

How We Discipline the Unrepentant

Upon This Rock, Part 9

Selected Scripture

In one of his books, I can't remember which one, Chuck Swindoll tells the story of some children in his neighborhood who worked long and hard on their little cardboard clubhouse. This was the place where they would meet, play and have fun. Since a clubhouse has to have membership rules, they came up with these three:

- Nobody act big;
- Nobody act small;
- Everybody act medium.

Writing to the Roman believers, the Apostle Paul wrote a biblical foundation for the same thing – he wrote, ***Do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation (Romans 12:16).***

Do not be wise in your own opinion.

It's interesting that only two Biblical writers used this same phrase – Paul and Solomon.

Solomon said, in this way . . . ***“Do you see a man who wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than in him.” (Proverbs 26:12)***

That's because he's unaccountable! In his self-deceived state, he remains above correction and beyond rebuke. He is also beyond counsel and discipling – he's heading for discipline from God.

Have you ever thought about the fact that discipling and discipline come from the same Greek root word? They are different activities of the same maturing process.

One activity – discipling – is a time of challenging and correcting with a willing individual; discipline is a time of challenging and correcting an unwilling individual.

However, both activities are commanded in scripture. The difference will be determined by whether or not we will welcome it or refuse it.

One of the critically important promises we are making one another, as members of this local body of Christ, is this: **we promise to welcome accountability to elders and members of the assembly through biblical discipline and discipleship.**

Listen to some of these passages, we've attached to this particular promise.

To the church in Galatia, Paul records that singular moment when he confronted the Apostle Peter for his inconsistency regarding Gentiles. Paul writes ***But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James (the church in Jerusalem), he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came (these Jewish church leaders), he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision . . . and even Barnabas was carried away by [this] hypocrisy (Galatians 2:11-21).***

In other words, Peter began to act with hypocrisy toward the Gentile believers – and Paul confronted him to his face and Peter straightened up and a greater division was averted

Paul also writes to the church in Corinth to literally dismiss an unrepentant man from the church – he writes, in ***Chapter 5, It is actually reported that there is immorality among you . . . that someone has his father's wife*** (in other words, a man in the congregation was sexually involved with his stepmother). ***Paul writes, “And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order***

that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.” (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

Paul also wrote to Titus with this clear command in **Titus 3:10 – Reject – that is, excommunicate – a divisive man after a first and second warning.**

In other words, give him a couple of warnings and then refuse to allow him access to the assembly. Whether he’s a member or nonmember – if he’s divisive, warn him . . . and then warn him again . . . and then refuse him access to the flock. Why? Because he wants to divide the flock, not unite it.

To the Ephesian church, Paul wrote, and **be subject – or accountable – to one another (Ephesians 5:21).**

In Romans 15:14, Paul writes that we are to admonish one another.

That verb **admonish** is *nouthetein* – which gives us the word for nouthetic counseling.

It means to warn and instruct and encourage someone so that their conduct is corrected.ⁱ

To the Philippian church, Paul add this exhortation to **do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself (Philippians 2:3).**

So the assembly is actually called to counsel and encourage and correct one another – with an attitude of humility and love that views the other person as more important than us.

This is the very issue that was about to destroy a small house church in the first century.

One of the members was no longer accountable to the others – no longer willing to be disciplined – he was above it, and he viewed himself as more important than anybody else.

And he is now in need of open confrontation and discipline.

John the Apostle writes a personal letter to this church and addresses the letter to a key leader in the church named Gaius.

And in this letter, John effectively points his finger at the man who was out of line and implies that unless this man straightens up, he would be removed from the church.

This personal letter John wrote is called, **The Third Epistle of John** – turn there if you would; it’s a page or two just before you get to John’s last inspired record we call the Book of Revelation.

The problem is a man named **Diotrephes** – and through this man’s divisive spirit, the Devil is effectively leading this church over a cliff.

Notice verse 9. (John writes) I wrote something to the church but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.

Verse 9 informs us that a letter had been written earlier to the church as a whole – but it’s a letter that went missing – and the implication is that it was intercepted and more than likely destroyed by Diotrephes.

And notice that John gets right to the problem – He names Diotrephes and then writes: **“he loves to be first among them.”**

That’s only one compound word in the original language – a combination of *philos* (for love) and *protos* (for first.)

He loves first place. It’s a word that describes self-seeking, spotlight grabbing ambition.

And John uses the present tense here to indicate that Diotrephes never lets up – he always demanded to be first in line – with his opinions engraved in stone and followed to the letter, as we’ll see further.

The root of this desire for preeminence is nothing less than pride, right?

But why had the church cowered before this man? Why were they paralyzed by him? We’re not told. Perhaps he was an intimidating personality. Perhaps he was physically overbearing.

There is an interesting clue in his name. The name Diotrephes is a Greek name which literally means, “Zeus reared” – or, “cared for by Zeus.” Greek scholarship has found that this name was typically reserved for Greek nobility – used by noble and ancient families. Diotrephes would have been a member of the Greek aristocracy.ⁱⁱ

I don’t know how many churches have been hijacked by a wealthy or well-connected elder or deacon or member; someone people deferred to because of their wealth, or their position.

John doesn’t care about any of that, does he? He just pulls the mask off and reveals the brutal truth – **he loves to be first.** And because of it, he and the church are in grave danger.

The problem is intensified because Diotrephes is not only self-promoting, but he’s also unaccountable.

Notice at the end of verse 9, “he does not accept what we say.”

Evidently, even to the point of discarding an earlier apostolic letter.

What John means here is that Diotrephes is openly disregarding apostolic authority – again, in the present tense, so that John describes someone

who persistently refuses to acknowledge any authority from the Apostles.

His ears are closed, and his mind is effectively unteachable.

And when you get to this point it almost becomes a lose-lose situation.

Solomon wrote it this way, ***“If you rebuke a scoffer, he will hate you – but if you rebuke a wise man, he will love you!” (Proverbs 9:8)***

Which means that one of the marks of a truly wise individual is not that he *knows* more – but that he’s willing to be *taught* more.

Wisdom equals teachability – even if the truth challenges who you are and what you’re doing.

John adds another danger regarding Diotrephes. ***Verse 10 – notice the middle part – he is unjustly accusing us with wicked words.***

In other words, it isn’t enough to simply ignore John’s authority; Diotrephes is attempting to assassinate John’s character.

One author wrote, this is the all too common ploy of those who seek to elevate themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

Apparently the church members were too afraid or too intimidated to stand up to Diotrephes when he accused the Apostle John with these untrue accusations, whatever they were, we aren’t told.

I find it interesting though that John uses this same word here translated ***wicked*** for the activity of the devil. In all of John’s New Testament letters, he will use this same word – five different times – to describe the devil.

And listen, no one in this house church would have missed it – John is effectively telling the church that the Devil is using Diotrephes to divide and potentially destroy them.

And notice this – ***John writes further in the middle part of verse 10 – and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren.***

In other words, Diotrephes is refusing to offer hospitality to the missionaries, the traveling teachers, basically the associates of the Apostles – certainly those associated with the Apostle John.

Diotrephes would have seen these preachers and teachers and traveling evangelists as a threat to his grasp for power in the church, and so he refuses to extend to them the courtesy of hospitality whenever they came into town.

One commentator writes, “Diotrephes willingly breaks the rules of Christian hospitality and by

denying them shelter and food, he hinders the progress of the Word of God.”^{iv}

He was personally inhospitable.

But even that wasn’t enough – there’s one more thing he was doing to literally rip this church apart.

Notice verse 10 again. And he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.

In other words, anybody in the church who shows hospitality to another pastor or teacher or evangelist . . . Diotrephes comes uncorked.

Pity the woman who brings one of these missionaries a casserole. Pity the couple who invite one of these traveling preachers to stay in their home for the night.

If Diotrephes finds out what you’re doing – you’re going to get kicked out of the church.

So try to wrap your mind around the irony here – Diotrephes is practicing church discipline on people who are doing the right thing.

He has successfully twisted the truth in his unaccountable perversion of abusive power.

He’s putting people out of the church. And John uses a verb that can literally denote violent physical action against them.^v

It’s the same word used when Jesus drove the money-changers out of the temple.

So in one simple sentence, here’s what’s happening: Diotrephes has successfully hijacked this local church.

And John the Apostle is sending a message loaded with implication; there’s going to be some excommunication taking place – but it won’t be those couples who offered their spare bedrooms to visiting teachers – it’s going to be a man whose heart is proud, whose mind is unteachable, whose mouth is disgraceful; whose spirit is inhospitable and whose leadership is unbiblical.

John pledges in ***verse 10*** that since the deeds of Diotrephes were public knowledge, an open public exposure of his sin before the assembly would take place.^{vi}

In other words, there would be a call for repentance – and if he does not repent, the discipline of the church will remove Diotrephes from their midst.

I’d love to have a Fourth Epistle of John to find out what happened.

So many churches today are hijacked in a similar fashion. And the church at large refuses to deal with

unrepentant sinners like these – they are intimidated and fearful.

And so I received a few weeks ago yet another email from an elder in another church in another state who writes that they have a key leader in their church who is refusing to repent of immorality and step down from leadership and is taking the church through the agony now of choosing sides . . . they are paralyzed by moral indecision . . . and he writes to ask for help about what they should do.

Some would say that it's not loving to privately or certainly publicly expose an unrepentant individual.

The opposite is true.

If you walked past your neighbor's house and saw flames licking up the living room curtains – the loving thing to do would be to make a racket; to bang on the door, jump up and down on the front porch, call for help and yell . . . even if it's in the middle of the night. Yes, it'll be embarrassing for your neighbors to stand out in the street in their pajamas . . . it'll certainly ruin their good night's sleep . . . but the most unloving, self-centered thing a person can do is walk by that house without any care for their peril.

Paul wrote to the Galatian church, ***Brethren, if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore him. (Galatians 6:1)***

He didn't say, "You who don't like him, go after him . . . you who like to stick your nose into other people's business . . . no! You who are spiritual!

This is the loving thing to do.

Others say that the exposure of unrepentant sinners causes church problems.

It does. It really does. It's going to mess up your church for a while. It's exhausting. It causes the flock to take sides, and some choose the wrong side.

Think about it – can you imagine for a moment what this letter from John is going to do in this church? John has basically called him a wicked man and deserving of public exposure. Can you imagine what Diotrephes is going to do as a result? He's going to jump into action; he's going to force people to take sides.

It's going to be messy!

But the mess will lead to greater maturity among the flock; in fact, the church that biblically and courageously responds will emerge spiritually stronger.

In fact, Paul told the church in Corinth that he'd heard they were having divisive issues in the church.

And the amazing thing he says is this in ***1 Corinthians 11:18. I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must be factions among you, in order that those who are mature may become evident among you.***

Instead of saying, "Knock it off – and you should never disagree over anything again," Paul actually reveals that divisive issues are important in this one regard – they reveal who has mature discernment in the church.

So whenever something divisive comes up . . . just watch . . . mature individuals are about to be revealed in how they handle it.

But didn't the Lord say that we shouldn't judge people?

I mean, Jesus said in ***Matthew 7:1, Do not judge lest you be judged.***

Jesus is referring to the judgmentalism typical of the religious leaders who were like Diotrephes – unaccountable and graceless . . . who delighted in exposing sin without ever proposing a solution!

By the way, ***Matthew 7:1 doesn't stop with the words, Do not judge lest you be judged – it continues on to read, "For in the way you judge, you will be judged."*** In other words, don't judge others with self-righteous, judgmentalism . . . that kind of spirit builds its own gallows.

So with that in mind, is it ever right for inconsistent human beings to judge somebody else?

I mean who are we to judge?

The Bible commands us on occasion to judge, under certain circumstances, such as rendering church discipline.

1. It's right to judge someone who lives openly in sin.

In ***1 Corinthians 5 Paul wrote, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you . . . you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. Now listen to this: For I . . . have already judged him who has so committed this [sin]."***

Paul judged the sinner – and wanted the church to do the same.

2. It's right to judge our culture as we compare it to the Bible.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 2:15 as Paul writes, “He who is spiritual, judges all things.”

So the person who says you shouldn't judge anyone – respond by telling them that spiritual people actually judge everything according to scripture.

But someone might say – and they do – “Jesus didn't judge the sinner . . . He hung around sinners . . . He ate with sinners.”

Keep in mind that there is a world of difference between how you treat sinning unbelievers and sinning believers.

Jesus hung around unbelieving sinners, not because He needed something to do on the weekend and didn't want to be alone. He hung around them because He had come *to seek and to save those who were lost (Luke 19:10)*.

But at the same time, He judged those supposed believers who were sinful and proud – like the Pharisees, whom Jesus called a brood of poisonous snakes; he said they were like caskets filled with dead men's bones. That wasn't very nice.

I received one note from someone who said, “Jesus never condemned or shamed anyone publically.”

Listen, beloved, read the Bible . . . read the Bible. Jesus embarrassed and condemned and shamed and pointed His finger at people, just like John is pointing his finger here at Diotrephes.

In fact, on one occasion Jesus looked at a group of religious people and said to them, ***“Your father isn't God, like you think He is, your father happens to be the devil.” (John 8:44)***

That would be embarrassing!

Woe to you . . . hypocrites . . . blind guides (Matthew 23:16) – that sounds like he's saying, “shame on you.” to me!

Someone recently wrote me and asked, “What sins is the church supposed to deal with . . . what sins are worthy of pointing out?”

That's a great question.

If you study church history, you find a number of different lists. Cotton Mather, the Puritan leader in the early American church, made a list of sins worthy of discipline that included, swearing, fighting, cheating, stealing, and idleness.

Other lists from church history include cheating on your taxes.

We certainly don't want to go that far.

Let me give you some guidelines we will try to follow from clear scripture:

a. Sins that destroy Christian unity should be confronted.

Diotrephes was certainly guilty of this – and John openly confronted him.

b. Another category would be sins that entangle a person in corrupt or immoral behavior.

1 Corinthians 5 is one context we've already quoted where Paul publicly disciplined an immoral man who refused to repent.

c. Another category would be sins harm the testimony of the church.

This is exactly what the Apostle John is doing as he puts Diotrephes and the entire church on notice that when he comes to them, he will call attention to his deeds.

I mean, this is going to be embarrassing . . . awkward . . . exposing . . . painful. But the testimony of the church and the gospel is worth it all!

I remember spending several hours with one man in particular whom we disciplined from our assembly – after spending nearly a year working with him and attempting to counsel him and correct him and lovingly invite him back into fellowship – he refused it all.

And then when we took action and publically dismissed him from the assembly, he called me over to his home a few days later and said to me, “You have embarrassed me before my family and the church by naming me publically . . . you have brought pain into my life . . . you have made my life miserable.”

I said, “We can fix *all* of that! You can be welcomed back with open arms and tears of joy and restored fellowship . . . you will be embraced and loved when you put away your immorality and return to the fellowship of Christ . . . we can remove all the shame, in fact, we can begin to do that right now . . . what do you say?”

But he chose to remain unrepentant.

Listen, he chose!

You see my friends, God has designed discipline to be a crossroads experience; the unrepentant man or woman chooses his union with sin over their

union with the assembly; a local church is never to allow someone to have both.

They can't have both. How many churches have been destroyed because they allowed someone to have fellowship with their sin and fellowship with their church at the same time?

According to our new constitution and bylaws, whenever someone in the future is disciplined from this assembly, members of our elder team will have been behind the scenes working and exhorting and inviting repentance – along with members of the church who might be involved.

If all our efforts fail and the unrepentant individual clearly wants nothing to do with the truth or with the counsel of the elders, the elder team will dismiss them from this assembly.

I will publically announce to you that this person has either left our church already or is no longer able to belong to our church or attend our church because they have refused the counsel of the elders and they are no longer in fellowship with the assembly.

We won't go into details about the sin – again, the details of the sin aren't important – the issue is not that someone sinned – in fact if everyone who sinned this past week wasn't allowed to worship in this assembly, who would be here today? Can I see your hand?

The issue isn't that someone sinned; the issue is that someone is persisting in sinning – even after being confronted, exhorted, encouraged, challenged, invited to repent of their sin and they persistently and defiantly refuse.

That's the issue . . . and that's what we will tell you, the church – as *Matthew 18* commands; and what we will be telling you – the church – is that this person has refused to follow the counsel of the elders and they are no longer in fellowship with the church – got it? This person has refused to follow the counsel of the elders and they are no longer in fellowship with the church.

And by the way, that's *any* church.

The man disciplined from the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5 couldn't run to the church in Ephesus and join there – or the church in Galatia or Philippi. To be out of fellowship with the church in Corinth was to be out of fellowship with the church at large.

Here's the seriousness of discipline – we are effectively dismissing the unrepentant individual from the fellowship of *the* church until they repent.

Don't get your opinions in the way of scripture on how this should work and whether or not the church is too harsh – read the Bible: read *1 Corinthians 5*; read *Titus 3*; read *Galatians 1*; read *Matthew 18*.

Read where Paul told the church in Corinth to effectively hand that unrepentant man over to the clutches of the devil – to physically pay the full consequences of his sin, unless he repented and reconciled.

This is serious business.

We play the role of parent, warning the unbeliever that they are heading for grave danger.

3. One final category that we must deal with seriously is a doctrinal error.

Paul told the church in Galatia that anyone teaching a gospel that was different than the Apostle's doctrine or gospel *should be accursed (Galatians 1:8)*.

They weren't to be ignored, by the way, they were to be accursed – that is, removed from their midst lest they infect others with their false doctrine.

I remember a man years ago who was caught up in one particular, rather strange doctrinal error. He was vocal about it too – he tried to convince everyone he knew to follow him – and members of our elder team warned him, including myself.

Eventually, a few of us on the elder team met with him and told him he was no longer welcome on our campus. He couldn't believe we were serious. We were.

Several months later he emailed me and said that he so terribly missed the fellowship of this assembly – the encouragement of our worship together – the company of his believing friends – that he would be willing to set aside that doctrinal difference and submit to the counsel of the elders. And he asked if he could return – and we joyfully agreed.

A public dismissal would have warranted a public reception back, following repentance; in this case it had been handled privately, as a non-member, and he was privately welcomed back into our fellowship.

That's the goal . . . that's our prayer . . . that's our hope.

In the meantime, we all as a body of believers promise one another that we will welcome this ministry into our lives; as we all graciously, lovingly, prayerfully, caution and warn and correct

and exhort one another to pursue the path of holy living and godly testimony and faithful witness to each other and our lost and dying world.

Let's promise to hold each other accountable so that ultimately Christ will be glorified and the gospel

advanced and the church protected and nurtured and biblically guided as we wait for the soon appearing of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/22/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 382

ii Sam Gordon, 1, 2, 3 John: Living in the Light (Ambassador, 2001), p. 279

iii John MacArthur, 1-3 John (Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 257

iv Quoted in MacArthur, p. 10

v D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 339

vi Hiebert, p. 338