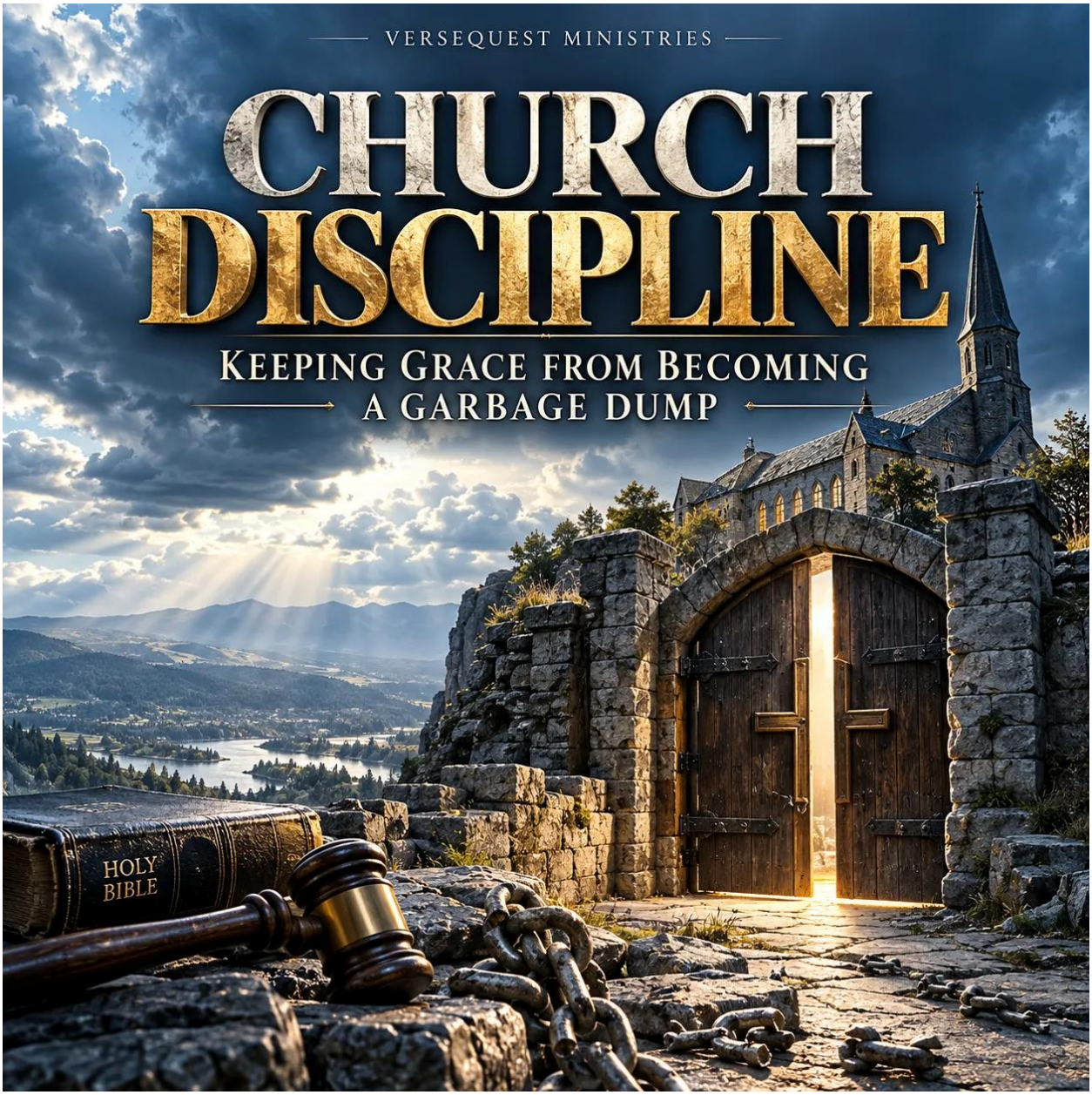
Church Discipline

Keeping Grace from Becoming a Garbage Dump

Series 1-10

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VerseQuest Ministries




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Church Discipline
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Statement of Purpose

This book has been prepared for biblical education, personal study, Christian instruction, and the strengthening of local churches through sound doctrine.

Its purpose is to encourage believers to examine the Scriptures carefully, distinguish biblical discipline from religious authoritarianism, uphold the holiness of the local church, and practice the forgiveness and restoration commanded in God's Word.

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”
— 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV)

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Church Discipline

Keeping Grace from Becoming a Garbage Dump

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Church Discipline

Keeping Grace from Becoming a Garbage Dump

Introduction

There is something mighty peculiar about modern Christianity when a preacher can thunder against the sins of Hollywood, Washington, and the local beer joint, but suddenly develops a remarkable case of spiritual lockjaw when the same wickedness walks through the church doors carrying a King James Bible. The congregation can condemn the world's corruption, shake its collective head over the condition of society, and announce its commitment to biblical holiness. But let somebody suggest that an openly unrepentant member ought to be confronted according to Scripture, and suddenly everybody discovers the importance of grace, tolerance, compassion, and not being judgmental. Apparently, the only sin left in certain churches is the terrible offense of identifying sin. The Apostle Paul did not share that remarkable philosophy. When the Corinthians tolerated notorious fornication within their assembly, he did not congratulate them for their broad-minded understanding of Christian liberty. He told them, **"Your glorying is not good" (1 Corinthians 5:6).** That is a devastatingly simple verdict against a great deal of what passes for Christianity today.

The trouble begins when people confuse salvation by grace with permission to live in open rebellion against the God who saved them. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes that salvation is by grace through faith, entirely apart from human works. That is settled doctrine. No amount of church attendance, moral improvement, religious activity, or congregational approval can purchase the new birth. The blood of Jesus Christ accomplished what human righteousness never could. But the same Apostle who taught salvation by grace commanded churches to confront wickedness, rebuke false doctrine, withdraw from disorderly brethren, and maintain proper fellowship. Romans 6:15 asks, **"What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid."** There goes the modern argument that grace makes obedience optional. Grace delivers the sinner from condemnation; it does not appoint him manager of a religious garbage dump where every form of rebellion receives permanent accommodation. The Christian is eternally secure in Jesus Christ, but his conduct is still subject to the commandments of Jesus Christ. Anybody who cannot distinguish those two truths has no business teaching either one.

One of the most neglected responsibilities of the local church is the proper exercise of biblical discipline. Mention the subject, and some Christians immediately imagine angry preachers, humiliating public announcements, people being thrown out over minor disagreements, and religious dictators controlling every detail of the congregation's life.

Unfortunately, such abuses have occurred, and the Bible condemns them. But the existence of counterfeit discipline does not eliminate the responsibility to practice genuine discipline. A crooked judge does not prove that justice is unnecessary, and an abusive shepherd does not prove that sheep should be left without protection. First Corinthians 5 commands action against established wickedness. Romans 16:17 warns against those causing divisions contrary to sound doctrine. Titus 3:10 instructs the rejection of a persistent heretick after admonition. Second Thessalonians 3:6 addresses brethren who refuse apostolic instruction and walk disorderly. These passages were not inserted into the New Testament to decorate a preacher's study. They contain commandments that local churches are responsible to understand and obey. **The church that refuses to practice biblical discipline has not risen above the Scriptures. It has simply decided that certain Scriptures are too inconvenient to practice.**

But there is another crowd that needs a good dose of Bible correction. These are the religious enforcers who seem to enjoy church discipline considerably more than the Lord ever intended. They can spot another man's faults from across the parking lot, remember every failure committed during the previous twenty years, and explain exactly why somebody ought to be removed from fellowship. Yet when the offender repents, acknowledges his wrongdoing, and seeks restoration, these same people suddenly become experts at keeping the door permanently locked. Their understanding of holiness consists largely of identifying everybody who fails to measure up to their standards. The Apostle Paul had something to say about that, too. Galatians 6:1 commands, **"ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness."** Second Corinthians 2:7 warns against an offender being swallowed up with overmuch sorrow after sufficient punishment. The church is not commanded to destroy people for the satisfaction of its most self-righteous members. **Discipline without truth becomes tyranny, and forgiveness without repentance becomes permission. The Bible commands neither counterfeit.**

The Scriptures also distinguish between an ordinary personal offense and wrongdoing requiring congregational action. Some church controversies could have been settled between two believers in ten minutes, but somebody decided to turn a private disagreement into a traveling revival of gossip. Before the person supposedly responsible even hears about the grievance, six other members have received confidential briefings, three families have selected sides, and half the congregation is wondering whether the church is about to split. Matthew 18:15 gives a principle that would prevent much of this foolishness: **"go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone."** That instruction must be understood in its proper setting during Christ's earthly ministry, with legitimate application alongside the direct Church Age instructions concerning truth, forgiveness, and

brotherly correction. It does not require victims of dangerous wrongdoing to confront offenders privately before obtaining protection, and it does not require public scandal to be treated as a harmless misunderstanding. But ordinary personal grievances should not become public entertainment. **Some Christians would rather recruit an audience for their offense than gain the brother who offended them. The Lord commanded reconciliation, not a church-sponsored gossip campaign.**

Other problems begin behind the pulpit itself. Not every man carrying a King James Bible is rightly dividing it, and not everybody who shouts "Amen" understands the doctrine being preached. Paul warned Timothy concerning Hymenaeus and Philetus, who taught that the resurrection was past already and overthrew the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:17–18). Acts 20:29–30 warns of grievous wolves entering the flock and men arising from within the assembly to draw disciples after themselves. A congregation must distinguish honest interpretive disagreements from persistent doctrinal corruption, but it cannot permit dangerous teaching to flourish simply because the fellow presenting it possesses a pleasing personality, an impressive vocabulary, or a particularly respectable necktie. The church must also recognize divisive troublemakers who turn personal grievances into congregational factions. Some people cannot build anything, but give them a few sympathetic listeners and they can tear apart what faithful Christians spent years establishing. **The devil does not always need to send persecution through the front door when he can persuade a religious troublemaker to open a division headquarters in the fellowship hall.**

And what happens when the pastor himself becomes the problem? That question makes certain religious establishments decidedly uncomfortable. Some preachers appear to believe that the authority of the pulpit grants them immunity from the Scriptures governing everyone else. They can rebuke a member for dishonesty while excusing their own questionable financial dealings, condemn another man's immorality while concealing their own misconduct, and demand absolute obedience while refusing legitimate accountability. First Timothy 5:19 protects faithful elders against unsupported accusations, but verse 20 commands that elders whose sin warrants it be rebuked before all. First Peter 5:3 forbids ministers from becoming lords over God's heritage. Third John exposes Diotrephes, who loved preeminence and cast brethren out of the church. A pastor deserves appropriate respect, support, and protection against malicious allegations, but he does not occupy a throne. **The qualifications for spiritual leadership were not written for the congregation to admire while the preacher enjoys a private exemption. A shepherd who begins feeding on the sheep has forfeited the right to hide behind his shepherd's staff.**

Proper church discipline therefore requires truth, evidence, impartiality, restraint, and an understanding of the limits of congregational authority. A local church can examine conduct, restrict fellowship, and remove someone from membership according to Scripture. It cannot cancel the new birth, erase the Holy Spirit's sealing, or overturn the finished work of Jesus Christ by majority vote. A church business meeting is not the Judgment Seat of Christ, and a preacher's personal displeasure is not the voice of Almighty God. Serious allegations must be examined honestly, innocent people must be protected against malicious accusations, and credible reports of abuse, exploitation, violence, or criminal wrongdoing must not be concealed beneath religious procedures. Romans 13:1–4 recognizes the legitimate authority of civil government. A congregation must never confuse protecting its reputation with protecting its people. **A church that conceals corruption to preserve its testimony has already sacrificed the very testimony it claims to be defending. You cannot bury wickedness beneath the pulpit and expect heaven to admire the carpet.**

Still, the great objective of biblical discipline must never be forgotten: wherever genuine repentance permits it, the fallen brother should be recovered. The Scriptures do not command a church to maintain permanent hostility toward somebody who has sincerely turned from his wrongdoing. Ephesians 4:32 commands believers to forgive one another as God for Christ's sake has forgiven them. Second Thessalonians 3:15 instructs the congregation concerning a disciplined brother, **"Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."** But forgiveness does not mean that every former responsibility must be immediately restored. A dishonest treasurer may be forgiven without receiving the checkbook again. A disqualified pastor may remain a Christian brother without being qualified to resume his office. A person who endangered others may require continuing restrictions even after expressing repentance. These are not contradictions. They are distinctions biblical wisdom requires. **Forgiveness is not weakness, repentance is not a magic password, and reasonable safeguards are not evidence of an unforgiving spirit. Grace knows how to open a door without handing the keys to somebody who has demonstrated that he cannot be trusted with them.**

Throughout this series, the issue will not be whether Christians occasionally stumble. Every honest believer already knows the answer to that question. The issue is how a congregation responds to genuine wrongdoing, persistent rebellion, doctrinal corruption, malicious division, disorderly conduct, abusive leadership, and sincere repentance. The ten studies will examine the commands governing these matters directly from the King James Bible, maintaining the necessary distinctions between Israel and the Church, law and grace, salvation and fellowship, spiritual accountability and eternal security. The objective is neither to encourage suspicious church members to investigate everybody's

private affairs nor to provide cowardly leadership with another collection of excuses. It is to establish what Scripture actually commands. The man struggling against sin needs biblical help. The man openly defending his sin needs biblical correction. The false teacher needs his doctrine examined. The divisive troublemaker needs admonition. The corrupt leader needs accountability. And the repentant brother needs the mercy Scripture commands. **Different conditions require different responses, and a church that treats them all alike has not achieved spiritual maturity. It has abandoned discernment.**

There is one final truth that ought to govern every discussion of church discipline: Calvary demonstrates both the holiness of God and the mercy of God more powerfully than any argument man can construct. The Lord Jesus Christ did not shed his blood because sin was an insignificant inconvenience that heaven could simply overlook. He died because sin required a sacrifice that guilty humanity could never provide. First Corinthians 15:3 declares, **"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures."** Romans 5:8 announces that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. There is the foundation of Christian grace. God does not excuse sin by pretending it is harmless, and he does not abandon sinners because they are guilty. The cross establishes the seriousness of sin and the greatness of redemption together. Any congregation preaching the cross while refusing to confront established wickedness has missed something enormous. Any congregation preaching holiness while refusing biblical mercy has missed something equally serious. **The blood of Christ was not shed to make sin respectable, and it was not shed to provide self-righteous church members with an opportunity to despise the people Christ came to save.**

The local church is not a showroom filled with perfect Christians, and nobody should imagine that church discipline will ever manufacture one. It is an assembly of redeemed sinners who have been called to walk worthy of their calling, maintain sound doctrine, exercise brotherly charity, and obey the commandments of their Lord. There will be offenses to settle, faults to correct, genuine needs to meet, false accusations to reject, dangerous misconduct to confront, and fallen believers to restore. All of those matters require the same thing: submission to the written Word of God. Personal loyalty must not outrank Scripture. Congregational reputation must not outrank righteousness. A preacher's authority must not outrank the authority of Christ. And nobody's desire to appear gracious can cancel a commandment because obedience might become uncomfortable. **Grace is not permission to turn the house of God into a garbage dump, and discipline is not permission to turn it into a slaughterhouse. The church was purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ, and it belongs to him—not the preacher, not the deacons, not the loudest member, and certainly not the fellow determined to defend his own wickedness. Keep the Book open, keep the doctrine straight, keep the sheep**

protected, and keep mercy where God commands it. The answer to abusive discipline is not abandoning discipline, and the answer to cheap grace is not abandoning grace. The answer is obeying the whole counsel of God without fear, favoritism, or apology.

1 of 10 — Church Discipline — The Church That Took the Gate Off the Sheepfold and Called It Grace

Key Passage: 1 Corinthians 5:6–7 (KJV)

“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:”

There is something terribly wrong with a congregation that can recognize wickedness in the world, preach against it from the pulpit, shake its head over the condition of society, and then suddenly develop a remarkable case of spiritual blindness when the same wickedness walks through the church doors carrying a King James Bible. The Apostle Paul encountered precisely that kind of foolishness at Corinth, and he did not congratulate the congregation for its tolerance. He told them, “Your glorying is not good.” That is a mighty short sentence to demolish a mighty popular philosophy. The Corinthians had confused their willingness to tolerate open sin with spiritual maturity, and Paul informed them that their magnificent understanding of grace was producing something considerably less magnificent than holiness. They had mistaken a swollen congregation for a healthy one. There is a difference. A dead animal can swell without having an ounce of life in it, and a church can boast about its acceptance while the testimony of Jesus Christ rots beneath the pews.

The modern religious world has developed an impressive collection of excuses for refusing to exercise biblical discipline. Somebody will announce that Christians are not supposed to judge. Somebody else will explain that everybody makes mistakes. Another fellow will insist that confronting sin is legalism, and before long the entire congregation is expected to stand politely while the Scriptures are turned into a decorative centerpiece. Apparently, the only person permitted to be confronted is the man who believes confrontation might occasionally be necessary. The trouble with this arrangement is that the Holy Ghost did not inspire the New Testament to provide religious people with a selection of comfortable opinions. He gave the churches instructions. Those instructions include rebuke, admonition, separation, restoration, and, when necessary, the removal of an unrepentant offender from congregational fellowship. None of those things contradicts salvation by

grace. The God who saves sinners by grace also commands saved sinners to walk in obedience. Grace is not a spiritual garbage truck assigned to haul away every consequence of deliberate disobedience.

Before this subject goes any further, one distinction must be nailed down so securely that no religious mechanic can pry it loose: salvation and local church fellowship are not the same thing. A man is not saved because a congregation accepts him into membership, and he does not lose eternal life because a congregation removes him from its membership. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares salvation to be by grace through faith, "Not of works, lest any man should boast." The believer's standing in Jesus Christ rests upon the finished work of the Saviour, not upon the approval of a church committee. Nevertheless, the same New Testament that teaches eternal security also teaches church discipline. Paul did not consider those doctrines enemies, and neither should anybody who believes the Book. A congregation has responsibilities concerning its testimony, its fellowship, its doctrine, and its treatment of sin. When those responsibilities are abandoned in the name of grace, the church has not become more spiritual. It has simply left the sheepfold gate hanging open and invited everything with teeth to come inside.

1. Corinth Had Plenty of Religion but Not Enough Backbone to Confront Sin

The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 5 exposes the problem without requiring anybody to invent one. Paul writes, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you," and then identifies an especially disgraceful case involving a man who had his father's wife. The situation was not a mysterious rumor whispered between two suspicious church members. It was commonly reported, and the congregation apparently knew enough about it for Paul to rebuke the assembly openly. Notice also that the offender was not simply an unsaved stranger passing through Corinth. Paul was dealing with wickedness tolerated within the professing Christian fellowship. The church had a responsibility to address what was happening among its own people. This is important because some modern congregations behave as though their only assignment is to condemn the sins of everybody outside their doors. They will thunder against the wickedness of Rome, Washington, Hollywood, and the local tavern while treating an openly unrepentant member as though he were a delicate museum exhibit nobody may touch.

Paul's next observation is even more revealing: "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned" (1 Corinthians 5:2). There is the diagnosis. The Corinthians were not merely tolerating a serious offense; they were spiritually inflated when they should have been grieving. Pride had replaced discernment, and whatever explanation they had constructed for their conduct, Paul refused to accept it. The proper response to scandalous sin within the congregation was not self-congratulation. It was mourning, followed by obedient

action. A spiritually minded church does not rejoice over the opportunity to discipline somebody. There should be no enthusiasm for ruining a man's reputation, displaying his failures, or putting his disgrace on public exhibition. Sin is serious because it dishonors God, injures people, and threatens the testimony of the assembly. But refusing to deal with it does not demonstrate compassion. Sometimes the most dangerous man in the building is not the one openly committing the offense. It is the fellow who keeps explaining why nobody should do anything about it.

The command in 1 Corinthians 5:2 was that the offender "might be taken away from among you." Paul was dealing with a matter that had already passed beyond ordinary private correction. His instructions did not authorize church members to investigate every weakness, advertise every confession, or demand public humiliation whenever somebody stumbled. The particular situation involved grave, known, ongoing wickedness that the congregation had failed to confront. That distinction matters tremendously. A church should not turn itself into a collection of detectives carrying magnifying glasses and searching for someone to prosecute. Neither should it become a sanctuary for people determined to continue in open rebellion. The Corinthians had made the remarkable discovery that if nobody dealt with a problem, everybody could pretend it was somebody else's responsibility. Paul spoiled that comfortable arrangement with one inspired chapter. A church cannot wash its hands of known corruption by calling its cowardice patience. There are occasions when refusing to act is itself an act of disobedience.

2. The Grace That Saves a Sinner Does Not Authorize Him to Live Like the Devil

The first great excuse offered against church discipline is usually the claim that believers are under grace rather than law. That statement is gloriously true, but it becomes a dangerous falsehood when somebody uses it to reach a conclusion the Apostle Paul expressly forbids. Romans 6:14 declares, "For ye are not under the law, but under grace." The next verse asks, "What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid." There goes the entire religious argument, knocked flat by two words. Paul did not teach that freedom from the Mosaic law amounted to freedom from obedience to Jesus Christ. He taught that believers were dead to sin and should not yield themselves as servants to unrighteousness. A Christian who uses grace as an excuse to defend deliberate wickedness has not discovered the depths of Pauline doctrine. He has simply stopped reading before the passage reached the part that condemned his excuse.

Titus 2:11–12 makes the matter equally plain: "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." Notice what grace teaches. It does not teach believers to excuse ungodliness, rename worldly lusts, or

pretend righteousness is an obsolete religious concept. Grace teaches the exact opposite. The same grace that brings salvation instructs the saved man concerning his conduct. That does not mean godly living purchases salvation, maintains salvation, or adds merit to the blood of Christ. Salvation is a free gift, and good works are not the price of admission. But when a man begins arguing that salvation by grace makes obedience unnecessary, he is no longer defending the gospel. He is defending the flesh. There is a considerable difference between being delivered from the condemnation of sin and being given permission to set up housekeeping with it.

First Corinthians 6:9–11 provides another necessary distinction. After naming various forms of unrighteousness, Paul reminds the Corinthian believers, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." Those words describe a glorious change of standing before God. The Corinthians had not been justified because their past conduct was respectable. They had been washed through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Yet that very truth made their continued association with scandalous wickedness more shameful, not less. A saved man may stumble, fall, and require correction; the presence of remaining flesh is a reality the New Testament never conceals. But a congregation must distinguish between a struggling Christian who acknowledges his sin and a defiant professor who demands that everybody else acknowledge his rebellion as acceptable. The first needs biblical help. The second needs biblical confrontation. Neither needs a preacher who has confused the liberty of Christ with permission to run a pigpen inside the assembly.

3. The Church Was Told to Judge Its Own House, Not Become the Police Department of the World

One of the most abused statements in modern Christianity is the claim that Christians are never supposed to judge anybody. Apparently, some people believe the word judge becomes a forbidden article of vocabulary the moment a person receives Jesus Christ. Unfortunately for that theory, Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 5:12, "do not ye judge them that are within?" The question is not difficult, and the answer is not mysterious. The Apostle distinguishes between people outside the church and those professing to belong to the Christian assembly. In verses 9–10, he explains that his instruction concerning association with fornicators did not mean believers must avoid every immoral person in the world. Such an arrangement would require Christians to leave the world altogether. The church is supposed to preach the gospel to sinners, not retreat into a religious bunker because sinners exist. But fellowship within the local congregation carries responsibilities that casual contact with an unbelieving world does not.

First Corinthians 5:11 identifies specific forms of wickedness requiring congregational action when practiced by one who is “called a brother.” Paul includes fornication, covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, and extortion. That list should interrupt the comfortable theory that church discipline applies only to sexual scandals. A man can damage a congregation with his mouth as surely as another can disgrace it with his conduct. A covetous extortioner wearing a business suit is not necessarily more acceptable to God than a drunkard stumbling through the front door. Paul concludes, “with such an one no not to eat.” The instruction concerns deliberate fellowship with someone persisting in the condemned conduct, not a prohibition against feeding a hungry person or showing ordinary human kindness. The purpose is to withdraw the appearance of Christian approval from unrepentant wickedness. When a church treats persistent rebellion as ordinary Christian fellowship, it communicates something, whether anybody announces it from the pulpit or not.

Nevertheless, judging matters within the church is not permission to become careless with evidence, suspicious of everyone, or eager to believe accusations. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering a matter before hearing it, and verse 17 reminds us that the first account of a controversy may seem right until another examines it. First Timothy 5:19 specifically protects elders against accusations received without two or three witnesses. Other serious allegations likewise demand responsible investigation rather than gossip, rumor, or mob judgment. Private offenses should not automatically become public spectacles, and criminal conduct must not be concealed under the excuse that Christians should settle everything internally. The local assembly has authority over its own fellowship, not a license to override lawful civil authorities. There is a difference between biblical discernment and religious nosiness. A church that refuses to distinguish truth from accusation will eventually punish innocent people, while a church that refuses to examine credible wrongdoing will eventually protect guilty ones. Neither outcome bears any resemblance to New Testament order.

4. A Little Leaven Never Promised to Stay in Its Own Corner

Paul's illustration in 1 Corinthians 5:6 is devastating because it exposes the foolish assumption beneath congregational tolerance: “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” Leaven works through the dough. It does not remain politely confined to the original portion because somebody has requested that it respect personal boundaries. Paul is explaining the corrupting influence of tolerated wickedness within an assembly. When open rebellion receives continued acceptance, other members learn that the congregation's proclaimed standards may be disregarded without consequence. Younger believers become confused, mature believers become discouraged, and the church's

testimony becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from the world it was commissioned to reach. The offender's conduct remains his responsibility, but the congregation's decision to excuse known wickedness becomes a separate matter for which the congregation must answer. Sin does not need a majority vote before it begins exercising influence. Sometimes it needs nothing more than a roomful of respectable people determined not to get involved.

Verse 7 continues, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.” Notice the distinction between what the believers are in Christ and how they are commanded to conduct themselves. Their spiritual position does not abolish their practical responsibilities. Paul adds, “For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” The historical Passover belongs to Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and Paul draws upon that familiar scriptural picture to teach the Corinthian believers concerning Christ's sacrifice and their conduct. This is a legitimate spiritual application, not a transfer of Israel's national covenant to the Church. The next verse directs believers to keep the feast “not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” A congregation cannot claim to honor the sacrifice of Christ while proudly accommodating the very wickedness his sacrifice condemns. Grace establishes the proper foundation for holiness; it does not eliminate the obligation.

This principle must be applied carefully, because every congregation contains imperfect believers. If church discipline required the immediate expulsion of every Christian who had ever sinned, the preacher would have to dismiss himself before anybody else reached the parking lot. First John 1:8 plainly declares, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” But there is a tremendous difference between acknowledging the continuing struggle with sin and formally approving flagrant, unrepentant conduct. The issue at Corinth was not the existence of human weakness; it was the acceptance of notorious wrongdoing. Nor does the leaven illustration justify spreading private accusations under the pretense of protecting the congregation. The response must fit the offense, and the people who genuinely need to know should be distinguished from the people who merely enjoy hearing. Removing leaven is a biblical responsibility. Throwing the entire sack of flour into the street because somebody whispered a rumor is not.

5. Church Authority Comes From the Scriptures, Not a Pastor's Appetite for Control

Whenever church discipline is discussed, another danger must be confronted just as forcefully as the danger of tolerating sin: the misuse of spiritual authority. Some preachers have behaved as though entering the ministry gave them personal ownership of the congregation. They can quote Hebrews 13:17 concerning obedience to those who rule, but

somehow their Bible seems to fall open less frequently at 1 Peter 5:3, which warns against being “lords over God's heritage.” A pastor is an overseer, a teacher, and a shepherd accountable to Jesus Christ. He is not a pope, a monarch, or the proprietor of every conscience in the building. Biblical discipline cannot be reduced to whatever makes the preacher angry. A personal disagreement does not automatically constitute rebellion against God, and asking a legitimate question is not evidence of a divisive spirit. The authority to correct sin must remain tied to the Word of God, not to a man's temperament, reputation, or ability to command a microphone.

Matthew 18:15–17 provides an important pattern for dealing with a brother who trespasses: personal confrontation, the involvement of witnesses when necessary, and a wider hearing if correction is persistently refused. Its immediate historical setting must be respected. Christ spoke these words during his earthly ministry before Calvary and before the fuller revelation of Church Age doctrine through Paul. Nevertheless, the passage supplies legitimate principles concerning restraint, witnesses, and the desire to gain an offending brother. Those principles agree with the concern for orderly correction found throughout the New Testament. They do not mean that public scandal must first be hidden behind a private conversation, or that victims of violence and abuse must personally confront dangerous offenders before seeking protection. First Corinthians 5 demonstrates that some matters already require congregational action. Applying the Bible faithfully means distinguishing the situations its passages actually address. A verse taken out of context can become a very convenient weapon in the hands of a man who wants everybody else to remain defenseless.

The same principle applies to doctrinal division and disorderly conduct. Romans 16:17 instructs believers to mark those causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine they have learned, while Titus 3:10 addresses the rejection of a heretick after the first and second admonition. Second Thessalonians 3:6 commands withdrawal from a brother walking disorderly rather than according to apostolic instruction. These are not blank checks for personal retaliation. They are directions concerning identifiable conduct measured against the Scriptures. Church leaders must be capable of explaining what biblical command has been violated, what credible evidence establishes the matter, and why the proposed discipline is appropriate. First Timothy 5:20 even requires public rebuke for elders whose sin warrants it. The pulpit does not protect a guilty man from accountability. A preacher who can discipline the congregation but cannot himself be questioned under Scripture has not established New Testament government. He has constructed a little kingdom, and the throne is already occupied by somebody who has no intention of surrendering it.

6. The Gate Can Be Closed Without Erasing a Man's Salvation

One of the most serious doctrinal errors surrounding church discipline is the idea that removing somebody from the local congregation somehow removes him from the body of Jesus Christ. That is a dangerous confusion of salvation with fellowship. Ephesians 1:13 teaches that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, and Ephesians 4:30 declares that they are sealed "unto the day of redemption." Romans 8:1 announces that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The security of a saved man rests upon the finished work of Christ, not upon his continuing membership in a particular assembly. If a genuinely saved believer is disciplined, the congregation has not canceled his new birth. It has exercised authority over its fellowship. Conversely, church membership cannot make an unsaved religious professor spiritually alive. A church roll is not the Lamb's book of life, and removing a name from one cannot erase a name from the other.

First Corinthians 5:5 contains one of the strongest statements concerning serious disciplinary action: "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Paul was exercising apostolic authority in a particular case, and the passage must not be turned into a theatrical formula supposedly giving modern preachers supernatural power over somebody's body. Nor should the verse be used to teach that salvation depends upon suffering enough punishment to satisfy a congregation. Paul distinguishes the destruction of the flesh from the salvation of the spirit in the day of the Lord Jesus. The offender was to experience the dreadful seriousness of his conduct, not be pronounced beyond the reach of God's grace. The church was commanded to act, but the ultimate authority over the man's life and eternal destiny belonged to God. An assembly may close its doors to unrepentant wickedness; it does not possess the keys to heaven and hell.

Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 gives another important safeguard. Paul commands the church to note the disobedient man and "have no company with him, that he may be ashamed." But he immediately adds, "Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." There is the balance that fleshly religion has such difficulty maintaining. The offender must not be permitted to mistake continued fellowship for approval, but neither should the church cultivate hatred toward him. The objective is admonition, not revenge; correction, not personal satisfaction. The restrictions must correspond to the scriptural offense and its seriousness. A faithful congregation does not chase a disciplined person through the community, organize a campaign of humiliation, or demand that everybody participate in a private vendetta. Biblical separation is not a license for cruelty. If a church

can remember every detail of a man's disgrace but cannot remember the command to admonish him as a brother, its disciplinary machinery needs some correction of its own.

7. A Faithful Shepherd Keeps the Gate, Protects the Sheep, and Looks for the Wandering Brother

Galatians 6:1 declares, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Restoration is not an optional decoration attached to church discipline. It belongs to the biblical purpose of correction. But restoration must be grounded in truth rather than appearances. A man who merely regrets getting caught has not necessarily repented of the conduct that brought discipline upon him. Second Corinthians 7:11 describes godly sorrow producing earnestness, clearing, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal, and revenge in the sense of a serious response against wrongdoing. Genuine repentance does not demand immediate trust as payment for saying the right words. It acknowledges the offense and accepts appropriate consequences. A congregation should welcome real repentance without allowing tears, eloquent explanations, or religious performances to replace evidence of change. Crocodiles can produce moisture around the eyes, but nobody mistakes that for a guarantee they have stopped biting.

Second Corinthians 2:6–8 reveals the danger of punishment continuing after sufficient correction. Paul instructs the Corinthians to forgive, comfort, and confirm their love toward an offender who had received adequate punishment. The passage does not explicitly identify that individual as the man from 1 Corinthians 5, so the two accounts should not be forced together as though Scripture settled the identification. Nevertheless, the principle is unmistakable. Discipline must never become a permanent monument to somebody's disgrace when genuine restoration is appropriate. At the same time, forgiveness does not automatically restore qualifications for spiritual office or eliminate legitimate safeguards. A dishonest treasurer may be forgiven without immediately receiving the checkbook. A disqualified pastor may be loved without being returned to the pulpit. A person who has endangered others must not be placed back into a position where further harm becomes possible. Mercy does not require foolishness, and prudence does not require bitterness.

The image of a sheepfold provides the proper understanding of the entire matter. A faithful shepherd does not open the gate to predators merely because keeping it closed might appear unkind. Neither does he beat an injured sheep because it wandered from the flock. He knows the difference between protection, correction, and restoration. Jesus Christ is the great Shepherd, and those entrusted with oversight of a local congregation must answer to him for the way they treat his people. First Peter 5:2 commands elders to feed the flock of God and take oversight willingly, while verse 3 forbids domineering control. A

congregation therefore needs both courage and restraint. It must possess enough backbone to confront serious wickedness and enough spiritual maturity to recognize sincere repentance. The gate is not there to satisfy the shepherd's pride. It is there because the sheep are worth protecting. The finest church discipline is never measured by how many people have been expelled, but by how faithfully Scripture has been obeyed.

Conclusion

The church at Corinth stands as a permanent warning against the foolish belief that grace and discipline cannot occupy the same congregation. Paul wrote to people who had been sanctified in Christ Jesus, enriched in spiritual gifts, and instructed in the gospel of God's grace. Yet those same people required severe correction because they were tolerating wickedness that even the surrounding Gentiles recognized as disgraceful. The Apostle did not recommend abandoning grace. He demanded that grace be understood and practiced according to truth. The church must preach forgiveness without excusing rebellion, show compassion without protecting corruption, and exercise authority without becoming tyrannical. There is nothing spiritual about refusing to obey 1 Corinthians 5 merely because obedience might produce an uncomfortable Sunday. The congregation is not called to be a collection of sinless people. It is called to be an assembly of believers who take the Scriptures seriously enough to correct wrongdoing rather than celebrate their willingness to ignore it.

Every Christian should also remember that the authority to discipline others never places him above correction himself. Second Corinthians 5:10 declares, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” That includes the preacher, the deacon, the member demanding discipline, and the fellow insisting discipline should never happen. The Lord will not be impressed by a pastor who mistreated the flock under the pretense of defending holiness, nor by a congregation that tolerated corruption because it lacked courage. The Judgment Seat of Christ is not the Great White Throne, and the saved believer is not facing a second trial to determine whether the blood of Jesus Christ was sufficient. Nevertheless, believers will give account concerning their service and conduct. A faithful church must therefore measure its actions against Scripture rather than popularity, convenience, financial contributions, influential family connections, or fear of public criticism. When the Book speaks plainly, the congregation has no business pretending it needs another committee to discover whether obedience is advisable.

The final verdict is plain enough for anybody willing to believe the words on the page. Grace saves the sinner, teaches the saint, and supplies no permission for a congregation to shelter deliberate wickedness. Church discipline, properly exercised, is not an embarrassment to Christianity. It is part of the obedience Christianity requires. The church

that never confronts sin has not reached some wonderful spiritual altitude above ordinary Bible-believing Christians. It has abandoned a responsibility the Holy Ghost placed directly in its hands. The church that disciplines harshly, dishonestly, or vindictively has likewise departed from the Scriptures it claims to defend. Both errors dishonor the Lord Jesus Christ. The answer is not to choose between holiness and mercy, but to obey the Bible concerning both. A shepherd who leaves the gate open cannot excuse the destruction by announcing how much he loves the sheep. And a shepherd who beats the sheep cannot justify his cruelty by pointing to the wolves outside. Keep the gate where God put it. Keep the Scriptures above every man's opinion. Keep grace where the gospel places it. Grace was never intended to become a garbage dump, and the church of Jesus Christ was never commissioned to operate one.

2 of 10 — Church Discipline — One Offended Brother, Two Loose Tongues, and a Congregation That Never Needed to Know

Key Passage: Matthew 18:15–17 (KJV)

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” Those words in Matthew 18:15 would prevent an astonishing amount of trouble in local churches if Christians would simply believe them. Unfortunately, some church members seem to think the Lord left out an important preliminary step: tell six friends, telephone three relatives, mention the matter to the pastor's wife, and make sure everybody knows how terribly you have been treated before approaching the person who supposedly offended you. By the time the two people involved finally speak, the disagreement has collected enough spectators to fill a fellowship hall. What might have been settled with one honest conversation has become a traveling revival of wounded pride, whispered accusations, and carefully recruited supporters. The Lord Jesus Christ gave instructions for gaining a brother. He did not establish a system for collecting witnesses to your personal greatness while publicly advertising somebody else's shortcomings.

There is a peculiar kind of religious foolishness that believes a private offense becomes more righteous every time it is repeated to another person. A disagreement between two Christians suddenly develops into a congregation-wide controversy, and everybody claims to be concerned about the Lord's work while contributing enthusiastically to its disruption. One brother says something careless. Another takes offense. Instead of speaking directly to him, the offended party begins explaining the situation to people who were not present,

have no responsibility in the matter, and cannot possibly settle it. The story grows a few decorations with every retelling. Eventually, the original disagreement becomes almost unrecognizable beneath the accumulated opinions of spectators. Proverbs 16:28 declares, “a whisperer separateth chief friends.” That is not merely an observation about unpleasant conversation. It is a warning about the destructive power of a tongue operating without biblical restraint. Some people would rather have an audience for their grievance than an opportunity for reconciliation. They do not want the fire extinguished. They want everybody to appreciate the flames.

The biblical handling of personal offenses requires a careful distinction between the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ and the doctrinal instructions governing the Church under grace. Matthew 18 was spoken before Calvary, before Pentecost, and before the full revelation of the mystery of the body of Christ through the Apostle Paul. The Lord was addressing disciples within Israel's historical setting, and the passage must not be treated as though every detail belongs automatically to Pauline Church Age doctrine without examination. Nevertheless, its principles concerning private confrontation, witnesses, orderly correction, and the recovery of an offending brother agree with instructions later given directly to Christian assemblies. Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 4:31–32, and the pastoral epistles supply the necessary Church Age instruction. Properly applied, these passages establish a simple truth: Christians are not permitted to use an offense as an excuse for becoming offenders themselves. When somebody wrongs you, the Bible does not authorize you to answer one sin with a traveling collection of your own.

1. Go to Your Brother, Not Everybody Who Knows His Name

The first command in Matthew 18:15 is so plain that a person needs considerable religious education to misunderstand it: “go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.” Notice the direction of travel. The offended brother is told to go to the offender, not to his friends, his neighbors, or the congregation's unofficial information department. The command is personal, direct, and deliberately limited in its audience. This does not mean every accusation must be handled privately regardless of danger or seriousness. The passage addresses a brother's trespass in a situation where private confrontation is appropriate, not criminal conduct, abuse, or publicly established wickedness requiring broader intervention. But where the matter genuinely belongs between two brethren, the instruction is unmistakable. You do not need a committee to explain that somebody's words hurt you. You do not need six spectators to ask whether a misunderstanding occurred. Sometimes obedience requires nothing more impressive than walking across the room and speaking honestly.

Consider the astonishing amount of trouble created when Christians reverse this order. Instead of confronting the person involved, the offended party begins consulting people who cannot resolve the dispute. One sympathetic listener assures him that he was mistreated. Another agrees that something ought to be done. A third remembers an unrelated incident from several years earlier, and suddenly the entire conversation resembles a criminal investigation conducted by people who never witnessed the alleged crime. The original offender remains unaware that anything is wrong while his reputation is dismantled one conversation at a time. Proverbs 25:9 gives remarkably practical counsel: "Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself; and discover not a secret to another." There are legitimate occasions for seeking responsible counsel, protection, or assistance, but that is not the same as broadcasting accusations to sympathetic listeners. A grievance does not become scriptural simply because the conversation begins with somebody saying he wants to handle it spiritually.

The objective of private confrontation appears in the closing words of Matthew 18:15: "if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." There is the whole purpose, sitting in plain sight. The Lord did not say that you have defeated your brother, embarrassed your brother, or demonstrated your superior understanding of the situation. You have gained him. The objective is reconciliation through truth, not victory through public pressure. Sometimes the confrontation reveals genuine wrongdoing requiring confession and correction. Sometimes it reveals misunderstanding, incomplete information, or words interpreted in a manner the speaker never intended. Either way, an honest conversation can accomplish what twenty whispered conversations cannot. When a man is interested in gaining his brother, he will welcome a satisfactory explanation and a genuine apology. When he is interested in winning an argument, even a satisfactory explanation becomes an obstacle to his campaign. The Christian who wants reconciliation looks for a way to settle the matter; the man who wants an audience looks for a reason to keep it alive.

2. Every Bruised Ego Is Not a Biblical Trespass

Before accusing another Christian of sin, it would be wise to establish that an actual offense occurred. Matthew 18:15 speaks of a brother who trespasses, not merely a brother who fails to satisfy somebody else's expectations. There is a difference between violating a biblical command and disappointing a personal preference. Perhaps a fellow did not greet you after church. Perhaps somebody disagreed with your opinion during a Bible discussion. Perhaps another member declined an invitation, selected a different ministry assignment, or failed to laugh at your favorite joke. None of those things automatically establishes spiritual misconduct. Some people have developed an extraordinary ability to discover offenses in situations where an ordinary person would discover nothing more than human

imperfection. Proverbs 19:11 declares, “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” Not every irritation requires formal proceedings. Sometimes the most mature response to a minor slight is to refuse to manufacture a major controversy out of it.

This distinction does not mean genuine wrongdoing should be dismissed. Lies, slander, dishonest dealings, cruel accusations, deliberate mistreatment, and other violations of Scripture are not excused because somebody calls them personality differences. Ephesians 4:25 commands believers to put away lying and speak truth with their neighbors. Verse 31 specifically condemns bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice. Those are real matters requiring correction when they occur. But a Christian must distinguish what Scripture condemns from what personal preference dislikes. Romans 14 addresses disputes involving matters of conscience and reminds believers that they are not authorized to turn their personal judgments into universal commandments. A man may prefer one approach to a church activity while another prefers something different. They may disagree firmly without either becoming a heretic, a rebel, or a candidate for church discipline. The Bible establishes moral standards. It does not appoint every sensitive church member as the official inspector of everybody else's manners.

Proverbs 18:13 warns, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” That verse should be displayed wherever church members are tempted to make judgments from fragments of information. A person may hear half a sentence, misunderstand an explanation, or receive an inaccurate report and immediately conclude that somebody has wronged him. Then pride enters the matter and makes correction difficult. Proverbs 18:17 adds, “He that is first in his own cause seemeth just; but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him.” The first account may sound convincing because nobody has examined it. This is why direct conversation matters. It permits questions, explanations, and correction before assumptions harden into accusations. A wise believer asks what actually happened, what Scripture says about it, and whether the facts support his conclusion. An unwise believer begins with a verdict and goes looking for enough sympathetic people to make the verdict appear respectable. An offense built entirely upon assumption is a poor foundation for a church controversy, no matter how many people are willing to stand on it.

3. The Tongue Can Burn Down a Fellowship Hall Without Ever Striking a Match

James 3:5 declares, “Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!” The immediate subject is the tongue, and the illustration is painfully appropriate for church disputes. A careless remark can ignite an argument, but the repeated spreading of accusations can turn an isolated spark into a congregation-wide blaze. James continues in verse 6, “And the

tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity." That is unusually strong language for an organ some church members appear determined to exercise without supervision. Consider how quickly a private grievance changes when it passes through multiple conversations. A statement becomes an insult. An insult becomes deliberate cruelty. Deliberate cruelty becomes evidence of a longstanding conspiracy. Eventually, people who never heard the original exchange are confidently explaining what happened and why the accused person should be disciplined. The remarkable thing is that every participant considers himself concerned for righteousness. Apparently, a fire becomes less destructive when everybody lighting it claims to be concerned about the temperature.

Proverbs 26:20 says, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth." That verse describes something many church disputes desperately need: fewer people supplying fuel. A talebearer does not have to invent every detail to become destructive. He may repeat accurate information that was never his responsibility to distribute. He may disclose a private confession, emphasize the most damaging interpretation of another person's words, or repeat an allegation while conveniently withholding information that might weaken it. Sometimes the entire operation is disguised as a prayer request. A fellow announces that everybody should pray for Brother So-and-so, then proceeds to distribute enough private information to keep the congregation occupied until the next business meeting. Genuine prayer is a holy privilege. It is not a religious wrapping paper for gossip. There are proper occasions for seeking wise counsel and reporting serious wrongdoing, but unnecessary exposure of private grievances is not sanctified by attaching the word prayer to it.

Ephesians 4:29 commands, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." Notice that grace is supposed to govern the believer's speech, not merely his opinion of other people's mistakes. The person spreading accusations must answer for what his words accomplish. Is he communicating truth responsibly to somebody who can help resolve the matter, or is he entertaining listeners with the shortcomings of an absent brother? The listener also bears responsibility. Proverbs 17:4 warns that a wicked doer gives heed to false lips, and a liar gives ear to a naughty tongue. You cannot pretend to oppose gossip while eagerly collecting every new installment. Sometimes the most useful contribution a Christian can make to a conversation is to ask whether the person involved has been approached directly. If the answer is no, the conversation may need to end before another sentence is added. A church does not need a bigger gossip ministry. It needs Christians who know when to close their mouths and open their Bibles.

4. Two or Three Witnesses Are Not Two or Three Cheerleaders

Matthew 18:16 gives the next step when a brother refuses legitimate private correction: “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” Notice the condition. The wider involvement follows a failure to resolve the matter properly at the first stage. It is not supposed to be the opening move. Furthermore, the people brought into the dispute must be capable of helping establish the truth. They are not supposed to be personal supporters recruited because they have already agreed with every accusation. A witness is not automatically reliable because he belongs to your family, attends your Bible class, or dislikes the same person you dislike. If you select three friends whose only assignment is to nod while you speak, you have not established biblical accountability. You have assembled a cheering section with religious vocabulary.

The principle of multiple witnesses appears in Deuteronomy 19:15, where matters of accusation under Israel's law required adequate testimony. Jesus draws upon that established principle in Matthew 18, and Paul employs the same concern for evidence in 1 Timothy 5:19 concerning accusations against elders. The settings and applications must be distinguished, but the common principle is unmistakable: serious allegations must not be settled by one person's unsupported assertion. The involvement of additional people is intended to bring greater accuracy and accountability, not greater intimidation. They should be able to hear explanations, examine relevant facts, and distinguish evidence from interpretation. Witnesses may confirm what happens during a confrontation without having personally observed the original offense; where the underlying allegations require independent corroboration, an additional listener alone does not manufacture that corroboration. Truth is not determined by whichever person can bring the largest collection of allies into the room. A lie does not become a fact when three people repeat it together.

The second stage also requires patience and a genuine willingness to resolve the matter. A brother who has refused correction should receive a fair opportunity to answer the concern before the dispute proceeds further. The witnesses may discover that the accusation was exaggerated, the facts were misunderstood, or the offended party himself needs correction. That possibility must remain open, because biblical discipline is not designed to guarantee the original complainant a victory. Proverbs 18:17 still applies when additional people become involved. If the facts establish wrongdoing, the offender should be admonished plainly and given opportunity to respond appropriately. If the accusation proves unfounded, the matter should not continue merely because somebody cannot bear to surrender his grievance. The goal remains gaining a brother rather than collecting trophies from an argument. The presence of witnesses is supposed to make dishonesty harder, not make repentance harder for the person who first complained.

5. Tell It to the Church—Not to the Entire County

Matthew 18:17 continues, “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.” That instruction comes after the private approach and the further attempt involving witnesses. The order matters because it demonstrates restraint before wider exposure. Jesus did not command that every offense become public information the moment somebody feels mistreated. He described a progression in which an unresolved trespass receives increasingly serious attention because correction has been refused. By the time the matter properly reaches the congregation, the issue is not simply the existence of an original offense. Persistent refusal to hear legitimate correction has become part of the problem. Even then, telling the church is not the same as announcing accusations to strangers, posting allegations for public entertainment, or exposing unnecessary private details. A congregation has responsibilities that outsiders do not possess. A church controversy does not become more biblical because somebody manages to distribute it across three counties before the Sunday evening service.

The instruction concerning the church must also be understood within its proper biblical setting. During Matthew 18, the Lord Jesus Christ was speaking before his crucifixion, and the Pauline revelation concerning the one spiritual body had not yet been fully disclosed. The reference to the church must therefore be handled according to its place in the developing New Testament revelation rather than forcing every later administrative practice backward into the passage. Nevertheless, the principle of responsible congregational judgment agrees with 1 Corinthians 5:12, where Paul asks, “do not ye judge them that are within?” When a matter legitimately becomes a local church responsibility, those exercising oversight must handle it honestly, impartially, and scripturally. They must distinguish established misconduct from personal disagreements and refuse to punish somebody merely because an influential member demands satisfaction. Nor should private information be exposed beyond what is necessary for responsible action. Church discipline should protect the congregation's testimony without creating an unnecessary parade of somebody else's disgrace.

The closing words of Matthew 18:17 are severe: “but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” Persistent refusal carries consequences. But those words must not be twisted into a claim that a modern congregation can cancel a saved man's eternal life. Salvation in the Church Age rests upon Jesus Christ, not a membership vote. Nor does Matthew 18:18–20 grant unlimited authority to two or three people who happen to agree about punishing somebody. The statements concerning binding, loosing, agreement, and the Lord's presence must be read in their immediate context, not converted into a religious blank check. Christ's authority is never

permission to contradict Christ's words. A church that proceeds beyond Scripture has not increased its authority; it has abandoned its foundation. Two or three people agreeing to do something unscriptural do not make the Lord Jesus Christ a partner in their foolishness. Heaven is not obligated to rubber-stamp a church meeting merely because somebody opened it with prayer.

6. Public Wickedness Is Not a Private Misunderstanding, and Crime Is Not a Church Secret

A dangerous mistake occurs when people attempt to apply Matthew 18:15 mechanically to every conceivable form of wrongdoing. The passage does not require a congregation to treat publicly established wickedness as though it were an ordinary disagreement between two brothers. First Corinthians 5 provides an obvious example. The Corinthian offender was involved in notorious fornication, and Paul directed the assembly to take disciplinary action. He did not instruct the congregation to pretend the matter was unknown until the proper number of private conversations had occurred. Likewise, Galatians 2:11–14 records Paul confronting Peter openly because Peter's conduct had produced public hypocrisy and influenced others. The circumstances required correction proportionate to the damage. There is a difference between privately addressing a personal trespass and confronting wrongdoing that has already injured the public testimony of the church. The Bible does not command believers to manufacture secrecy around conduct that Scripture requires them to address.

The distinction becomes especially important when allegations involve violence, abuse, exploitation, threats, or criminal wrongdoing. No victim should be told that obedience to Matthew 18 requires personally confronting a dangerous offender before seeking protection or contacting lawful authorities. Romans 13:1–4 establishes the legitimacy of civil authority in dealing with evildoers. The local church is not a substitute police department, criminal court, or investigative authority over matters belonging to civil government. Appropriate reporting, protection of those endangered, preservation of relevant evidence, and cooperation with lawful investigations are not violations of biblical forgiveness. Neither does the involvement of civil authorities remove the church's responsibility to consider its own fellowship and leadership standards. A pastor who uses religious language to suppress credible reports of serious wrongdoing is not protecting the testimony of Christ. He is protecting the appearance of the institution at the possible expense of the people entrusted to its care. The command to avoid gossip was never a command to conceal crimes.

Acts 6:1–6 supplies another useful distinction. When a legitimate complaint arose concerning the neglect of Grecian widows in the daily ministration, the apostles did not

dismiss it as divisive gossip. They addressed the matter and established an orderly response. A genuine problem affecting people within the assembly deserved responsible attention. The lesson is not that every complaint must become public, but that the nature of the wrongdoing determines the appropriate response. A private misunderstanding may require a private conversation. A dispute involving multiple people may require witnesses and oversight. A public scandal may require public correction. Serious criminal conduct requires appropriate civil involvement. The church must possess enough biblical discernment to recognize the difference. Privacy is valuable when it protects people from unnecessary exposure; it becomes corrupt when it protects wickedness from necessary accountability. A closed door can provide a proper setting for reconciliation, but it must never become a convenient place to bury the truth. The purpose of order is righteousness, not concealment.

7. The Object Is to Gain a Brother, Not Build a Trophy Case of Defeated Enemies

Galatians 6:1 gives the Church Age believer a direct instruction concerning the restoration of a fallen brother: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Notice the qualifications of the person doing the restoring. Paul does not assign the responsibility to whichever individual is angriest, loudest, or most enthusiastic about exposing another man's failure. He addresses those who are spiritual, and he requires meekness together with personal watchfulness. That does not mean weakness toward sin or reluctance to state the truth. It means exercising correction without becoming intoxicated with one's own supposed superiority. A Christian can confront wrongdoing firmly while remembering that he possesses the same flesh that has ruined better men before him. The person enjoying another man's humiliation should examine his own spiritual condition before advertising his qualifications as a restorer. Restoration requires more than a pointed finger and a self-righteous expression.

Ephesians 4:31–32 addresses the spirit in which Christians should deal with offenses: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.” Those instructions do not make dishonesty acceptable or require injured people to surrender necessary protection. Forgiveness is not pretending that a wrong never occurred, and it does not automatically restore every previous responsibility or level of trust. A dishonest person may be forgiven while remaining unqualified to handle church finances. A person who has endangered others may be treated without hatred while being kept away from situations where further harm could occur. Nevertheless, Christians have no scriptural permission to preserve bitterness as a

permanent possession. If the offense has been genuinely acknowledged and appropriately resolved, the offended brother should not keep digging it out of the grave whenever an argument needs ammunition. Forgiveness does not require the destruction of discernment, but neither does discernment require the preservation of revenge.

Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 provides the proper balance even when an offender refuses correction. Paul commands believers to note the disobedient man and withdraw ordinary company from him, yet adds, “count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” That instruction should prevent church discipline from becoming organized hostility. Romans 12:18 likewise declares, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” The qualification matters because reconciliation requires truth, and one party cannot compel another to repent. A faithful Christian may pursue peace and still encounter persistent refusal. In such cases, appropriate boundaries remain necessary. But where an ordinary personal offense has been resolved, there is no biblical justification for maintaining rival factions, circulating old accusations, or keeping the congregation divided over a dispute that should already be settled. A church is not supposed to function like a battlefield where every wounded ego recruits an army. The congregation belongs to Jesus Christ. Its members should spend considerably more time serving their Saviour than organizing opposition campaigns against one another.

Conclusion

The instructions of Matthew 18:15–17 expose a simple problem that continues to plague churches: people often prefer talking about somebody to talking to him. The Lord's direction concerning personal trespasses was designed to pursue reconciliation through orderly correction, beginning privately where the nature of the offense permits. The Apostle Paul's instructions reinforce the importance of truth, godly speech, brotherly forgiveness, and responsible accountability within the Christian assembly. None of those commands authorizes gossip disguised as concern, accusations built upon assumptions, or public exposure used as punishment. Neither do they demand silence concerning serious wrongdoing. Biblical wisdom recognizes the difference between an ordinary personal grievance and conduct that endangers people or corrupts the congregation. A mature Christian must possess enough courage to confront an actual offense, enough humility to recognize his own mistakes, and enough restraint to avoid involving people who have no proper responsibility in the matter. The Bible provides no encouragement for turning every disagreement into a congregation-wide emergency.

There is also a warning here for people who delight in assuming the role of unofficial church investigators. Every congregation needs faithful members who care about truth, but it does not need an intelligence agency operating between the Sunday school classrooms.

Proverbs 17:9 declares, “He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends.” That proverb must never be abused to conceal dangerous or ongoing wickedness, but it certainly condemns the needless repetition of matters that ought to remain private or have already been resolved. First Peter 4:8 likewise teaches that charity covers a multitude of sins. Biblical charity does not approve unrighteousness. It refuses to parade unnecessary offenses for public consumption. There are things Christians should confront, things they should report, things they should forgive, and minor irritations they should simply refuse to magnify. The ability to distinguish those matters is evidence of scriptural discernment. Some people want every disagreement heard before the church because they have never learned when a matter belongs before God alone.

The final lesson is not complicated, although human pride has spent centuries trying to make it so. When a brother trespasses against you in an ordinary personal matter, seek the truth and pursue him directly. When correction is refused and the matter warrants further action, follow the biblical principles of witnesses, accountability, and orderly involvement. When the offense is public, dangerous, or criminal, do not misuse a passage about private confrontation to obstruct necessary protection and justice. When genuine repentance occurs, obey the Scriptures concerning forgiveness and restoration while maintaining whatever safeguards righteousness requires. Above all, refuse to become another source of corruption through gossip, exaggeration, factionalism, or revenge. Jesus Christ did not purchase his Church with his blood so that its members could spend their days circulating accusations and keeping score over personal grievances. A Christian who truly wants to gain his brother does not need a crowd to witness his righteousness. He needs enough love to tell the truth, enough humility to hear the truth, and enough obedience to stop talking when the matter is finished. One offended brother and two loose tongues can tear apart a congregation that never needed to know. The Bible's answer is plain: settle what ought to be settled, confront what must be confronted, and stop turning private offenses into public entertainment.

3 of 10 — Church Discipline — The Fornicator in the Pew and the Leaven Nobody Had the Backbone to Remove

Key Passage: 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 (KJV)

“It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are

puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you." — 1 Corinthians 5:1–2

There is something almost comical, if it were not so spiritually disgraceful, about a congregation that can thunder against the wickedness of the world while maintaining a reserved seat for the same wickedness inside its own fellowship. The preacher can denounce Hollywood, the congregation can shake its collective head over Sodom, and everybody can express deep concern about the moral collapse of civilization. But let the same kind of corruption appear among the membership, and suddenly the entire assembly discovers the extraordinary importance of being nonjudgmental. That is precisely the mess Paul confronted at Corinth. The problem was not that the church contained sinners. Every local church contains sinners, because the only alternative would be a congregation with no members. The problem was that open, scandalous wickedness had established itself within the fellowship, and the Corinthians were behaving as though their refusal to confront it demonstrated exceptional spiritual maturity. Paul did not call that grace. He called their glorying bad.

The fifth chapter of First Corinthians is one of those passages that separates genuine Bible-believing Christianity from the sentimental religious entertainment business. Paul was not conducting a popularity survey, protecting a financial contributor, or attempting to determine whether confronting the offender might lower attendance. He was dealing with a local assembly that had forgotten something elementary about holiness. A man was involved in sexual immorality so disgraceful that even the surrounding Gentile society recognized its character, and the congregation had failed to respond properly. Worse than the man's conduct was the assembly's apparent satisfaction with its own spiritual condition. The offender had sinned, but the congregation had developed a second problem by accommodating the offense. When corruption moves into a church and nobody objects, the problem no longer belongs exclusively to the person committing it. The whole assembly has acquired a responsibility it cannot discharge by announcing that everybody deserves another chance.

This chapter also exposes two opposite errors that have damaged local churches for generations. One crowd refuses to confront notorious wickedness because somebody might accuse them of lacking grace. Another crowd uses church discipline as an excuse for humiliation, personal revenge, and self-righteous demonstrations of authority. Neither crowd is following Paul. First Corinthians 5 is addressed to a local New Testament congregation under apostolic instruction, and its commands concern the purity and fellowship of that assembly, not the loss of salvation or the establishment of a religious police state. The passage distinguishes those within from those without, known

misconduct from ordinary contact with unbelievers, and disciplinary action from the ultimate judgment of God. It must be read exactly where the Holy Ghost placed it, in the Church Age epistles, without borrowing somebody else's covenant or inventing authority that belongs to no modern preacher. The issue is not whether Christians should love sinners. The issue is whether love requires a congregation to pretend that public rebellion against Scripture is perfectly acceptable.

1. A Scandal So Open That Even the Heathen Knew Something Was Wrong

Paul opens with the words, “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you” (1 Corinthians 5:1). Notice the language. This was not presented as an obscure accusation whispered by an anonymous troublemaker. The offense was commonly reported, and Paul possessed sufficient knowledge of the situation to address the assembly authoritatively. He identifies the conduct as fornication and then describes the particular scandal: “that one should have his father's wife.” The expression indicates a sexual relationship involving the man's father's wife, not a legitimate marriage merely misunderstood by outsiders. The text does not supply every biographical detail concerning the woman, and responsible exposition will not manufacture details the Holy Ghost withheld. What Scripture does establish is that the arrangement was disgraceful, notorious, and being tolerated among professing Christians. The Corinthians did not need an investigative committee to discover that the situation was wrong. They needed enough backbone to obey what they already knew. Some churches have confused gathering additional information with postponing an unavoidable decision.

The expression “such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles” is particularly cutting. Corinth was hardly a sanctuary of public morality, yet Paul identified conduct disgraceful even by the standards of the surrounding heathen. Imagine the testimony of a congregation that claims to possess the truth of God while tolerating something the unbelieving neighbors recognize as shameful. First Corinthians 6:18 commands, “Flee fornication,” and 1 Thessalonians 4:3 declares, “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication.” These are not obscure commands requiring three years of special religious training to interpret. The believer's body belongs to the Lord, and Christian liberty does not convert sexual immorality into an acceptable expression of personal freedom. Paul was not condemning the man because his behavior offended respectable Corinthian society. He was condemning conduct that violated God's revealed standards. When the world occasionally demonstrates more shame over wickedness than a professing Christian congregation, the congregation should examine its own condition before congratulating itself on its enlightenment.

Nevertheless, the fact that this particular case was commonly reported must not become an excuse for treating every allegation as established fact. There is a difference between a verified scandal and somebody's suspicious interpretation of another person's circumstances. Proverbs 18:13 condemns answering a matter before hearing it, while Proverbs 18:17 reminds us that the first account of a controversy may sound convincing until another examines it. A congregation must establish the facts, consider relevant testimony, and distinguish genuine wrongdoing from malicious accusation. Neither private struggles nor confessed sins being honestly forsaken should automatically be turned into public spectacles. A Christian seeking help against temptation is not equivalent to a defiant offender demanding approval for ongoing wickedness. The Corinthians faced a notorious case requiring action, not permission to investigate everybody's private life. Biblical discipline requires enough courage to confront established sin and enough honesty to refuse invented sin. A church that believes every rumor will destroy innocent people; a church that ignores established facts will protect guilty ones.

2. The Congregation Was Puffed Up When It Should Have Been on Its Knees

First Corinthians 5:2 delivers the second indictment: “And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned.” Paul does not merely rebuke the man committing fornication. He rebukes the congregation for its response. This is the part that modern religious tolerance would prefer to remove from the chapter. The Corinthians apparently considered themselves spiritually impressive while accommodating a scandal that should have brought them grief. Throughout this epistle, Paul repeatedly confronts their pride, divisions, and carnal boasting. First Corinthians 4:6 warns against being “puffed up for one against another,” and verse 18 identifies others who were similarly inflated. Now the same disease appears in connection with tolerated immorality. The assembly was swollen with religious self-importance while lacking the moral seriousness required to address what was happening beneath its own roof. A balloon may look impressive until somebody discovers that its contents consist almost entirely of air. Spiritual pride works much the same way, except that the explosion can scatter considerably more wreckage.

Paul says they should have mourned. That word destroys the notion that church discipline is supposed to become an opportunity for religious excitement. A faithful assembly does not celebrate the disgrace of a member. It does not assemble spectators to enjoy an announcement, publish unnecessary details, or turn another person's failure into an evening of congregational entertainment. Known wickedness should grieve believers because it dishonors Jesus Christ, injures people, and damages the testimony of the gospel. But mourning is not an excuse for paralysis. Paul connects their failure to mourn with their failure to remove the offender. The correct response required both seriousness of

heart and obedience in action. Some Christians have become experts at announcing how deeply concerned they are while ensuring that their concern never produces a single difficult decision. They can hold meetings, issue statements, and express sorrow until the cows come home, but the corruption remains comfortably seated in the second row. Grief that refuses obedience eventually becomes another costume worn by cowardice.

There is also a practical danger when the offender possesses money, influence, family connections, or personal popularity within the congregation. Scripture does not say the Corinthian man was wealthy, and there is no justification for inventing that detail. Nevertheless, James 2:1–9 condemns partiality among believers, and the principle applies whenever an assembly must judge misconduct fairly. The church cannot develop one standard for an unknown laborer and another for the fellow who contributes the largest offering. Nor may the pastor excuse an influential family's wickedness while publicly rebuking somebody who lacks supporters. First Timothy 5:21 requires action "without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality." The same Bible governs the wealthy, the poor, the preacher's relatives, the deacon's children, and the newest member. An assembly that disciplines only those who cannot fight back has not established holiness. It has established a pecking order. When the size of a man's offering determines the seriousness of his sin, the church has stopped exercising discipline and started operating a religious auction.

3. Delivering a Man Unto Satan Is Not a License for Modern Preachers to Play Apostle

First Corinthians 5:3–4 introduces the authority behind Paul's instructions: "For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed." Paul was not sitting in Corinth collecting rumors and pretending to possess inside information through mysterious impressions. He was an apostle of Jesus Christ, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and he had judged a known matter requiring apostolic intervention. Verse 4 speaks of the Corinthians gathering together "with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ." The assembly was to act in obedience to Christ, not independently of him. Paul did not present congregational discipline as a personal disagreement between competing personalities. He established the authority of the Lord behind the necessary correction. That distinction matters because no present-day pastor possesses Paul's apostolic office or the right to issue inspired judgments. A preacher's calling does not turn his personal conclusions into Scripture. The authority of church discipline comes from the written Word of God, not the preacher's ability to sound impressive while announcing it.

Verse 5 contains the severe instruction "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Those

words deserve careful attention rather than sensational preaching. Paul was directing an apostolic judgment concerning a specific offender, and the purpose included the destruction of the flesh while preserving the distinction concerning the spirit's salvation in the day of the Lord Jesus. The passage does not authorize modern preachers to claim that they can command Satan to attack somebody's body, assign demons to troublesome church members, or pronounce supernatural curses from the pulpit. Paul possessed apostolic authority that modern ministers must not counterfeit. First Timothy 1:20 records another apostolic action involving Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom Paul delivered unto Satan "that they may learn not to blaspheme." The purpose was corrective, not a theatrical display of spiritual power. A preacher who pretends to exercise powers he cannot establish from Scripture is not defending apostolic doctrine. He is dressing personal presumption in apostolic clothing.

The passage also must not be twisted into teaching that church discipline cancels salvation. Ephesians 1:13 teaches that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, and Ephesians 4:30 identifies the duration as "unto the day of redemption." Salvation under grace is not maintained by uninterrupted good behavior or a favorable vote at a church business meeting. First Corinthians 5 does not identify the congregation as the administrator of eternal life. Nor does the phrase concerning the destruction of the flesh require us to declare with absolute certainty the particular physical outcome Paul expected in this case. Scripture says what it says, and responsible preaching should stop where the inspired words stop. The Corinthians were commanded to deal seriously with the offender, not to imagine themselves sovereign over his final destiny. A congregation may remove a person from its fellowship, but it cannot remove a genuinely saved believer from Jesus Christ. A church membership roll is not the Lamb's book of life, and no preacher possesses an eraser capable of reaching into heaven.

4. A Little Leaven Does Not Need Permission to Corrupt the Whole Lump

Paul turns from the offender to the congregation's boastful attitude with a question that should permanently silence the argument for tolerating notorious sin: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). Leaven spreads through dough, and Paul uses that familiar process to illustrate the corrupting influence of tolerated wickedness. Notice that the problem is not limited to the man committing the offense. The congregation's willingness to accommodate his conduct threatens the moral testimony of the whole assembly. Other members observe what leadership refuses to confront. Younger believers learn that the church's proclaimed standards are apparently negotiable. Those faithfully resisting temptation wonder why open rebellion receives approval disguised as compassion. Eventually, the distinction between biblical instruction and actual

congregational practice becomes difficult to discover. The preacher may continue proclaiming holiness every Sunday, but the assembly's conduct announces a different message. A little leaven does not need a membership application, a committee assignment, or permission from the deacons. Given the opportunity, it simply works through the lump.

Verse 7 follows with a command: “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” The doctrinal language is important. Paul addresses believers according to their position in Christ while commanding conduct consistent with that position. They are described as unleavened, yet they must purge the old leaven. That is not a contradiction. It distinguishes what God has made the believer in Christ from the believer's practical responsibility concerning sin. Paul then identifies Christ as our passover, drawing upon Israel's historical deliverance and the significance of the Passover sacrifice. The original Passover belonged to Israel under God's dealings with that nation; Paul does not transfer the Mosaic covenant wholesale to the Church. He identifies Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the sacrificial picture and applies the lesson to Christian conduct. The blood of the Lamb establishes redemption. It does not provide a religious covering beneath which open wickedness may operate undisturbed.

Verse 8 completes the illustration: “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Paul is not instructing Gentile congregations to return to the ceremonial requirements of Israel's calendar. He is employing the language of the feast to demand sincerity and truth instead of malice and wickedness. Notice that sincerity alone is not enough. A congregation may sincerely believe that refusing all confrontation demonstrates superior love, but sincere error remains error. Truth must govern the assembly's conduct. Nor does purging leaven mean eliminating every imperfect Christian, because then the building would be empty before the opening hymn finished. Paul is confronting established wickedness being tolerated in the fellowship, not the ordinary struggle of believers who acknowledge sin and seek to obey God. There is a difference between a church filled with sinners seeking the Lord and a church determined to make sin comfortable. The first needs faithful preaching. The second needs to obey what has already been preached.

5. Called a Brother: The Man Inside the Fellowship Is Not the Heathen Outside the Door

First Corinthians 5:9–10 supplies a distinction that is essential to understanding the chapter: “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world.” Paul immediately explains that avoiding all immoral

people outside the church would require believers to depart from the world altogether. Christianity was never intended to produce a colony of religious hermits who refuse ordinary dealings with unsaved humanity. Christians must live among unbelievers, conduct honest business, demonstrate kindness, and preach the gospel to lost sinners. First Corinthians 9:22 records Paul's willingness to become “all things to all men” so that he might save some. That missionary concern does not mean adopting worldly sin, but it certainly requires contact with people who need salvation. The church cannot fulfill the Great Commission while treating every unsaved neighbor as someone too contaminated to approach. Separation from wickedness is not the same thing as isolation from the people Christ came to save.

Verse 11 makes the distinction unmistakable: “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.” The expression “called a brother” concerns someone professing Christian identity within the fellowship. Paul does not require the congregation to possess infallible knowledge of the man's regeneration. Neither does he declare that everybody who commits one of the listed sins has automatically lost salvation. The issue is a professing brother persisting in conduct requiring separation. Notice also that fornication is not the only offense listed. Covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, and extortion appear beside it. That ought to disturb congregations that can condemn sexual immorality loudly while tolerating financial dishonesty, abusive speech, and deliberate exploitation. God's standards are not a menu from which respectable church members select whichever sins happen to be least fashionable in their neighborhood.

The command “with such an one no not to eat” communicates a serious restriction of fellowship. It is not a prohibition against supplying necessary food to a hungry person or performing lawful obligations that cannot simply be abandoned. Nor is it permission to stalk the disciplined person through town, harass his family, or treat him as though ordinary human decency has been abolished. Paul's purpose is to prevent the congregation from maintaining the appearance of normal Christian fellowship with someone persisting in scandalous conduct. The church must not communicate acceptance where Scripture commands disapproval. That includes refusing to allow an offender to use congregational participation as evidence that his conduct has been approved. But the action must remain connected to the offense and the purpose of correction. Second Thessalonians 3:15 reminds believers not to count a disciplined brother as an enemy, but to admonish him as a brother. Biblical separation withdraws the approval of fellowship; it does not grant permission to replace Christian holiness with personal hatred.

6. Judge Them That Are Within, and Stop Pretending Discernment Is a Dirty Word

First Corinthians 5:12 confronts another popular excuse for congregational cowardice: “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within?” There is no complicated theological puzzle here. Paul distinguishes between the unbelieving world and the professing membership of the Christian assembly. The church is not responsible for exercising its internal discipline over every sinner in the community. God will judge those outside. But within the local fellowship, believers have a responsibility to make judgments concerning matters Scripture places under congregational oversight. The modern slogan that Christians must never judge anybody collapses when confronted with the actual words of the Apostle. The same Paul who preached salvation by grace commanded churches to exercise discernment. Judging rightly is not the opposite of grace. It is an obligation within biblical fellowship. A church that refuses to judge what God has already condemned is not demonstrating humility. It is announcing that its own judgment of tolerance outranks God's judgment of sin.

But biblical judgment must be governed by truth, not suspicion, popularity, or the preacher's personal irritation. Paul was addressing an established scandal, not authorizing investigations into every rumor circulating through the fellowship hall. First Timothy 5:19 specifically requires adequate witnesses before receiving an accusation against an elder, and verse 21 demands impartiality. Proverbs 18:13 condemns answering before hearing the matter. Those principles are especially important when allegations involve serious consequences for another person's reputation, family, livelihood, or place in the congregation. A pastor who acts without sufficient evidence is not displaying courage. He is demonstrating recklessness. Likewise, a congregation that treats every private confession as material for public exposure will discourage honesty rather than encourage repentance. A Christian honestly struggling against temptation needs scriptural help, not the threat of becoming next Sunday's disciplinary announcement. Public rebellion and private repentance are not interchangeable conditions. The Bible never commanded the church to install a magnifying glass over every pew, but it certainly did not authorize blindness when established wickedness stands in front of the pulpit.

Verse 13 provides the chapter's final command: “Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Those are the words of the Holy Ghost through Paul, and they are not improved by pretending they mean something less severe. The command concerns removal from the congregation's fellowship, not physical violence, civil punishment administered by church members, or a pronouncement that the offender is eternally damned. The assembly must act within the authority Scripture actually grants. It must also avoid confusing the discipline of a genuine offender with the protection of its

own reputation. Where conduct involves criminal wrongdoing, the church must not obstruct lawful investigation or conceal evidence behind a claim of religious privilege. Romans 13:1–4 establishes the place of civil government in dealing with evildoers. Congregational discipline and civil accountability address different responsibilities. The church's reputation is not protected by hiding wickedness. It is protected by obeying God when the truth becomes uncomfortable. A spotless public image purchased through concealed corruption is not holiness. It is merely dirt under a very expensive carpet.

7. Remove the Leaven Without Turning the Church Into a Slaughterhouse

The severity of First Corinthians 5 must be understood alongside the restorative instructions given elsewhere in the Church Age epistles. Galatians 6:1 commands, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” The objective of biblical correction is not to provide self-righteous church members with an opportunity to destroy somebody who has fallen. Restoration remains desirable wherever genuine repentance and circumstances make it appropriate. Nevertheless, restoration cannot be manufactured by ignoring the offense. A man who continues defending his wickedness is not restored merely because the congregation finds discipline unpleasant. Genuine repentance acknowledges wrongdoing, ceases defending rebellion, and produces conduct consistent with that acknowledgment. Second Corinthians 7:10–11 distinguishes godly sorrow from the sorrow of the world and describes the earnest response associated with repentance. Regretting that your sin became public is not necessarily the same thing as repenting that you committed it. A man can be sorry the roof leaked without having any intention of putting out the fire.

Second Corinthians 2:6–8 demonstrates that discipline must not become endless punishment when sufficient correction has accomplished its purpose. Paul speaks of an offender who had received punishment from many and instructs the Corinthians to forgive, comfort, and confirm their love toward him. Scripture does not explicitly establish that this individual was the same man addressed in First Corinthians 5, and there is no reason to make an uncertain identification into an absolute doctrine. What the passage plainly establishes is that a congregation can become guilty of excessive severity after a disciplinary matter should be resolved. But forgiveness does not automatically restore qualifications for leadership, remove necessary restrictions, or erase every consequence of serious wrongdoing. A repentant offender may be received into appropriate fellowship while remaining unqualified for positions involving trust or authority. The protection of those previously harmed must not be sacrificed to produce an impressive appearance of

reconciliation. Mercy is commanded, but pretending that repentance instantly restores every lost qualification is not. Scripture requires both charity and discernment.

First Corinthians 6:11 provides a glorious reminder that salvation changes a sinner's standing before God: “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” The congregation was not composed of people who had never committed wickedness. Some had been rescued from the very kinds of sin Paul condemns. That is what makes the gospel so magnificent. Jesus Christ saves guilty people through his finished work, not respectable people through their religious achievements. Nevertheless, the same grace that saves believers commands them to put off the works of the flesh and walk worthy of their calling. A church must never shut the gospel door against a sinner who needs salvation, nor abandon a repentant brother merely because restoration demands patience. But neither may it grant respectable standing to persistent wickedness under the banner of forgiveness. The blood of Christ cleanses sinners; it was never provided so that a congregation could paint over corruption and call the building clean.

Conclusion

The fifth chapter of First Corinthians leaves the modern church without a comfortable escape hatch. Paul identified a notorious case of fornication, rebuked the congregation for its inflated attitude, commanded decisive action, exposed the corrupting influence of tolerated wickedness, and distinguished disciplinary responsibility within the church from God's judgment upon the unbelieving world. The instructions are not complicated, but they become exceedingly inconvenient whenever obedience threatens financial support, personal friendships, influential families, or the congregation's carefully maintained public image. The Corinthians were not condemned because sinners existed among them. They were condemned for allowing established scandalous wickedness to continue without the required response. A church may contain members battling temptation, confessing failures, and sincerely seeking to obey God. That is one thing. A church that knowingly accommodates brazen rebellion while boasting of superior grace is another matter altogether. There is no holiness in pretending sinners do not struggle, but there is no grace in pretending rebellion does not matter.

Every congregation should examine both sides of this warning. The church that refuses to confront public wickedness has abandoned an unmistakable apostolic responsibility. The church that delights in humiliation, accepts unsupported accusations, exercises partiality, or treats disciplined people with personal cruelty has also departed from Scripture. Neither compromise nor tyranny belongs in the house of God. Hebrews 12:6 declares, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth,” establishing that divine correction is not inherently

opposed to divine love. Yet the Lord's chastening as a Father must be distinguished from a congregation's limited responsibility over its fellowship. Church leaders are not substitutes for God, and no local assembly possesses authority to revoke eternal salvation. The responsibility is to obey the written Word with courage, impartiality, restraint, and genuine concern for righteousness. When a church excuses the wealthy offender, humiliates the powerless one, or conceals wrongdoing to protect its reputation, it has replaced biblical discipline with religious politics. God did not inspire First Corinthians 5 to establish another committee of hypocrites.

The final issue is whether the church intends to believe the Book or simply admire it from a safe distance. Paul did not tell the Corinthians to celebrate their broad-minded acceptance of the fornicator. He told them to purge the leaven and put away the wicked person. He did not command hatred, vindictiveness, or a campaign of public humiliation. He commanded obedience concerning an established offense that the congregation had tolerated. The same Scriptures that require correction also require genuine forgiveness, honest judgment, and godly restoration when repentance makes restoration proper. A church that refuses discipline because it fears appearing unloving has misunderstood love. A church that uses discipline to satisfy personal revenge has misunderstood righteousness. Both need to get back beneath the authority of the words God actually gave. The fornicator in the Corinthian assembly was guilty of his own wickedness, but the congregation was guilty of permitting that wickedness to remain unchallenged. A little leaven does not ask permission before working through the lump, and ignoring corruption does not make a church compassionate. It makes the corruption comfortable. The Lord never commanded his people to maintain a garbage dump in the name of grace. He commanded them to purge the leaven, preserve the testimony, and obey the Book—even when somebody occupying a pew does not like what the Book says.

4 of 10 — Church Discipline — Poison Behind the Pulpit: When False Doctrine Wears a Suit and Carries a King James Bible

Key Passage: 2 Timothy 2:15–18 (KJV)

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.”

There is something particularly dangerous about a man who carries a King James Bible into the pulpit, quotes it correctly, speaks confidently, and then proceeds to teach something the passage never said. A congregation naturally expects the fellow standing behind the pulpit to know what he is doing with the Book in his hands. Unfortunately, possessing a Bible and understanding it are two entirely different accomplishments. A butcher can own a surgical instrument without being qualified to perform an operation, and a preacher can possess the correct Bible while making a doctrinal slaughterhouse out of its contents. Paul warned Timothy that the word of false teachers would eat like a canker. That is not the language of a man discussing harmless differences over church furniture or the color of the carpet. It describes doctrinal corruption that spreads, destroys, and undermines the faith of those who listen. The worst poison in a congregation does not always arrive through the back door. Sometimes it stands behind the pulpit, wears a respectable suit, and asks everybody to turn to the correct chapter before administering the wrong doctrine.

Modern Christianity has developed an extraordinary tolerance for doctrinal confusion, provided the man producing it possesses enough personality to attract a crowd. He may confuse Israel with the Church, salvation with discipleship, the Judgment Seat of Christ with the Great White Throne, or the Rapture with the Second Advent, and somebody will defend him by explaining that he has a good heart. Apparently, sincerity has become the universal antidote for error. The problem is that sincerity does not change the meaning of a Bible verse. Paul did not instruct Timothy to approve every teacher whose intentions appeared honorable. He commanded him to study, rightly divide the word of truth, shun corrupt teaching, and protect the people being influenced by it. A congregation that carefully examines the moral qualifications of a pastor but never investigates what he actually believes has inspected the paint on the building while ignoring termites in the foundation. A pleasant personality cannot compensate for a corrupted gospel, and a polished sermon cannot transform unsound doctrine into truth.

Church discipline concerning false teaching must therefore be handled with biblical courage and biblical precision. Every imperfect explanation is not heresy, every disputed interpretation is not rebellion, and every preacher who makes an honest mistake is not another Hymenaeus. The same Scriptures that command believers to expose dangerous doctrine also forbid foolish accusations, partiality, and careless judgment. Nevertheless, persistent doctrinal corruption cannot be excused indefinitely merely because the offender quotes Scripture, enjoys popularity, or occupies a position of religious authority. Romans 16:17–18, Titus 1:9–13, Acts 20:28–31, and Paul's instructions to Timothy establish unmistakable responsibilities concerning those who deceive congregations and subvert sound doctrine. This is a Church Age matter addressed directly in the Pauline epistles, not an attempt to borrow Israel's national judgments or manufacture some new religious

government. The question is whether a local assembly will submit its teachers to the authority of the written Word or allow the written Word to become the decorative covering for whatever its teachers prefer to believe.

1. A King James Bible in the Hand Does Not Guarantee Sound Doctrine in the Head

Second Timothy 2:15 begins with an imperative: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God.” Notice that the approval in question comes from God, not from a congregation impressed by somebody's vocabulary, delivery, or ability to produce a stirring conclusion. Paul addresses Timothy as a workman, which immediately implies labor, responsibility, and the possibility of shame for work performed badly. The command continues with the essential requirement: “rightly dividing the word of truth.” The Bible does not instruct a preacher merely to divide something. It commands him to divide it rightly. That means understanding the words in their proper context, recognizing the people being addressed, distinguishing the doctrines that govern different dispensations, and refusing to force one passage into a setting where God never placed it. A man can quote Scripture accurately and apply it dishonestly. The devil quoted Scripture in Matthew 4, and the Lord Jesus Christ answered him with Scripture properly understood. Possessing a verse is not the same as possessing the truth that verse teaches.

Consider the damage produced when a preacher refuses to distinguish Israel from the Church. God gave Israel national covenants, earthly promises, a priesthood, and a law governing the nation's relationship with him. The Church, which is Christ's body, receives its doctrinal position through the finished work of Jesus Christ and the revelation committed to the apostles, particularly Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith apart from works, while Romans 6:14 declares that believers are not under the law but under grace. That distinction does not make the Old Testament useless. Second Timothy 3:16 declares that all Scripture is profitable, but profitable Scripture must still be understood according to its setting. A preacher who transports commandments from one dispensation into another without explanation can produce bondage where God established liberty. A man who confuses the Rapture of the Church with the visible return of Christ to establish his kingdom can turn prophetic instruction into a theological traffic accident. The Bible is not confused. The fellow operating the steering wheel is.

But rightly dividing Scripture must never become an excuse for arrogance or reckless accusations against everybody who disagrees over a difficult passage. Some matters are plainly established by direct apostolic instruction, while others require careful examination and recognition of details the text does not explicitly settle. The deity of Jesus Christ, his bodily resurrection, salvation through his blood, and justification by grace through faith are

not optional ornaments attached to Christianity. They belong to its foundation. Yet Christians may disagree over the precise interpretation of a disputed expression without thereby denying the gospel. First Thessalonians 5:21 commands, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” That requires examination rather than blind acceptance, but it also requires honesty concerning what Scripture actually proves. Sound doctrine is not established by the preacher who shouts the loudest or produces the longest list of supposed enemies. The man who rightly divides the Bible must first be willing to let the Bible divide his own opinions from God's words.

2. Hymenaeus and Philetus: Two Religious Wrecking Balls Swinging at the Resurrection

Second Timothy 2:16 warns Timothy to “shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.” Paul immediately illustrates that warning by naming Hymenaeus and Philetus. These men were not merely presenting an unusual opinion concerning a difficult historical question. Verse 18 identifies their error: “Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.” There is the doctrinal crime, stated plainly. They were teaching that the resurrection had already occurred, contradicting the apostolic revelation concerning the future resurrection of believers. Paul did not pause to congratulate them for introducing a fresh perspective into the Christian conversation. He identified their teaching as error and described its destructive consequences. Some modern religious circles would probably have invited the two men to conduct a weekend conference on alternative resurrection perspectives. Paul put their names in Scripture as a warning. Evidently, the Apostle considered accuracy more important than preserving the reputation of two fellows who were damaging the faith of others.

The resurrection is not a disposable article of Christian doctrine. First Corinthians 15 establishes the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as essential to the gospel, and Paul declares in verse 17, “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.” The chapter also teaches the future resurrection of those who belong to Christ, with verse 23 establishing an order in God's resurrection program. First Thessalonians 4:16–17 describes the dead in Christ rising first and living believers being caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. That future hope cannot be canceled because somebody announces that the promised resurrection has already taken place. Hymenaeus and Philetus were corrupting doctrine concerning an event that belongs to the believer's hope. The exact additional arguments they used are not recorded, so there is no justification for inventing their entire theological system. What Scripture establishes is sufficient: they

contradicted the truth about the resurrection and consequently damaged the faith of some who heard them.

The expression “overthrow the faith of some” deserves attention because false doctrine does not remain a harmless collection of words floating above a congregation. It enters minds, reshapes expectations, undermines confidence, and produces spiritual instability. Nevertheless, the phrase must not be twisted into teaching that a genuinely saved believer can lose eternal life because somebody deceived him concerning prophecy. The next verse declares, “Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.” Ephesians 1:13 likewise teaches the sealing of believers with the Holy Spirit of promise. Doctrinal deception can seriously damage a Christian's understanding, assurance, fellowship, and service without canceling the finished work of Christ. That is precisely why it must be confronted. A man does not have to demolish the foundation of salvation to ruin the spiritual usefulness of people standing upon it. False doctrine may not remove a saved man from Christ, but it can leave him so confused about Christ's promises that he spends years wandering through a theological fog somebody else manufactured.

3. Good Words, Fair Speeches, and the Religious Salesmen Who Deceive the Simple

Romans 16:17 contains one of the clearest commands concerning doctrinal troublemakers in the Church Age: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” Notice the standard Paul establishes. The issue is not disagreement with the pastor's favorite opinion, failure to support a church program, or refusal to applaud an influential personality. The divisions and offenses are contrary to apostolic doctrine. That distinction prevents the verse from becoming a weapon against legitimate questions or necessary correction. Sometimes the fellow accused of causing division is the very man attempting to preserve sound doctrine against an influential teacher who has departed from it. Truth must determine the matter, not the numerical strength of the opposing parties. Nevertheless, when persistent teaching contradicts established Scripture and produces doctrinal corruption, the congregation is commanded to mark the offenders and avoid them. Paul did not say to admire their sincerity, purchase their latest materials, or invite them back for another opportunity to confuse the membership.

Verse 18 explains how such men operate: “For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” There is an important warning for believers who imagine false teachers must always appear dishonest, unpleasant, or obviously wicked. Paul specifically identifies good words and fair speeches as instruments of deception. A man can speak beautifully while

teaching terribly. He can possess excellent manners, fashionable clothing, impressive credentials, and a voice that would make a radio announcer envious. None of those things establishes doctrinal reliability. The question is what he teaches when the Bible is opened. His presentation may be polished enough to impress a congregation, but polish does not remove poison. Arsenic does not become nutritious because somebody serves it in an expensive crystal glass. A smooth tongue is no substitute for sound doctrine, and a preacher who can charm a congregation away from Scripture has not fed the sheep. He has merely learned to poison them politely.

Paul also identifies the motive of such deceivers: they serve their own belly rather than Jesus Christ. That does not authorize believers to claim supernatural knowledge of every teacher's private intentions. Scripture reveals the character of the deceivers Paul describes; present accusations must still be established responsibly. Yet the warning is unmistakable. Religious teaching can become a means of personal advancement, financial enrichment, or the accumulation of influence. A man may discover that sensational claims attract attention, doctrinal novelty sells materials, and attacking established truth produces a loyal following among people eager to hear something different. Second Timothy 4:3 describes those who accumulate teachers according to their own lusts, “having itching ears.” The preacher supplies the novelty, and the congregation supplies the appetite. Both become responsible for rejecting sound instruction. The antidote is not suspicion toward every successful ministry. It is the biblical examination of teaching, motives where evidence establishes them, and conduct. Popularity cannot prove a doctrine true, and obscurity cannot prove it false. The Book must remain the judge.

4. Wolves Among the Elders: When the Shepherd's Staff Becomes a Weapon Against the Sheep

Acts 20:28–31 records one of the most solemn warnings Paul ever delivered concerning the oversight of a local church. Addressing the elders of Ephesus, he commands them to take heed to themselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers. Their responsibility was “to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” That statement establishes both the importance of the congregation and the seriousness of pastoral stewardship. The people belong to God, not to the men appointed to oversee them. Their redemption was purchased with blood, not with a church building, denominational charter, or impressive ministerial résumé. A preacher who treats the congregation as his personal possession has already misunderstood the office he occupies. The flock exists for the glory of Jesus Christ, and the overseer's responsibility is to feed it faithfully. He is not authorized to substitute his imagination for Scripture simply because he happens to be holding the microphone.

Paul continues in verse 29, “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.” The illustration is severe because the danger is severe. Wolves do not enter a sheepfold to improve its nutritional program. Their purpose is destruction, and Paul uses the picture to warn against those who would corrupt and damage the assembly. But the next verse is even more disturbing: “Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” The danger would not come exclusively from outsiders. Men from among the congregation's own leadership could arise and distort the truth to gather disciples around themselves. That is why the opening command includes taking heed to themselves. A preacher may spend years warning against false teaching in other churches while gradually becoming the very thing he condemns. It is possible to guard the front gate against wolves while one of them is already conducting the Bible study.

Verse 31 reveals the spirit in which Paul delivered this warning: “Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.” This was not casual criticism offered by a man who enjoyed finding fault. Paul had labored among those believers, taught them faithfully, and warned them with tears. The seriousness of doctrinal corruption moved him to sustained instruction rather than occasional emotional outbursts. That is the example church leaders need. A pastor should teach the congregation enough Scripture that members can recognize error before it becomes established. Acts 20:27 records Paul's testimony that he had not shunned declaring “all the counsel of God.” A church nourished only upon favorite topics and repeated slogans becomes vulnerable whenever deception appears outside the preacher's familiar collection of verses. The flock needs the whole counsel of God, rightly divided and faithfully taught. A shepherd who never teaches the sheep to recognize dangerous ground should not act surprised when they follow a smiling stranger over the edge of a cliff.

5. The Gainsayer at Crete: Subverting Whole Houses While Pretending to Defend the Faith

Titus 1:9 identifies a fundamental qualification for spiritual leadership: “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” Notice that a bishop must do more than possess administrative ability, personal charisma, or a reputation for being agreeable. He must hold fast the faithful word and be capable of employing sound doctrine to answer opposition. The preacher's responsibility includes positive instruction and the correction of error. A man who can deliver an entertaining sermon but cannot explain why a false doctrine contradicts Scripture is inadequately equipped for a major part of his assignment. Likewise, an elder who recognizes doctrinal corruption but refuses to confront it because

he fears losing popularity has abandoned a responsibility attached to his office. The standard is not whether the pastor can win every argument. It is whether he knows the Scriptures well enough to establish truth and answer those who oppose it.

Paul explains the danger in Titus 1:10–11: “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.” The reference to the circumcision identifies a particular problem involving teachers associated with Jewish religious claims, and the historical setting must be respected. The Church under grace must not be placed back beneath Mosaic requirements as though Christ's finished work were insufficient. But the broader warning also reveals how corrupt teaching enters homes and destroys stability. These men were not merely making harmless mistakes during informal discussion. They were teaching prohibited doctrines, subverting households, and pursuing disgraceful gain. Paul's command concerning stopping their mouths refers to silencing their destructive teaching, not authorizing physical abuse or some religious assault squad. A congregation should refuse such men teaching authority rather than continuing to provide a platform for corruption. When a preacher repeatedly poisons the well, the answer is not to purchase another bucket and compliment his enthusiasm.

Titus 1:13 supplies the corrective command: “Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.” Notice the purpose attached to the severity. Paul does not command sharp rebuke because Titus needs an opportunity to demonstrate superior intelligence. The objective is soundness in the faith. Verse 14 continues by warning against Jewish fables and commandments of men that turn from the truth. A faithful rebuke must identify the actual error, establish the biblical correction, and distinguish the commandment of God from the traditions of men. This principle also places a restriction upon the person administering discipline. A pastor may not label his own preferences sound doctrine and then rebuke everybody who refuses to obey them. The teaching must be measured against Scripture. Sharpness without accuracy is merely noise, and accuracy without willingness to confront persistent deception leaves the congregation exposed. The purpose of doctrinal rebuke is to remove error from the mind, not to remove dignity from the person. A sword properly handled cuts away corruption; waved recklessly, it wounds everybody standing nearby.

6. A Shipwrecked Faith and the Apostolic Warning Nobody Wants to Hear

First Timothy 1:3 reveals that Paul left Timothy at Ephesus for a specific doctrinal responsibility: “that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine.” That instruction precedes Paul's warning concerning those who had departed from faith and a

good conscience. In verses 19–20, he writes of “Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.” The illustration of shipwreck is particularly appropriate. A vessel may possess impressive sails, polished brass, and a confident captain, but none of those accomplishments will keep it afloat after the hull has been torn open. Doctrine and conscience belong together. A man who knowingly rejects truth while continuing to teach others is not merely exercising intellectual independence. He is sailing toward destruction while assuring his passengers that the water entering the ship is part of an exciting new experience.

Hymenaeus appears in both First Timothy 1:20 and Second Timothy 2:17, while Alexander is named in the former passage and Philetus in the latter. Scripture does not establish that Alexander and Philetus were the same man, nor does it identify every particular error involved in the first passage. What Scripture does establish is that Paul confronted men whose conduct and teaching endangered the faith. The expression concerning delivering Hymenaeus and Alexander unto Satan belongs to Paul's apostolic authority and must not be transformed into a supernatural disciplinary power claimed by modern pastors. A congregation may withdraw fellowship, remove teaching responsibilities, and act according to biblical instruction. It cannot manufacture apostolic authority by repeating Paul's words with sufficient volume. The objective stated in First Timothy 1:20 is corrective: “that they may learn not to blaspheme.” Even severe action must remain governed by the purpose Scripture establishes. Discipline is not a religious performance designed to convince spectators that the preacher possesses extraordinary powers.

The connection between conscience and doctrine also warns against treating persistent false teaching as a purely intellectual matter. A man who discovers his error and receives correction demonstrates something different from a man who understands the biblical objection but continues promoting the falsehood for influence or advantage. Second Timothy 3:13 warns that evil men and seducers will grow worse, “deceiving, and being deceived.” Deception can involve both personal corruption and the corruption of others. Nevertheless, accusations concerning a teacher's motives must be supported by evidence rather than invented to strengthen an argument. A congregation should confront the teaching it can establish, examine the conduct it can verify, and refuse imaginary charges. Where the error is serious and correction is rejected, continued teaching authority becomes indefensible. You do not leave a man at the ship's wheel after he has repeatedly steered toward the rocks simply because he assures everybody that his intentions are excellent.

7. Guard the Pulpit Without Turning Every Disagreement Into a Heresy Trial

A faithful congregation needs doctrinal discernment without developing an appetite for accusations. Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans because they received the word with readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether the things they heard were true. Their example is especially powerful because they examined the preaching of Paul himself. The Church Age believer has no authority to accept religious claims merely because they come from an admired personality. First Thessalonians 5:21 commands, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." That requires an open Bible, honest examination, and enough humility to acknowledge when an interpretation is mistaken. It does not require treating every difference over a difficult verse as a denial of the gospel. Christians can disagree concerning secondary details while holding firmly to the essential doctrines of the faith. Discernment is the ability to distinguish truth from error, not the talent of discovering a heretic behind every commentary, church bulletin, and unfamiliar expression.

Second Timothy 2:24–25 supplies the proper manner of correction: "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves." Those words occur in the same chapter that condemns the destructive teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus. There is no contradiction. Paul requires the condemnation of dangerous error while commanding patience in the work of instruction. Titus 3:10 provides a further boundary: "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject." The proper response depends upon the nature and persistence of the offense. Honest misunderstanding calls for teaching. Correctable mistakes call for correction. Persistent doctrinal rebellion requires firmer action. The accused teacher must be heard fairly, and any action must rest upon established facts rather than factional pressure. Biblical correction is not a contest to determine which preacher can deliver the most impressive denunciation. It is an effort to protect truth and, where possible, recover the person who has departed from it.

Second Timothy 4:2–4 completes the pastoral responsibility with the command to "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." Paul immediately warns of a time when people will refuse sound doctrine and collect teachers according to their own lusts. That danger places responsibility upon congregations as well as preachers. A church should appoint qualified teachers, examine serious doctrinal accusations, provide opportunities for honest correction, and remove persistent false teachers from positions where they can continue deceiving others. But it must never confuse pastoral authority with personal ownership of the faith. Ephesians 4:14 describes the objective of spiritual maturity: believers should no longer be children tossed

about by every wind of doctrine. The solution is not blind loyalty to a preacher. It is faithful instruction in Scripture. The strongest church is not the one where nobody dares question the man behind the pulpit. It is the one where the people know their Bibles well enough to recognize whether the man behind the pulpit is telling the truth.

Conclusion

False doctrine is not made harmless by respectable clothing, religious vocabulary, impressive credentials, or the possession of a King James Bible. Paul identified men who corrupted the resurrection, warned against smooth-speaking deceivers, exposed wolves arising from among church leaders, and commanded congregations to confront teaching contrary to apostolic doctrine. Those warnings concern genuine dangers, not imaginary enemies created to entertain a congregation. A preacher's teaching must be examined according to Scripture, and accusations against him must be handled with equal honesty. The Church cannot afford either reckless denunciations or cowardly silence. The Lord Jesus Christ purchased his Church with his own blood, and those entrusted with feeding it have no permission to substitute doctrinal poison for spiritual nourishment. A congregation can recover from an embarrassing announcement, a poorly delivered sermon, or a preacher who occasionally loses his place in the chapter. It cannot safely build its future upon doctrine that systematically contradicts the Book it claims to believe.

The responsibility belongs to every believer who receives instruction, but it rests with particular weight upon those entrusted with pastoral oversight. A teacher must study, rightly divide, hold fast the faithful word, and remain willing to receive correction himself. The man who rebukes everybody while refusing to have his own doctrine examined has not demonstrated spiritual authority. He has demonstrated spiritual arrogance. Likewise, the congregation that demands sound doctrine from outsiders while excusing persistent corruption from a favorite teacher has exchanged biblical conviction for personal loyalty. Salvation remains by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, and no honest doctrinal examination should confuse eternal security with permission to teach error. The believer's standing in Christ is secure; the preacher's responsibility to handle Scripture faithfully remains serious. The Judgment Seat of Christ will not reward a man for the size of the crowd he gathered through doctrinal confusion. Popularity is a poor substitute for faithfulness when the Lord himself examines the work.

The final verdict is written plainly enough that nobody needs an advanced education to understand it. “Study to shew thyself approved unto God,” Paul commanded, and the requirement remains “rightly dividing the word of truth.” A church must distinguish sincere mistakes from persistent corruption, correct error according to Scripture, and refuse continued teaching authority to those who knowingly undermine the faith. It must also

guard against the opposite sin of using doctrinal discipline to silence legitimate questions or punish personal disagreements. Truth must govern both the accusation and the correction. Hymenaeus and Philetus are permanent reminders that religious error can overthrow the faith of those who listen, while Paul's warnings to the Ephesian elders establish that dangerous men may arise from within the very leadership expected to protect the flock. A King James Bible in a man's hand does not guarantee a King James Bible in his doctrine. A suit does not make a shepherd, a microphone does not establish authority, and an enthusiastic congregation does not transform falsehood into truth. When a man persistently poisons the well, stop admiring the bucket. Shut off the poison, protect the sheep, and get back to the Book.

5 of 10 — Church Discipline — The Heretick With a Fan Club: When One Divisive Mouth Becomes a Church-Splitting Machine

Key Passage: Titus 3:10–11 (KJV)

“A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.”

There is a peculiar kind of religious troublemaker who cannot build a church, cannot establish a sound Bible class, cannot encourage a struggling Christian, and cannot seem to produce much of anything except another controversy. Give him a shovel and he probably could not dig a respectable hole, but give him three sympathetic church members and he will attempt to divide an entire congregation before Wednesday prayer meeting. His greatest talent is discovering grievances, manufacturing suspicions, and convincing other people that their church is falling apart unless everybody immediately begins listening to him. He seldom announces that he is organizing a faction. He simply has a few concerns that must be shared privately, a few questions that somehow never receive satisfactory answers, and a few confidential conversations that eventually involve half the membership. By the time the preacher realizes what is happening, the congregation has acquired two competing groups, several offended families, and enough secondhand accusations to occupy a courthouse. The remarkable thing is that the fellow responsible for spreading the confusion will often announce that his only desire is peace. Apparently, he intends to achieve it by making sure nobody else has any.

The Apostle Paul understood that kind of trouble long before modern churches began decorating it with respectable religious language. Titus 3:10–11 gives a direct command concerning a heretick who refuses correction: “after the first and second admonition

reject.” Paul does not say to tolerate persistent division indefinitely, negotiate with every new accusation, or surrender the congregation to somebody who has made controversy his principal occupation. But neither does he authorize a pastor to brand every questioning member a heretic and throw him out because he refused to admire the preacher's latest decision. The passage concerns identifiable wrongdoing, requires admonition, and reaches rejection after correction has been refused. That order matters. Biblical discipline is not a weapon for defending personal pride. It is a responsibility exercised under the authority of the Scriptures. A church that tolerates deliberate factionalism will eventually surrender its peace to troublemakers, while a church that condemns every legitimate objection will surrender its conscience to a dictator. Neither arrangement qualifies as New Testament Christianity.

The subject requires careful doctrinal distinctions because religious unity has become one of the most abused expressions in modern church life. Some congregations imagine that unity means everybody agreeing with the pastor, never questioning established practices, and treating legitimate concerns as evidence of a rebellious spirit. Others imagine that every member possesses a divine right to organize opposition, circulate allegations, and demand that the entire congregation participate in his private disagreements. Paul condemns both errors when his instructions are read together. Romans 16:17–18 warns against divisions contrary to apostolic doctrine. First Corinthians 1:10–13 condemns factional loyalties built around personalities. Titus 3:10–11 establishes the treatment of persistent heretical division. These instructions belong directly to the Church Age and must be applied according to the finished work of Christ, the doctrine revealed through his apostles, and the believer's responsibilities within the local assembly. Salvation remains by grace through faith, but salvation by grace has never granted anybody permission to make the church his private battlefield.

1. The Heretick Is Not Every Brother Who Disagrees With the Preacher

The immediate setting of Titus 3:10–11 begins with Paul's warning in verse 9: “But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.” Paul was addressing a particular kind of religious controversy that distracted believers from profitable doctrine and produced needless contention. Titus had been left in Crete to establish order, appoint qualified elders, and confront teachers who were corrupting the faith. Titus 1:10–11 identifies unruly and vain talkers who were subverting whole houses with teaching they ought not to teach. By the third chapter, Paul instructs Titus concerning the handling of a man whose conduct demands rejection after repeated admonition. The word “heretick” must therefore be understood within that doctrinal and divisive setting. It is not a convenient label for anybody who interprets a

difficult verse differently from the pastor. Nor is it a substitute for establishing precisely what false teaching or factional conduct has occurred. The Bible supplies the accusation's standard; the preacher does not get to invent one.

A heretick, in this setting, is a man persistently promoting destructive religious error or factional division against the truth after correction has been given. The surrounding verses concern controversies, strivings about the law, and the corrupting influence of false teachers. That distinction is essential because faithful Christians may disagree over secondary questions without attempting to overthrow the doctrine or fellowship of the congregation. Romans 14 recognizes differences of conscience in matters that must not become occasions for condemning brethren. A man who asks whether a preacher's interpretation agrees with the passage has not necessarily become a troublemaker. He might be doing exactly what First Thessalonians 5:21 commands: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” A preacher who cannot distinguish sincere examination from deliberate rebellion is not qualified to throw around accusations of heresy. The man holding the pulpit does not possess a monopoly on the Holy Ghost, and disagreeing with his personal opinion is not automatically an act of war against heaven.

But that necessary distinction must not become an excuse for ignoring genuine factionalism. Some men do not merely disagree with a teaching; they organize opposition against sound doctrine, recruit followers, and refuse correction even after the Scriptures have been opened before them. They repeatedly shift the controversy whenever one accusation collapses, because their objective is not resolution. It is influence. Titus 3:11 describes the persistently offending man as “subverted,” and says that he “sinneth, being condemned of himself.” Paul identifies a person whose course of action exposes his rejection of correction. The church is not required to treat endless controversy as a spiritual virtue. Nor does every man who claims to be defending truth actually defend it. Satan quoted Scripture in Matthew 4, and the presence of Bible verses in an argument does not guarantee that the argument follows the Bible. A religious troublemaker can carry a King James Bible under one arm and a crowbar under the other, using the first to justify what he intends to tear apart with the second.

2. First Admonition, Second Admonition, and Then the Door Closes

Paul's instruction in Titus 3:10 is remarkably specific: “after the first and second admonition reject.” Notice that the Apostle does not begin with rejection. He requires admonition first. An admonition is not an angry announcement that the pastor has had enough, nor is it a vague accusation that somebody possesses a bad attitude. The offending conduct must be identified, the relevant Scripture established, and the individual given an opportunity to hear correction. If a man is teaching that salvation can be lost, the

passages concerning salvation and eternal security must be examined. If he is spreading false accusations, the evidence and biblical commands concerning truthfulness must be addressed. If he is organizing a faction contrary to sound doctrine, the nature of that division must be established. Correction without scriptural substance is merely somebody in authority expressing displeasure. A preacher cannot substitute the weight of his personality for the authority of God's words and then complain when the accused man asks to see the chapter and verse.

The second admonition demonstrates that Paul allowed further opportunity for correction without requiring the congregation to endure an endless parade of excuses. Second Timothy 2:24–25 commands the servant of the Lord to be gentle, patient, and capable of teaching, “In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves.” That instruction does not prohibit a firm rebuke. Titus 1:13 specifically commands sharp rebuke where the circumstances warrant it. The governing principle is that correction must be truthful, appropriate, and directed toward repentance. The individual must know what he is being asked to abandon and why Scripture condemns it. Sometimes a genuine misunderstanding can be settled when both parties open their Bibles and discuss the passage honestly. Sometimes the accused man demonstrates that the charge itself was mistaken. But sometimes the offender hears the truth, understands the objection, and returns to his little circle of supporters to explain why everybody else is wrong. Two admonitions cannot manufacture repentance in a man determined to remain his own final authority.

Then comes the command religious compromisers would prefer to erase: “reject.” Paul does not instruct Titus to continue negotiating indefinitely with an offender who persists after correction. Rejection means the church must stop accommodating his destructive course, refusing the influence or fellowship through which the faction continues its work. The appropriate application must remain connected to established misconduct and the church's scriptural responsibilities. It does not authorize harassment, physical mistreatment, or a campaign against the offender's family. Nor does it cancel the eternal salvation of a genuinely saved man. The church governs its fellowship under Christ; it does not administer the new birth. Nevertheless, when persistent heretical division has been properly established, continued toleration becomes disobedience. Some church leaders behave as though every additional warning represents superior spirituality, even after their warnings have become a familiar weekly ceremony. When a man has refused biblical correction and continues dividing the congregation, another ten meetings may accomplish nothing except providing him with ten more opportunities to recruit an audience.

3. Mark Them and Avoid Them: A Command That Does Not Need a Committee to Explain It Away

Romans 16:17 supplies the Church Age congregation with direct apostolic instruction: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” Three matters must be observed. First, the offenders are causing divisions and offenses. Second, those divisions are contrary to established apostolic doctrine. Third, believers are commanded to mark and avoid the offenders. The passage does not condemn every disagreement or require Christians to treat organizational harmony as more important than truth. The standard is the doctrine they have learned. A man teaching the gospel of grace must not be condemned merely because his teaching contradicts a denomination's traditions. Conversely, a man who deliberately contradicts the gospel cannot demand protection under the slogan of Christian liberty. The truth determines which side is producing the offense. A divided congregation does not automatically prove that the man raising the objection is guilty. Sometimes the division begins when somebody refuses to keep swallowing what the pulpit has been feeding him.

Verse 18 explains that the offenders Paul describes “serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” There is the religious salesman with his merchandise displayed. His words are pleasant, his explanations appear reasonable, and his intentions are presented as thoroughly noble. He may never raise his voice or openly announce his desire for control. Instead, he quietly establishes himself as the trusted interpreter of everybody else's motives. One member hears that leadership cannot be trusted. Another learns that his concerns are shared by several others. A third is invited to participate in a confidential discussion concerning the church's future. Soon the congregation contains an unofficial government that nobody elected and a collection of accusations nobody has properly examined. Fair speeches can conceal unfair intentions. The fellow dividing the church seldom introduces himself as a wolf. He usually arrives carrying a concern, a compliment, and a carefully selected Bible verse.

The instruction to mark such individuals requires identification grounded in evidence, not careless public accusations. A congregation must know what teaching or conduct violates Scripture, whether the accusation is accurate, and whether correction has been refused. Proverbs 18:17 warns that the first account of a matter may appear convincing until the other party answers. A pastor cannot manufacture doctrinal charges against a legitimate critic and then use Romans 16:17 to shield himself from examination. Neither may an offending member escape accountability by repeatedly claiming persecution whenever his conduct receives scrutiny. Marking genuine troublemakers protects the flock by identifying an established danger; marking innocent people creates another danger. The command to avoid requires withdrawing the influence and association that enable the destructive

campaign. It is not permission to invent further accusations or organize retaliatory hostility. The congregation's responsibility is to preserve sound doctrine and orderly fellowship, not to conduct a prolonged character assassination. Biblical separation is effective when it is governed by truth and proportionate to the offense.

4. The Church-Splitting Machine Runs on Whispered Accusations and Borrowed Ears

Proverbs 6:16–19 identifies seven things the Lord hates, concluding with "A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren." Notice that sowing discord is placed among offenses God expressly condemns. The expression describes deliberate activity, not merely the accidental discovery that two believers disagree. A sower distributes seed, and the man sowing discord distributes material intended to produce division. His seed may consist of exaggerated complaints, selectively repeated statements, unsupported suspicions, or accusations stripped of the circumstances that would explain them. He does not necessarily need to invent an entire lie. Sometimes a carefully edited truth does the job quite efficiently. He tells one person half the facts, another person the most damaging interpretation, and a third person that everyone else already understands the problem. Before long the church has enough suspicion to start a war and not enough verified information to settle an argument. Half a truth placed in the wrong hands can do the work of a whole lie.

The machinery of factionalism often depends upon private conversations that gradually transform personal opinions into supposed congregational judgments. Somebody begins by expressing concern about a sermon. Another mentions a disagreement concerning church administration. Neither matter necessarily constitutes sin. But when the discussions become an organized effort to discredit faithful brethren, influence others through distorted information, or obtain control through pressure rather than biblical procedure, the character of the activity changes. Proverbs 26:20 declares, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth." A faction requires fuel. Its organizers need listeners willing to accept accusations without examination and repeat suspicions without responsibility. Sometimes the most effective remedy is for a Christian to refuse the invitation to become another carrier of the dispute. A man cannot build a church-splitting machine out of his own mouth unless somebody keeps volunteering his ears for spare parts.

But the warning against discord must not be twisted into a command to conceal genuine wrongdoing. There is a substantial difference between spreading malicious accusations and responsibly reporting established misconduct to those charged with addressing it. Serious financial dishonesty, abuse, criminal wrongdoing, or dangerous behavior cannot be dismissed automatically as gossip because somebody finds the allegations

inconvenient. Nor is a person guilty of factionalism merely because other members independently recognize the same documented problem. Scripture requires truthfulness from the accused, the accuser, and those exercising oversight. First Timothy 5:19–21 establishes safeguards concerning accusations against elders and demands impartiality. Proverbs 18:13 condemns reaching conclusions before hearing the matter. Biblical discernment therefore requires examination of evidence, the nature of the concern, and the conduct of everyone involved. An honest report seeks proper correction through responsible channels. A malicious campaign seeks influence through unnecessary circulation. The difference is not whether the information makes somebody uncomfortable. The difference is whether truth and righteousness govern what is being done with it.

5. When the Man Asking Questions Is Right and the Man Demanding Unity Is Wrong

Galatians 2:11–14 provides a devastating answer to the notion that questioning spiritual leadership automatically constitutes rebellion. Paul writes concerning Peter, “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.” Peter had withdrawn from eating with Gentile believers when certain men associated with the circumcision arrived, and his conduct influenced others, including Barnabas. Paul confronted the hypocrisy openly because it affected the truth of the gospel. The Apostle did not submit to the error merely because Peter possessed an impressive history of service. Nor did Peter's standing place his conduct beyond examination. This was not a personality feud disguised as doctrine. It was a necessary confrontation over behavior inconsistent with the truth being proclaimed. Sometimes the fellow disturbing the peace is the only man in the room willing to disturb a comfortable lie. Biblical unity cannot require silence when established truth is being compromised.

Third John 9–10 gives another sobering example in Diotrephes, who “loveth to have the preeminence among them.” John describes his malicious speech, his refusal to receive brethren, his interference with those who would receive them, and his practice of casting people out of the church. There was a religious ruler who apparently understood the value of keeping everybody in line, provided the line formed directly behind himself. His actions demonstrate why church authority cannot be separated from biblical accountability. First Peter 5:3 forbids elders from being “lords over God's heritage,” and 2 Corinthians 1:24 declares, “Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy.” A pastor may possess legitimate authority without possessing unlimited authority. When a leader demands personal allegiance above Scripture, the congregation is not obligated to pretend his ambitions are the same thing as God's commandments. A preacher who fears

every honest question should examine whether he is defending the Bible or merely defending his chair.

The Bereans provide the proper standard in Acts 17:11, where they searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether the things they heard were so. Their examination of Paul's preaching was commended, not condemned. That principle does not authorize every church member to become an argumentative nuisance who challenges everything for the pleasure of hearing himself speak. But it establishes that scriptural examination is honorable. A legitimate objection identifies a genuine issue, presents relevant evidence, and seeks correction according to truth. A factional campaign distorts evidence, recruits personal alliances, and treats every answer as another opportunity for opposition. The distinction requires more than counting how many people support each side. A majority can defend error, and a minority can defend truth. Peace purchased by suppressing Scripture is not Christian unity. It is merely a ceasefire arranged by the people who control the ammunition. The Bible must judge the preacher and his critics alike.

6. Paul, Apollos, and Cephas: The Bible Already Exposed the Personality Club

First Corinthians 1:10–13 confronts factional loyalty within a congregation that had begun attaching itself to competing religious personalities. Paul reports that some claimed allegiance to Paul, others to Apollos, others to Cephas, and others to Christ. Then he asks, “Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?” Those questions strike directly at the foolishness of making a Christian assembly revolve around human personalities. The Corinthians had turned the names of legitimate ministers into banners for competing groups. Paul refused to accept the arrangement, even when his own name was among those being celebrated. A modern congregation can commit the same offense when members identify themselves principally with a favorite teacher, influential family, former pastor, or self-appointed reformer. The issue is not appreciation for faithful servants. It is allowing loyalty to servants to displace loyalty to the Lord whose servants they are.

First Corinthians 3:3 identifies the condition plainly: “For whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” Paul then returns to the factions surrounding himself and Apollos. He asks who these ministers are and answers that they are servants through whom the Corinthians believed. Verse 6 declares, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase.” There goes the magnificent importance of the personality club. One minister planted, another watered, but neither possessed the power to produce spiritual life. God gave the increase. That should cure a considerable amount of congregational hero worship. A faithful preacher deserves appropriate respect, but he does not deserve the place belonging to Jesus Christ. Likewise,

a church member who gathers admirers around himself because he considers his opinions indispensable has forgotten the identity of the One who actually builds the Church. When a congregation starts measuring its spirituality by loyalty to personalities, the Lord Jesus Christ becomes a guest at a meeting supposedly held in his name.

Ephesians 4:3 commands believers to endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” while verses 11–16 connect the ministry of gifted servants with doctrinal maturity and protection against deceptive teaching. Christian unity is therefore rooted in the truth of God's revelation, not maintained by pretending every doctrine is equally acceptable. The Church is one body in Christ, but local congregations still bear responsibility for sound teaching and orderly fellowship. Ephesians 4:14 warns against being carried about by every wind of doctrine, while verse 15 commands believers to speak the truth in love. Those instructions belong together. A congregation that abandons truth to preserve appearances has not maintained biblical unity. Neither has a congregation that possesses sound doctrine while its members continually organize personal quarrels. The unity of the Spirit does not require Christians to surrender discernment, but it certainly condemns making factions out of every disagreement. The truth should unite believers around Christ, not become another excuse for collecting supporters around themselves.

7. Reject the Divider, Protect the Flock, and Leave the Door Open to Repentance

The instruction to reject a persistent heretick is severe because the consequences of allowing deliberate factionalism to continue can be severe. A church may spend years recovering from accusations that required only a few weeks to circulate. Families who once enjoyed fellowship may become suspicious of one another. Faithful teachers may abandon responsibilities after enduring repeated campaigns of misrepresentation. Younger Christians may conclude that church membership consists mainly of political maneuvering interrupted occasionally by hymns and sermons. Leadership must therefore confront established divisive conduct before it consumes the congregation. Yet the decision must remain accountable to Scripture, supported by evidence, and free from personal retaliation. Romans 16:17 commands believers to mark and avoid genuine offenders, while Titus 3:10 establishes admonition before rejection. Both commands must be obeyed. Removing a troublemaker after biblical correction is not necessarily the destruction of unity. Sometimes it is the necessary removal of the man who has been destroying it.

But rejection is not permission to cultivate hatred. Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 addresses a disorderly brother in a distinct disciplinary setting, commanding believers to note his disobedience while adding, “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” The governing principle is instructive: Christian correction should remain

directed toward repentance rather than revenge. Galatians 6:1 requires spiritual believers to restore an overtaken brother in meekness. That does not mean an offender can demand immediate restoration to every position of influence merely by announcing that he is sorry. Repentance must address the wrongdoing itself, including false accusations requiring correction and damage that may require appropriate acknowledgment. Second Corinthians 2:6–8 also demonstrates that sufficient punishment should not become endless hostility when forgiveness and comfort are appropriate. The Bible commands firm action against persistent rebellion without granting anybody permission to become personally cruel. There is a difference between closing a door against destructive conduct and locking a repentant man outside because somebody enjoys holding the key.

The responsibility extends to the congregation because factionalism cannot flourish without willing participants. Church members should refuse to distribute unverified allegations, decline invitations to participate in personality campaigns, and direct legitimate concerns toward responsible examination. Leaders must likewise receive genuine complaints fairly and never confuse protection of their own reputation with protection of the flock. The standard must remain the written Word of God. Where an offender is corrected and genuinely repents, appropriate restoration should be considered. Where he refuses correction and continues the destructive campaign, the church must not surrender its fellowship merely to avoid an uncomfortable decision. Every action should be measured against truth, proportionality, and the welfare of those affected. A congregation belongs to Jesus Christ, not to its loudest member or most influential family. The church does not exist to provide every ambitious man with a platform, every offended person with an audience, or every faction with its own corner of the building. It exists to glorify the Saviour and obey his Word.

Conclusion

Titus 3:10–11 leaves little room for the romantic notion that persistent religious division should be tolerated indefinitely because somebody claims to possess good intentions. Paul commands admonition followed by rejection when a heretick refuses correction. Romans 16:17–18 identifies divisions contrary to apostolic doctrine and warns against deceptive speech. Proverbs 6:16–19 declares that God hates the sowing of discord among brethren. First Corinthians exposes the carnality of organizing factions around religious personalities, while Galatians demonstrates that legitimate correction of spiritual leaders is not automatically rebellion. Those passages establish a necessary distinction between the man protecting biblical truth and the man using religious language to manufacture a following. The church must not confuse disagreement with heresy, nor confuse repeated rebellion with harmless disagreement. Both errors can destroy a congregation's testimony.

The troublemaker who spreads accusations while demanding sympathy and the preacher who silences truth while demanding loyalty are capable of serving the same destructive purpose from opposite ends of the building.

Every Christian should examine his conduct before becoming another participant in congregational conflict. Is the matter actually contrary to Scripture, or merely contrary to personal preference? Have the facts been established, or has somebody accepted the first convincing accusation? Is the objective to correct wrongdoing, or to gather enough supporters to win a contest? Those questions do not replace the Bible; they demand obedience to it. A legitimate concern should be examined honestly even when it embarrasses influential people. A malicious campaign should be confronted firmly even when its organizer possesses a pleasing personality and an impressive collection of religious expressions. The Church Age believer is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by winning church arguments or maintaining spotless membership records. But saved people remain responsible for truthfulness, charity, doctrinal faithfulness, and orderly conduct. The Judgment Seat of Christ will reveal considerably more than the outcome of this week's congregational dispute. A man may win a factional battle and discover that he has wasted years fighting against the very fellowship he was supposed to help strengthen.

The final verdict is plain. A church should never mistake an agitator for a reformer merely because he carries a Bible, and it should never mistake a faithful brother for an enemy merely because he refuses to flatter the leadership. Scripture, not personality, must settle the difference. Correct honest mistakes with patience. Examine serious accusations without partiality. Confront persistent factionalism with biblical courage. Reject the offender who refuses proper admonition, and pursue restoration where genuine repentance makes it possible. Above all, remember that the local congregation was purchased at a price no troublemaker, preacher, or committee could ever afford. Jesus Christ shed his blood for the Church, and no man's appetite for influence gives him permission to tear it apart. A fellow who cannot build a church may still possess enough tongue to split one, especially when half the congregation volunteers to help him. Do not confuse the noise of a faction with the voice of God. Do not surrender biblical truth for a counterfeit peace. And do not hand the keys to the sheepfold to a man whose principal talent is convincing the sheep that they ought to fight one another.

6 of 10 — Church Discipline — Idle Hands, Busy Mouths, and the Brother Who Refused to Walk in Line

Key Passage: 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 (KJV)

“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.” — 2 Thessalonians 3:6

There is a peculiar breed of church member who has enough energy to investigate everybody else's business, enough time to criticize everybody else's work, and enough opinions to occupy three committee meetings, but somehow cannot find the strength to take responsibility for his own affairs. He knows what the pastor ought to be doing, how the deacons ought to spend their money, which families need correction, and why the entire congregation would improve if everybody would simply listen to him. Unfortunately, the fellow's remarkable expertise seldom extends to the responsibilities sitting unfinished in his own house. The Apostle Paul encountered this kind of nonsense among the Thessalonians, and he did not mistake it for a spiritual gift. He called it disorderly conduct. Some Christians apparently believe that remaining busy with other people's problems excuses them from handling their own. Paul had another arrangement in mind: work with your own hands, mind your own business, and stop making your irresponsibility somebody else's permanent obligation.

Second Thessalonians 3 is one of those chapters that modern religious sentiment would prefer to read with several verses conveniently missing. Paul does not merely suggest that disorderly brethren might benefit from improved habits. He commands the congregation, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to withdraw from those who persistently refuse apostolic instruction. He identifies people who will not work, exposes busybodies who interfere with matters that do not concern them, and gives an unmistakable command concerning the man unwilling to labor: “neither should he eat.” Those words have survived nearly two thousand years of religious attempts to soften them into something more agreeable. Yet the same passage commands patience, perseverance in doing good, and brotherly admonition instead of personal hatred. Paul was not establishing a congregation of merciless taskmasters. He was correcting a recognizable problem: people who expected the charity and fellowship of Christians to subsidize conduct they had no intention of correcting.

This subject requires the same doctrinal precision demanded by every other question concerning church discipline. The Thessalonian believers were members of a New Testament assembly living under grace, awaiting the return of Jesus Christ, and receiving

direct apostolic instructions concerning their conduct. They were not Israelites under the Mosaic economy, nor were they attempting to earn eternal life through hard work. Salvation remained the free gift of God through Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the grace that saved them did not excuse laziness, interference, rebellion, or the deliberate neglect of ordinary responsibilities. At the same time, Paul's commands must never be twisted into an excuse for abandoning widows, disabled believers, the elderly, the sick, or those genuinely unable to provide for themselves. The Holy Ghost distinguishes unwillingness from inability, and any preacher who cannot recognize that difference should reconsider his qualifications for administering correction. Christian charity was commanded to carry burdens, not to finance rebellion; and biblical discipline was established to correct disorder, not to punish people for having needs.

1. Paul Said Withdraw, Not Pretend That Disorderliness Is a Spiritual Gift

The opening command of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 deserves attention before anybody attempts to explain it away: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul does not introduce the matter as a personal preference or a suggestion for congregations interested in stricter standards. He invokes the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ and directs the Thessalonian believers to withdraw themselves from every brother walking disorderly and contrary to the instruction previously received. The word “brother” is important because Paul is discussing conduct within Christian fellowship, not demanding that believers administer church discipline to everybody in the surrounding world. The word “disorderly” is equally important because the following verses identify the particular behavior under consideration. These were not merely people with unusual personalities or different preferences concerning church administration. Their conduct contradicted apostolic teaching. The Church of Jesus Christ was never intended to become a boardinghouse where rebellion receives free accommodation because the offender knows how to quote grace.

Paul also specifies that the disorderly man was not walking according to “the tradition which he received of us.” The expression must be understood in its apostolic setting. Paul is not defending every custom invented by a denomination, inherited from a congregation's founders, or preserved because an influential family likes things done a particular way. Second Thessalonians 2:15 instructed the believers to hold the traditions taught by the apostles, whether by word or epistle. Those instructions carried apostolic authority. Modern congregations possess that inspired doctrinal standard in the written Scriptures, not in a preacher's unwritten preferences. A man cannot be disciplined merely because he dislikes the church carpet, questions an administrative decision, or refuses to participate in an activity Scripture never commanded. There is a world of difference between refusing

apostolic doctrine and refusing somebody's favorite church tradition. The first is disobedience; the second might simply be good judgment.

The gravity of the command becomes clearer when compared with Paul's earlier instructions in 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” Notice that different circumstances require different responses. The unruly need warning. Those needing comfort must receive comfort. The weak require support. All deserve patience. A church that applies the same disciplinary treatment to every difficulty has abandoned biblical discernment. It would be as foolish as a physician prescribing the same treatment for a broken arm, a fever, and deliberate poisoning. Paul's command to withdraw concerns persistent disorder, not every inconvenience created by human weakness. Correction must be fitted to established wrongdoing, and the congregation must distinguish those resisting obedience from those struggling under burdens they cannot presently overcome. A faithful church knows when to warn, when to help, and when to withdraw. It does not confuse compassion with permissiveness or firmness with cruelty.

2. The Apostle Worked With His Hands While the Loafers Worked Their Mouths

Second Thessalonians 3:7–8 reminds the believers of Paul's own conduct: “For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you.” Here was a man entrusted with revelations concerning the mysteries of God, bearing the burdens of apostolic ministry, enduring persecution, and establishing churches. Yet he was willing to labor with his hands rather than unnecessarily impose upon those he served. Acts 18:3 identifies Paul working with Aquila and Priscilla because they shared the occupation of tentmaking. Evidently, preaching the gospel had not convinced the Apostle that ordinary labor was beneath his spiritual dignity. He did not consider a pair of working hands incompatible with a head full of sound doctrine. Some people today might have difficulty understanding that arrangement, particularly those who consider themselves too spiritually occupied to earn their own bread.

Paul immediately explains an essential distinction in verse 9: “Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us.” He was not denying the legitimate right of gospel ministers to receive material support. First Corinthians 9:14 declares, “Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.” The Apostle possessed that right, but in the particular circumstances at Thessalonica he chose to labor so the congregation could observe a practical example of responsibility. His voluntary sacrifice does not establish a universal command that every

pastor must support himself through outside employment. Nor does receiving legitimate ministerial support make a preacher disorderly. The lesson concerns willingness to work and refusal to exploit the generosity of others. Paul could have demanded support within his rightful authority, yet chose to labor. The loafer possessed no such authority, yet apparently expected support without labor. That is a remarkable reversal of responsibility.

There is another striking lesson in Paul's example: spiritual work and ordinary responsibility were not enemies competing for his allegiance. The same Apostle who instructed believers concerning the Rapture, the resurrection, and the coming of the Lord also addressed their daily conduct with practical precision. First Thessalonians 4:11 commands them "to study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands." The heavenly calling of a Christian does not abolish his earthly responsibilities. A man may spend hours discussing prophecy and still neglect the bills on his kitchen table. He may possess strong opinions concerning the coming Antichrist while refusing to confront the disorder presently occupying his household. Such conduct does not demonstrate superior spirituality. It demonstrates a divided understanding of Christian obedience. A believer who can explain the timing of the resurrection but cannot be trusted to perform his ordinary duties has learned something about the future while overlooking what God expects of him today.

3. If Any Would Not Work, Neither Should He Eat—A Verse the Freeloader Wishes Paul Had Forgotten

Second Thessalonians 3:10 contains one of the most direct statements concerning personal responsibility in the New Testament: "For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat." Notice the exact wording. Paul does not say that anybody who cannot work should be denied food. He says, "if any would not work." Unwillingness is the issue. The individual possesses the ability and opportunity to labor but deliberately refuses while expecting others to provide for his needs. That is an altogether different condition from sickness, disability, advanced age, unemployment despite honest effort, or circumstances that prevent someone from working. The distinction is built into the words of the passage. A preacher who changes "would not" into "could not" has not strengthened the Bible. He has contradicted it. Paul was rebuking the man who refused to carry his own load, not the man whose load had become too heavy for him to carry.

The command also demonstrates that Christian charity does not eliminate individual accountability. Ephesians 4:28 instructs the former thief to steal no more, "but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." Notice the progression: dishonest conduct must cease, honest labor must replace it, and productive work should enable generosity toward others. Biblical labor is

therefore more than a means of satisfying personal appetite. It creates the opportunity to provide for dependents and assist those in genuine need. First Timothy 5:8 likewise declares that a person refusing responsibility for his own household has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel. These instructions do not establish salvation by employment, nor do they condemn someone genuinely unable to provide. They establish moral responsibility where ability exists. The man who refuses honest labor while demanding that everybody else finance his comfort has confused Christian generosity with a personal subscription service.

The Thessalonian setting makes the instruction especially striking because these believers were receiving substantial teaching concerning the return of Jesus Christ. First Thessalonians 4:16–17 describes the dead in Christ rising and living believers being caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Second Thessalonians 2 corrects confusion concerning the day of Christ and the events associated with that prophetic subject. Yet Paul's instruction concerning work remains unmistakable. Scripture does not explicitly state that every disorderly individual had abandoned labor because he expected Christ to return immediately, and that explanation must not be manufactured as though the text settled it. What the text establishes is sufficient: prophetic expectation never canceled ordinary Christian duties. The hope of the Rapture should encourage faithful service rather than excuse irresponsibility. If the Lord comes today, let him find you obeying him. If he comes tomorrow, that does not give you permission to spend today living off the labor of somebody who believes the same promise.

4. Working Not at All but Busy About Everything: The Congregation's Unofficial Investigators

Second Thessalonians 3:11 identifies the disorderly conduct with extraordinary precision: “For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies.” Those final words contain enough practical truth to explain a surprising number of church controversies. The offenders were not entirely inactive. They were busy, but their activity was directed toward matters that did not belong to them while their own responsibilities remained neglected. Paul draws a sharp contrast between profitable labor and meddlesome interference. A fellow may be physically idle while keeping his tongue employed at double wages. He can spend an afternoon examining another family's decisions, investigating the pastor's schedule, and speculating about the deacons' conversations, then announce that he simply has not had time to attend to his own affairs. A busybody is often a man who has mistaken the affairs of everybody else for the work God assigned him personally.

First Peter 4:15 adds another sober warning: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters.” Peter is not declaring those offenses identical in severity. He is warning that suffering caused by sinful conduct must not be confused with suffering for Christ. The busybody belongs in that warning because meddling can produce substantial damage. Private disputes become public controversies. Suspicions become accusations. Family troubles become material for religious conversations among people who have no legitimate responsibility in the situation. The troublemaker may eventually experience opposition and announce that he is being persecuted for righteousness. But opposition caused by interference is not necessarily persecution. Sometimes people object because the fellow will not leave their legitimate affairs alone. There is a difference between suffering for the testimony of Jesus Christ and suffering because your tongue has repeatedly entered places where your feet had no business going.

The remedy is already supplied in 1 Thessalonians 4:11: “study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands.” Quietness does not mean that a Christian must remain silent concerning actual wrongdoing. It does not prevent legitimate questions, responsible reporting, scriptural correction, or necessary intervention when people are endangered. It means abandoning needless interference and attending faithfully to responsibilities that actually belong to the individual. Some church members would accomplish considerably more for the Lord if they spent half as much time examining their own conduct as they presently spend examining everybody else's. Romans 14:12 declares, “So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.” Notice the singular accountability. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, the Lord will not ask you to present a detailed inventory of every neighbor's shortcomings as a substitute for answering concerning your own service. A Christian's business is quite sufficient to occupy him without requiring him to become the congregation's unpaid director of unnecessary investigations.

5. The Bible Commands Charity, but It Never Commanded the Church to Sponsor Laziness

Second Thessalonians 3:12 gives the corrective instruction concerning those who refused to work: “Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.” Paul combines command and exhortation. These men were not merely encouraged to consider employment as an attractive lifestyle improvement. They were instructed to cease their disorderliness, labor quietly, and accept responsibility for their own provision. Notice again the connection between work and quietness. The man who is faithfully attending to his duties usually has

considerably less opportunity to manage everybody else's affairs. The passage does not forbid accepting legitimate assistance during hardship. It condemns the deliberate refusal to work while depending upon others. There is nothing shameful about receiving necessary help when circumstances genuinely require it. The shame belongs to the fellow who possesses the ability to contribute but prefers to convert Christian generosity into a permanent arrangement for his personal convenience.

Yet Paul immediately adds something that prevents the congregation from turning firm correction into hardhearted neglect: “But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing” (2 Thessalonians 3:13). That instruction stands directly beside the rebuke of disorderly dependence. The church must not allow irresponsible people to exhaust its willingness to assist those who are genuinely needy. Galatians 6:2 commands, “Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” Later, verse 5 declares, “For every man shall bear his own burden.” Those statements are not contradictory. Christians must bear responsibilities that properly belong to them while helping others with burdens that require assistance. A sick brother may need practical support. An elderly widow may need continuing provision. A family facing circumstances beyond its immediate control may need generous intervention. The Bible does not command believers to carry a lazy man's excuses, but it certainly commands them not to abandon a suffering brother beneath the weight of genuine need.

First Timothy 5:3 commands, “Honour widows that are widows indeed,” and the surrounding passage carefully addresses family responsibilities and the proper administration of congregational support. That is an important example of biblical charity operating with both compassion and discernment. The church was not ordered to ignore legitimate needs because some people might exploit generosity. Neither was it directed to distribute assistance without considering responsibility, circumstances, and the duties of relatives able to provide. Acts 6:1–6 likewise records the apostles addressing the neglect of widows in the daily ministration. The solution was orderly attention to the problem, not an announcement that the neglected women should demonstrate greater independence. A congregation faithful to Scripture should therefore protect genuine benevolence while refusing deliberate exploitation. When an able-bodied loafer abuses charity, the answer is not to punish every struggling widow, disabled believer, or unemployed father who comes seeking help. Correct the abuse without abandoning the needy. That is biblical discernment, not weakness.

6. Note That Man and Have No Company With Him: When Admonition Has Been Repeatedly Ignored

Second Thessalonians 3:14 supplies the consequence for continued refusal to obey: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.” The command follows Paul's established instruction concerning disorderly conduct and the refusal to work. It is not a general authorization for church leaders to punish anybody who disagrees with an administrative decision. The standard is apostolic instruction contained in the epistle. A congregation must therefore establish the actual offense, distinguish unwillingness from inability, and communicate the necessary correction before imposing restrictions. The purpose is not to make discipline easy for impatient leaders, but to make obedience unmistakable for the offender. When a brother persists in conduct Scripture condemns, the assembly is not commanded to pretend that his rebellion is acceptable. There comes a point when continued accommodation stops being patience and becomes participation in the very disorder the Bible commands the church to confront.

The expression “note that man” requires deliberate recognition of the offender's continued disobedience. Paul does not command the congregation to circulate rumors, publish unnecessary details, or construct a humiliating public exhibition. The accompanying instruction, “have no company with him,” establishes a meaningful withdrawal of ordinary fellowship intended to awaken the individual to the seriousness of his conduct. The stated purpose is “that he may be ashamed.” Biblical shame, in this setting, concerns the recognition of wrongdoing, not the destruction of a person's dignity for the entertainment of spectators. The restriction must fit the offense, and those exercising oversight must remain accountable to Scripture. There is no authorization here for harassment, cruelty, or indefinite punishment imposed simply because the pastor dislikes somebody. Church discipline is not a license to turn a man's repentance into a spectator sport. The congregation should want him corrected, not publicly crushed beneath the weight of its self-righteous satisfaction.

The principle also requires distinguishing different forms of disorder rather than treating every matter as interchangeable. First Corinthians 5 addresses notorious sexual immorality requiring congregational separation. Titus 3:10 addresses the persistent heretick after first and second admonitions. Second Thessalonians 3 concerns brethren refusing apostolic instruction, particularly in their work and interference with others. These passages share a concern for obedient fellowship but address identifiable circumstances with appropriate corrective responses. A church cannot select the severest disciplinary expression available and apply it automatically whenever somebody causes inconvenience. Neither may it ignore persistent disobedience because the offender possesses influence, popularity, or financial importance. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering before hearing a matter, and 1 Timothy 5:21 demands impartiality. The accused person's circumstances and response

must be examined honestly. A congregation that disciplines only the weak while accommodating influential offenders has not established biblical government. It has established a religious pecking order with a Bible lying open on the table.

7. Admonish Him as a Brother, Not as an Enemy You Finally Have Permission to Destroy

Second Thessalonians 3:15 supplies the necessary restraint upon everything preceding it: “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” That sentence should be read slowly by anybody who enjoys the prospect of removing troublesome people from church fellowship. Paul had commanded withdrawal, identified the need for shame, and required the congregation to respond to continued disobedience. Yet he immediately prohibited the treatment of the offender as an enemy. The distinction is fundamental. The Christian assembly may withdraw normal fellowship while continuing to desire the man's repentance and restoration. Admonition remains appropriate because the objective is correction. This does not mean the offender can demand unrestricted access to every activity, ministry, or position while persisting in rebellion. It means the disciplinary action must not become a private war. The moment church discipline becomes an opportunity to settle personal scores, the people administering it have introduced another offense into a matter already requiring correction.

Galatians 6:1 establishes the proper spirit toward a brother who has fallen: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” The instruction does not require a congregation to pretend repentance has occurred when the offender continues defending his conduct. Restoration must correspond to genuine correction. A disorderly brother who begins working honestly, abandons unnecessary interference, and demonstrates a willingness to obey Scripture should not remain permanently condemned because somebody enjoys remembering his previous failures. At the same time, a verbal apology does not automatically erase every consequence or immediately restore responsibilities that require established trust. Correction and restoration both require discernment. Forgiveness is not a magic trick that makes yesterday's conduct disappear, but neither is yesterday's conduct a weapon Christians may sharpen indefinitely after genuine repentance has taken place.

The distinction between fellowship and salvation must also remain secure. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith apart from works, while Ephesians 4:30 declares that believers are sealed unto the day of redemption. A genuinely saved man does not lose eternal life because the congregation disciplines him for disorderly behavior. Neither does the church's willingness to tolerate him establish that he has been saved.

Membership and regeneration are different matters. The authority of a local assembly concerns its fellowship and responsibilities under the written Word of God. The authority over eternal salvation belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. This truth should prevent both the careless man who thinks salvation excuses disobedience and the authoritarian preacher who imagines expulsion from membership amounts to expulsion from Christ. A church may remove a man's name from its membership roll, but it cannot reach into heaven and erase what the blood of Jesus Christ has secured. Discipline the conduct according to Scripture, and leave the eternal judgment to God.

Conclusion

Second Thessalonians 3:6–15 establishes a standard that the modern church desperately needs to recover. Paul commanded believers to withdraw from brethren who persisted in disorderly conduct, reminded them of his own example of honest labor, condemned those who refused to work while becoming busybodies, and required appropriate separation when apostolic correction was ignored. Yet he also commanded the congregation not to grow weary in doing good and specifically prohibited treating the disciplined brother as an enemy. There is nothing contradictory about those instructions. Biblical charity and personal responsibility belong together. A church should willingly assist the sick, support the weak, honor widows, and help those burdened by genuine hardship. It should also refuse to make deliberate irresponsibility a permanent financial obligation imposed upon more faithful members. The Lord did not command Christians to become hardhearted toward the needy, and he did not command the needy to be used as a shield behind which the deliberately lazy could hide.

The warning concerning busybodies deserves particular attention because their damage is not always recorded in financial accounts. Some members may never demand money from the congregation, yet consume enormous amounts of time, attention, and spiritual energy through constant interference. They criticize faithful workers while neglecting their own assignments, spread suspicions while claiming concern, and manufacture controversies that responsible believers must then spend hours correcting. First Thessalonians 4:11 offers a remarkably effective remedy: study to be quiet, attend to your own business, and work with your own hands. If a Christian obeyed those commands consistently, many local churches would discover that half their unnecessary controversies had disappeared without requiring another committee meeting. There is work to be done in preaching the gospel, teaching sound doctrine, helping struggling brethren, supporting missionary labor, and serving the Lord faithfully. The harvest is too great and the time too short for a congregation to spend its strength chasing every rumor produced by people who apparently have nothing better to do.

The final verdict is plain enough for a Christian willing to believe what Paul wrote. A brother who persistently refuses apostolic instruction cannot demand that the congregation treat his disorderliness as normal Christian conduct. A man who deliberately refuses honest work while expecting others to provide for him needs correction, not another excuse. A busybody who continually invades other people's affairs needs to learn that minding his own business is a biblical responsibility, not an optional courtesy. And a congregation administering discipline must remember that the offender is to be admonished as a brother rather than hated as an enemy. The Scriptures leave no room for either cowardly accommodation or vindictive punishment. Christian charity may carry another man's burden, but it was never commanded to carry his rebellion. Grace does not turn laziness into holiness, gossip into ministry, or deliberate disorder into a spiritual gift. Put your hands to honest work, your tongue under biblical restraint, and your conduct beneath the authority of the Book. The church has enough real burdens to carry without manufacturing a comfortable living for the fellow who refuses to carry his own.

7 of 10 — Church Discipline — The Pastor Is Not Bulletproof: When the Man Behind the Pulpit Becomes the Problem

Key Passage: 1 Timothy 5:19–22 (KJV)

“Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality. Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure.”

There is something terribly wrong with a preacher who can thunder against sin in everybody else's life but suddenly discovers a thousand reasons for mercy, misunderstanding, and confidentiality when the spotlight turns toward his own conduct. He can preach against fornication until the windows rattle, denounce dishonesty until the offering plates tremble, and warn the congregation against rebellion with enough volume to wake the dead. But let somebody produce credible evidence that the man behind the pulpit has been practicing what he condemns, and suddenly the congregation is informed that questioning the pastor is equivalent to attacking God Almighty. That is an extraordinary arrangement, particularly since the Apostle Paul never heard of it. First Timothy 5:19–22 establishes both the protection of faithful elders against unsupported accusations and the public accountability of elders whose sin has been established. The same passage that guards a pastor against

malicious charges commands rebuke when he is guilty. A pulpit is not a bulletproof vest, ordination is not a diplomatic passport, and the man preaching the Bible is still subject to every word in it.

Some church members have become so accustomed to treating pastoral authority as untouchable that they behave as though the preacher occupies a spiritual position somewhere between the Apostle Paul and the throne of God. They will defend his decisions before examining the facts, excuse his conduct before hearing the allegations, and accuse anyone raising legitimate concerns of possessing a rebellious spirit. Other congregations make the opposite mistake, treating a pastor as though his calling places a target on his back and every whispered accusation deserves immediate belief. Both errors violate the Scriptures. A faithful preacher should not spend his ministry defending himself against every malicious rumor produced by somebody with a grievance and a telephone. Neither should a guilty preacher be permitted to hide serious misconduct behind his office, popularity, or history of service. The New Testament establishes qualifications for spiritual leadership precisely because leadership carries responsibility. When a man accepts the authority of the office but rejects the accountability attached to it, he is not defending the ministry. He is attempting to keep the privileges while canceling the commandments.

This question belongs directly to the government of local New Testament churches under grace, and it must be handled according to the doctrinal instructions given through the apostles. First Timothy 3 establishes qualifications for bishops and deacons. First Timothy 5 governs accusations and correction concerning elders. Titus 1 reinforces the moral and doctrinal requirements of overseers, while 1 Peter 5 prohibits spiritual leaders from acting as lords over God's heritage. These passages do not teach salvation by flawless conduct, nor do they suggest that a Christian loses eternal life when he becomes disqualified from ministry. Ephesians 2:8–9 settles salvation by grace through faith, while Ephesians 4:30 establishes the believer's sealing unto the day of redemption. But eternal security does not equal permanent qualification for office. A man can remain saved while losing the right to serve as pastor. The blood of Jesus Christ secures redemption; it was never intended to become an excuse for retaining spiritual authority after biblical qualifications have been forfeited.

1. Two or Three Witnesses: Protecting the Shepherd Without Protecting His Sin

First Timothy 5:19 begins with an important safeguard: “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.” Paul understood that spiritual leadership attracts opposition, and some accusations originate in personal resentment rather than established wrongdoing. A pastor who faithfully preaches against sin will occasionally offend somebody who prefers his sins undisturbed. A man corrected for dishonesty may

seek revenge against the preacher who confronted him. A disgruntled member may circulate accusations because his personal preferences were not adopted by the church. Paul therefore forbids the careless reception of unsupported allegations against an elder. This does not establish a special class of Christians above investigation. It protects a serious office from reckless accusation. The same Scripture that demands accountability also demands evidence. A preacher should never be condemned merely because somebody dislikes him, but neither should he be declared innocent merely because somebody likes him. The Bible is interested in truth, not the popularity of the parties involved.

The requirement for witnesses draws upon a principle already established in Deuteronomy 19:15 concerning the necessity of adequate testimony. Paul applies that evidentiary principle to accusations against elders within the Church Age. It must not be manipulated into requiring two eyewitnesses to every hidden offense before a complaint may even be examined. Serious wrongdoing may be established through credible testimony supported by documents, communications, admissions, financial records, or other reliable evidence. Nor should a person reporting abuse be told that the accusation cannot even be considered unless another victim comes forward. The passage prohibits careless reception and judgment, not responsible investigation. Proverbs 18:13 warns, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” A church must examine relevant facts, distinguish accusation from proof, and avoid deciding the outcome before the evidence is considered. The witness requirement was given to protect justice, not to provide a hiding place for misconduct committed without an audience.

The responsibility is especially serious because an accusation against a pastor may damage his family, livelihood, reputation, and future service. If the accusation proves false, the church must not allow the original falsehood to continue circulating as though nothing happened. Proverbs 6:19 identifies a false witness that speaks lies among the things the Lord hates. Those deliberately spreading malicious allegations bear responsibility for their conduct. But a report made honestly and in good faith must not be equated with malicious slander merely because the evidence remains incomplete. An accused pastor deserves a fair examination; those raising credible concerns deserve to be heard without intimidation. The congregation should avoid appointing the accused man as the final judge of allegations concerning himself. When a preacher conducts his own investigation, selects the witnesses, controls the information, and announces his own innocence, the proceedings may resemble a courtroom, but the defendant appears to have appointed himself judge, jury, and court reporter. Biblical fairness requires something better.

2. Them That Sin Rebuke Before All: The Verse That Makes Religious Cover-Ups Uncomfortable

First Timothy 5:20 delivers the instruction that destroys the notion of untouchable church leadership: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” Read that immediately after verse 19. Paul first establishes safeguards against unsupported accusations, then commands rebuke when wrongdoing is established. The two instructions belong together. A pastor must not be condemned without adequate evidence, but neither may he escape appropriate correction after the evidence demonstrates guilt. The context concerns elders, and the public nature of the rebuke reflects the seriousness of established misconduct in leadership. Paul is not ordering the congregation to announce every private irritation, minor mistake, or confessed failing from the pulpit. He is addressing sin requiring disciplinary rebuke, particularly where the elder's conduct affects the assembly and its testimony. The same Bible that protects the innocent preacher also exposes the guilty one. Anybody who insists upon preaching verse 19 while refusing to acknowledge verse 20 has developed a remarkably convenient method of dividing Scripture.

Notice the stated purpose: “that others also may fear.” Paul is concerned with the moral seriousness of sin and the example established before the congregation. When an elder commits serious misconduct and receives correction, the assembly learns that biblical standards apply even to those occupying positions of authority. When an elder commits the same misconduct and receives special protection because of his office, the congregation learns something else entirely. It learns that certain people possess privileges unavailable to ordinary members. It learns that public reputation matters more than obedience. It learns that the preacher's sermons against wrongdoing may be ignored if the offender becomes sufficiently influential. That is a dreadful lesson to teach younger believers. A pastor who publicly rebukes ordinary members for misconduct while secretly excusing identical behavior among leadership has transformed biblical government into religious favoritism. A church cannot preach that nobody is above the law of God while maintaining an unpublished exemption for the fellow who signs the church checks.

Galatians 2:11–14 provides a striking example of public accountability among prominent servants of God. Paul wrote concerning Peter, “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.” Peter's conduct concerning fellowship with Gentile believers had produced hypocrisy and influenced others, including Barnabas. Paul confronted the matter openly because the error affected the truth of the gospel. Peter's apostolic standing did not make his behavior immune from correction. Nor did Paul's confrontation constitute an attempt to destroy Peter's salvation or erase his

previous service. It was necessary correction of established wrongdoing. That principle should settle the argument that spiritual office automatically shields a man from rebuke. If Peter could be confronted for public hypocrisy, a modern pastor should not imagine that his ordination certificate places him beyond biblical examination. The preacher who thinks his office makes him greater than correction has somehow acquired a privilege the Apostle Peter never possessed.

3. Blameless Is a Qualification, Not a Decorative Word in the Ordination Certificate

First Timothy 3:1–2 begins the qualifications for a bishop by declaring that a man desiring the office desires a good work, then immediately adds, “A bishop then must be blameless.” Notice the word “must.” Paul does not say that blamelessness would be desirable if convenient, or that it applies only until the ordination service concludes. The bishop must meet the qualifications appropriate to spiritual oversight. The following verses address marital faithfulness, vigilance, sobriety, good behavior, hospitality, ability to teach, freedom from violence and greed, proper household government, and a good report from outsiders. These requirements describe the character and conduct expected of a man entrusted with the flock. Blamelessness does not mean absolute sinlessness, for no ordinary Christian possesses that condition in the flesh. It concerns a life not properly chargeable with the disqualifying patterns Scripture condemns. The qualifications were not written so that a preacher could admire them before ordination and then file them away with his marriage license and favorite sermon outlines.

Titus 1:7 reinforces the standard by declaring, “For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre.” The description of the bishop as God's steward is crucial. A steward administers what belongs to someone else. He does not become the owner through appointment. The congregation belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the pastor administers spiritual responsibilities entrusted to him. Titus also requires the elder to hold fast the faithful word so that he may exhort by sound doctrine and convince gainsayers. Therefore, serious doctrinal corruption can bear directly upon pastoral qualification, just as dishonesty, violent conduct, or greed can. A man might deliver magnificent sermons while living in a manner that contradicts his office. Paul does not offer excellent preaching ability as a substitute for godly character. A man may know enough Bible to fill a library and still be unqualified to shepherd a congregation if he refuses to obey the Bible governing shepherds.

The qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 likewise demonstrate that spiritual office demands tested character. Deacons must be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, and not greedy of filthy lucre. Verse 10 commands, “And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless.” The word

“proved” establishes a responsibility to examine a man's fitness before assigning him office. That responsibility does not disappear afterward. A deacon handling church finances who commits fraud cannot retain his responsibilities merely because he has served faithfully for twenty years. A pastor who becomes characterized by disqualifying conduct cannot appeal to previous qualifications as though they were permanent immunity. Past faithfulness should be remembered fairly, but it does not cancel present requirements. Yesterday's obedience does not purchase tomorrow's permission to rebel. A man may have been qualified when appointed and become unqualified through his own conduct. The church does not dishonor his former service by recognizing what Scripture requires today.

4. Feed the Flock, Not on the Flock: When Pastoral Authority Becomes Personal Dominion

First Peter 5:1–4 establishes the proper character of pastoral oversight. Peter exhorts elders to “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind.” Then comes the warning in verse 3: “Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.” That settles the question of ownership. The sheep belong to God. The shepherd is responsible for feeding, protecting, and leading them according to the Scriptures. He has no divine permission to intimidate members, control their private decisions beyond biblical authority, or demand personal submission as though disagreement with him constituted rebellion against Jesus Christ. Hebrews 13:17 establishes legitimate responsibility toward spiritual leaders, but it does not authorize leaders to contradict the rest of the New Testament. A pastor is supposed to carry a shepherd's staff, not a royal sceptre. The moment he begins treating God's people as personal property, he has misunderstood the ownership of the sheepfold.

Acts 20:28 makes the issue even more serious when Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to feed the church of God, “which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Consider that price. The congregation was not purchased with the pastor's sacrifices, the deacons' offerings, the founding family's donations, or the building committee's fundraising efforts. It belongs to the Lord who redeemed it. Paul continues by warning about grievous wolves entering the flock and men arising from within to speak perverse things and draw away disciples after themselves. That internal danger includes spiritual leaders who begin cultivating personal followings rather than faithful disciples of Christ. A preacher may gradually convince himself that protecting his authority is identical to protecting the gospel. Once that mistake takes hold, legitimate questions become threats, correction becomes persecution, and ordinary accountability becomes rebellion. The church belongs

to the One who shed his blood for it, not the man who occasionally sheds his temper while preaching to it.

Third John 9–10 provides a particularly ugly portrait of abusive religious leadership. Diotrephes "loveth to have the preeminence among them," and John identifies his malicious speech, refusal to receive brethren, interference with those who would receive them, and practice of casting people out of the church. There is the spirit of domination dressed in religious clothing. Diotrephes wanted the first place, and he exercised control over fellowship to preserve it. His example destroys the argument that every act of church exclusion automatically reflects legitimate spiritual authority. Sometimes the man removing others is the one who needs correction. A faithful church must distinguish biblical government from personal ambition, legitimate discipline from retaliation, and pastoral leadership from intimidation. Nobody should be removed merely for asking an honest question, reporting credible misconduct, or refusing an unscriptural demand. The preacher who must silence everybody else to preserve his authority has already demonstrated how little confidence he places in the authority of the Book.

5. Fornication, Filthy Lucre, and False Doctrine Cannot Be Hidden Beneath a Three-Piece Suit

Sexual wrongdoing by a spiritual leader requires serious examination because the qualifications of the office include moral integrity and faithfulness. First Timothy 3:2 requires a bishop to be "the husband of one wife," while Titus 1:8 requires holiness and temperance. First Corinthians 6:18 commands believers to flee fornication. A pastor who engages in adultery, sexual exploitation, or other serious misconduct cannot excuse the behavior by appealing to his preaching ability or previous years of service. The distinction between an isolated confessed failure and an established pattern may matter when evaluating facts and consequences, but serious misconduct cannot simply be declared irrelevant to qualification. Where coercion, exploitation, or abuse is involved, the wrong must not be disguised as a mutual moral stumble. The nature of the conduct, the people harmed, and the responsibilities attached to the office must be considered. A preacher cannot spend Sunday morning commanding the congregation to flee fornication and spend the remainder of the week arranging convenient explanations for his own.

Financial dishonesty deserves equal attention because Scripture repeatedly connects spiritual oversight with freedom from greed. First Timothy 3:3 requires the bishop not to be covetous, and Titus 1:7 condemns being given to filthy lucre. First Peter 5:2 likewise forbids overseeing the flock for dishonest gain. A pastor who misappropriates offerings, conceals financial dealings, pressures vulnerable members for personal benefit, or uses church resources dishonestly has violated responsibilities directly related to his stewardship.

Second Corinthians 8:20–21 reveals Paul's concern to avoid blame in handling financial contributions and to provide things honest before God and men. Legitimate ministerial support is biblical, as First Corinthians 9:14 establishes, but financial support does not grant permission for exploitation. Congregations should maintain responsible financial oversight without automatically suspecting every pastor who receives a salary. There is nothing unscriptural about paying a preacher for faithful labor. The trouble begins when the fellow treats the Lord's treasury as his private wallet and calls every question about the receipts an attack upon the ministry.

Doctrinal corruption and deliberate intimidation also bear directly upon pastoral qualification. Titus 1:9 requires the elder to hold fast the faithful word and be able to answer those opposing sound doctrine. First Timothy 3:2 requires aptitude for teaching, while verse 3 forbids violent, quarrelsome conduct. Second Timothy 2:24 declares, “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient.” A preacher who persistently teaches a corrupted gospel or uses threats and intimidation to prevent biblical examination is not simply exercising a colorful preaching style. Nor should every forceful sermon, disputed interpretation, or firm correction be treated as abuse. The actual doctrine and conduct must be established. But when a pastor repeatedly manipulates Scripture to defend his wrongdoing or silence legitimate objections, he threatens the congregation's spiritual welfare. A man can poison a church with false doctrine, empty its treasury through dishonesty, or terrorize its members through intimidation. None of those accomplishments becomes holy because he performed it while holding a King James Bible.

6. Investigate the Wrongdoing, Protect the Injured, and Stop Calling a Cover-Up Church Unity

First Timothy 5:21 places the administration of these matters under a solemn charge: “I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.” Paul could scarcely have made the demand for impartiality stronger. Those examining accusations against elders must not decide the outcome according to popularity, financial influence, longstanding friendships, or fear of embarrassment. A fair investigation identifies the allegation, preserves relevant evidence, hears appropriate testimony, allows the accused a proper opportunity to answer, and reaches conclusions grounded in established facts. When allegations concern church leaders, people not controlled by the accused should be involved in responsible review. Those conducting the inquiry must be willing to discover that an accusation is false or that a respected leader is guilty. An investigation designed in

advance to protect the pastor is not an investigation. It is a church-sponsored search for enough excuses to keep the Sunday schedule unchanged.

Serious criminal wrongdoing cannot be reduced to a private dispute that the congregation must handle behind closed doors. Romans 13:1–4 establishes the proper authority of civil government concerning evildoers. Where credible reports concern sexual abuse, violence, exploitation, theft, or other criminal conduct, appropriate protection and lawful reporting must not be obstructed by appeals to forgiveness or pastoral reputation. A person endangered by a leader should not be compelled to confront him privately before seeking safety or assistance. Neither should a church pressure witnesses into silence, conceal evidence, or treat cooperation with lawful authorities as betrayal. Church discipline and civil accountability concern different responsibilities, and both may apply to the same misconduct. The church's disciplinary investigation should not interfere with legitimate criminal inquiries. A crime does not become a private spiritual matter because it occurred in a church building, and the police do not become enemies of the gospel because the suspect knows how to preach one.

The demand for truth also governs what the congregation communicates after wrongdoing has been established. Public rebuke does not require broadcasting every private detail, identifying vulnerable people unnecessarily, or turning an investigation into religious entertainment. But necessary disclosure must not be suppressed simply because it would damage the ministry's public image. Ephesians 4:25 commands believers to put away lying and speak truth with their neighbors. Concealing material facts, circulating misleading explanations, or allowing innocent people to carry the blame for a leader's misconduct contradicts that instruction. Likewise, false allegations should be corrected appropriately when the evidence establishes their falsity. Those harmed deserve honest treatment, practical protection, and appropriate assistance rather than pressure to preserve appearances. The congregation deserves truthful information sufficient to understand legitimate leadership decisions. A church that protects its reputation by sacrificing the truth has already lost the very testimony it claims to be protecting. You cannot sweep corruption beneath the pulpit and then boast that the sanctuary is clean.

7. Forgiveness Is Commanded, but Nobody Is Entitled to Have the Pulpit Handed Back

The distinction between repentance and damage control becomes especially important when a minister's misconduct has been exposed. Second Corinthians 7:10 declares, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” Paul continues in verse 11 by describing the earnestness and changed conduct associated with godly sorrow. A guilty pastor may weep publicly, acknowledge embarrassment, and repeatedly announce his love for the congregation

without actually addressing the wrongdoing. Tears alone cannot establish repentance, particularly when the individual continues concealing facts, blaming others, or pressuring injured people to forgive him on his preferred schedule. Genuine repentance abandons excuses, acknowledges established wrongdoing, and accepts appropriate consequences. It does not negotiate with the congregation over how quickly the scandal must disappear. A man who is sorry he lost his pulpit is not necessarily sorry he violated the Scriptures. The difference becomes apparent when repentance requires surrendering something he desperately wants to keep.

First Timothy 5:22 adds a particularly appropriate warning: “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure.” In the setting of church leadership, the instruction warns against careless identification with men whose character has not been properly established. A congregation should not appoint an unproved man hastily, and it should exercise serious judgment before restoring responsibility to someone whose conduct has demonstrated disqualification. Forgiveness and qualification are different questions. A genuinely repentant pastor may be received as a Christian brother without being entitled to resume pastoral office. Some offenses permanently destroy the trust necessary for particular responsibilities, while other circumstances require extended examination and demonstrated faithfulness before any further ministry can properly be considered. Restoration to Christian fellowship should never be confused with automatic restoration to pastoral authority. The Bible commands Christians to forgive repentant brethren. It does not command them to return the church treasury to a repentant thief or the shepherd's staff to a man who has repeatedly injured the sheep.

Galatians 6:1 instructs spiritual believers to restore an overtaken brother in meekness, while 1 Peter 5:4 reminds elders that the chief Shepherd will appear and that faithful service will receive its proper reward. Those two passages provide the necessary perspective. A fallen pastor remains a person to whom biblical compassion, truth, and appropriate Christian care may be extended. But the congregation's first responsibility is not to rescue his ministerial career. It is to obey the Lord, protect those harmed, and maintain the scriptural qualifications of leadership. A man who has genuinely repented should not be subjected to unnecessary cruelty or perpetual public humiliation. Neither should injured people be forced into immediate reconciliation or made responsible for rebuilding his reputation. If the minister cannot continue in office without compromising biblical standards, he must relinquish the office. A man can lose his pulpit without losing his Saviour, and sometimes surrendering the pulpit is the first honest evidence that he finally understands the difference.

Conclusion

First Timothy 5:19–22 establishes a standard that every local church should recognize before the first allegation against a spiritual leader ever arises. Faithful elders must be protected against unsupported accusations, guilty elders must receive appropriate correction, serious sin may require public rebuke, and every decision must be made without partiality. The qualifications of First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not ceremonial ornaments attached to ordination. They govern the continuing fitness of men entrusted with spiritual oversight. First Peter 5 forbids pastors from lording authority over God's heritage, while Acts 20 reminds them that the flock was purchased with the blood of God himself. The preacher's office carries real authority, but that authority is limited by the Scriptures from which it comes. A congregation that permits its pastor to stand above biblical correction has not honored the ministry. It has placed a man where only the Lord Jesus Christ belongs.

There is also a serious warning to those who would misuse these passages to attack faithful preachers. A pastor who labors honestly, teaches sound doctrine, and confronts sin according to Scripture should not be left defenseless against malicious accusations. The witness requirement exists for good reason, and the deliberate destruction of an innocent man's reputation is wickedness, regardless of how spiritual the accuser attempts to appear. But a faithful preacher's reputation cannot become a shelter for another preacher's corruption. A congregation must possess enough discernment to distinguish evidence from accusation, correction from revenge, and compassion from concealment. It must also remember that eternal salvation and qualification for office are distinct matters under grace. The genuinely saved believer is secure in Jesus Christ, while every minister remains accountable for the office he occupies. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, preaching accomplishments will not transform disobedience into faithfulness. The Lord will not be impressed by a man's ability to command a congregation if the man himself refused to submit to the Book.

The final verdict is plain, and there is no reason to decorate it with religious excuses. A pastor is not bulletproof. His calling does not exempt him from Scripture, his ordination does not excuse disqualifying conduct, and his years of service do not purchase permission to violate the very commandments he was appointed to teach. If he is falsely accused, protect him with truth and evidence. If he is guilty, confront the wrongdoing according to Scripture and without favoritism. If criminal conduct is involved, do not conceal it beneath religious language. If he repents, extend the forgiveness appropriate to a Christian brother without pretending that forgiveness automatically restores the qualifications of spiritual office. The congregation belongs to Jesus Christ, and no shepherd has the right to destroy what the Chief Shepherd entrusted to his care. A man who faithfully feeds the sheep deserves respect, protection, and proper support. A man who begins

feeding on the sheep has forfeited the right to hide behind his shepherd's staff. The pulpit is not a throne, the pastor is not the final authority, and the church is not obligated to sacrifice righteousness to preserve one man's reputation. Open the Book, establish the truth, obey the Scriptures, and remember whose blood purchased the flock.

8 of 10 — Church Discipline — A Pulpit Is Not a Throne and a Church Vote Is Not the Judgment Seat of Christ

Key Passage: 1 Peter 5:2–3 (KJV)

“Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.”

There is something dangerously wrong with a preacher who begins treating the pulpit like a throne, the congregation like his private kingdom, and every disagreement with himself as an organized rebellion against Almighty God. He may have started with a genuine calling, an open King James Bible, and a sincere desire to feed the flock, but somewhere along the road he began confusing the Lord's authority with his own importance. Before long, the sheep are expected to obey his preferences, admire his decisions, finance his ambitions, and remain silent whenever his conduct deserves examination. If somebody asks a legitimate question, he is accused of having a rebellious spirit. If somebody reports wrongdoing, he is charged with attacking the ministry. If somebody refuses an unscriptural demand, the preacher reaches for the church discipline machinery. That is not shepherding. That is religious tyranny wearing a necktie, carrying a Bible, and collecting an offering.

The Apostle Peter settles the ownership question before the aspiring church dictator can finish polishing his crown. He commands elders to “Feed the flock of God,” then specifically forbids them from being “lords over God's heritage.” Notice whose flock it is. Notice whose heritage it is. The congregation does not belong to the pastor, the founding family, the chairman of the deacons, or the majority that happened to prevail at the last business meeting. Acts 20:28 declares that the church of God was purchased with his own blood. That purchase price permanently settles the question of ownership. A preacher may dedicate his life to a congregation, endure hardships for its benefit, and faithfully serve its members for decades. He deserves proper honor for such service, but he never acquires ownership of the people. His sacrifices do not purchase their consciences. The man who

thinks twenty years behind a pulpit entitles him to rule other Christians without biblical restraint has forgotten that the Lord purchased the sheep long before the preacher arrived.

The same New Testament that commands believers to respect legitimate spiritual oversight also places unmistakable limitations upon those exercising it. Second Corinthians 1:24 rejects dominion over another believer's faith. Third John exposes Diotrephes, a religious ruler who loved preeminence and cast brethren out of the church. First Timothy 5 establishes safeguards for accusations and commands public rebuke when elders sin. Matthew 18 supplies important principles concerning witnesses and orderly correction, while Romans 13 recognizes the lawful authority of civil government. These passages must be distinguished according to their doctrinal settings, but together they expose the wickedness of using church discipline as a personal weapon. A local assembly possesses responsibility over its own fellowship; it does not possess authority to cancel salvation, conceal crimes, or transform the pastor's opinions into divine law. The church has a Head already. His name is Jesus Christ, and no amount of congregational voting will replace him.

1. God's Heritage Is Not the Preacher's Personal Real Estate

First Peter 5:1–2 opens with Peter addressing the elders and identifying himself as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ. He then commands them to feed the flock of God and take oversight willingly, not for filthy lucre. Peter's words establish both a real responsibility and a real limitation. Elders are not instructed to abandon leadership, apologize for exercising legitimate authority, or permit the congregation to descend into disorder. They are commanded to oversee the flock. But oversight is not ownership, and spiritual government is not personal domination. The preacher is a steward accountable to the Chief Shepherd, not a religious landlord collecting obedience from tenants who have nowhere else to go. A faithful shepherd knows the sheep have been entrusted to him for their welfare. The congregation is not the pastor's retirement investment, personal inheritance, or collection of obedient admirers. God's people are not merchandise, and the shepherd's staff is not a deed to the property.

Verse 3 makes the restriction unmistakable: “Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.” A lord demands submission by position; an example demonstrates obedience through conduct. Peter does not forbid pastoral leadership. He forbids the domineering exercise of it. The pastor must teach sound doctrine, confront actual sin, and lead according to Scripture, but he may not demand that church members surrender their judgment to his personal wishes. He cannot properly discipline somebody for declining a voluntary activity, choosing an honest occupation he dislikes, or refusing to adopt his preferences concerning family decisions. Where Scripture establishes a

command, the preacher must faithfully declare it. Where Scripture grants liberty, he must not manufacture a commandment to increase his influence. Colossians 2:20–23 warns against human ordinances and will worship. A preacher who cannot distinguish God's commandments from his own preferences will eventually expect the congregation to obey both with equal enthusiasm.

Peter concludes the instruction by directing the elders toward the appearing of the Chief Shepherd in verse 4. That places pastoral authority beneath a future accounting. The minister who faithfully serves the flock will receive the appropriate crown, but the man who uses the office for personal dominion has no promise that his ability to intimidate church members will impress Jesus Christ. Hebrews 13:17 likewise speaks of leaders who “watch for your souls, as they that must give account.” Notice that the accounting is to God, not merely to the church membership. A pastor may persuade a committee to approve his conduct and still be wrong before the Lord. He may win every congregational argument while losing sight of the commandments governing his own office. The most dangerous moment in a preacher's ministry may arrive when he becomes so accustomed to being obeyed that he forgets he is still required to obey somebody himself.

2. We Have No Dominion Over Your Faith, No Matter How Impressive the Pulpit Looks

Second Corinthians 1:24 contains a statement that ought to be engraved upon the conscience of every spiritual leader: “Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.” Paul was an apostle personally commissioned by Jesus Christ, yet he rejected the notion that his ministry gave him ownership of the Corinthians' faith. He possessed genuine apostolic authority, delivered inspired instruction, corrected serious wrongdoing, and rebuked the congregation when necessary. Nevertheless, he identified the proper character of his ministry as helping believers rather than dominating their faith. The words become even more striking when compared with the pretensions of certain modern preachers. Paul could establish doctrine under inspiration and still reject personal dominion. Yet some fellow with a Sunday morning microphone imagines that disagreement with his judgment amounts to disobedience against heaven. The Apostle Paul refused a throne that lesser men seem determined to build for themselves.

This principle must not be distorted into denying legitimate church authority. Hebrews 13:7 commands believers to remember those who have spoken the word of God unto them, considering their conduct and following their faith. Verse 17 instructs believers to obey those who have the rule over them and submit themselves, recognizing their responsibility to watch for souls. The instruction is real, but it does not repeal 1 Peter 5:3 or 2 Corinthians 1:24. Biblical obedience to spiritual leadership concerns leadership exercised under the

authority of God's Word. The preacher does not acquire permission to contradict Scripture simply because he holds an office Scripture recognizes. Acts 5:29 establishes the enduring principle, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” That statement arose in a particular confrontation with Israel's rulers, but its principle remains unmistakable. A pastor may command respect for his office; he cannot command rebellion against the Book and expect God to call it submission.

Some congregations have gradually allowed pastoral advice to become a system of personal control. Members feel compelled to seek permission concerning employment, ordinary family decisions, friendships, finances, and other matters where Scripture has not granted the preacher final authority. Biblical counsel is valuable, particularly when believers need help applying clear principles. But counsel becomes domination when disagreement produces threats of discipline or accusations of spiritual rebellion. Romans 14:4 asks, “Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth.” The immediate passage concerns matters of conscience and must be understood accordingly, yet it demonstrates that believers remain accountable to their Lord in matters where he has not appointed another person to dictate their choices. A preacher who must approve every ordinary decision in another man's household has confused pastoring a church with adopting a congregation of grown children. The Holy Ghost never resigned his ministry so the pastor could take over.

3. Diotrephes Loved the First Place and Started Throwing Brethren Out of the Church

Third John 9 introduces one of the clearest examples of authoritarian religion in the New Testament: “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.” There is the man's distinguishing characteristic. He loved having the preeminence. John does not provide a formal title identifying Diotrephes as a pastor or elder, and there is no need to manufacture one. The passage reveals a man exercising destructive influence within a congregation, resisting apostolic authority, and attempting to control Christian fellowship. His problem was not an innocent misunderstanding over how a church meeting should be conducted. He wanted the first place, and his conduct demonstrated what happened when that desire encountered opposition. The same spirit can infect a pastor, a deacon, an influential member, or anybody who begins treating the local assembly as an instrument for personal advancement. A man obsessed with having the first place will eventually discover an astonishing number of reasons why everybody else belongs in the last one.

Verse 10 exposes the methods Diotrephes employed. John speaks of his “prating against us with malicious words,” his refusal to receive the brethren, his prohibition against others receiving them, and finally his practice of casting people out of the church. Notice the

progression. First comes malicious speech against legitimate authority. Then comes personal refusal of fellowship. Next comes interference with other people's fellowship. Finally comes exclusion of those who refuse to submit to his demands. Diotrephes was not merely exercising private discernment concerning his own associations. He was attempting to control the associations and membership of others. That is why his example is so important in any examination of abusive church discipline. A man can use exclusion to protect the congregation from genuine wrongdoing, but he can also use it to protect his own position from legitimate opposition. An expulsion is not automatically biblical because the fellow announcing it possesses a Bible and enough supporters to carry the motion.

John's response also deserves attention. He did not instruct faithful believers to accept Diotrephes's actions because preserving the appearance of unity was more important than confronting wrongdoing. He declared that, if he came, he would remember the man's deeds. Verse 11 then commands, “Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good.” Those words prevent the church from baptizing authoritarian behavior as legitimate spiritual government. The believer's responsibility is to follow what is good, not blindly imitate whoever presently controls the congregation. This does not justify every offended member who claims to be another victim of Diotrephes. Accusations still require examination, and legitimate church discipline remains necessary. But the passage establishes that a man can wrongfully exclude brethren while claiming to defend the fellowship. Sometimes the real troublemaker is not the Christian being shown the door. It is the man standing at the door who has mistaken the keys to the building for the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

4. Witnesses Are for Establishing Truth, Not Decorating a Decision Already Made

Matthew 18:16 instructs that where appropriate private confrontation has failed, the offended brother should take one or two others “that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” The immediate setting is the Lord's earthly ministry before Calvary, and the passage must not be treated as though every circumstance in Church Age discipline can be mechanically forced into its sequence. Nevertheless, the principle of careful examination agrees with instructions given directly to the churches through Paul. First Timothy 5:19 commands, “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.” These passages establish the necessity of credible testimony rather than unexamined accusations. But the witnesses must serve the truth, not the ambitions of either party. Three men selected because they have already promised to agree with the pastor are not necessarily three reliable witnesses. Sometimes they are merely one opinion wearing three different neckties.

Responsible investigation begins with identifying precisely what wrongdoing has been alleged. A vague accusation that somebody possesses a rebellious spirit is not sufficient when the actual complaint concerns disagreement over an administrative decision. Likewise, a serious allegation of financial dishonesty, sexual wrongdoing, intimidation, or doctrinal corruption must be examined according to its actual facts. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering a matter before hearing it, while verse 17 reminds believers that the first account may appear right until another examines it. The accused person should ordinarily have a fair opportunity to know and answer the allegations, subject to safeguards necessary to protect endangered people and avoid interfering with lawful investigations. Relevant testimony, documents, records, and corroborating evidence should be examined honestly. A church hearing where the conclusion has already been determined and the accused person is invited merely to watch the proceedings is not biblical justice. It is a performance staged to make prejudice look official.

The same standard applies when allegations concern the pastor himself. First Timothy 5:20 commands public rebuke of elders whose sin warrants that correction, and verse 21 requires that these responsibilities be carried out "without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality." That prohibition destroys the convenient arrangement in which ordinary members receive discipline while influential leaders receive private excuses. A pastor accused of serious misconduct should not control every aspect of the investigation concerning himself. Neither should a congregation condemn him merely because several disgruntled individuals repeat the same unsupported allegation. Reliable evidence, independent judgment where necessary, and an honest opportunity to establish the facts are essential. The standard must remain Scripture rather than money, family influence, personal loyalty, or public embarrassment. A church that declares a man guilty before examining the evidence has violated justice. A church that declares its pastor innocent before examining the evidence has committed the same offense while wearing a more respectable expression.

5. Not Every Disagreement Deserves Discipline, and Not Every Serious Sin Deserves Another Excuse

Biblical discipline requires distinguishing the seriousness of offenses rather than treating every irritation as a congregation-wide emergency. A member who disagrees concerning a church activity is not automatically comparable to a teacher deliberately corrupting the gospel. A person asking for financial accountability is not automatically guilty of sowing discord. A believer who makes an honest mistake and receives correction is not necessarily equivalent to someone persistently defending established wickedness. Romans 14 addresses matters of conscience that believers must not elevate into universal

requirements, while Galatians 6:1 instructs spiritual Christians to restore an overtaken brother in meekness. Those passages prohibit the kind of religious machinery that grinds every disagreement into a disciplinary charge. A church that requires the same punishment for questioning a meeting schedule as for deliberate fraud has not demonstrated firmness. It has demonstrated that somebody misplaced the scales while pretending to administer justice.

Serious wrongdoing, however, must not be minimized because confronting it would embarrass an influential person. First Corinthians 5 commands congregational action concerning notorious immorality. Titus 3:10 directs rejection of a persistent heretick after first and second admonition. Second Thessalonians 3:6–15 addresses withdrawal from brethren who refuse apostolic instruction concerning disorderly conduct. These passages deal with different kinds of offenses, and faithful application requires recognizing their distinctions. The purpose, severity, and necessary publicity of correction should correspond to the nature of the conduct and the applicable biblical instruction. The church must also distinguish confirmed wrongdoing from suspicion and meaningful repentance from continued defiance. Where conduct presents an immediate danger, protective action need not wait for every ordinary stage of personal admonition. Patience is a virtue when it allows a brother to receive correction. It becomes an excuse for disobedience when it is used to keep dangerous or openly corrupt conduct comfortably undisturbed.

The person exercising discipline must also be accountable for his own behavior throughout the proceedings. Ephesians 4:25 commands truthfulness, while verse 31 condemns bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice. Those requirements do not disappear when church officers begin examining an allegation. A pastor who exaggerates charges to obtain a desired outcome becomes guilty of his own wrongdoing. Members who circulate confidential information unnecessarily may also violate Scripture. Those responsible for correction should protect innocent people, maintain appropriate restraint, and avoid humiliating an offender beyond what lawful and biblical responsibilities require. If repentance occurs, restoration should be considered according to the nature of the offense and the qualifications of any office involved. Forgiveness never requires an immediate return to sensitive authority. The Bible commands discipline for correcting sin, not for giving respectable religious people an opportunity to practice the same malice they claim to be condemning.

6. A Church Can Remove Your Membership, but It Cannot Repeal Your New Birth

One of the most dangerous claims made by authoritarian religious leaders is that removal from their congregation places a genuinely saved believer outside the salvation of Jesus Christ. That notion confuses local church fellowship with the spiritual body of Christ. First

Corinthians 12:13 declares, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body,” and Ephesians 1:13 teaches that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise after believing the gospel. Ephesians 4:30 identifies that sealing as extending “unto the day of redemption.” These are works of God, not privileges administered by the church membership secretary. Salvation is by grace through faith according to Ephesians 2:8–9, and Romans 8:1 declares that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. A congregation may determine who participates in its local fellowship according to Scripture, but it cannot undo the spiritual work accomplished by the Lord. A church may cross a name off its membership roll, but no majority vote can reach into heaven and erase what the blood of Christ has secured.

Matthew 18:18 speaks of binding and loosing, and verses 19–20 concern agreement and the Lord's presence where two or three are gathered in his name. These words have sometimes been stretched into the extraordinary notion that church leaders possess unrestricted authority to make heaven approve whatever decisions they announce. But the immediate context concerns the Lord's instructions to his disciples during his earthly ministry, before the finished work of Calvary and the full revelation of Church Age doctrine. Those words must not be detached from their historical setting or employed to contradict the direct teaching concerning salvation in Christ. The Lord's presence is not a blank check for unscriptural government. A church meeting does not become infallible because somebody opens it with prayer, nor does a majority acquire divine authority to condemn an innocent person. Two or three Christians agreeing to do something foolish have established an agreement, not necessarily the will of God. Heaven is not obligated to endorse every resolution passed beneath a church steeple.

The distinction between church judgment and eternal judgment must remain equally clear. Second Corinthians 5:10 declares that believers must appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, while Revelation 20:11–15 describes the Great White Throne judgment. These are not interchangeable judgments, and neither is a local congregational meeting equivalent to either one. The Judgment Seat of Christ concerns believers' accountability before their Saviour, not a church committee deciding whether Christ's finished work was sufficient. The Great White Throne concerns the final judgment described in Revelation, not the removal of somebody from a local membership list. Church discipline has a legitimate but limited purpose: maintaining obedient fellowship, confronting established misconduct, and seeking correction where appropriate. It cannot bestow eternal life or remove it. The preacher who announces that a church vote has delivered a saved man into eternal condemnation has confused the authority of his office with the throne of Almighty God. Somebody needs to remind him which One actually occupies that throne.

7. Civil Authority Still Exists, Even When the Accused Man Carries a King James Bible

Romans 13:1–4 establishes that civil government possesses legitimate authority in matters properly belonging to its jurisdiction. Paul declares that rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil, and identifies the civil authority as “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” That passage belongs directly to Paul's instruction to believers living under grace. It does not authorize every act committed by a government, nor does it eliminate the Christian's higher obligation to obey God when human commands contradict him. But it clearly establishes that lawful civil authority has responsibilities distinct from the responsibilities of a local church. A congregation must not imagine that serious criminal wrongdoing becomes exclusively an ecclesiastical matter because the accused person is a pastor, deacon, or church member. A crime does not lose its criminal character when it crosses the church threshold, and an ordination certificate is not a government-issued exemption from the law.

This distinction becomes particularly important when allegations involve abuse, violence, sexual exploitation, theft, or other serious criminal conduct. A church must not force endangered people into private confrontation with an accused offender or require them to submit to internal procedures before obtaining necessary protection. Credible concerns should receive responsible attention, appropriate reporting should be made to lawful authorities, and evidence must not be concealed or destroyed. Church leaders should cooperate with legitimate investigations without attempting to determine criminal guilt through a congregational popularity contest. At the same time, the existence of a criminal investigation does not automatically answer every question concerning church membership or fitness for ministry. Those responsibilities require their own careful biblical examination. The pastor who insists that the police must stay out of a serious criminal matter because the church will handle everything internally has confused the sanctuary with a courthouse and himself with a judge. The Bible appointed neither arrangement.

A congregation's reputation is never more important than truth and the protection of people entrusted to its care. First Peter 5:2 commands elders to feed the flock, while Acts 20:28 reminds overseers that the church belongs to God. That responsibility cannot be fulfilled through intimidation, concealment, or pressure upon those reporting credible wrongdoing. Likewise, malicious accusations must not be accepted without examination simply because the accused person holds office. The church must protect the innocent from false charges and the vulnerable from genuine offenders. It must be willing to discover facts that produce uncomfortable consequences, including the removal of leaders who no longer meet biblical qualifications. First Timothy 5:21 commands impartiality, and that requirement includes the people appointed to investigate wrongdoing. When protecting the

institution becomes more important than protecting the people, the shepherd has mistaken the fence for the flock. A respectable building is a poor accomplishment if corruption is permitted to flourish inside it.

Conclusion

The New Testament leaves no room for a pastor who treats the congregation as personal property or church discipline as an instrument for enforcing loyalty to himself. First Peter 5 commands elders to feed God's flock rather than lord over his heritage. Second Corinthians 1:24 rejects dominion over the faith of believers. Third John exposes Diotrephes, who loved preeminence and expelled brethren while resisting legitimate spiritual authority. First Timothy 5 requires evidence, impartiality, and accountability, even when the accused person occupies the office of elder. Romans 13 establishes the legitimacy of civil authority concerning wrongdoing properly within its jurisdiction. Together, these passages draw boundaries around church government that no preacher, committee, or majority vote possesses permission to erase. Biblical authority is not weakened when it operates within biblical limits. It is strengthened because those limits prevent men from turning the authority of God into the property of their own ambitions.

The opposite error must also be rejected. A congregation cannot function properly if every member treats legitimate pastoral instruction as optional, every correction as oppression, and every disagreement as sufficient grounds for rebellion. Hebrews 13:17 establishes responsibility toward faithful spiritual oversight, and the Pauline epistles give churches unmistakable instructions concerning discipline. A pastor who faithfully preaches Scripture, confronts established wrongdoing, and leads according to biblical qualifications deserves appropriate respect and support. But respect is not worship, and submission is not the abandonment of discernment. The same Book that commands believers to honor faithful leadership also commands leaders to govern without partiality, greed, domination, or deceit. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, no preacher will escape personal accountability merely because his congregation approved his decisions. The man who teaches obedience to the Bible must be willing to demonstrate that obedience when the Bible places his own conduct under examination. Otherwise, his authority has become a sermon he expects everybody to obey except himself.

The final verdict is unmistakable. A pulpit is not a throne. A church vote is not the Judgment Seat of Christ. An ordination certificate is not a license for tyranny, and a majority cannot transform unscriptural conduct into righteousness by raising enough hands. Establish the facts before imposing discipline. Distinguish legitimate questions from genuine rebellion. Protect faithful pastors against malicious accusations, and hold guilty leaders accountable when wrongdoing is established. Never conceal serious crimes beneath church

procedures, and never threaten a believer's eternal salvation because he refuses to surrender his conscience to another man's opinions. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ, and every authority exercised within it must remain subject to his written Word. A faithful shepherd stands beneath the Chief Shepherd, feeds the sheep, protects the flock, and answers to the Book. A religious dictator demands the first place, silences opposition, and mistakes his personal authority for the voice of God. When a preacher begins treating disagreement with himself as rebellion against heaven, somebody needs to remind him that the church already has a Head—and it is not the fellow holding the microphone.

9 of 10 — Church Discipline — Put Him Out, but Don't Nail the Door Shut: The Forgotten Business of Restoring a Fallen Brother

Key Passage: Galatians 6:1–2 (KJV)

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

There is something terribly wrong with a congregation that knows exactly how to put a fallen brother out the door but has absolutely no idea what to do when that brother repents and wants to come back. The church can organize a disciplinary meeting, produce a solemn announcement, remove a name from the membership roll, and congratulate itself on having defended the holiness of God. But let the offender acknowledge his sin, abandon his rebellion, and seek proper reconciliation, and suddenly half the congregation begins behaving as though forgiveness were a dangerous theological experiment. Some members want him permanently marked, others want every detail of his disgrace remembered, and a few appear genuinely disappointed that the fellow has stopped supplying material for their conversations. The Apostle Paul had something to say about that kind of religion. Galatians 6:1 commands spiritual believers to restore a brother overtaken in a fault. It does not authorize the congregation to establish a permanent exhibition of everybody who has ever fallen. Church discipline is supposed to correct sin, not manufacture a lifetime occupation for people who enjoy remembering it.

The opposite error is equally dangerous. Some churches have transformed restoration into a cheap religious ceremony where a man says he is sorry, sheds a few convenient tears, and expects every consequence of his conduct to disappear before the closing prayer. A pastor caught in serious wrongdoing wants his pulpit returned. A dishonest treasurer wants the checkbook restored. A divisive troublemaker who spent six months tearing the

congregation apart wants everybody to act as though nothing happened because he finally announced that he regrets the controversy. Apparently, the words I repent are supposed to operate like a heavenly eraser that removes every obligation to demonstrate changed conduct. That is not biblical restoration either. Scripture commands forgiveness, but it never teaches that forgiveness and qualification are identical. Repentance must be genuine, responsibility must be faced, and legitimate safeguards must remain where circumstances require them. Grace can forgive the man who burned down the barn without requiring the farmer to hand him another box of matches.

The New Testament establishes both the necessity of discipline and the responsibility to pursue restoration wherever genuine repentance makes it possible. Galatians 6:1–2 addresses the spiritual handling of an overtaken brother. Second Corinthians 2:5–11 warns against excessive punishment and commands forgiveness, comfort, and confirmed love. Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 requires withdrawal from a disorderly brother while forbidding believers to count him as an enemy. James 5:19–20 adds an important warning concerning those wandering from the truth, though its immediate audience and doctrinal setting must be distinguished carefully. These passages do not teach salvation by church membership, nor do they suggest that expulsion from a congregation cancels the eternal life received through Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, and Ephesians 4:30 declares that believers are sealed unto the day of redemption. The local church has authority over its fellowship, not ownership of anybody's new birth. The same Bible that commands the removal of unrepentant wickedness also commands the recovery of a fallen brother. A church that obeys only the first command has stopped reading before God finished speaking.

1. Ye Which Are Spiritual: Restoration Is Not Assigned to the Loudest Pharisee in the Building

Galatians 6:1 begins with a condition that immediately exposes the qualifications of those attempting restoration: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one.” Paul is addressing believers under grace, not Israelites attempting to maintain their standing beneath the Mosaic law. The immediate context of Galatians 5 contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit, and Galatians 5:25 declares, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” The following verse warns against vain glory, provoking one another, and envying one another. Then comes the instruction concerning an overtaken brother. The connection is unmistakable. Restoration requires spirituality demonstrated through obedience to the Spirit, not merely an official position or a reputation for being strict. A man can possess the title of deacon and still be governed by pride. He can preach against sin with tremendous volume while secretly enjoying another

person's humiliation. A harsh tongue and a large Bible are not sufficient evidence that a man is spiritual.

The expression “overtaken in a fault” also requires attention. Paul recognizes that a believer can fall into wrongdoing and need correction from other Christians. That recognition does not excuse the fault or suggest that every offense should receive the same response. First Corinthians 5 addresses notorious, tolerated wickedness requiring congregational separation. Titus 3:10 concerns a persistent heretick refusing admonition. Galatians 6:1 concerns the responsibility of spiritual brethren toward someone overtaken in a fault. The circumstances differ, but the consistent concern is obedience to Scripture and the recovery of the offender wherever possible. The spiritually mature believer does not begin by determining how thoroughly he can disgrace the fallen man. He begins with the truth of the offense and the biblical means of correction. There is no permission to overlook ongoing danger, conceal serious wrongdoing, or dismiss the injuries suffered by others. But there is equally no permission to convert every failure into a permanent sentence of congregational disgrace.

Paul adds another qualification: “considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” There is the warning every self-righteous disciplinarian needs. The man helping another Christian must remember that he possesses flesh of his own, and that flesh is not improved by holding a church office. First Corinthians 10:12 declares, “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” That does not mean nobody may confront sin because everybody is imperfect. If sinlessness were required before correction, the church would never confront anything. It means the person administering correction must do so without pride, malice, or the delusion that temptation has somehow become impossible for him. A brother's fall should produce seriousness, not entertainment. The man standing beside a spiritual ditch should be helping his fallen brother climb out, not congratulating himself that he has never slipped while moving closer to the edge to obtain a better view.

2. Restore Such an One: The Command Was Not to Keep Him Broken for Everybody's Satisfaction

The central verb in Galatians 6:1 is “restore.” Paul does not merely say to notice the fault, condemn the offense, or separate from the offender forever. He commands spiritual believers to seek the fallen brother's recovery. Restoration means addressing what is wrong so the person may return to faithful conduct and appropriate Christian fellowship. It is not a command to pretend the offense never occurred, and it does not establish an unconditional right to regain every lost responsibility. The spiritual condition of the offender, the seriousness of the wrongdoing, and the consequences of his conduct must all be considered. But the objective remains recovery rather than destruction. Some

Christians behave as though discovering another believer's failure gives them a lifetime supply of moral superiority. They can forgive a man in theory while ensuring that every conversation eventually returns to his disgrace. If a brother has genuinely repented and the matter has been properly resolved, continually digging up his failure does not demonstrate holiness. It demonstrates that somebody has developed an unhealthy affection for the shovel.

Paul specifies the manner of restoration: “in the spirit of meekness.” Meekness does not mean doctrinal weakness, reluctance to confront sin, or surrendering the church's responsibility to protect its members. The same Apostle who wrote Galatians 6:1 commanded severe action concerning the offender in First Corinthians 5. Meekness concerns the disposition of the person exercising correction. He must be governed by truth rather than pride, charity rather than revenge, and obedience rather than personal satisfaction. Second Timothy 2:24–25 likewise commands the servant of the Lord to be patient and instruct opposing people in meekness. A spiritually mature Christian can speak plainly about wickedness without treating the offender as something less than human. He can require repentance without enjoying humiliation. He can maintain necessary restrictions without cultivating bitterness. Firmness does not require cruelty, and gentleness does not require cowardice. The Bible has room for both because neither was designed to replace the other.

Galatians 6:2 continues, “Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” The connection is significant. Restoring a fallen brother may require patient instruction, practical help, encouragement toward honest repentance, and assistance with responsibilities created by genuine hardship. Yet verse 5 also declares, “For every man shall bear his own burden.” Those instructions are not contradictory. The Christian is responsible for his own conduct while believers are commanded to assist one another appropriately. A repentant offender cannot transfer responsibility for his wrongdoing onto the people attempting to help him. Neither should those helping him demand that he carry burdens beyond what Scripture requires merely to satisfy their anger. The church may assist a man rebuilding his life without financing continued rebellion or removing necessary consequences. Christian charity is commanded to help carry a burden, not to carry a man's excuses while he refuses to walk. Restoration requires both helping hands and an honest willingness to stand.

3. Sufficient Is This Punishment: When Paul Told the Corinthians to Stop Piling On

Second Corinthians 2:5–6 introduces a situation involving an offender whose conduct had caused grief within the Corinthian assembly. Paul writes, “Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many.” Notice that disciplinary action had already

occurred. The congregation had not simply overlooked wrongdoing or substituted pleasant words for necessary correction. A punishment had been administered, and Paul now declared it sufficient. The passage does not explicitly identify this individual as the man involved in the scandal of First Corinthians 5. That identification has often been assumed, but the inspired text does not settle it, and sound doctrine should not be constructed upon an assumption. What the passage establishes beyond question is that congregational discipline can accomplish its proper purpose and reach the point where continuing punishment becomes inappropriate. A church must know when discipline is necessary, but it must also know when enough is enough. The rod of correction was never intended to become a permanent piece of furniture in the fellowship hall.

Verse 7 carries the argument further: “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.” That is an astonishingly important warning. Paul recognizes that excessive sorrow can become destructive when a congregation continues pressing punishment beyond its proper purpose. The same church that needed firmness in administering discipline now needed obedience in extending forgiveness and comfort. Those are not contradictory responsibilities. They belong to different stages of the same biblical process. The offender's conduct had required correction; the circumstances now required a different response. Some Christians seem to understand only the first half. Once they have discovered an opportunity to rebuke somebody, they behave as though releasing their grip would compromise their standards. But if God commands forgiveness after sufficient discipline, refusing to forgive is not a higher form of holiness. It is another act of disobedience wearing the clothing of righteousness.

Paul becomes even more direct in verse 8: “Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.” He does not merely tell the Corinthians to stop punishing the offender while privately maintaining their contempt. They are instructed to confirm their love. That requires more than a reluctant announcement that the disciplinary matter has technically concluded. Verse 9 refers to the proof of their obedience, and verse 11 warns, “Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.” The context shows that failure to respond properly after sufficient punishment can produce another spiritual danger. Satan can exploit a congregation's unwillingness to forgive just as surely as he can exploit its willingness to tolerate wickedness. The devil is perfectly willing to watch a church discipline an offender correctly if he can persuade the congregation to spend the next twenty years forgiving him incorrectly. Obedience requires correction when correction is due and mercy when mercy is commanded.

4. Have No Company With Him, but Do Not Start Treating Him Like Judas Iscariot

Second Thessalonians 3:14 establishes another important disciplinary situation: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.” The immediate context concerns brethren who were walking disorderly, refusing proper work, and becoming busybodies in matters that did not belong to them. Paul had instructed such believers to work with quietness and eat their own bread. When a man persisted in rejecting that apostolic instruction, the congregation was commanded to withdraw ordinary fellowship. The purpose was corrective: “that he may be ashamed.” Paul was not authorizing personal revenge or demanding that every church member become an enemy of the offender. The withdrawal was intended to bring the seriousness of disobedience home to a brother who had refused correction. Sometimes a man will not recognize the disorderliness of his conduct until the congregation stops pretending that his rebellion is a perfectly acceptable arrangement.

Then comes verse 15, one of the most important qualifications in the entire subject of discipline: “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” Notice the word “Yet.” Paul has not canceled the separation commanded in the previous verse. He has explained the spirit in which that separation must be maintained. The disciplined man is not to be treated as an enemy whose destruction the congregation desires. He remains the object of brotherly admonition. There is a considerable difference between withdrawing approving fellowship and conducting a personal campaign of hostility. Some people enjoy having a biblical reason to stop associating with somebody because they imagine it also supplies permission to become rude, vindictive, and unnecessarily cruel. Paul shuts that door. A church may close the door of ordinary fellowship against persistent disorder, but it must not nail the door shut against genuine repentance. Separation is a corrective instrument, not a declaration of personal warfare.

The instruction also establishes a responsibility for the offender himself. He cannot demand restored fellowship while continuing the very conduct that required correction. A man disciplined for dishonesty must cease dishonesty. A troublemaker disciplined for persistent factionalism must stop spreading discord. A disorderly brother refusing honest work must address the refusal rather than merely complain that the congregation has become unfriendly. Restoration is not secured through emotional pressure, accusations of harshness, or the convenient announcement that everybody should forget the past. The offending conduct must be confronted honestly. Nevertheless, once genuine correction has occurred, the congregation must not preserve restrictions simply because somebody remains personally offended. Romans 12:18 instructs believers, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” The qualification recognizes that peace requires more than one person's cooperation. A repentant man cannot force everyone to

trust him immediately, but neither may an unforgiving congregation require him to spend the rest of his life purchasing mercy God has already commanded them to extend.

5. Convert the Sinner From the Error of His Way Without Confusing Restoration With Salvation

James 5:19–20 provides another passage concerning the recovery of someone wandering from the truth: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” These words must be understood within the epistle's historical setting. James 1:1 identifies the original recipients as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad,” establishing an expressly Jewish audience. That setting must not be erased by pretending James wrote the same doctrinal material to the same immediate audience as Paul's epistles to Gentile churches. Nevertheless, the passage contains a legitimate practical lesson concerning the seriousness of spiritual error and the value of recovering someone who has wandered. The proper application is not that Christians earn salvation by recovering sinners, but that turning someone from a destructive course is a matter of tremendous spiritual importance.

The word “convert” in James 5:19 concerns turning the erring individual from the truth's abandonment back toward what is right. The passage is dealing with a person who has wandered, not merely one whose conduct differs from somebody else's preferences. The expression concerning saving a soul from death must not be recklessly converted into a declaration that a sealed Church Age believer can lose eternal life through misconduct. Ephesians 1:13 establishes the believer's sealing with the Holy Spirit, and Romans 8:1 declares the absence of condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. James's language belongs first to its own context, where sin, prayer, restoration, and death are treated with solemn seriousness. We should not force a narrower explanation of the death mentioned there than the passage establishes. The practical warning remains powerful: wandering from truth has consequences, and recovering an erring person is worth serious effort. The Bible never treats sin as a harmless sightseeing excursion from which every traveler automatically returns without injury.

James also declares that such recovery “shall hide a multitude of sins.” That statement cannot mean concealing criminal wrongdoing, destroying evidence, suppressing accusations, or protecting persistent corruption from proper investigation. Proverbs 28:13 states, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” The distinction is between sin properly dealt with and wickedness dishonestly concealed. When an offender truly turns from his error, the continuing multiplication of sin may be prevented, and unnecessary exposure need not continue. First

Peter 4:8 likewise declares that charity shall cover a multitude of sins. Biblical charity does not publish every failure for the entertainment of spectators. It seeks righteousness and refuses needless disgrace. There is a difference between covering a repentant brother with charity and covering an unrepentant criminal with secrecy. One follows the spirit of biblical mercy; the other makes the church an accomplice to corruption. The Scriptures command honesty in correction and restraint in what follows.

6. Godly Sorrow Is Not a Password That Erases Every Consequence

Second Corinthians 7:10 establishes an essential distinction concerning repentance: “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” Paul then describes the Corinthians' response in verse 11, identifying carefulness, clearing, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal, and revenge. These expressions demonstrate that godly sorrow produces serious concern about wrongdoing rather than merely regret over its discovery. The passage must be understood in the context of Paul's dealings with the Corinthian church, not used to teach that a saved man must repeatedly obtain eternal salvation through disciplinary repentance. The practical principle is plain: genuine repentance concerns the sin itself, not merely the consequences of exposure. A man may weep because he lost his position, his reputation, or the admiration of his friends. Those tears do not automatically establish that he has forsaken the wrongdoing. Being sorry that the chickens came home to roost is not necessarily the same thing as being sorry you opened the henhouse to the fox.

Genuine repentance must therefore be considered alongside conduct. A dishonest brother should acknowledge the dishonesty and make appropriate restitution where possible. A divisive member should cease spreading accusations and correct false statements he previously circulated. A man involved in scandalous immorality should abandon the conduct rather than demand that the congregation accept it as an unfortunate misunderstanding. But repentance cannot become an endless obstacle course designed by people who have no intention of receiving the offender regardless of what he does. Some members will demand evidence of change, receive that evidence, and immediately invent another requirement because they enjoy retaining authority over the disgraced brother. That is not biblical discernment. It is religious revenge operating through constantly changing conditions. Repentance must be genuine, but the congregation must also be genuine about its willingness to recognize repentance. A door advertised as open is not truly open when somebody keeps moving the entrance.

The distinction between restored fellowship and restored responsibility becomes especially important when an offender formerly occupied a position of trust. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 establish continuing qualifications for bishops and deacons. A former pastor

may genuinely repent of disqualifying wrongdoing without becoming qualified to resume his office. A dishonest treasurer may receive Christian forgiveness without receiving immediate control over the offerings. A person who abused authority may require continuing restrictions to protect others, even when repentance is sincerely expressed. Where criminal wrongdoing occurred, appropriate civil accountability remains necessary. Forgiveness does not invalidate legitimate safeguards, and a harmed person should not be pressured to restore private access, trust, or personal relationships merely to satisfy somebody else's preferred appearance of reconciliation. Yet these necessary distinctions must not become permission to despise a repentant believer. A church can embrace a restored brother without returning him to every position he once occupied. Christian fellowship is not a certificate guaranteeing that every former responsibility must be handed back.

7. Confirm Your Love Toward Him: The Congregation Must Learn How to Finish the Job

Ephesians 4:31–32 commands believers to put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice, then adds, “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.” Those words apply to the people administering discipline as surely as they apply to the offender. A congregation cannot claim to have completed biblical correction while continuing to nourish bitterness against someone whose wrongdoing has been genuinely addressed. Forgiveness does not demand pretending the offense never occurred, but it does forbid treating past wrongdoing as an inexhaustible supply of ammunition. When a matter has been properly resolved, believers should stop dragging it into unrelated conversations. The repentant brother should not discover that every new friendship comes with an unofficial briefing concerning the worst thing he ever did. A church should not advertise forgiveness on the front sign while maintaining a permanent museum of forgiven sins in the basement.

The congregation also has a responsibility to protect the restoration process from unnecessary interference. Members who were never involved in the original wrongdoing do not automatically possess a right to every detail. Appropriate leadership may need to examine evidence, establish safeguards, and communicate necessary decisions, but that does not make the offender's history public property. Proverbs 17:9 declares, “He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends.” Again, covering a matter in the sense of charitable restraint must never be confused with concealing ongoing wickedness or suppressing necessary reporting. But where repentance has occurred and responsible correction has been completed, continued repetition can become a fresh offense. A man should not have to answer the same resolved accusation every time somebody needs a conversation topic after church.

The brother who has repented may still have consequences to bear, but the congregation has no commission to manufacture additional consequences through gossip.

The greatest testimony of proper restoration is not an emotional public ceremony but a congregation that obeys the Scriptures consistently. The offender acknowledges his wrongdoing, abandons rebellion, and accepts legitimate restrictions. Spiritual believers provide instruction and support without surrendering discernment. Those injured receive appropriate consideration rather than pressure to perform forgiveness for an audience. Church leaders maintain necessary safeguards while refusing vindictiveness. Where restored fellowship is proper, the congregation receives the brother without demanding perpetual humiliation. This is the kind of obedience Paul required when he told the Corinthians to confirm their love toward the offender in Second Corinthians 2:8. It is not an invitation to sentimental foolishness. It is a command to complete the work of correction according to truth. A church that knows how to rebuke but not how to forgive is only half-trained in righteousness. The Bible that teaches the congregation when to close the gate also teaches it when to open the gate again.

Conclusion

Biblical discipline was never established to provide self-righteous Christians with an opportunity to finish destroying somebody who has already fallen. Galatians 6 commands spiritual believers to restore an overtaken brother in meekness. Second Corinthians 2 warns that excessive punishment can swallow an offender with overmuch sorrow and commands the congregation to forgive, comfort, and confirm its love. Second Thessalonians 3 requires disciplinary separation while expressly forbidding believers to count the offender as an enemy. James 5 reinforces the seriousness of recovering someone who has wandered from the truth. These passages do not weaken the responsibility to confront wickedness. They explain what righteous correction is supposed to accomplish. A church must distinguish rebellion from repentance, forgiveness from automatic restoration to office, and legitimate safeguards from unnecessary cruelty. God never commanded a congregation to choose between biblical holiness and biblical mercy. He commanded obedience concerning both, and neither can be discarded merely because the other requires difficult judgment.

The warning falls equally upon the offender and those administering correction. The offender must not use grace as an excuse to avoid confession, forsake responsibility, or demand that consequences disappear through religious pressure. A man who genuinely repents should be willing to acknowledge the truth and accept whatever restrictions righteousness requires. But the congregation must not use discipline as permission to preserve bitterness indefinitely. Forgiveness cannot become an empty word recited

publicly while hostility continues privately. The saved believer's eternal standing rests upon Jesus Christ, not upon the changing opinions of a congregation. His service and conduct remain matters of accountability, and Second Corinthians 5:10 declares that believers must appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Those who administer discipline will answer for their conduct as surely as the offender will answer for his. The man who sinned must not hide behind grace, and the man who corrected him must not hide behind holiness while practicing revenge. Both are required to obey the Book.

The final verdict is simple enough to understand and serious enough to demand obedience. When a brother persists in established wickedness, confront the sin and exercise the discipline Scripture requires. When he sincerely repents, acknowledge the repentance and pursue appropriate restoration. Maintain necessary safeguards without pretending they cancel forgiveness. Protect those harmed without making needless public humiliation a condition of Christian fellowship. Refuse cheap repentance that leaves wickedness untouched, and reject harsh discipline that leaves a repentant brother permanently condemned by the congregation. The blood of Jesus Christ was shed to redeem sinners, and the New Testament does not authorize Christians to turn the failures of redeemed people into a lifelong spectator sport. Put the unrepentant offender out when the Bible commands it, but do not nail the door shut against the brother who has genuinely turned from his sin. A church that only knows how to throw people out has learned how to guard the gate but forgotten why the Shepherd came seeking sheep. The same Bible that commands correction commands forgiveness, comfort, and brotherly love. Open the Book, obey all of it, and finish the work God actually commanded.

10 of 10 — Church Discipline — When Forgiveness Becomes a Cover-Up and Grace Becomes a Garbage Dump

Key Passage: 1 Corinthians 5:6–8 (KJV)

“Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

There is something spectacularly dishonest about a congregation that preaches the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ while operating a permanent storage facility for sins nobody is permitted to confront. The preacher can announce that God hates

wickedness, the choir can sing about holiness, and the membership can congratulate itself on being a wonderful example of Christian love. But let somebody mention that an influential member is openly living in rebellion against Scripture, and suddenly the whole building develops a remarkable allergy to the word accountability. The congregation is informed that nobody is perfect, everybody deserves grace, and confronting the offender would damage the church's testimony. Apparently, the church's testimony is best preserved by pretending the Lord cannot see what everybody else already knows. The Apostle Paul confronted precisely that religious foolishness in First Corinthians 5. He did not commend the Corinthians for their magnificent tolerance. He informed them that their glorying was not good. A church does not become more gracious by becoming less obedient, and calling corruption grace does not make it anything other than corruption.

The opposite extreme is just as rotten. Some churches possess enough disciplinary enthusiasm to remove half the membership before lunch, but precious little understanding of forgiveness, mercy, or the recovery of a fallen brother. They can quote First Corinthians 5 while pointing toward the exit, but somehow Second Corinthians 2 disappears when the offender genuinely repents. They can remember every disgraceful detail of a man's past, recount every accusation with remarkable precision, and maintain a permanent record of everything he ever did wrong. Yet ask them to demonstrate the forgiveness commanded in Ephesians 4:32, and they suddenly require another six months of investigation. These people have confused biblical holiness with religious vengeance. They do not want a corrected brother; they want a defeated enemy. The same Bible that commands the removal of persistent wickedness also commands the restoration of those who sincerely turn from it. Grace is not permission to maintain a garbage dump, and discipline is not permission to operate a slaughterhouse. Both extremes are disobedience dressed in Sunday clothes.

The final issue in church discipline is whether Christians will submit their opinions, sympathies, prejudices, and personal loyalties to the written Word of God. First Corinthians 5 commands decisive action against known scandalous wickedness. Second Corinthians 2:6–11 commands forgiveness and comfort after sufficient punishment. Galatians 6:1 requires spiritual believers to restore an overtaken brother in meekness. Titus 3:10 orders the rejection of a persistent heretick after admonition, while Second Thessalonians 3:15 forbids treating a disciplined brother as an enemy. These instructions belong within the New Testament's complete teaching concerning Christian conduct and local church fellowship. They do not contradict salvation by grace through faith, and they do not transfer the judgments of Israel's national law into the administration of a Church Age assembly. A genuinely saved believer is secure in Jesus Christ, yet remains responsible for his conduct and service. God never commanded the church to choose between holiness and mercy. He

commanded the church to obey him concerning both, whether the congregation finds the result comfortable or not.

1. The Leaven Was in the Lump, and the Corinthians Were Bragging About the Recipe

First Corinthians 5 begins with a scandal involving a man who had his father's wife. Paul identifies the conduct as fornication and declares that it was commonly reported among the Corinthians. The offense was not a vague suspicion, a private disagreement, or an anonymous accusation somebody circulated through the fellowship hall. It was a notorious matter demanding congregational attention. Yet verse 2 reveals that the Corinthians were “puffed up” when they should have mourned. Their problem was not merely the presence of a guilty man. Their response had become an additional offense. Instead of confronting established wickedness, the assembly accommodated it while maintaining an inflated opinion of its own spiritual condition. Paul did not applaud their impressive ability to overlook sin. He directed them to deal with the offender. When a congregation becomes proud of tolerating what God condemns, the church has not discovered superior grace. It has discovered how to make disobedience look respectable beneath a religious roof.

Paul's illustration in verse 6 is devastatingly simple: “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” Leaven works through dough, influencing what surrounds it. The picture exposes the folly of imagining that openly tolerated corruption will remain isolated from congregational life. Younger believers observe what leadership refuses to confront. Faithful members begin questioning whether the church actually believes its own preaching. Other offenders discover that obedience is negotiable when disobedience becomes sufficiently inconvenient to address. Eventually, the congregation's public standards and practical conduct move in opposite directions. This does not mean every Christian struggling with sin contaminates the entire assembly. Paul is addressing notorious wickedness that the congregation knowingly tolerated. The distinction matters because the church must help believers resisting temptation without offering approval to those openly defending rebellion. A little leaven never approaches the dough with a written request for permission. It simply spreads while everybody congratulates himself that the mixture still looks respectable.

First Corinthians 5:7 commands, “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.” Notice the relationship between position and practice. Paul addresses believers according to what they are in Christ and commands them to conduct themselves accordingly. He then declares, “For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” The Passover belongs historically to God's dealings with Israel, but Paul employs that scriptural picture to proclaim the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and its implications for Christian

living. The Church is not being placed under the Mosaic ceremonial system. Rather, the sacrifice of Christ establishes the foundation for conduct marked by sincerity and truth instead of malice and wickedness. Verse 8 explicitly identifies those contrasting qualities. The believer's righteous standing does not abolish the responsibility to pursue righteous conduct. The blood of Christ was shed to redeem sinners, not to provide a crimson curtain behind which a congregation could conduct its wickedness without interruption.

2. When Grace Becomes the Religious Excuse for Everything the Flesh Wants

Romans 6:14 declares, “For ye are not under the law, but under grace.” That is a glorious doctrinal truth concerning the Church Age believer. Unfortunately, some people appear determined to stop reading before reaching the next verse. Romans 6:15 asks, “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.” There is the Holy Ghost's answer to the entire argument that grace eliminates moral accountability. Paul does not qualify the rebuke with an explanation that deliberate wickedness becomes acceptable when committed by somebody who professes salvation. He says, “God forbid.” Freedom from the Mosaic law is not freedom to make sin one's master. The believer has been delivered from condemnation through Jesus Christ and is commanded to yield himself unto righteousness. When somebody quotes grace to defend what Paul explicitly condemned, he is not rightly dividing the Bible. He is using half a verse as a shovel to bury the other half.

Titus 2:11–12 explains precisely what grace teaches: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.” Grace does not merely rescue the believer from the penalty of sin; it instructs him concerning his present walk. Notice that the passage does not say godliness purchases salvation. Salvation is already identified as the gift brought by God's grace. But that same grace teaches denial of ungodliness and worldly lusts. A congregation cannot honestly claim to magnify grace while deliberately contradicting its instruction. Nor should it confuse doctrinal liberty with moral lawlessness. The saved man is not under Israel's national covenant, but he remains accountable to the Lord who redeemed him. Grace is not a permission slip signed in heaven authorizing whatever the flesh happens to enjoy on earth. It is God's unmerited favor, not God's approval of rebellion.

Ephesians 2:8–10 supplies another distinction the church must preserve. Salvation is “by grace are ye saved through faith,” and Paul immediately excludes works as its cause. Then verse 10 declares, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” Good works are the intended fruit of salvation, not its purchase price. When a Christian falls, his salvation is not maintained by pretending he never sinned, nor is it forfeited every

time he requires correction. Ephesians 4:30 teaches that the believer is sealed unto the day of redemption. Yet eternal security does not eliminate fellowship consequences, damaged testimony, lost qualifications for office, or accountability at the Judgment Seat of Christ. A man may remain saved while forfeiting a position he is no longer qualified to occupy. The Church of Jesus Christ must never confuse the security of the believer with the security of his misconduct. The first rests upon Christ's finished work; the second enjoys no protection whatsoever from the Scriptures.

3. The Brother Fighting Sin Is Not the Same as the Man Defending It

Galatians 6:1 begins, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.” Paul recognizes that a Christian can fall and require help from spiritually mature brethren. That acknowledgment is not an endorsement of the fault. It is an instruction concerning the proper response to someone needing restoration. First John 1:8 warns, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” No congregation consists of people who have achieved sinless perfection in their present flesh. But there is an enormous difference between the man who confesses his wrongdoing, seeks biblical correction, and struggles to overcome it, and the man who openly defends his rebellion while demanding the congregation's approval. The church is supposed to help the wounded soldier back into the battle, not congratulate the deserter for announcing that obedience is unnecessary.

Proverbs 28:13 establishes an essential principle: “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” Confession and forsaking belong together. A man who repeatedly announces his repentance while deliberately arranging to continue the same wickedness has not fulfilled the principle simply because his apology sounded impressive. Genuine repentance concerns the wrongdoing itself, not merely the embarrassment of exposure. Second Corinthians 7:10 distinguishes godly sorrow from the sorrow of the world, and verse 11 describes the earnestness produced by a proper response to correction. Yet the church must also distinguish a repentant believer who falls again while honestly fighting temptation from one who has made deliberate rebellion his settled course. Repeated failures require serious attention, but the mere existence of another struggle does not prove that every previous confession was false. There is a difference between a man who falls while attempting to walk straight and a man who builds his house in the ditch and demands that everybody call it the highway.

The distinction also governs the evidence required before discipline is imposed. A congregation cannot assume deliberate rebellion merely because an accusation circulates among dissatisfied members. Proverbs 18:13 condemns answering before hearing a

matter, and verse 17 warns that the first account may appear convincing until another examines it. The church must consider established facts, the seriousness of the conduct, the offender's response, and whether genuine correction is occurring. Private confession should not automatically become public entertainment. Nor should known, persistent wrongdoing remain unchallenged because the offender knows how to sound remorseful when confronted. Spiritual maturity requires more than selecting the harshest possible response or the easiest available excuse. A preacher who treats every struggling Christian as a hypocrite will destroy people who need help, while a preacher who treats every defiant hypocrite as a struggling Christian will provide wickedness with a comfortable hiding place. Neither man has obeyed the Book.

4. The Rod of Correction Was Not Made for Beating Repentant Sheep

First Corinthians 5:11 commands believers to withdraw ordinary fellowship from a man "called a brother" who persists in certain forms of wickedness, including fornication, covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, and extortion. The command is serious, and Paul concludes the chapter by instructing the Corinthians to put away the wicked person. But another passage reveals what happens when discipline has accomplished its proper purpose. Second Corinthians 2:6 declares, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many." The offender in this later passage is not explicitly identified as the man from First Corinthians 5, and that identification should not be treated as established fact. The lesson, however, is unmistakable: congregational punishment can reach a point of sufficiency. A church must know when Scripture requires discipline, but it must also know when the punishment has served its purpose. Otherwise, the rod of correction becomes the club of religious revenge.

Second Corinthians 2:7 continues, "So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow." Those words should trouble Christians who enjoy administering correction but find forgiveness strangely inconvenient. Paul recognizes that excessive punishment can become destructive. He does not instruct the congregation to deny the offense or pretend that correction was unnecessary. He commands a different response when the punishment has become sufficient. Verse 8 adds, "Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him." That is not sentimental weakness. It is apostolic instruction. The Corinthians were required to demonstrate obedience at both stages. First, sin must not be accommodated. Then, appropriate forgiveness and comfort must not be withheld. The fellow who can quote every disciplinary command but refuses to obey the commands concerning forgiveness is not more faithful to Scripture. He has simply chosen the verses that permit him to remain angry.

Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 establishes the same necessary restraint in another disciplinary setting. Paul commands believers to note the man who refuses apostolic instruction and withdraw ordinary company from him, “that he may be ashamed.” Then he immediately adds, “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” Notice that corrective separation and brotherly concern are not opposites. The congregation must not pretend continued disobedience is acceptable, but neither may it organize a campaign of hatred against the offender. Titus 3:10 likewise commands rejection of a persistent heretick after the first and second admonition. These instructions address distinct offenses, but none grants permission for unnecessary cruelty. Where an offender sincerely turns from his wrongdoing, the church should consider restoration according to Scripture and the circumstances involved. The purpose of discipline is not to prove that the congregation can close a door. It is to establish righteousness, protect the flock, and seek the recovery of a brother when repentance makes that possible.

5. Forgiveness Does Not Return the Checkbook, the Pulpit, or the Keys to the Nursery

Ephesians 4:32 commands, “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.” That is a direct instruction to Church Age believers, and no congregation has permission to replace it with permanent bitterness. But forgiveness must not be confused with the automatic restoration of every privilege, responsibility, or position previously occupied by an offender. A church treasurer who committed deliberate financial dishonesty may sincerely repent and receive Christian forgiveness without immediately receiving unrestricted control over church funds. A pastor who engaged in disqualifying misconduct may be forgiven as a brother without being qualified to resume his office. A person who seriously endangered others may remain subject to necessary restrictions regardless of an expressed apology. Forgiveness is a biblical commandment, but handing the matches back to the man who burned down the barn is not one of the commandments attached to it.

First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 establish qualifications for bishops and deacons that remain relevant after ordination. First Timothy 3:2 declares, “A bishop then must be blameless,” and Titus 1:7 describes the overseer as “the steward of God.” Those requirements are not erased when a man apologizes for violating them. A qualification concerns fitness for responsibility; forgiveness concerns the proper Christian response to wrongdoing. Those are related but distinct matters. First Timothy 5:22 warns, “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure.” Responsible examination must therefore precede the appointment or restoration of spiritual authority. A man who has damaged trust through serious misconduct cannot require the congregation to restore that trust instantly as proof of its forgiveness. A preacher's eternal salvation rests upon the

Saviour, but his qualification to occupy the pulpit rests upon the biblical standards governing the office. Confusing those two things protects neither grace nor the congregation.

The injured person must also be distinguished from the offender seeking restoration. A church cannot properly demand that someone harmed by serious misconduct resume private contact, personal access, or a former relationship merely because the offender has apologized. Romans 12:18 declares, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” The qualification recognizes that one person cannot manufacture peaceful relations through unilateral effort. Reconciliation may require truthfulness, time, demonstrated change, restitution where appropriate, and safeguards that remain necessary even after sincere repentance. Those who were harmed should receive proper consideration rather than being pressured to participate in a public display of forgiveness. Yet members who were not injured must not maintain needless hostility simply because they enjoy rehearsing the scandal. Christian forgiveness does not require foolishness, and responsible protection does not constitute unforgiveness. A repentant man must not demand privileges he forfeited, and an offended congregation must not invent punishments God never commanded.

6. Covering Sin Is Not the Same as Covering Up Wickedness

Proverbs 28:13 declares, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” That verse settles the distinction between biblical forgiveness and dishonest concealment. Mercy belongs with confession and the forsaking of sin, not with organized efforts to prevent wrongdoing from being discovered. First Peter 4:8 teaches that charity covers a multitude of sins, but that instruction cannot be twisted into permission to conceal serious crimes, suppress credible accusations, or protect persistent offenders from necessary accountability. Scripture also condemns false witnesses, malicious gossip, and unnecessary exposure of private matters. These commands must operate together. A congregation should not advertise a repentant brother's former failures simply to entertain curious members. Neither should it hide established misconduct to protect the reputation of an influential leader. Charity may cover a multitude of sins, but it was never commissioned to become the church's official department of buried evidence.

Romans 13:1–4 establishes the legitimate authority of civil government concerning wrongdoing within its jurisdiction. The local church possesses responsibilities concerning fellowship and spiritual oversight, but it is not a substitute for lawful civil investigation. When credible allegations involve abuse, violence, sexual exploitation, theft, or other serious criminal conduct, appropriate reporting, protection, and cooperation with

authorities must not be obstructed through appeals to forgiveness. Vulnerable people must never be required to remain exposed to a dangerous offender merely because church leadership wants the controversy resolved quietly. Nor should allegations automatically be treated as proved without responsible examination. First Timothy 5:19–21 establishes safeguards concerning accusations against elders and commands impartiality. Scripture demands fairness to the accused and protection for those reporting credible wrongdoing. A church that conceals crimes to protect its testimony has misunderstood both the meaning of testimony and the purpose of protection. The courthouse does not become unscriptural because the defendant happens to own a King James Bible.

The distinction between privacy and concealment deserves particular attention. Matthew 18:15 provides an important principle concerning the private handling of appropriate personal offenses, though its immediate setting belongs to Christ's earthly ministry before Calvary and must not be confused with every situation governed by Paul's Church Age instructions. An ordinary disagreement between brethren should not become public entertainment. Serious allegations requiring investigation, however, cannot automatically be reduced to private misunderstandings. Public sin may require public correction, and conduct endangering others requires appropriate protective action. First Timothy 5:20 commands rebuke of elders whose sin warrants it, “that others also may fear.” Church leadership must therefore determine what information legitimately needs to be communicated without exposing unnecessary private details. Privacy protects people from needless disgrace. Secrecy protects corruption from necessary examination. When a congregation confuses the two, the wrong people usually end up receiving protection.

7. Calvary Settles the Argument: God Does Not Excuse Sin, and He Does Not Despise Repentant Sinners

The greatest demonstration of God's attitude toward sin is not found in a church disciplinary meeting. It is found at Calvary, where the Lord Jesus Christ shed his blood for guilty sinners. First Corinthians 15:3–4 identifies the gospel: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Romans 5:8 declares, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Consider what those words establish. God's love did not require him to declare sin harmless. His righteousness did not prevent him from providing redemption. The cross demonstrates the seriousness of sin and the greatness of divine mercy together. If sin were nothing more than an unfortunate personal preference, Calvary would have been unnecessary. If God possessed no mercy toward sinners, Calvary would never have happened. The cross condemns both the man who excuses sin and the man who imagines fallen sinners are beyond the reach of grace.

The believer's salvation rests upon that finished work, not upon his ability to maintain an uninterrupted record of obedience. Ephesians 1:13 teaches that those who believe the gospel are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, while Romans 8:1 declares no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus. Nevertheless, First Corinthians 3:12–15 and Second Corinthians 5:10 establish that Christian service will be examined at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That judgment must not be confused with the Great White Throne of Revelation 20 or converted into another trial concerning whether the blood of Christ secured salvation. Yet the believer's conduct matters tremendously. Church discipline addresses present fellowship and accountability; the Judgment Seat concerns the believer's future appearance before his Lord. A congregation cannot replace that judgment with its own verdict. The church may determine whether a man is qualified to occupy a pulpit, but it cannot determine whether the Saviour has sufficient blood to keep a redeemed sinner saved.

The Church must therefore maintain the distinction between its responsibilities and God's eternal work. It must preach salvation freely to lost sinners, teach saved believers to walk worthy of their calling, confront known persistent wickedness, and seek restoration when repentance makes it appropriate. Ephesians 4:1 commands believers to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,” while Ephesians 4:32 commands forgiveness. Both instructions apply to the Christian life. A congregation cannot discard holiness to appear merciful or discard mercy to appear holy. The preacher cannot transform biblical discipline into his own private instrument of authority, and the membership cannot vote away the commandments simply because obedience threatens an influential relationship. The cross stands above the pulpit, above the church committee, above the offended member, and above the disciplined sinner. Every one of them must bow to the same Lord and obey the same Book.

Conclusion

The whole matter comes down to whether a congregation intends to practice the Scriptures it claims to believe. First Corinthians 5 establishes the responsibility to confront known, serious wickedness rather than accommodate it. Galatians 6 requires spiritual believers to restore an overtaken brother in meekness. Second Corinthians 2 commands forgiveness, comfort, and confirmed love when sufficient correction has occurred. Titus 3 and Second Thessalonians 3 identify circumstances requiring separation from persistent disobedience. First Timothy 5 demands proper evidence and impartial accountability, even when church leaders are involved. These instructions do not compete with one another. They address different circumstances within the responsibilities of Christian fellowship. A church that obeys them selectively will produce predictable corruption. If it discards

correction, unrepentant wickedness becomes comfortable. If it discards mercy, repentant believers become permanent targets. The Bible was not written so that Christians could choose whichever command best accommodates their personalities. It was written to be believed and obeyed, including the passages that make obedience uncomfortable.

Every member of a local congregation should understand that maintaining biblical discipline is not exclusively the pastor's responsibility. Believers must refuse gossip, examine accusations honestly, confront wrongdoing appropriately, receive genuine repentance, and resist the temptation to place personal loyalty above Scripture. The preacher must possess enough courage to correct influential offenders and enough humility to receive correction himself. The deacons must exercise their responsibilities without favoritism. The congregation must distinguish struggling Christians from deliberate rebels and protect innocent people from both malicious accusations and genuine wrongdoing. There is no commission to manufacture sinless members, but there is every responsibility to maintain truth and accountability within the assembly. A church filled with repentant sinners seeking to obey God is not a garbage dump. A church proudly accommodating open rebellion while congratulating itself on superior grace is approaching something considerably closer to one. The difference is not human perfection. It is submission to the written Word of God.

The final verdict is written plainly enough that no Christian needs a committee, a denominational headquarters, or a preacher's personal permission to understand it. Forgive as God commands. Confront sin as God commands. Protect the flock as God commands. Receive genuine repentance as God commands. Refuse to conceal wickedness, and refuse to destroy a repentant brother through unnecessary cruelty. Do not permit the sentimental crowd to remove the teeth from biblical discipline, and do not permit the self-righteous crowd to remove the mercy from biblical correction. The Lord Jesus Christ purchased his Church with his blood, and no congregation has permission to transform that precious possession into either a refuge for unrepentant wickedness or an exhibition hall for religious vengeance. Grace is not permission to turn the house of God into a garbage dump, and discipline is not permission to turn it into a slaughterhouse. The same cross that proves God takes sin seriously also proves that he loves sinners enough to provide redemption. Keep the truth where God put it, keep mercy where Scripture commands it, keep the flock under the Chief Shepherd, and keep every man's conduct beneath the authority of the Book. God never commanded the Church to choose between holiness and grace. He commanded it to be faithful to both.

Church Discipline

Keeping Grace from Becoming a Garbage Dump

Conclusion

After examining what the King James Bible actually says about church discipline, one thing ought to be settled beyond argument: **God never commanded the local church to become a sanctuary for unrepentant wickedness, and he never authorized it to become a slaughterhouse for repentant sinners.** Yet those are precisely the two establishments that much of modern Christianity has managed to construct. On one side stands the congregation that refuses to confront anything because somebody might accuse it of lacking grace. On the other stands the religious execution squad that can rebuke, expose, expel, and condemn with remarkable enthusiasm but seems to have misplaced every passage concerning forgiveness and restoration. Both crowds claim to believe the Bible. Both can produce impressive explanations for their conduct. Both can probably organize a conference to defend their position. Unfortunately, neither has managed to obey everything God actually wrote. The answer is not halfway obedience, where a congregation compromises enough holiness to satisfy one crowd and withholds enough mercy to satisfy the other. The answer is to quit treating the Scriptures like a religious buffet and start obeying the whole Book.

The Apostle Paul did not leave the Corinthians guessing about their responsibility when notorious fornication appeared within their congregation. First Corinthians 5:6 declares, **"Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?"** That statement ought to settle the modern fantasy that overlooking open rebellion somehow demonstrates exceptional spiritual maturity. The Corinthians were not being rebuked because imperfect Christians attended their meetings. They were being rebuked because established wickedness had been tolerated while the congregation remained puffed up. Paul commanded them to purge the leaven and put away the offender. He did not appoint a committee to investigate whether the surrounding Gentiles might consider such correction unkind. He did not suggest that the offender's popularity, financial contributions, or personal relationships should determine whether the Scriptures remained applicable. **When a church permits open wickedness because confronting it would be inconvenient, it has not protected grace. It has surrendered righteousness to the highest bidder, the loudest complainer, or the most influential family in the building.** A little leaven does not ask permission to spread. It simply works while everybody pretends the lump remains perfectly healthy.

But not every disagreement between Christians belongs before the congregation, and not every bruised ego qualifies as a biblical emergency. Matthew 18:15 establishes the principle of approaching an offending brother directly where private confrontation is appropriate, rather than broadcasting grievances to people who have no responsibility in the matter. Ephesians 4:31–32 commands believers to put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking, and malice. Those commandments would eliminate an astonishing amount of church trouble if Christians would apply them before placing another telephone call. Some people have transformed personal offense into an unofficial ministry. They collect sympathizers, distribute accusations, cultivate suspicion, and eventually present themselves as innocent victims of the controversy they helped manufacture. **A church does not need a gossip committee, a rumor department, or a collection of self-appointed investigators who cannot settle their own disputes without recruiting the entire Sunday school.** Genuine wrongdoing must be addressed, but ordinary misunderstandings should not become public trials. A congregation that cannot distinguish between the two will eventually spend more time managing wounded pride than preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Doctrinal corruption presents another danger that cannot be solved by smiling politely while a false teacher continues poisoning the flock. Second Timothy 2:15 commands believers to rightly divide the word of truth, and verses 17–18 identify Hymenaeus and Philetus as men whose teaching concerning the resurrection was overthrowing the faith of some. Romans 16:17 instructs believers to mark those causing divisions and offenses contrary to apostolic doctrine. Titus 1:9 requires qualified elders to hold fast the faithful word and answer gainsayers with sound doctrine. These passages were not written to encourage endless quarrels over secondary matters, nor were they provided so that a pastor could brand everybody who questions him a heretic. They establish the necessity of distinguishing actual biblical truth from religious error. **A King James Bible in a man's hand does not guarantee sound doctrine in his head, and a handsome pulpit does not transform foolishness into revelation.** A congregation may survive bad grammar, questionable illustrations, and the occasional sermon that runs twenty minutes longer than necessary. It cannot safely build its faith upon a steady diet of doctrinal poison served by somebody who knows how to sound authoritative while contradicting the Book.

The same principle governs those who deliberately manufacture factions within the assembly. Titus 3:10 commands, **"A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject."** Paul did not authorize the indefinite accommodation of a man whose principal contribution to church life consists of recruiting supporters, repeating grievances, and undermining faithful brethren. Proverbs 6:19 identifies the sowing of discord among brethren as something the Lord hates. But Scripture also exposes the danger of religious

rulers who abuse authority to silence legitimate objections. Third John describes Diotrephes, who loved to have the preeminence and cast brethren out of the church. That fellow provides a permanent warning against confusing spiritual government with personal domination. **Sometimes the man dividing the church is the troublemaker whispering in the back pew, and sometimes he is the dictator standing behind the pulpit demanding that everybody agree with him.** The proper question is never merely who possesses the most supporters or who controls the membership vote. The proper question is who is following the Scriptures. Biblical unity is founded upon truth, not enforced silence, and peace purchased through the suppression of righteousness is nothing more than a ceasefire negotiated with corruption.

Second Thessalonians 3 adds another responsibility that modern religious sentiment would rather soften into oblivion. Paul commanded withdrawal from brethren who persisted in disorderly conduct and specifically rebuked those who refused to work while becoming busybodies. He declared, **"if any would not work, neither should he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).** Notice that the Apostle condemned unwillingness, not inability. The sick, disabled, elderly, and genuinely needy must never become targets of a verse written against deliberate irresponsibility. Galatians 6:2 commands believers to bear one another's burdens, and the Church has every reason to demonstrate practical charity toward those who genuinely need assistance. But Christian generosity does not require a congregation to subsidize rebellion indefinitely. Nor must the church pretend that the man who meddles in everybody else's affairs while neglecting his own responsibilities possesses some extraordinary gift of discernment. **There is enough genuine suffering in this world without financing the comfort of a fellow who refuses to carry his own load while supervising everybody else's.** Charity must remain charitable, responsibility must remain responsibility, and biblical discipline must distinguish the man who cannot work from the man who simply will not.

Then there is the question of church leadership, where biblical accountability must apply without fear or favoritism. First Timothy 5:19 protects elders against unsupported accusations, while verse 20 commands public rebuke when an elder's sin warrants it. The qualifications of First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 establish moral and doctrinal requirements that do not disappear after ordination. First Peter 5:3 specifically forbids spiritual leaders from becoming lords over God's heritage. These commands protect faithful pastors while establishing accountability for unfaithful ones. A congregation must not entertain malicious accusations simply because somebody dislikes a preacher's sermons. But neither may it excuse a guilty pastor because exposing his conduct would embarrass the ministry. **A pulpit is not a throne, an ordination certificate is not a license for corruption, and twenty years of faithful service do not purchase twenty minutes of**

permission to disobey the Bible. The sheep belong to Jesus Christ. A shepherd who faithfully feeds them deserves respect, proper support, and protection against unjust accusations. A shepherd who begins feeding on them must not be permitted to hide behind the staff he was entrusted to carry.

Proper discipline also requires evidence, impartiality, and an honest understanding of the authority God has actually granted a local church. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering a matter before hearing it. First Timothy 5:21 requires judgment without partiality. Accusations must be examined fairly, and innocent people must be protected against malicious charges. At the same time, credible reports of abuse, financial dishonesty, violence, exploitation, or criminal wrongdoing must not be concealed beneath appeals to forgiveness or the church's reputation. Romans 13:1–4 recognizes the legitimate authority of civil government, and a congregation cannot replace lawful investigation with a private meeting designed to protect an influential offender. Nor does the authority to discipline extend to determining a person's eternal salvation. **A church may remove someone from its fellowship, but it cannot remove a genuinely saved believer from Jesus Christ by majority vote.** Ephesians 1:13 declares that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, and Ephesians 4:30 identifies that sealing as extending unto the day of redemption. A church business meeting is not the Judgment Seat of Christ. The preacher is not the final Judge. And heaven does not automatically endorse every decision merely because somebody opened the meeting with prayer.

Yet after everything has been said about correction, separation, accountability, and protection, the matter of restoration remains essential. Galatians 6:1 commands spiritual believers to restore an overtaken brother in the spirit of meekness. Second Corinthians 2:6–8 warns against excessive punishment and directs the congregation to forgive, comfort, and confirm its love after sufficient correction. Second Thessalonians 3:15 declares, **"Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."** Those instructions do not cancel the responsibility to confront wrongdoing. They establish what righteous correction is intended to accomplish. Genuine repentance must address the sin itself rather than merely the inconvenience of being caught. Forgiveness does not automatically restore every lost responsibility, and necessary safeguards must remain where the circumstances require them. But a congregation that continues punishing a repentant brother simply because certain members enjoy remembering his disgrace has departed from the Scriptures. **The same Bible that tells the church when to close the gate also tells it when to open the gate again. A shepherd who refuses to recover a repentant sheep has misunderstood the purpose of having a sheepfold in the first place.**

One of the most important distinctions established throughout these studies is the difference between struggling against sin and openly defending it. A Christian who confesses wrongdoing, seeks correction, and sincerely endeavors to walk in obedience is not in the same condition as a professing believer who brazenly refuses the Scriptures while demanding congregational approval. First John 1:8 reminds believers that claiming sinlessness is self-deception, while Proverbs 28:13 connects mercy with confession and the forsaking of sin. These truths must remain together. A struggling Christian should receive scriptural instruction, appropriate help, and genuine encouragement toward obedience. A persistently rebellious offender must not be allowed to redefine wickedness as a testimony of grace. Likewise, an offender who sincerely repents should not be required to endure endless humiliation merely because his former conduct supplied the congregation with something memorable to discuss. **Grace does not require the church to pretend a man never sinned, and holiness does not require the church to pretend a repentant man never changed.** The spiritually mature congregation knows the difference between helping a fallen brother stand and helping an unrepentant rebel remain comfortable in the ditch.

The entire question ultimately returns to Calvary, because nowhere does Scripture demonstrate the holiness and mercy of God more powerfully than at the cross of Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 15:3 declares, **"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures."** Romans 5:8 announces that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That settles the foolish notion that divine love requires God to treat sin as harmless. If wickedness were insignificant, the sacrifice of God's Son would never have been necessary. But the cross also destroys the self-righteous idea that guilty people are beyond the reach of mercy. God did not send his Son to redeem a collection of respectable individuals who had already achieved moral perfection. He provided salvation for sinners who could never purchase their own redemption. The believer is justified by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, not by church membership, personal merit, or flawless conduct. **Calvary proves that sin is too serious to excuse and sinners are too precious to abandon when God's grace can redeem them.** A church that preaches the cross while tolerating known rebellion has forgotten the seriousness of sin. A church that preaches holiness while refusing biblical restoration has forgotten the greatness of mercy.

And there is one final accounting that ought to remove the arrogance from every person involved in church discipline. Second Corinthians 5:10 declares, **"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ."** That includes the pastor who administered discipline, the deacon who participated in the decision, the member who demanded correction, the offender who refused admonition, and the brother who withheld forgiveness after genuine repentance. The Judgment Seat of Christ is not the Great White

Throne, and it is not a second trial to determine whether the blood of Jesus Christ was sufficient to save the believer. But it is a solemn reminder that Christian service and conduct will be examined by the Lord himself. The preacher who abused his authority will not be excused because his congregation admired him. The member who circulated malicious accusations will not be rewarded because his supporters believed him. The church that knowingly accommodated serious wickedness will not receive approval for calling disobedience compassion. **When the Lord examines the work, nobody will be able to hide behind the church minutes, the pastor's reputation, the majority vote, or the comfortable excuse that everybody else agreed.** The only safe position is obedience to the written Word of God.

So the conclusion is plain, and it ought to remain settled long after these ten studies have been read. The local church belongs to Jesus Christ, and every responsibility within it must remain beneath the authority of his Word. Confront established sin without favoritism. Refuse false doctrine without becoming an arrogant faultfinder. Correct divisive troublemakers without silencing legitimate objections. Require personal responsibility without abandoning the genuinely needy. Hold pastors accountable without entertaining malicious accusations. Protect vulnerable people without concealing wrongdoing. Forgive repentant brethren without pretending every consequence must disappear. Maintain biblical holiness without becoming cruel, and practice biblical mercy without becoming foolish. **The Church of Jesus Christ was not commissioned to provide permanent accommodations for wickedness, nor was it appointed to destroy every sinner who stumbles. It was purchased with blood, entrusted with truth, and commanded to walk worthy of its calling. Grace is not permission to turn the house of God into a garbage dump, and discipline is not permission to turn it into a slaughterhouse. The cross condemns both extremes. Keep the Book open, keep the doctrine straight, keep the sheep protected, keep the gate where God put it, and never allow the personal opinions of men to replace the commandments of the Lord. When all the arguments have ended and every excuse has been exhausted, the verdict remains the same: holiness without mercy becomes religious tyranny, mercy without truth becomes religious corruption, and neither has any authority to rewrite the Scriptures. The answer is not less grace or less righteousness. The answer is obedience to the whole counsel of God.**

VERSEQUEST MINISTRIES

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

KEEPING GRACE FROM BECOMING A GARBAGE DUMP

BIBLICAL TRUTH • RIGHTLY DIVIDED • HEALTHY CHURCHES • FAITHFUL DISCIPLINE

"Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened."
1 Corinthians 5:7 (KJV)

1 THE CHURCH THAT TOOK THE GATE OFF THE SHEEPFOLD AND CALLED IT GRACE

- What church discipline is and is not
- Grace does not cancel accountability
- The purpose of biblical discipline
- The danger of tolerating known sin

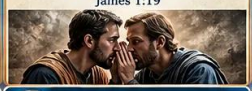
1 Corinthians 5:6–8
Romans 6:14–15
Ephesians 2:8–10
2 Timothy 2:15



2 ONE OFFENDED BROTHER, TWO LOOSE TONGUES, AND A CONGREGATION THAT NEVER NEEDED TO KNOW

- Private offense vs. public scandal
- Confronting a brother directly
- The sin of gossip and tale-bearing
- When to involve church leadership

Matthew 18:15–17
Proverbs 18:13, 17
Ephesians 4:29–32
James 1:19



3 THE FORNICATOR IN THE PEW AND THE LEAVEN NOBODY HAD THE BACKBONE TO REMOVE

- Public sin and its effect on the church
- A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump
- When separation is commanded
- Protecting the testimony of the assembly

1 Corinthians 5:1–13
1 Corinthians 5:6–8
Galatians 5:9
2 Corinthians 2:6–8



4 POISON BEHIND THE PULPIT WHEN FALSE DOCTRINE WEARS A SUIT AND CARRIES A KJV BIBLE

- Identifying false doctrine in the church
- The danger of smooth religious leaders
- Marking those who cause divisions
- Protecting the flock from doctrinal error

2 Timothy 2:15–18
Titus 1:9, 10–16
Romans 16:17–18
2 Peter 2:1–3



5 THE HERETICK WITH A FAN CLUB WHEN ONE DIVISIVE MOUTH BECOMES A CHURCH-SPLITTING MACHINE

- Recognizing a divisive troublemaker
- Refuting heresy and persistent error
- When admonition is not enough
- Maintaining unity through truth

Titus 3:10–11
Romans 16:17–18
2 Corinthians 11:3–4
Proverbs 6:19



6 IDLE HANDS, BUSY MOUTHS, AND THE BROTHER WHO REFUSED TO WALK IN LINE

- Disorderly conduct in the local church
- The brother who will not work
- Being a busybody in other men's matters
- When withdrawal is required

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15
1 Thessalonians 4:11–12
1 Timothy 5:13
Proverbs 26:16



7 THE PASTOR IS NOT BULLETPROOF WHEN THE MAN BEHIND THE PULPIT BECOMES THE PROBLEM

- Qualifications for spiritual leadership
- Accountability for pastors and elders
- When an elder's sin must be rebuked
- Protection from false accusations

1 Timothy 3:1–7
1 Timothy 5:19–21
Titus 1:6–9
1 Peter 5:2–3



8 A PULPIT IS NOT A THRONE AND A CHURCH VOTE IS NOT THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

- The limits of congregational authority
- Salvation vs. fellowship and service
- Fair evidence and impartial judgment
- Civil government and serious wrongdoing

1 Corinthians 3:12–15
2 Corinthians 5:10
Romans 13:1–4
1 Timothy 5:21



9 PUT HIM OUT, BUT DON'T NAIL THE DOOR SHUT THE FORGOTTEN BUSINESS OF RESTORING A FALLEN BROTHER

- When punishment is sufficient
- Forgiveness and comfort after correction
- Restoring an overtaken brother
- Continuing restrictions when necessary

2 Corinthians 2:6–11
Galatians 6:1
Ephesians 4:32
Luke 17:3–4



10 WHEN FORGIVENESS BECOMES A COVER-UP AND GRACE BECOMES A GARBAGE DUMP

- Balancing holiness and mercy
- The difference between struggling and defending sin
- Avoiding both extremes
- Faithfulness to the whole counsel of God

1 Corinthians 5:6–8
2 Corinthians 2:6–11
Ephesians 4:32
Titus 3:10
2 Thessalonians 3:6–15



INTRODUCTION

Church Discipline:
Keeping Grace from Becoming a Garbage Dump

KEY VERSES

1 Corinthians 5:6–8 (KJV)
"Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:"

CONCLUSION

Church Discipline:
Keeping Grace from Becoming a Garbage Dump

BIBLE STUDY CHART

Detailed Overview, Key Scriptures, and Practical Applications