failure to discipline the immoral brother DIG: If you were a Corinthian church member, how would you explain to your pagan neighbor why this man had been disfellowshipped? In what ways is church discipline similar to discipling children? In what ways is it different? What harm is there in not dealing with known sin? Why was it important for the Corinthians to mourn over this sin? Why is disfellowshipping important in restoring unrepentant sinning believers? What would happen if the church continued to ignore it?

REFLECT: When faced with a potential conflict with someone, are you more likely to fight? Or flee? Or ignore the problem and hope it goes away? In matters of discipline, are you overly judgmental? Too permissive? Inconsistent? Helpful? Explain. Does your church “celebrate the Seder?” If not, why not? Why do you think the Ruach inspired Paul to instruct believers in the B’rit Chadashah to “celebrate the Seder?” Why do Christian churches today fail to do so? How do you think God views their disobedience?

Church discipline. Not a pleasant topic. But a necessary one.

The situation in **the church** at **Corinth** had deteriorated to the point where extreme **church discipline** needed to be exercised. But as we will soon see, **the leadership** refused to fulfill **their God-given, Messiah-commanded** duty to remove the unrepentant **sinning** member. **Paul’s** response to **their** unwillingness increased the seriousness of this unpleasant responsibility. **The leaders** of every church must exercise vigilance in protecting **their** flock from ongoing, unrepentant, willfully defiant **sin** among its members.¹³⁶

The need for discipline (5:1-2b): It is actually being reported that there is sexual immorality (Greek: *porneia*) among you. *Porneia* in the Greek culture at the time simply meant *prostitution*. The Greeks were generally ambivalent on that

matter, depending in part, whether one went openly to the brothels or was more discreet and simply had an escort. The word, however, had been picked up in Hellenistic Judaism, always disapprovingly, to cover every kind of extramarital sexual **sin**, including incest and homosexuality. It could refer to any of these **sins**, as it does here with incest. **And it is sexual immorality of a kind that is condemned even by pagans - a man is sleeping with his stepmother (5:1)!** The testimony of **the church** in **Corinth** was thereby severely damaged.

Sin always takes you further than you wanted to go, costs you more than you wanted to pay, and makes you stay longer than you wanted to stay. **Reuben, the firstborn** of **Jacob**, committed incest with **his father's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:22)**; Therefore, although **he** had some good characteristics, was deprived of significant blessing in **Jacob's** final prophecies (see the commentary on **Genesis, to see link click Le - Reuben, You are My Firstborn, Turbulent as the Waters, You Will No Longer Excel**).¹³⁷

Three things about that particular **sin** seem obvious. First, the present tense: **there is sexual immorality**, indicates that the incest had been going on for some time and was still going on. It was not a one-time or short-term affair, but was continuous and open. They may have been living together as husband and wife. Second, since adultery is not charged, the relationship between **the son** and **his stepmother** probably caused **her** to be divorced from the father. At the time, neither of them were legally married. Third, because **Paul** calls for no **discipline** of **the woman**, it seems likely that **she** was not a believer. Thus, **the man**, being a believer, was not only **immoral**, but **unequally yoked** as well (**Second Corinthians 6:14**).¹³⁸

One of the major problems in **the church** at **Corinth** was that the baby believers were dragging their worldly behaviors into **the church**. As has been said many times, the problem was not that **the church** was **Corinth**, the problem was that **Corinth** was in **the church**! **Sexual immorality** was merely one of several examples.

More shocking to **Paul** than **the sin itself** was **the church's** toleration of **it**. The scandal rested squarely on the shoulders of **the false apostles** (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Af - The Problem of the False Apostles**) who regarded the situation with an appalling indifference. Worse than that, **the church** was **proud** that **they** were so progressive in **their** thinking.¹³⁹ **Paul** was really quite incensed over what **he** had heard. **And you are proud (5:2a)!** It was as if **he** was saying, "And in spite of this incest in **your** midst, **you** continue to hold

your heads high toward **me** as you have been doing? What right do **you** have to be **proud** with this kind of thing going on and no one doing anything about it?¹⁴⁰

Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning (5:2b NIV)? A church that does not **mourn** over **sin**, especially **sin** within its own fellowship, is on the edge of spiritual disaster because whenever **sin** is not repented of and cleansed, **it** spreads through the body like an infection. When **Paul** wrote **his** second letter to **the Corinthians** (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Af - A Chronology of Paul's Relationship with the Believers of Corinth**), **he** was still deeply concerned about its spiritual and moral condition, saying: **I am afraid that when I come again, my God may humiliate me in your presence, and that I will be grieved over many of those who sinned in the past and have not repented of the impurity, fornication and debauchery that they have engaged in (Second Corinthians 12:21). She** arrogantly followed **her** own feelings and rationalizations rather than **God's Word**, and found **herself** ignoring, and perhaps even justifying, flagrant **sin** in **her** own midst.¹⁴¹

The method of discipline (5:2c-5): That would have led you to remove from your company the man who has done this thing (5:2b)? There are always some who see disfellowshipping as harsh and unloving; but such criticism comes from those who do not appreciate the biblical view of **God's holiness**, and a deep hatred of **sin** that **holiness** demands. When **Isaiah** saw **ADONAI** sitting on a high and lofty throne, he heard the seraphim cry out, "Holy, holy, holy, is **ADONAI-Tzva'ot**" (Isaiah 6:1-3), he bowed in deep personal and national repentance. In such moments, **the removal of sin** is the natural consequence.¹⁴²

Paul makes clear the action that should have been taken to **discipline the man** who refused to repent of **his** blatant **immorality**. **He** should have been disfellowshipped. If a brazen, unrepentant sinner does not meet some consequences for **his** actions, **he** has no need to change **his** ways. Previous figures in biblical history had **mourned** over the **sinful** conduct of others, knowing that **it** would have consequences for the whole community (see the commentary on **Ezra-Nehemiah Bo - Ezra's Prayer about Intermarriage**). Individual **sins** can lead to corporate problems. **Achan's sin** caused defeat for **Isra'el (Josh 7)**, **sexual offenders** had to be **cut off** (disfellowshipped) from Ancient **Isra'el (Lev 18:24-30 and 22:22-24)**, and one can also consider the **blessings** and **curses** of **Deuteronomy 28**. Not removing unrepentant **sinner**s from the congregation of **God** can be seen by others as accepting the act and condoning such behavior.

Apparently, the incest was not something that had happened secretly, and was apparently well known among the **Corinthian** believers.¹⁴³

In view of the **Corinthian** indifference to the matter, **Paul himself** was compelled to act. **Discipline** is not inconsistent with **love**. It is lack of **discipline**, in fact, that is inconsistent with **love**. **ADONAI corrects the people He loves and disciplines those He calls His own** (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children**). **God disciplines His children** because **He loves** us, and we should **discipline** our **brothers** and **sisters** in **the Lord** if we truly **love** them.

For I myself, even though I am absent physically, am with you spiritually; and I have already judged the man who has done this as if I were present. Paul called on the **Corinthian church** to acknowledge, with **him**, the seriousness of the offense, to recognize the need for **discipline**, and to take appropriate action - as **Paul** would have done if **he** were actually there. **He** was saying that, in **his** inner **spirit**, **he** had already passed judgment on **the sinning man**, and had declared the mandatory consequence of disfellowshipping **him**. **So when you are assembled, and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Yeshua among us (5:3-4)**. When a local congregation acts in **Yeshua's** name, that is, according to **His Word**, they can be sure they are acting in **His power**.¹⁴⁴



Hand this man over (5:5a). This has to be a believer because the issue here is **church discipline** and **the church** doesn't **discipline** unbelievers. **Hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be preserved** (Greek: from *sos*, meaning *safe*, *preserved*, or *well*) **on the Day of the Lord (5:5 BSB)**. **Satan** is the ruler of this world, and **handing over** a believer **to Satan**, therefore, thrusts **him** back into the world on **his** own, apart from any support of **the church**. **He** would have forfeited **his** right to participate in **the**

church of Yeshua Messiah, which **He** intends to keep pure at all costs. **To hand over** (Greek: *paradidomi*) is a strong term indicating the judiciary act of sentencing, or **handing over** for punishment. The sentence would be to be **handed over to Satan (First Timothy 1:20)**.

The result of such **discipline** is **the destruction of the flesh so that the spirit may be preserved**. Physical weakness, sickness and even death can result from persistent **sinning**. In fact, death is frequently used in connection with divine judgment on **sin**. If you trace the Scriptures through the various Dispensations, **divine punishment has to be more severe at the beginning of a new Dispensation**, and **First Corinthians** was one of the earliest books written (see the commentary on **Galatians Ae - The Dates of the Books in the B'rit Chadashah**). This was a crucial time for the early **Church**, and such impurity, **sin**, scandal and **satanic** infiltration could have corrupted the entire **church** at its root.¹⁴⁵

Take, for example, **Nadab and Abihu**, the **two sons** of **Aaron** in **Leviticus 10:1-2** at the beginning of the Dispensation of Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of Torah**). **They** burned the incense in an improper manner and **God** killed **them** right in the holy place. Later, worse **sins** were done in the Temple (**Ezeki'el 8-10**), but the punishment was not as severe because **Ha'Shem** is always harsher at the beginning of a new Dispensation.¹⁴⁶ It is certainly true that the account of **Ananias and Sapphira** introduces us to a different world of thought from that of today. It is a world in which **sin** was taken seriously.¹⁴⁷

The destruction of the flesh indicates that **the immoral brother**, who had dragged **the Lord's** name through the mud, would eventually die unless **he** repented of **his sin**. We are not told of the specific affliction, disease, or circumstances, but **his** body was on the way to **destruction** in a special **disciplinary** way. If **he** kept **sinning**, **his** life would end before **he** otherwise would have died. **He** would go to heaven; but **he** would lose rewards (**1 Corinthians 10b-15**). To protect **His Church**, **ADONAI** would have to take **him** early. We must remember that a **disciplined brother** is still a **brother**, and is never to be despised, even when unrepentant: **If anyone does not obey what we are saying . . . take note of him and have nothing to do with him, so that he will be ashamed. But don't consider him an enemy; on the contrary, confront him as a brother and try to help him change (2 Thessalonians**

3:14-15). And if **he** repents, **he** is to be forgiven and restored in **love (Gal 6:1-2).**¹⁴⁸

That day (Second Timothy 4:6-8), or the Day of the Lord (5:5c), is when this **brother** will **stand before the bema seat of Messiah** (see **Au - God is the Master Builder**), and **his** life will be tested. All **the wood, hay and straw** will be burned up, and only **the gold, silver and precious stones** will remain. Believers are never judged **for there is no longer any condemnation awaiting those who are in union with the Messiah (Rom 8:1).**

The reason for discipline (5:6-7): Discipline must sometimes be severe because the consequences of not **disciplining** are much worse. **Sin** is a spiritual cancer that will not stay isolated. Unless removed, it will spread until the whole **church** will suffer its ravaging effects. **Your boasting is not good.** It's as if **Paul** is saying, "Look where your arrogance and your boasting has gotten you. Because you **love** human "wisdom" and human recognition, you are completely blinded to the brazen **sin** that will destroy your **church** if you don't remove it." **Don't you know the saying, "It takes only a little hametz (sin) to leaven a whole batch of dough (the church)?" Get rid of the old hametz, so that you can be a new batch of dough, because in reality you are unleavened (sinless). For our Pesach lamb, the Messiah, has been sacrificed (5:6-7).** As pictured in the **Passover** in Egypt, the sacrifice of **Yeshua Messiah, ADONAI's** perfect **Pesach lamb**, and the placing of **His** blood over us, completely separates us from the power of **sin** and penalty of judgment.¹⁴⁹

So let us celebrate the Seder (which included the Festival of **Unleavened Bread**) **not with leftover hametz, the hametz of wickedness and evil, but with the matzah of purity and truth (5:8).** This is undeniably one of the most important verses for today's Messianic movement. The key verb is *heortazo*, which means *to celebrate the Seder*. When today's Messianic believers see **First Corinthians 5:8**, they read it as a clear mandate from **Paul** that the **Corinthians** were to keep **the Passover**, which is an important observance for all believers, remembering both **the Exodus** and the sacrifice of **Isra'el's Messiah.**¹⁵⁰

This does not point back to practices in the Dispensation of Torah, but is a present tense, active verb. Although primarily Gentile, **the Corinthian** congregation nevertheless observed **the Passover** without supposing that, as many of today's Christians might think, **they** were "going back under the Law."¹⁵¹ So, I ask, how can Gentile Christians and churches say that they do not need to **celebrate the**

Passover when **Paul** instructs a primarily Gentile church to do so? This passage also proves that even in Gentile communities such as **Corinth**, it was common practice to observe the feasts of **ADONAI**. If this were not so, **Paul's** imagery here would have been meaningless to **his** readers. This is not merely a metaphor. Since the context in these verses is holy living, and moral purity in general, would there not be something lost if the reference to **Pesach** was entirely metaphorical?¹⁵² Without the practice, actual practice, there would be no metaphor!

The sphere of discipline (5:9-13): The **Corinthians** had misunderstood what **Paul wrote** on this subject in his earlier letter (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Af - A Chronology of Paul's Relationship with the Believers of Corinth**). They thought **Paul** was talking only about those **outside the church**. When he said **not to associate with people who engage in sexual immorality, he didn't mean the sexually immoral people outside the church, or the greedy, or the thieves or the idol-worshippers - for then you would have to leave the world altogether!**

No, what he wrote you was not to associate with anyone inside the church, members, who do not act like a believer, but who also engage in unrepentant sexual immorality, is greedy, worships idols, is abusive, gets drunk or steals continually. If they repent, of course, try to help them. But if they don't, with such a person you shouldn't even eat! Their sin has to cost them something. Still correcting their misunderstanding, Paul asked: For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Isn't it those who are part of the church that you should be disciplining? God will judge those who are outside. But it was his business to discipline those within the church if the Corinthians would not. They had a responsibility to keep their own house in order. Just expel the unrepentant, sinning, evildoer from among yourselves (First Corinthians 5:9-13; Deuteronomy 13:5 17:7 and 12, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21 and 24; 24:7).

This passage presents more than its share of difficulties for believers in the twenty-first century: How does one reconcile these last words with the teaching of **Yeshua (Matthew 7:1-5)**? or with **Paul** earlier in this letter (**4:3**)? And how does one reconcile it with what follows immediately (**6:2**)? Yes, the application of all this to the modern scene is not easy. Our different circumstances must be taken into account. But **Paul's** main point, that **the church** must not tolerate the presence of evil in its midst, is clearly permanently relevant.¹⁵³