

**2 Corinthians 13:1-14**  
**(Deuteronomy 13:1-3; Matthew 7:15-20)**  
**“Examine Yourselves”**

**Introduction**

Paul concludes this letter with a plea and a warning: a plea that those who claim to be God’s children, but still live in rebellion against him, repent and follow Jesus in the way that leads to life. If they refuse to repent, he warns them that he is about to make his third visit to Corinth and will confront and, if need be, discipline those still rebelling against God’s grace and rejecting Paul’s authority.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation of the western church, the Reformers noted that there were three things that marked a congregation as a true church: the faithful preaching of the Word of God, the faithful administration of the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. This last mark of the church is, especially in an anti-authority culture such as ours, difficult to do effectively, and yet crucial to the health of a church.

Church membership matters. If you are a Christian but not an active member of a local church, you have no place of accountable, covenant relationship within the body of Christ, and no elders and deacons committed to the care of your body and soul. You may have Christian friends, a community that you look to for these things, but your situation is not one envisioned by the apostles.

Your relationship to the church is much like that of a couple who lives together but sees no reason to enter into the covenant bond of marriage. You are a creature of your culture, but not of the Bible that everywhere envisions God’s people voluntarily bound to one another through covenant promises, and that sees the church as a community bound together in covenant under the care of elders and deacons.

Why do I say that? Because both discipleship and discipline such as the Bible calls the church to exercise only have meaning for those who have taken vows to a community of Christians. When we join a local church, one of our promises is to submit to the government and discipline of the church. Only in such a covenant is the kind of biblical accountability possible that we see in our text this morning. Just as in a family, discipline can be abused, either by being neglected or by being too harshly enforced, so too in the body of Christ, individuals, the reputation of a congregation, and the cause of the gospel in the surrounding community, all suffer when discipline is neglected as well as when it is enforced harshly and unlovingly.

In these verses, Paul gives us a picture of discipline wisely and lovingly enforced, as he demonstrates the crucial importance of discipline, the power and authority of discipline, the focus of discipline, and the aim or goal of discipline.

## Body

### 1. The importance of discipline (13:1-2):

The church is the body of Christ in the world. The only reason the world has for believing the gospel is the presence of the church, the transforming message entrusted to it, and the transformed lives of those who profess the message. If our lives do not vindicate the promise of the gospel, then why should anyone believe that promise?

So, Paul warns that, if his opponents are still living unrepentantly rebellious lives (see 12:20-12), he will confront them and bring the issue to a conclusion, meaning that they will either repent or be barred from the Lord's Supper and excommunicated from the church. Paul is not interested in unsubstantiated rumors or second-hand accusations. He lays out the principle that marked both the Old Testament and New, that charges must be substantiated by evidence presented by at least two or three witnesses.

Discipline, even in the case of the most public and egregious offenses, must be dealt with in a just manner, and anyone accused must have the opportunity to defend himself. But discipline must be pursued for the sake of the person charged, for the sake of those who have been wronged, and for the honor of Christ and the vindication of the gospel.

### 2. The power and authority of discipline (13:3-4, 10):

But, you may be thinking, what right does anyone have to judge another? Didn't our Lord say, "Judge not that you be not judged"? Yes, but he was neither referring to the civil courts of law required for both justice and mercy to be done in civil society, nor to congregations seeking to maintain both the peace and the purity of the church. We are all broken sinners, but in Christ we are called to new life, keeping short accounts when we fail, repenting of sin and seeking to live in glad obedience to God's Word, by the power of God's Spirit.

Both the power and the authority to exercise discipline within the church are given us by Christ himself. In Jesus' final words to his disciples, he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples ..." (Matthew 28:18f). So here Paul says that he hopes that when he arrives in Corinth, he will not have to use "the authority that the Lord Jesus has given me" (13:10). Authority is the legitimacy to act. Power is the ability to act. The church is not ours, but Christ's, and he has given his people his own power and authority to make disciples, including the use of discipline for the sake of the community. Having the authority of Christ, it is legitimate to use the power entrusted to us. Paul's appeal is to the power of Christ that is made perfect in human weakness (13:3-4).

But what does that look like? What exactly are we talking about? It means that when a brother or sister is living unrepentantly in a way that is opposed to the gospel of Christ and to life in the Spirit (see, e.g., 12:20-21), those who know and love that person should go to him and plead with him to repent and return to the ways of life. If he repents, the matter ends there without making it public, and with the promise to walk together in love. But if he refuses to repent, then the friends are to go to the appropriate leaders of the church and continue the process described by Jesus in his teaching on what to do when confronted with sinful behavior (see Matthew 18:15-20).

### **3. The focus of discipline (13:5-6):**

Lest this seem an exercise in self-righteous, censorious judgmentalism, Paul tells us who is to be the focus of our critique: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?” (13:5).

We are not called to spend our days critiquing others, examining their behavior and motives, bringing what we perceive to be their failures and sins into the light for discussion. Paul says, “Examine yourself! Are you following Jesus?” He’s not asking whether we are perfect. Of course not! Paul made no such claim for himself. But he insists that the gospel begins a work of transformation in those who have been born again, born from above, born of the Spirit. So is there any evidence that Christ is now living in you by his Spirit? Do you have new affections, new desires warring against the old ones? Are you delighted when you do God’s will and grieved when you resist it? Is there, as we say so often, a new trajectory to your life?

### **4. The aim of discipline (13:7-14):**

And the aim of all this is not to drive out the strugglers, the broken, those who keep failing. It is not to break down and humiliate. It is to build up, to heal, to restore. Paul writes, “Your restoration is what we pray for. ... [to] use the authority the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” (13:10). And, “Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace” (13:11). Discipline, whether in the church or in the home – and I would dare say, even in courts of law – should aim when possible at healing, restoration and peace. The aim is not to cast away but to embrace, not to wound but to heal.

## **Conclusion**

The final words express Paul’s heart: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (13:14). Our desire for ourselves and for the church could never rise higher than this.

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