



The Purpose of Discipline

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Rev. Fred Greco

I would draw your attention this morning to the book of 2 Corinthians. We're going to be looking this morning at a section from chapter 2, verses 5-11. If you have your Bibles with you, please follow along as we read God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Second Corinthians, chapter 2, beginning at verse 5:

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, open up your Word to us. Show us wonderful things in your Word. Show us the majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ, of his grace and the forgiveness and peace that comes through his work. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

The subject of discipline is a difficult one. It brings to mind sinful actions. Perhaps even more than that, the *worst* of sinful actions. At the same time, discipline brings to mind harshness, even legalism. Even the Bible acknowledges the reality that discipline is hard. Hebrews, chapter 12, tells us, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

So, why should we discuss discipline? I think it's because God has a purpose for discipline, and he brings it up specifically for us in his Word. In the passage that's before us this morning, Paul could easily have skipped these verses in his letter. If you take a look at this and just in your mind's eye read verse 4 of chapter 2 and then skip down to verse 12, you will see that the flow is very smooth, that there is nothing lost in the essence of Paul's argument, but Paul has intentionally inserted this here.

He has inserted it here for his own pastoral purpose, but even beyond that, God has had him insert it in his inerrant Word for us to have today. That's what the Bible is. The Bible is God's message to you and to me today. God wants us to see not just how discipline works but why it exists. So this morning, we'll look at this passage and see, first, the *necessity of discipline*, and then secondly, the *blessing of discipline*, and then thirdly, the *consequence of discipline*. The necessity, the blessing, and the consequence of discipline.

Necessity of Discipline

Let's begin, then, by looking at the necessity of discipline. Again, we ask the question... *Why bring this subject up?* Why does Paul need now, at this point, to raise the issue of discipline? We remember from last week that the exercise of authority, and especially discipline under authority, is painful, not just for those who are under discipline but for those who are exercising discipline as well. Paul has just told us the truth of this.

There are several reasons in the text to have the issue of discipline raised. The first comes even before we *get* to the text. This text has a context. It comes to us in a setting, and it comes to us for a reason. The reason it comes to us is because sin exists in the church. This is where our theology must inform our culture. The culture of the church often says *this*: "The church is where the good people are. The church is where it's safe, where nothing goes wrong, where everyone knows how to behave, where everyone is in place, dressed finely, hands covered on their laps, paying rapt attention to the pastor, only doing what they should."

But our theology (the Bible) reminds us that sin still remains in believers and sin can come out in the worst of ways. When we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, we are forgiven, but we are not made perfect. John tells us this in his first letter. He says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We may think we are on the road toward getting rid of sin, but we cannot reach that destination here in this life. The path of sanctification is one of hard work, of pain and struggle against remaining sin.

Now, we have to remember that sin that comes out from believers is not the exception; it's the rule. We might think again, "Of course, Pastor. There are some who sin in church. Every place has a few bad apples. Every place has a few people who don't know how to behave themselves or to act properly," but that's not what the Bible teaches us. Do you remember the chapter that speaks of the greatest examples of faith in the Bible? It's Hebrews, chapter 11. We often call it the *hall of faith*.

It goes down through all of the famous heroes of the faith, those who have trusted the Lord and followed after him... Abraham, Moses, Samson, Jacob, Jephthah, David. But let's remember who these men are. Abraham was a liar, Jacob was a deceiver, Moses was a killer in broad daylight, Samson was one who was brought down by lust, Jephthah was one who made a rash vow, and David was an adulterer and a murderer. All of these things are on public display in God's Word because they were very much on display for the world and the church to see.

All of these sins were prominent in their lives. It was not something that was hidden. It did not need a whistleblower to bring it out. Everyone could see them. The Christian life is one of the flesh warring against the Spirit. Now, that can be very discouraging. We might have hoped when we first came to know the Lord Jesus Christ that all of our problems and troubles would be over, that Jesus would take us and refine us and we would not notice or have the problems of sin anymore.

I think, in another sense, this can be encouraging to you and me, because when we sin, when we fall short, when we have to repent and ask the Lord for forgiveness, we're not alone. We're not odd. We're not the exception. We're followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus is there for you. This, of course, was the case in the church at Corinth.

The background to this section of 2 Corinthians 2 is 1 Corinthians, chapter 5. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul says a sin has been reported to him as being among them, a grievous, scandalous sin. Paul describes it *this* way in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 1: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not even tolerated among pagans."

He says, "You are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?" He says, "If I were present, I have already pronounced judgment about this sin, and when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

Paul is writing now another letter to the Corinthians. He has written them once before and told them about this prominent sin, so prominent that it has come to his ears in Ephesus. He tells them they have to do something about this, but instead, the church has been allowing this to go on, such that it even looked arrogant and boastful about this sin.

Paul was shocked that they'd done nothing. He himself had made a judgment about this sin. What Paul is saying is, "This is not a hard case. This is not a gray area. This is an easy judgment to make." Yet the church had not done this. What Paul is reminding the Corinthians, and us, is that both the health of the church and its reputation in the community were at stake. What should they do with this open sin?

Now, the sooner we realize that Christians *can* and *do* sin and that sin is in the church, the better we will be equipped to deal with it in a biblical fashion. Don't close your eyes to sin, and don't treat sin like the mythical bogeyman that is to be whispered about but not to be seen or heard. Be ready, instead, to face it with God's Word.

Paul was obviously very concerned about this sin and how the church was treating it, and the language he uses in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, is emotional. It is sharp. He says that just standing by and seeing the sin is actually a part of the problem. Paul says in chapter 2, verse 5, that this man and his sin actually caused pain. The way Paul puts this is very interesting. You would think that what Paul would have said was that it was causing *him* pain.

He might say, "After I had written to you that you should obey me and take action, but now you haven't, and I'm pained by this. I'm pained by your lack of response to my authority. I'm pained by you allowing this to go on in this church. After all," Paul could say, "I founded this church. I taught you what the Scriptures teach, and you're ignoring all of it." But he doesn't do that. Instead, he references the pain that comes to the whole of the church.

He wants the church to understand that open and unrepentant sin without discipline is a hurt to the whole church, yet he does not want to overstate his case. He doesn't want to pile on to the sinner. We'll see why in just a moment. Instead, he pushes aside any personal hurt. He says, "There has been no pain caused to me, but in some measure, pain has been caused to you, and I don't want to put that too severely."

He doesn't want to put a burden on the church from this. His language is very soft. He is going out of his way to be gentle with the church at Corinth. Why? Paul was very sharp in 1 Corinthians 5. He was indignant. Why is he

going out of his way to moderate his speech with the Corinthians now? I think it's because the immediate danger is past.

The danger of open, unrepentant sin is that it will spread throughout the church. That's what Paul's warning was in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8. He says, "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" Paul uses this image of leaven that we see elsewhere in the Bible. If you are a baker, you will understand this.

If you have a lump of dough and you want that lump of dough to rise so you have that kind of good, doughy, crusty bread, you put leaven in it. You put yeast in it. If you put some in and mix up the lump, the whole lump rises. It's not as if part of it remains flat and part of it rises. A little bit of leaven leavens that whole loaf. That's an image we can see and understand easily.

Jesus uses the same image in Matthew 16 when he tells his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He's saying, "If you take even a little bit of their teaching, it will ruin you. A little bit of works righteousness does away with all of grace." That's what Paul is saying here. This makes some sense, doesn't it? When we see someone sin and there are no consequences, we're drawn to that sin. We think, "This must be acceptable. Maybe this is even good. Maybe this is even encouraged by the church." So sin spreads like wildfire.

Imagine this even in your own home. Parents know that if they use foul language in front of their children, children will pick it up; that if parents disparage others in their home, children will pick up that habit; if they're lazy or if they steal things or if they do anything without any consequence, children will see and follow. This is what will happen in the church as well. That's what Paul was afraid of. That's why he counseled action immediately. In essence, he tells the Corinthians, and us, that if you want to stop the spread of sin, discipline is necessary.

So eventually, the church did something about it. Verse 6 explains this. He says, "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough..." Paul had told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5:2 to "remove this one from among you." This is the main passage we get the idea of church excommunication from. To excommunicate someone means to take them out of the communion of the body. That's what *excommunicate* means. It's not something that is to be done lightly.

We know, for example, that there was other sin in Corinth. There are other sins in other churches that Paul writes to in the Bible, and Paul didn't advise excommunication in every instance. So excommunication is not where we should jump every time we see someone commit the smallest infraction of God's law. But in *this* instance, Paul saw that this sin was open and it was unrepentant. The sinner refused the direction of God's Word. He would not repent. He would not change his way, and it was clear that what the church did was some kind of formal act of discipline.

Again, *discipline* can be a dirty word to us in the church. It's something we don't want to see spoken about or acted on, but Paul's text makes it clear that there is something formal going on here beyond just a mere admonition or counsel, because the word Paul uses for *punishment* is only used here in all of the New Testament, but in

extrabiblical literature, it describes a legal penalty or a sanction. It is a formal censure or punishment that is brought about after a decreed judgment.

Paul also told them in 1 Corinthians 5 that they were to execute this when they were assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus. That describes a formal setting of a church. This is not something just done in a back room. This is not gossip. This is not someone being called out on social media. This is the church gathering together and executing discipline. Paul says this action was taken by the majority of the Corinthians. That implies the entirety of the congregation, the many of the congregation.

So, one purpose of discipline is to protect the purity of the church, to protect the body from the spread of sin. In *this* sense, discipline is not just about the offender or even the one who is offended; it's about all of those who are under Jesus' care. The leadership of the church is to protect *them* from the spread of sin. But is that the only reason for discipline?

It seems easy, I think, to see Paul's first point. Sin is in the church, and the church has a duty to stop its spread, because if sin spreads, then it will harm individuals. It will harm families and the gospel witness of the church in the world. It may have taken the Corinthians a bit of time to see this, but they *did* see it. They *did* act. They passed a censure against this sinner, telling him what he was doing was sin and that it was excessive and open and brought into doubt his testimony of faith in Jesus.

Blessing of Discipline

That brings us to the second purpose of discipline: discipline is a blessing. It's a blessing both to the sinner and to the church. Now, that seems odd to say. How can discipline be a blessing? How can it be good for a sinner to receive punishment like Paul references? Young people, children, could you imagine coming downstairs and saying to your parents, "Mom, Dad, would you please discipline me? Would you please ground me? I think it will help me. I think it will be a blessing to me if you punish me." Of course not.

We've already seen that Hebrews 12 tells us all discipline at the time does not seem to be good. It seems rather to be harsh, to be a punishment, but that doesn't change the truth that, in reality, discipline is a blessing. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul was concerned that the church would not hold the sinner accountable, but here he's concerned about something else, something different. Now he's concerned that they won't act in a different way.

We see in verse 7 that the discipline had occurred, and it appears to have had its stated effect. Verse 7: "...so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Paul writes in verse 6 that the discipline here was enough. It was sufficient. It had done what it was intended to do. That means no more discipline was needed. Now why is that? Because the sinner had repented. He had turned from his sin. He had left his sin.

The goal of discipline, Paul is telling us, is not to harm the sinner. That's not what would bring Paul joy. No, the goal of discipline is to bring about repentance. So, if the cause of discipline was to show the sinner his profession of faith looked false because of the life he was living, now this repentant one could be encouraged in his faith

because he had turned from his sin and turned back to Jesus. The Bible tells us that believers flee from sin. Believers know that Jesus wipes away the stain of sin.

To repent necessarily means that God is at work in you. Remember, the presence of sin does not mean someone is unsaved. We saw this earlier. Sin is present always in the church, remaining sin. Sin is in the church, but someone who is truly saved will have the power of Jesus' blood and the work of the Holy Spirit enabling them to fight against sin, to do battle against sin. This is, indeed, truly a blessing: to point someone away from sin and back to Jesus.

Think about this right now. Have you ever made a bad decision (I mean, a *really* bad decision) and had someone come alongside you and say, "This is not so good of an idea. This is not going to turn out well. You need to change your course"? Then, after you listened and changed course, do you remember what you thought of the one who came alongside you? Weren't you so thankful? Weren't you thankful that they helped get you off the wrong course and on the right course and that you did it quicker than you would have realized on your own?

You see, sin blinds us. It's one of the characteristics of sin that the Bible describes. The Bible is very clear about this. Proverbs puts it *this* way in chapter 4, verse 19: "The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble." What that means is when we are in sin, we often can't even see it. Our heart deceives us. We are in darkness and we stumble. We need someone to come alongside us. What a blessing it is to have someone shine light for us.

Have you ever been in the dark and someone shines light? What's the first thing you experience? You know it's not, "Oh, I'm so thankful I can see." The first thing you experience is "Oh, this hurts!" and "Oh, I don't know where I am. I'm all disoriented. I can't see." You have to get used to the light. Right? Especially if you've been in a pitch-black room and blazing lights are turned on.

That's what a blessing is when someone turns on the light for us. Discipline shows us, in spite of the difficulties it brings to us, that we are on the path of destruction. It reminds sinners of their faith in Jesus Christ, of what Jesus has done, of the way of life. Discipline reminds them of the work of Jesus, that it is sufficient.

But discipline is not just a blessing for the individual sinner. Discipline is also a blessing for the whole church as well. Paul writes in verse 7 that the Corinthians should rather change course now. When he says *rather*, what he means is "It would be preferable for you to change your course, for you to turn and do something." To turn and do what? Remarkably, Paul tells them to forgive and to comfort the sinner. It's not just the sinner who's affected by restoration; it's the church also.

What Paul is describing here is not just a mere passing over. It's an active restoration of the sinner to the life of the church. To *forgive* here... The word means to graciously give freely. It's the same word Paul uses in Romans 8:32. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Paul calls upon the church to be gracious, to forgive, to go the extra mile, to bring the sinner back into fellowship, and not just to forgive but to come alongside him and comfort him.

Now, we might see the church removing an active censure, legally taking an action, saying, "This punishment is no longer in place. You are no longer forbidden from the fellowship of the church. You can even come and partake of the Lord's Supper now." But we can also picture that the sinner would still have to stand off in the back, that he couldn't really be a part of the family of the church.

We could see no one really wanting to get close to the sinner. After all, isn't he a sinner? How could he ever come back and be a part of the church? Maybe, we might even think, the best thing for him to do would be to go someplace else. He can be a church member in good standing in another place where no one knows about his sin, where no one knows about the discipline, where no one knows about the restoration. He could use that as a fresh slate.

Paul tells us that's not the goal of discipline. The goal of discipline is to restore the sinner to fellowship. When discipline is successful, the sinner is repentant, and he is restored to fellowship. This should not surprise us. We should hope for it. We should expect it. Why? I think sometimes we have become jaded with sin. We see someone fall into sin and we write them off. We think it would be easier to find someone who hasn't even come to faith yet, someone who's not a believer yet, and bring them to faith than it would be to restore one who has stumbled.

But it shouldn't surprise us, because God is a God of grace. He is in the business of forgiving sinners. He is in the business of granting repentance. That's what has happened to every member of the church in the very first place. That's what has happened to *you*. What greater blessing could the church have than to show that it is a place of grace and forgiveness? What better way to show that it is a place of a gathering of people who strive to be like Jesus...forgiving, showing grace?

Once again, just like he did with punishment, Paul uses formal language to describe this restoration. He tells the Corinthians in verse 8 to "reaffirm your love for him." This means to take a formal decision, to come to a conclusion, to legally ratify something. This word *reaffirm* is used by Paul in Galatians 3:15 where he describes ratifying a covenant, to take a legal action, a formal action.

Paul is very concerned that the church do this. As a matter of fact, he *begs* them to do this. Paul is wearing his emotions on his sleeve. He's telling the church it's best for the sinner and it's best for them if they reunite, if they restore the sinner to full and open fellowship. Experiencing grace is a central blessing of discipline.

Consequence of Discipline

Thirdly, there are also consequences of discipline. There are goals of discipline, and they show themselves after the proper use of discipline. So, they are the goal of discipline, but they come in its wake. They are a consequence. One of these we see in verse 7. "You are to turn and forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."

It's not just that Paul is telling the Corinthians to take this opportunity to do the right thing, that they should follow the rules of the Bible. That should not be what motivates them to forgive and to show grace. He's telling them that there's also a danger. There is a danger that if the church does *not* restore the sinner, if it is *not* a place where grace is seen and shown, Satan will find an opening for an attack on the church.

Now, what does this look like? Imagine, if you will, that a sinner is disciplined. He is told that his actions make a lie of his profession of faith and that he is in danger of going to hell unless he repents, so the sinner comes to a sense of sorrow and shame at his actions. He sees that he's wrong. He sees that God has declared his actions to be a sin, so he turns from his sin.

He repents. He turns around, if you will. That's exactly what the word *repent* means. He turns around. He listens to the voice of the church, and then he wants to find forgiveness and grace in the church. He now longs for the fellowship he has been missing. He longs for encouragement in his path. He longs for accountability to help him from falling into that sin again.

What would happen if the church responded with a cold shoulder? What if those in the church continued to talk about him behind his back, if as he's in the church there were whispers? "You can't trust *that* guy. Do you know what he did? Well, let me tell you how you can pray for him, because he has done some really horrible things." Oftentimes, we couch our gossip in the terms of prayer requests.

What would the repentant sinner conclude about this or what would new believers in the church conclude about this or what would even those who are not yet in the church, who have not yet professed faith in Jesus Christ but who are seeking him, who are hearing the gospel for the first time... What would *they* conclude about this? Well, they would conclude that the church is a place full of lies. It's a place that doesn't really rejoice in forgiveness, no matter how much it talks about it, no matter how much it sings about it.

They would conclude that forgiveness isn't real, it's not substantive, that the Bible is not true when it says, as James does in chapter 2, that mercy triumphs over judgment. They would see judgment triumphing over mercy. All that would be left would be sorrow. That's what Paul writes about here in verse 7. He says that the repentant one could be overwhelmed. That means to be swallowed up. It means to be drowned in the sea. It means to have no hope at all.

"We can't have that," says Paul. "Don't be ignorant of Satan's designs. Don't let him outwit you. Don't let him take advantage of you," Paul says. "Don't let him use this situation for his advantage, because he hates God, and he hates the church, and he hates the people of God." So, a proper use of discipline understands that it is not a punishment against sinners, but it is a way to restore sinners and show the grace of God. It actually defeats Satan and his attacks. It shows that the grace of Jesus is greater than sin.

The final consequence of discipline is its most important. It's not the most immediate. Discipline immediately protects the church from the spread of sin. Discipline can bring a sinner back to Christ and back to the church. Discipline protects the church and sinners from the attacks of the Enemy, but discipline is also a way to show glory to God. We might even say this is the ultimate purpose of all of the other purposes we have looked at.

What happens when the church is kept pure and sin is kept in check? What happens when a sinner repents and confesses that Jesus is Lord? What happens when the Enemy is defeated and grace reigns? What happens is that God is glorified. I think that in this world, God is no more glorified than when his glory is set against the backdrop of repented sin.

Did you have the opportunity this morning to get up and to look out as the sun rose? I did. I was in the back of the church, and I looked out over the tree line as the sun was coming up and the darkness was being dispelled. Even if you slept in a bit this morning, you've seen the sun rise. What makes the sunrise so brilliant? It's not just that there's light. It's that all the darkness and shadows of the night are dispelled. There is a complete transformation, and the sun is seen in all its glory.

That's what we have with the Lord our God and the dispelling of sin. God's glory is seen in his grace and his mercy and his purity and his holiness, and we see this against the black backdrop of sin as the church turns its back on sin and turns to Jesus. God is not glorified when we pretend that we are perfect. God is not glorified when we pretend we deserve his love because of how good we are. No. The whole story of the Bible is the glory of God in the redemption of sinners by the work of Jesus.

So, why wouldn't we want a proper display of discipline to glorify God? Wouldn't it show that God's work can conquer all sin, even open sin, even scandalous sin, even sin that's embarrassing in the church? I think that's what Paul is getting at in verse 10. He says, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ."

He's saying that *he* has forgiven. He wants the Corinthians to forgive. He says that all of this has been done for the church's sake in the presence of Christ. It's as if Jesus is standing behind Paul, looking over his shoulder, and seeing the magnificence of grace in the church.

Discipline is hard. It's hard for parents and families. It's hard in the church, and it *can* be done wrongly. It can be done harshly, unlovingly, without a view toward restoration and grace, but that is not an excuse for us to abandon discipline. It's a reason for us to be all the more diligent about it, to make sure we keep in mind the true purpose of discipline: to protect the church, to bring about forgiveness and grace, and to bring glory to God.

You are never too far gone for the grace of Jesus. He is waiting for you to come back to him. Will you run from your sin today? Will you look for the hope and blessing in Jesus instead of in your sin? Jesus has given us discipline for our good. May we receive it in the way he intends it for restoration and forgiveness. May we use it in the way he intended for grace and God's glory. Amen.