



Light from the Word

Loving Discipline

“Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”¹

As believers, we are grafted into the true vine, and as such, we should reflect the life of the Savior and thereby, His fruit. This is a daily process of growing in grace which includes self-denial and taking up our cross, whereby we are refined into His image each day of our life.

“And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”²

As we are called to be ambassadors for Christ³, we represent not ourselves, but our Father, as we walk in the world, but are not a part of it.⁴ To that end, biblical principles of self-discipline and brotherly correction should be evident in a believer's life, as we grow to be more like Him and possess His mind.⁵ We realize that—while each day we battle against Satan and his devices—there are times that we fail, and subsequently experience the chastening of the Lord and call to repent. Sometimes, depending on the seriousness of the sin, the church may also have a role to help the erring soul regain a right relationship with God and a restoration of peace, as well as to keep the Church holy and without spot. This can result in various forms of church discipline. As the return of the Holy Spirit's fruit, a restored relationship with God and an overcoming life are observed, reinstatement of these privileges can be considered. We will discuss these topics in more detail in this article.

Through the working of the Holy Spirit, self-discipline is evidenced by the submission of our will to the Father's and the transformation of all aspects of our life, e.g. our thoughts, attitudes, speech and walk.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable

service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”⁶

This self-discipline, directed by the Holy Spirit, instructed by the Word, and empowered by His grace, is manifested within an individual's life in the form of temperance—the ability for the Spirit to govern the mind, motives, appetites, and passions in light of Jesus Christ, the perfect example. Paul encouraged the Corinthian church and us to examine ourselves and our faith.⁷ Some introspective questions that could be helpful are:

1. Are we thankful in all things, knowing that God is in control and will provide?
2. Do we have the same love for and are willing to show it to all of God's children, as well as our enemies, or have we justified why we can't love or forgive someone?
3. Do we save time for ourselves to do only “what we want,” or are we earnestly about the Father's business?

Discipline in all of its forms is intended to be an expression of God's love, so that the believer will be a faithful ambassador and child of God bearing more fruit.

“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”⁸

The Father's love is also expressed within the church body, with God using the body to help us become more Christ-like, “*for the perfecting of the saints.*”⁹ This happens in many ways, including pulpit teaching, Bible Study, instruction from older, mature brethren, and through mentoring and accountability within the brotherhood.¹⁰

When a believer sins, they will experience a measure of judgment in the form of conviction, suffering, or guilt. It is God's sincere expression of

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love to warn and chasten such a soul, so that humility will result and repentance can occur. While we are reminded that the mark of the believer is the perfection of Christ, we are grateful that, if we come in faith and repentance, Christ is the propitiation for our sin through His blood and advocacy. *“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”*¹¹

As believers, we have our individual responsibility to help keep the Church body without spot, holy, and blameless in preparation to meet Christ and as a healthy witness to the lost.¹² This leads to Holy Spirit-inspired correction, which calls us to go to our brother/sister alone with our concern, wrapped in charity. The desire to help each other in the grace of our Lord Jesus will allow one to receive a confession of fault, establish accountability, and provide a deep commitment to pray for a Spiritual healing.¹³

In an effort to help an individual who cannot see his error, the Scriptures instruct us to

express loving concern through the mouth of two or three witnesses.¹⁴ At those times when self, individual, or small group discipline have not been fruitful, the church has the responsibility to exhibit loving correction, through public discipline, to help the erring soul.¹⁵

Even if a broken and contrite confession exists, which is necessary for God’s forgiveness, it may not eliminate the necessity of public church discipline. Rather, it can be helpful to confirm a sincere repentance, aid in breaking the pattern of sin through transparency, and reinforce the seriousness of sin.¹⁶ This aids in a breaking of pride so that humility can again allow for God’s grace to be granted.¹⁷ Additionally, it has benefits for the entire body of believers, warning the body of its need to remain sober and vigilant against Satan’s devices and tactics.¹⁸ Often, the sooner that awareness of sinful patterns can be realized and needed assistance provided, the less spiritual damage and risk of hardness of heart will occur.¹⁹

Restoration of peace and a right relationship with God is always the goal after a believer has sinned and has been helped through discipline in its various forms. When an individual has experienced a separation

from God due to sin and then repentance occurs, this individual can again possess a “present hope of salvation.”²⁰

Restoration to a right relationship with God will not be possible without genuine repentance. A believer who has sinned and has an unrepentant heart is deceived and can become hardened to the point²¹ where he would fall away and reject his faith in Christ (become apostate) and in that condition be unable to find repentance.²² Thus, an individual can forfeit his salvation.²³

When individuals resist the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, the church extends its love in various forms, including reprimands, withdrawing company, and severing membership. The desired response is repentance toward God, reconciliation of the damaged relationship with Him, and the return to a dependency and living faith in Christ for grace and advocacy.²⁴

The scripture is clear that the eternal judgment of a soul to heaven or hell is left to God the Father and Jesus His Son.²⁵ When there is evidence of the destroyed flesh, restored relationship, return of His Spirit of peace, and clear, sustained, overcoming living, reinstatement of membership within the church for the purpose

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of confirming His restorative work can be considered. While God is the final judge regarding one's salvation, the church and elder have a role in these situations. This includes the instruction of erring souls, based on the Scriptures, concerning the principles of repentance, self-denial, an overcoming life through the power of God's grace, with discernment through the Holy Spirit and the Word.²⁶ In addition, the church can reassure the individual and confirm to the world, the evidence of God's renewed working in the lives of the repentant soul, based on the manifestation of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible explicitly teaches examples where authority is given to the church, including to bind and loose.²⁷ This authority is limited by the totality of the Scriptures²⁸ as well as the discernment and leading of the Holy Spirit.²⁹ This authority was administered through church leadership throughout the New Testament, including cutting off false doctrine, restoring those that had committed sin,³⁰ turning individuals from darkness to light,³¹ and forbidding, for a time, the company of the overtaken individual with the local church.³² Each of these examples fulfilled the church's role in aiding God's

work to convert those that had erred from the truth.³³

When considering reinstatement, a number of principles are relevant in balancing the welfare of the individual soul who fell into sin and the welfare of the church body and other impacted souls. These include the fruit of repentance, evidence of the spiritual nature, including the Fruit of the Spirit, and restitution with others.

The fruits of repentance and evidence of a restored relationship with God are evidence of God's power to heal and convert – such as godly fear, vehement desire to serve God, acknowledgment of the hurt or reproach to the body of believers, and faith and trusting in Christ's mercy and His grace to gain victory over sin and over one's deserved judgment for sin.³⁴ True repentance is also expressed as an absence of rationalization, in a true sorrow for the sin, with an open and full confession, by complete restitution where possible, resulting in the restoration of joy and peace. When such repentance has occurred and has been observed by others, reinstatement can be an encouragement to the individual, the church, and the community, as it is a public acknowledgment of the restoration and return of the work of the Spirit. Reinstatement without such fruit would create a false sense of hope in the individual

and confusion within the church and community.

We know that judgment of heaven or hell is ultimately reserved to God. The local elder with assistance from other brethren and the ministry (and often other elders), is expected to make a discerning judgment (or binding/loosing) regarding the heart of a convert before acceptance into the Body, which is a discerning of the evidence of dying to sin and a spiritual rebirth, led by the Spirit and living in faith and grace. Likewise, as part of the consideration for reinstatement within the church, a similar discernment is expected to determine if sin still reigns and membership should continue to be withheld, or if Christ again reigns and membership could be reinstated. An important part in this discernment is observing the fruit in a believer's life from the chastening of the Lord.³⁵ Discerning the correct timing of reinstatement of some or all privileges is required to avoid cutting short the benefits to the individual of the Lord's loving chastening or extending to the point of creating overmuch sorrow.³⁶

The church plays a key role in the discipline of an individual through prayer, love, withdrawal, accountability, encouragement, etc. When such an individual repents and the fruit of God's presence is again evident, there is

rejoicing and embracing that can strengthen the individual and the church. This is also manifested where sin has created hurt and/or conflict, but true repentance results in peace and forgiveness.³⁷

Where sin has damaged the cause of Christ within the church or community due to its public nature, or sin has damaged the faith of others, the resulting complexity may require a more deliberate and cautious approach to any reinstatement to avoid hindrance to the Gospel. While an individual may repent and experience the mercy of God in restoring peace to his soul, the impact of his sin on others (including those possibly involved in the actual sins) deserves special consideration. Luke 17:1-4 emphasizes both the seriousness of another soul being damaged or offended (caused to stumble spiritually) and a call to forgiveness by the offended.³⁸

Binding and loosing will need to be revisited from time to time as the fruit of these decisions can be observed. The fruit will be evidence of God or flesh.³⁹

We have so many reasons to be thankful to God, for the peace we have through faith in the Atoning Blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, for the gift of grace to help us live an overcoming life, for the Holy Spirit and His word,

which is a lamp unto our feet and our constant guide, and for His boundless mercy and love which is expressed to us in so many different ways. May each one of us strive daily to deny self, humbly receive His pruning to bear more fruit, walking as His disciples.⁴⁰

(Footnotes)

¹ John 15:2

² Luke 9:23

³ 2 Cor. 5:20

⁴ John 17:16

⁵ 1 Pet 4:1

⁶ Rom. 12:1-2

⁷ 2 Cor. 13:5

⁸ Heb. 12:6

⁹ Eph. 4:11-13

¹⁰ Titus 2:1-8

¹¹ 1 John 2:1-2

¹² 1 Cor. 5:6-7; Eph. 5:26-27

¹³ Matt. 18:15; James 5:16

¹⁴ Matt. 18:16

¹⁵ Matt 18:17, Rom. 16:17-18

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 7:10-11; 1 John 1:9

¹⁷ James 4:6-10

¹⁸ 1 Tim. 5:20; 1 Pet. 5:8;

Rom. 12:21

¹⁹ Heb. 3:13

²⁰ Gal 6:1; Titus 3:3-7

²¹ Heb. 3:13

²² Rom. 1:28; Heb. 6:4-6

²³ 2 Pet. 2:20-22

²⁴ Gal. 6:1; Heb. 7:24-25; 1 John 1:7-9; 1 John 2:1-2

²⁵ John 5:22-27

²⁶ John 14:16, 26

²⁷ Matt. 16:19; Matt. 18:18

²⁸ Acts 20:27; 2 Tim. 3:16

²⁹ John 20:22-23

³⁰ Gal. 6:1

³¹ Acts 26:18

³² 1 Cor. 5

³³ James 5:19-20

³⁴ 2 Cor. 7:11

³⁵ Gal 5: 22-23

³⁶ Prov. 3:11; 2 Cor. 2:6-9

³⁷ Rom. 12:12, 15; Heb. 12:14

³⁸ Rom. 14:13, 16-20;

Phil. 1:9-11

³⁹ 1 John 4:1; Heb. 6:7-8

⁴⁰ John 8:31-32; 15:4, 8-12