

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Church Discipline, Step Four: Excommunication

Scripture: Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–11

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Editor's Note: The wrong article was posted earlier today. The following is the correct article, and the other one will be re-posted on Thursday.

Just last month a federal judge determined that California's death penalty law is unconstitutional. The reason? The penal code is so broken and beleaguered it amounts to cruel and unusual punishment—violating the Eighth Amendment. Incredibly, a judge determined the process and waiting period (often decades long) for the death penalty is more cruel than the penalty itself!

There is a lesson to be learned from such an ineffective system. The brokenness of the system partly explains why there is such rampant crime and disregard for law. Criminals have little to fear in terms of punishment. Charges are usually far less than the actual crime. Jail is of little consequence to hardened criminals. Overcrowded jails lead to undeserved early release for even violent criminals. Even the death penalty proves toothless due to endless appeals and the decades it takes to complete—if it ever happens.

While criminal punishment and church discipline are completely different issues, there is a similar lesson to be learned. Rampant sin in the church is in part due to the unwillingness, on the part of many leaders and churches, to engage in the difficult task of church discipline.

The tragic reality of living in a fallen world is that church discipline is unavoidable. It's unlikely a local church will escape the need to respond to flagrant sin within the flock. And church discipline, as outlined in Matthew 18:15-20, is the only righteous response to a church member whose sins [cannot be safely overlooked](#) without harm to the offender or to the Body of Christ. The process must be initiated with [private confrontation](#). If the offender refuses to repent, further confrontation is required with [witnesses](#). If he persists in unrepentance then [the entire congregation must be informed](#).

Further impenitence at this point demands the final step in the discipline process—excommunication: "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). This does not call for heaping scorn on the person. It is not a command to treat the person badly. It simply means that the person is to be regarded as an unbeliever. The repeated hardening of his heart calls the reality of his faith into question. From henceforth he should be regarded as an evangelistic prospect rather than a brother in the Lord.

Excommunication Explained

Implicit in this is the revocation of his membership. He is no longer to be deemed a member of the body. Rather, he should be regarded as an unbeliever, and therefore he should not be permitted to participate in the blessings and the benefits of the Christian assembly. In particular, he should not be welcomed as a communicant in the celebration of the Lord's Table. That is precisely what the term *excommunication* means.

But as far as the treatment extended to him by church members is concerned, this is no license for hostility or contempt. In fact, Christ's treatment of heathens and tax collectors is notable chiefly because of how He reached out to them in love.

A similar kind of compassionate evangelistic pursuit should characterize our treatment of those who have been excommunicated in this manner, with one significant difference: As long as the offender remains unrepentant *and continues to identify with Christ*, believers must not carry on a relationship with that person as if nothing were wrong. In order to send clear signals both to the sinning individual and the watching world, even fellowship in everyday social settings is to be suspended. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

In other words, because of the mixed messages sent by someone who *professes* faith in Christ and yet lives a disobedient life, the lines must be drawn as clearly as possible. We are supposed to have as little association as possible with such people.

Again, the point is not to be antagonistic or malevolent toward them, but to make clear that willful sin is incompatible with Christian fellowship. Since this person has identified with Christ and is a “so-called brother,” it becomes vitally important for the fellowship as a whole to demonstrate that this person's rebellion against Christ is incompatible with a profession of faith in Him.

Even at this point, however, the primary goal with regard to the offender is to win him back. Second Thessalonians 3:15 says, “Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” There is a sense in which you never really let him go; though you put him out of the church and out of your sphere of social fellowship, you keep calling him back. If the offender at any time demonstrates genuine repentance, he is to be welcomed back into the fellowship. But until that point, he is to be regarded as an outsider.

Paul, for example, instructed the Corinthian assembly to excommunicate the incestuous man from their midst. He wrote:

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. (1 Corinthians 5:1–2)

Details of what, if anything, had been done to pursue this man's repentance are not recorded. But his sin was already known to all, and he was continuing impenitently in the grossest kind of immorality. The time for excommunicating him was long past. So Paul exercised his apostolic prerogative and ordered the man excommunicated immediately:

For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:3–5)

The Purpose in the Life of the Sinner

Paul's words are harsh, but they give insight into what excommunication is about. The sinning person is "deliver[ed] . . . to Satan for the destruction of his flesh."

In other words, he is given over to the Satan-controlled system of sin and dissipation that he has chosen, where he will reap the full consequences of his sin. The excommunicated person may descend to the very depths of sin before repenting. In this final step of the discipline process, the church hands the sinner over to the natural result of his sin.

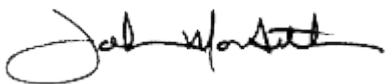
Notice that Paul characterizes the potential end result as "the destruction of his flesh." Sin, especially of the deliberate and wanton variety, often takes a physical toll on the sinner. Sin's natural consequences may include illness, or in extreme cases, even death (1 Corinthians 11:30). If he or she is a genuine believer, this should be a further motivation to repent, and the person will be ultimately saved. Again, the primary objective is the repentance and restoration of the offender.

The Purpose in the Life of the Church

A secondary objective at this point is the purity of the church. Willful sin is like leaven. If tolerated, it will eventually permeate the entire body. "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened" (1 Corinthians 5:6–7). The unrepentant believer must be put out of the assembly *for the sake of the assembly*.

A widespread commitment by evangelical churches to practice church discipline in obedience to Christ's command would radically alter the purity of the church landscape in America and abroad. Churches would be safer places for disciples to grow and the world would have a much easier time seeing the distinction between themselves and Christians.

But as fallen human beings, it can be a daunting prospect for church elders to deliver that final judgment of excommunication. Can we be confident in God's approval when ejecting members from the church? Jesus emphatically answered that question and we'll examine it next time.



(Adapted from [*The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*](#))

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