

“THE EFFECTS OF NO CHURCH DISCIPLINE”

BY IRVIN LEE, “BACK TO BASICS,” VOL. 3 NO. 6, JUNE, 2005

Failure to carry out any command of God is a serious failure. The New Testament emphasizes the duties of the individual, but there are certain responsibilities assigned to groups of Christians (churches) because we are to work together as a family or body under the elders and under Christ, our Chief Shepherd (Rom. 16: 16; Ti. 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-5).

1) No Discipline Causes Men To Be Lost: -- God does not want any to perish because every soul is precious to Him (Matt. 16:26; 2 Pet. 3:9). If a brother sins, he endangers his own soul. Any Christian near him should seek to convert or restore him to God (Jas. 5:19,20; Gal. 6:1). If efforts of this type fail, the important task of rescuing this one from perishing falls upon the church (1 Cor. 5). Let every member be aware of the fact that the effort is to save the sinner as well as to protect the reputation of the church (1 Cor. 5:4-8). We may admonish the sinner as a brother because we are interested in his spiritual welfare. We want him to be ashamed of his sinful way, so we withdraw from him (2 Thes. 3:6, 14,15).

2) No Discipline Allows Leaven's Wickedness To Enter The Lump: -- The church at Corinth was "puffed up" with its own wisdom rather than depending on the counsel of God concerning the member who was a fornicator. Allowing one couple to live in violation of the law was a way of letting the leaven of wickedness to enter the "lump." It was true then as it is now that "*a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump*" (1 Cor. 5:6-8). If the church closes its eyes to one case, there will likely soon be another and then others.

3) No Discipline Will Keep Men From Enduring Sound Doctrine: -- Timothy was charged to "*preach, reprove, rebuke and exhort*" in an urgent way, if he would push off the day when they would not endure sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1-5). The mouths of those who speak unsound doctrine, should be stopped, but who will do this, if the people like the perverted pattern? (Ti. 1:10-14; 2 Pet. 2:1-3). Timothy was urged to be forceful and faithful in his preaching, and the churches were taught to mark, avoid and reject false teachers. They were to purge out the leaven of wickedness and disorder to avoid the evil day when they would not endure sound doctrine (Rom. 16:17,18; Acts 20:29-31; Gal. 1:6-10).

4) No Discipline Encourages The Worldly: -- If a church looks the other way and refuses to notice when more and more members become ungodly, that church will become a gathering place for the worldly. It will also lose the respect of the community. Its zeal for Christ will vanish, so it will fall into the same condition that had come to Israel when Isaiah and Jeremiah lived. God was displeased with a church that tolerated doctrine and practices that were contrary to His Will (Rev. 1:14,15).

“WHY WE MUST WITHDRAW”

BY MIKE THOMAS, OWENSBORO, KY

One of the most difficult responsibilities Christians have is that of withdrawing from erring brethren. No sincere Christian enjoys taking a strong and definite stand against another Christian. It is painful for everyone involved, as anyone knows who has given and received discipline (Heb. 12:11). The Lord says that "*afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*",

But, at the time it is hard to believe it. The benefits of pruning are not always foreseeable.

We cannot deny the fact that Christ teaches us to mark and avoid erring Christians. He addressed this matter in His teachings (Matt. 18:15-17) and inspired the apostles to teach the same (vs. 18-20; 1 Cor. 5:4). It is His will to discipline erring Christians, so how we respond to this command will reveal the kind of faith and love we have for Him (2 Cor. 2:9).

Because of its unpleasant nature, Christian discipline is sometimes viewed as an unloving (and ungodly) treatment of sinners. "How will we ever win the erring back to the Lord if we withdraw from them?" Or, "What will others think of us for treating brethren like this?" The list could go on and on. But for every excuse made for not withdrawing, there remains one overwhelming reason why we should: it is God's will (1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Thes. 3:14,15). He is the one who founded the idea; He is the one who holds us responsible for performing it.

Some ask, "Well, what if the erring withdraws from us first? How can we still discipline them?" It is interesting that this kind of reasoning is never applied to any other relationship in the world except the Christian. If someone leaves the military while still enlisted, they are considered AWOL (absent without leave) and punished as such. If an American citizen defects to an opposing nation, they are tried and convicted for treason (e.g., John Walker Lindh in joining Taliban forces). But in the church, if a Christian departs from the truth and joins sides with error, they want to be set free without any judgment from brethren. And some brethren are granting their request! These brethren forget that it is our responsibility as Christians to judge one another with the gospel (1 Cor. 5:12,13). We recognize this authority in the home as parents over unruly children; and we demand it from the government when a fellow-citizen betrays our nation. But when it comes to the Lord's church, the most important relationship in all humanity, we want to close our eyes and pretend everything is okay. We fail to realize that we only accomplish the will of Satan by not taking a stand against sin (Luke 11:23).

If a fellow-Christian wanders from the truth, God's will is not that we turn the other cheek and pretend

there is no sin. Where is the love in that kind of response? Instead, God's will is that we use our relationship with that person to bring them to repentance (2 Thes. 3:14,15; 1 Cor. 5:5). It is a plan that has proven its effectiveness before, with other Christians (2 Cor. 2:6,7; 7:10), and will continue to work if we have enough faith and love in God to carry it out. God's plan works when we work His plan! And so it is in discipline. We withdraw because we care, and we want to see the erring in fellowship with God once more. It matters not if they wander from the local church or remove their "membership" (to avoid public marking and withdrawal). This is ludicrous! If they are in rebellion to God's will, we must "*note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.*" This is true in any circumstance, in or out of the local church (1 Tim. 1:20). If I condone a Christian in their rebellion, and keep company with them, it is as if I am participating in their evil with them—because I am! (2 John 10,11; Gal. 2:9).

I hate discipline, both giving and receiving it. I wish things were such that I did not have to remind people of God's will. But that is not God's will (Eph. 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:15). I hate having to punish my children for doing wrong, but they need it to learn God's will, and to "*deliver his soul from hell*" (Pro. 23:14). We couldn't have a peaceful home without it (29:17). Likewise, I hate having to take a stand against brethren who depart from God's will. I wish I could turn the other cheek and pretend everything is all right. But discipline is necessary in bringing them to repentance and in maintaining peace and godliness in the local church (1 Cor. 5:7). How will other Christians learn to avoid sin if we never condemn the Christian who leaves to practice sin? Thus spreads the leaven.

Instead, God wants us to use our association with one another to remind each other of the seriousness of living by God's will. As with erring elders, "*Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest may fear*" (1 Tim. 5:20). Why do others need to fear a public marking and avoiding for departing from the truth? "Because brother so and so got caught up in sin and it happened to him!" This is how others learn to fear sinful rebellion and evil compromise. "But we've never done this before, so why start now? What about all those we failed to withdraw from?" This won't be the first time God's people had to make this correction (1 Cor. 5:2). What will we do with the truth from here on out?

As much as I hate it, I will stand against my brethren who leave to do evil. Not because I love hurting them (God forbid!), but because I care for their soul and realize the seriousness of their rebellion against God. There is a very dark and painful future awaiting them if they do not repent (2 Thes. 1:7,8; Matt. 13:38-42). They must see the error of their way, now, before it is too late! I hope they would have enough love for me to do the same should I be living in ways that lead to hell.

Besides all this, God has taken a stand against them (1 John 1:7; 2:3-6), and expects me to do the same if I truly love Him (and them). If Jesus could withstand the daily threats and attacks, and eventual crucifixion, from those whose consciences were condemned by the truth He taught, I can take up my cross and follow Him, even unto death (Rev. 2:10), in withdrawing from erring brethren. But if I won't endure the rejection of family and friends who are erring Christians, and choose their love and acceptance over God's, my life will end as if I never knew God—because I don't. Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will...*" Well, you know the rest. Now it's only a matter of having enough faith, courage, conviction and love to apply it.