

Sin in the Camp: How to Handle Church Discipline

“Now 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” (Matt. 18:15).

An unrepentant man attends church while continuing a porn addiction; a wife leaves her husband for a boyfriend; a gossip continues belittling and slandering ... the lists goes on and on.

No matter how small, sin, like cancer, can grow and destroy the whole body. James 1:15 tells us that when a sinful desire is born it grows until it consumes and overcomes. God is clear that a church cannot allow unrepentant sin to continue. The apostle Paul provides an example of a man living with his father's wife while the church remains silent. He responds, “Put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:13) with the goal being repentance and restoration.

Sadly, many churches take the easy route by avoiding confrontation. But saying nothing is saying something. We are condoning sin by our silence. Granted, we should not rush to judgment—grace, mercy and forgiveness must be underscored. God's patience with us is a good example to follow. If someone is caught in sin, we should restore that person gently while being careful not to fall into temptation as well (Gal. 6:1). Here are a few ways:

1. Examine your heart first. Jesus encourages us to remove the plank from our eye first because our sinful tendency is to point out the flaws in others. This doesn't mean that we should look the other way, but that we should refrain from eager judgmentalism.

2. Research the facts. Proverbs 18:13 says that we should not

make a decision before hearing both sides. Be patient and ask God to reveal what's really going on. Don't be quick to assume.

3. Don't move too quickly. Those handling the situation need to pray and wait on God. Often, God is convicting the person who is walking in disobedience. Moving too quickly can hinder this and damage communication. But on the flip side, moving too slowly has pitfalls as well. Sometimes we must intervene immediately as in the case of drug use, abuse and so on. Wisdom is needed here.

4. Lovingly confront the person. This is often not the time for anger but tears. Lovingly and graciously challenge them. It may also be appropriate to walk them through relevant Scriptures and remind them that poor choices have consequences, but also remind them that there is grace and forgiveness via repentance.

5. Offer a solution. Saying, "I will walk through this with you," offers great hope. The man addicted to porn needs to show that he is serious by installing accountability software. The wife who left her husband needs to end the affair immediately and so on. Accountability often starts the process of lasting change.

6. Healing requires time. In the same way that physical injuries take time to heal, spiritual restoration takes time as well. If restoration occurs too quickly, more damage can result because of a weakened state that is not yet strong. From my experience, a person who is eager to jump right back into ministry and avoid the waiting process is not ready—their motives may be skewed. Granted, God will often renew passion for ministry, but He's planting the seed for future service. The seed needs time to nourish and grow. We must feel the pain that our sin has caused. Time is needed to revisit progress, talk to family members and reassess the situation—encourage and believe the best in others (1 Cor. 13), but don't rush the

process.

7. Assess the heart of the person. If the person is contentious and angry about accountability, they are not broken. It's possible to be sorry about the consequences, but not truly repentant. A penitent person turns from sin. They accept full responsibility for their actions without blame, resentment, or bitterness. When repentance is genuine, we want to be reconciled with those we've injured; we want to do the right thing rather than make excuses.

8. What if a person doesn't listen? In Matthew 18:16-17, Jesus says to "But if he does not listen, then take with you one or two others, that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every word may be established. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." How churches handle this varies, but in my opinion, this is not a quick process (there are exceptions). After many weeks of pleading, praying and waiting on God, the time may come when church discipline needs to occur.

I don't believe that every situation needs to be brought before the entire congregation, but only before those who are affected (unless the person is in a position of leadership). "Tell it to the church" no doubt involves telling people who have some form of relationship with the person. Only those who know the person can treat them accordingly.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 sheds additional light, "If anyone does not obey our word in this letter, note that man, and do not socialize with him, so that he may be ashamed. Still, do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

We need to avoid needless communication so that God can work in their heart. "Shouldn't we be eager to restore our fallen brethren? To fellowship, yes. But not to leadership. It is not an act of love to return a disqualified man to public

ministry; it is an act of disobedience” (John MacArthur).

This doesn't mean that we arrogantly walk past them, but that we not conduct ourselves in a way that supports their decision to remain in sin. This is not the time for usual fellowship as if nothing is wrong; it's a time to lovingly follow the scriptural course regardless of the pain both parties feel. God often uses pain to eventually bring the prodigal home. We can't rush the process, nor should we try to avoid it.

As a final thought, don't forget about the emotional state of the victim and their family, especially if children are involved. Their spiritual well-being and emotional health are just as important as the offender's if not more so. {eoa}

Click here to watch the beginning of the 4 part series on Sin In The Camp.

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