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Sermon Notes

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Practical Aspects of Healthy Church Discipline

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

The first sin that occurred centered around something as simple as eating a piece of fruit... God had put Adam and Eve in the beautiful Garden of Eden and had given them total freedom in the place, to eat from any tree they wanted... any tree EXCEPT ONE; Adam was forbidden by God to eat from that tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and was warned that if he ate from that tree, he would die. He was specifically put in the Garden to SERVE IT and PROTECT IT... (Genesis 2:15); the word "protect" could also be translated "GUARD" as a night watchman guards a defenseless city, or a sentry guards a sleeping army at night... That word will show up again in a moment.

But Adam failed to do his duty... the serpent came and deceived his wife, and Adam stood idly by while this evil conversation went on. Eve was deceived and ate from the forbidden fruit; Adam was rebellious and ate as well. And sin entered the world, and death through sin.

"The wages of sin is DEATH" ... but Adam and Eve didn't die right away. Actually, the first death came in the very next chapter, when their two sons Cain and Abel were grown men.

Both of them made offerings to God, but Abel followed God's command to offer animal sacrifice and Cain did not. God looked with favor on Abel's obedience and offering, but did not look with favor on Cain's disobedience and his offering. Cain was jealous and hated his brother, and rose up and killed Abel out in the field.

God confronted Cain, saying "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain answered, "I don't know... am I my brother's *keeper*." That word comes from the same root as what Adam was told to do to the Garden of Eden... to be its guardian, its watchman, its protector. Cain is saying "Am I the one who's supposed to watch over the safety of my brother?"

In the church of Jesus Christ, we have agreed to be each other's guardians, protectors, shepherds

In our church covenant, we have agreed to WATCH OVER ONE ANOTHER IN BROTHERLY LOVE... not like Cain who murdered his brother, then said it wasn't his job to look after his brother

Not like the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, who saw the poor victim of highway assault lying bleeding by the side of the road and crossed to the other side and walked on unconcerned

But instead, to "have each other's back" SPIRITUALLY... that expression, "I've got your back" means "I will protect your blind side, your vulnerable place, where the enemy can sneak up on you and do you harm."

In promising to WATCH OVER ONE ANOTHER IN BROTHERLY LOVE, we are promising to be shepherds to each other's souls... because the threats we all face are deadly serious... the world, the flesh, and the devil attack each one of us every single day

Christ's answer for our protection is multifaceted and powerful... The Father's sovereign power, his own intercessions for us, his sovereign power over this world and over Satan's activities, the indwelling Holy Spirit's continual work within us

But a big part of Christ's protection of his sheep is the CHURCH... a healthy local church, which commits to one another to WATCH OVER ONE ANOTHER'S SOULS every day in brotherly love

This morning, we will look for a second Sunday at church discipline... but I want to expand it to address more than just excommunication, which 1 Corinthians 5 commands

I want to look at the bigger picture of all that a healthy church should be doing in its members to guard them from sin

I. Review: 1 Corinthians 5

- A. Last Week: We walked through the most important chapter on church discipline in the Bible
- B. We begin this morning with a review of that text and what we learned
- C. Then, I want to expand our consideration of church discipline to address some vital practical aspects
- D. The real issue we're dealing with here: the deadly danger of indwelling sin, and God's amazing wisdom in setting his children in local churches where we can know and be known
- E. Our powerful enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil
 1. Changing the order... the devil, the world, and the flesh
 2. The devil: the ancient serpent, called also Satan, Paul calls him "the god of this age" who blinds the minds of unbelievers... a powerful ruler of an evil spiritual kingdom made up of powerful demons who are skilled in tempting people; Satan is shrewd,

clever, filled with schemes, able to tempt us to sin, then turning to accuse us of sin; brilliant in mind, perfectly evil in his heart, far too powerful for any of us to face

3. The world: Satan's masterpiece of temptation... alluring us with the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life; pulling our souls away from Christ to follow earthly pleasures and possessions and powers
4. The flesh: our own internal sin nature, corrupt, habitually following Satan and the world into sin; Paul describes the flesh in Romans 7: "sin living in me"... "The very thing I hate, I do; but the good I want to do, I do not do!!"
5. Local churches are responsible for each other spiritually... and the church is called to BE HOLY BECAUSE GOD IS HOLY

F. Paul Confronts the Corinthian Church on a Matter of a Sinning Member

1. A church member has committed a scandalous sexual sin, and the Corinthian church has done nothing about it
2. Paul clearly commands the church in chapter 5 to expel the man from church membership... actually he says it FOUR TIMES in different ways
 - a. Vs. 2 "you should have put out of your fellowship" the man who did this
 - b. Vs. 5: "Hand this man over to Satan"
 - c. Vs. 7: "Get rid of the old yeast of wickedness"
 - d. Vs. 13: "Expel the wicked man from among you"
3. It couldn't be clearer! And it exactly lines up with what Jesus says a church should do with an unrepentant sinner in Matthew 18: "Treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector"... that is, as an outsider

II. Five Motivations for Church Discipline

A. The Glory of God

1. The church should be the light of the world, so that people will see our good works and our holy lives and GLORIFY GOD
2. A church that tolerates sin does not glorify God

B. The Possible Repentance and Final Salvation of the Sinner

1. Note: it seems that this particular man DID eventually repent and Paul commanded the Corinthians that they should RESTORE him to full membership (2 Corinthians 2:7-11)
2. Amazingly he said they should show this man grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness, and restore him

2 Corinthians 2:11 IN ORDER THAT SATAN MIGHT NOT OUTWIT US, for we are not unaware of his schemes”

3. Amazing! It shows that Satan is working BOTH SIDES of this equation... first, trying to get churches to be too lax, too lenient, too tolerant of sin and too spiritually lazy... but then, if the church DOES practice church discipline, he wants them to be TOO HARSH, unforgiving, ungracious... so that a repentant sinner has NOWHERE TO TURN! No one will love him, welcome him, forgive him... he is left desperate and an outcast forever, as though he's committed the unforgiveable sin
4. This teaches us a practical lesson about church discipline: even after the sinner is voted out, he should be encouraged to keep attending public worship, to keep hearing sermons, to keep connected in some way with Christians who can speak into his life and see if he is turning away from sin

C. The Protection of the Church from the Internal Spread of Sin

1. “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough”
2. If you tolerate public sin like this, soon more and more sin will occur in the church

D. The Restoration of Unity in the Church

1. Sin tends to divide churches... to pit one person against another
2. When the church addresses sin in this pattern, the church can be restored to biblical unity, loving one another and growing together

E. The Reputation of the Church and of the Lord in the Community

1. When scandalous sin occurs, the reputation of the church and indeed of the Lord Jesus take a hit in that watching community
2. Outsiders, unbelievers can MOCK the church and Christ for it
3. They feel justified in their own sins and no need to repent and find salvation in Christ
4. But when the church DOES address sin, the reputation of the church and the Lord is restored, and the gospel ministry can continue

III. Common Objections and Issues with Church Discipline

A. Last week, I mentioned the American Church context: most churches have forsaken church discipline; they never practice it at all

1. Lifeway survey: More than 80% of pastors surveyed said their churches had disciplined no church member in the last year
2. More than half of those pastors said they'd not heard of any church in which a member had been disciplined for sin
3. 55% of the pastors said that no member of any of the churches they pastored had ever been disciplined

4. The pastors almost universally admitted it was a subject that was rarely even discussed

B. “It’s Not Loving”

1. This was the objection raised by a number of members when we began to practice church discipline years ago
2. They said “We’re supposed to love each other and forgive each other”
3. To those people, it seemed harsh
4. BUT we pointed out that it is not unloving to make someone face their own sin and deal with it
 - a. Imagine someone had all the symptoms of a serious, life-threatening disease
 - b. Would it not be unloving to ignore those tell-tale warning signs?
 - c. Even more, suppose that disease were highly contagious? Even if that person could not be saved, wouldn’t it be loving to the people he might infect to cause him to be quarantined?
5. People who argued that church discipline is unloving invariably are underestimating the danger of SIN
6. But this argument is just one of many that people make

C. Chuck Lawless listed Twelve Reasons churches don’t practice church discipline

1. They don’t know the Bible’s teaching on discipline
2. They have never seen it done before
3. They don’t want to appear judgmental
4. The church has a wide-open front door (very low expectations of their members; very little process for becoming a member)
5. They’ve had a bad experience with church discipline in the past
6. The church is afraid to open “Pandora’s Box”... they fear it’s a slippery slope that there’s no way to stop
7. They have no guidelines for discipline
8. They fear losing members (and dollars)
9. Their Christianity is individualized and privatized
10. They fear being “legalistic”
11. They hope “transfer growth” will fix the problem (they pass the problem on to another local church)

12. Leaders are sometimes dealing with their own sin issues

D. The Most Common Sin Addressed: Forsaking Assembling Together

1. The first church discipline case we addressed in my pastoral ministry here concerned a woman who was leaving her husband for another man; neither of them are members now or have been for many many years
 - a. It was a tragic scenario, and many people, especially women who knew her well tried to reach out to her, to talk to her, plead with her to stay with her husband and their children
 - b. But her mind was made up and she became defiant... she actually threatened legal action if any more women or men from the church came to knock on her door
 - c. The church was ready to address her status as a member, and we followed Paul's prescription—we were FILLED WITH GRIEF and voted her out of our fellowship
2. However, such cases are rare
3. By far, the greatest number of church discipline cases have been on FAILURE TO ATTEND corporate worship on Sunday mornings
 - a. The elders have worked consistently on our membership list
 - b. Our goal is that we will only have two types of members: those who regularly attend corporate worship, and those who are physically unable to do so because of medical infirmity
 - c. So, if someone stops attending worship, the elders and other church members seek to find out why... what's going on in their life; we want to restore them to healthy patterns
 - d. Generally, "where there's smoke, there's fire... if someone stops attending worship, it's usually because of some sin in their lives

IV. "We Will Watch Over One Another in Brotherly Love" (Heb. 3:12-13)

This is a commitment we make to each other in our church covenant... I want to walk through the key passage on why we need such careful shepherding of our souls

Hebrews 3:12-13 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

A. One of the Most Powerful Passages on WHY YOU SHOULD BE A MEMBER OF A HEALTHY LOCAL CHURCH

1. We go over this every New Members' weekend as we prepare people for membership
2. "Why should I become the covenant member of a local church?"

3. Answer: because each of us has the seeds of our own spiritual destruction within our bodies... INDWELLING SIN... Romans 7, “sin living in me”

Romans 7:15-17 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

4. Hebrews 3:12-13 also addresses this problem

B. The Great Danger: Apostasy

1. “a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God”
2. That we will turn away from following Christ and go into a life of open sin
3. If anyone thinks that could never happen to them, you don’t know your own heart... you are in more danger than you think you are
4. As the hymn says concerning our hearts, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love”

C. Hebrews 3: How Does the Heart Turn Away from the Living God?

1. Vs. 13 “being HARDENED BY SIN’S DECEITFULNESS”
2. Temptation and sin are extremely deceitful... sin does not tells us “Hello, I am sin! I am here to destroy your world... to steal and kill and destroy... to take from you everything you have ever valued—your family, your home, your money, your friends, your reputation, your job, your health and ultimately your life
3. Furthermore, sin has a stealthy gradual HARDENING effect on the heart... look again at verse 13: “hardened by sin’s deceitfulness”
 - a. Hardening means little by little, we are less responsive to the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit; our consciences become more and more accustomed to sin patterns that we originally were shocked and saddened by; now they seem like no big deal
 - b. Hardening means we are more and more rebellious against the Word... we don’t yield to it, submit to it... instead, we are STIFF-NECKED, resisting what the Lord wants us to do
 - c. As the heart becomes more and more hardened by sin’s deceitfulness, we start to drift away from the Lord—we don’t have quiet times like we used to, we don’t enjoy reading God’s word, we don’t enjoy going to church as much; so we start to miss some Sundays, doing thing we find more enjoyable
 - d. Our minds become more and more worldly... thinking about the things of this world more and more: pleasures, entertainments, possessions, wealth, hobbies... we don’t think very much about Jesus, what his will is for us
 - e. After a while, we have developed a SINFUL HEART OF UNBELIEF that turns away from the living God

4. The Remedy: the CHURCH... the brothers in Christ who are watching over your souls
 - a. "SEE TO IT, BROTHERS, that NONE of you has a sinful unbelieving heart..."
 - b. The Body of Christ committed to WATCHING OVER ONE ANOTHER IN BROTHERLY LOVE
 - c. "see to it" = literal translation... WATCH... the eye is on the brothers and sisters, to see if there are any tell-tale signs of the sheep wandering away from Christ
 - d. Know and be known is the key! New habit patterns, new facial expressions, new demeanors

5. "Encourage each other DAILY"
 - a. The Greek word "encourage" is very broad and very active; it is the same word used to describe the Holy Spirit as the "counselor" or "comforter"... it can have a stronger sense like "exhort"...
 - b. Bottom line: get involved in each other's lives!
 - c. DAILY... a consistent pattern of being involved with each other
 - d. Watch over one another in brotherly love!
 - e. Know and be known!
 - f. Get involved in Home Fellowships... develop friendships
 - g. Be in accountability relationships: men with men, women with women
 - h. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each
 - i. Watch each other's life patterns; ask, "What is going in in so and so's life that could cause them spiritual trouble?" Is it prosperity—maybe a lot of success, a lot of money; is it scarcity—not enough money; is it medical trials
 - j. Find out about each other's spiritual disciplines... are they feeding on the word daily? Are they praying consistently? Do you see the fruit of the Spirit in their lives
 - k. Keep in mind what Jesus prayed for Peter... he also prays for us

Luke 22:31-32 "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Hebrews 7:25 he always lives to intercede for them.

- l. Pray that for each other!! Pray that his or her FAITH WILL NOT FAIL!

V. A Toolbox for Skillfully Dealing with Sin

A. One of the Biggest Misunderstandings: A Church that Will Excommunicate its Members will be Harsh, Legalistic, Unfeeling and TOO SOON APPLY the final measure

B. Illustration: Four hammers used to build my treehouse

1. The 8 pound Maul, used for the massive ridgepole for the roof
2. The 28 oz. framing hammer... used for driving large framing nails
3. The 16 oz. ordinary hammer... used for all the rest of the regular nails
4. The 5 oz tack hammer used for tiny finishing nails on decorative molding

C. Principle: Use the Minimum Force to Bring About Repentance and Spiritual Health

1. We don't pull out the massive sledge hammer for deal with every sin that might occur in the life of the church
2. Jesus in Matthew 18 wanted some sins dealt with in private just between the two of you... use the MINIMUM force needed to bring about repentance
3. All discipline is dealing with sin, but some sins are more serious than others, and some sins habits are more entrenched than others
4. Elders as the shepherd the church need to know what tool to reach for

D. The Bulletin Insert: Toolbox for Skillful Shepherding... also for church members skillfully watching over one another in brotherly love

E. Final Word: the Gospel for the Unbeliever

F.

G.