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Galatians 6:1-2

Accountability & Discipline: But Why?

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This summer my son started doing something that's really cute. We'll ask him to pick up his toys, or take a few more bites, or get his shoes on, and before he does any of those things he'll ask us a question. Do you know what it is? "But... why?!" He throws his arms open wide and with the deepest look of sincerity a two-year old can muster he asks, "But... why?!"

That's probably the first question we are asking when we start talking about today's topic. Today's topic, which I will be teaching on for the next couple weeks, giving us a break from Acts, is a sensitive issue. It can be inflammatory, provoking, uncomfortable. The topic is accountability and church discipline.

Here's a simple definition of accountability and church discipline. Accountability is the process where one Christian gently corrects a brother or sister in Christ who is sinning, and if they don't listen, brings another Christian, and then if they still don't listen, brings it to the whole church body. Accountability can lead to church discipline but is not the same thing. The act of church discipline is when the church body formally rejects the confession of faith of the one continuing in sin. The church no longer affirms their Christian faith, no longer offers them communion but continues to call them to repentance. I'll unpack and explain more on accountability and discipline as we go along, but hopefully this helps define it for now.

Do you feel something when I talk about church discipline? What wells up inside you? Feelings of confusion, "What is that?!" Feelings of dread, "I'd rather not talk about that!" Or maybe mixed feelings, "I understand the need for it, but I hope we never have to do it." It's okay to feel uncomfortable when talking about church discipline. It's not a fun conversation, but it is a necessary one.

I don't remember the first time I heard about church discipline. Growing up as a pastor's kid I'd sometimes hear about how this person or that person was asked to leave the church, but I didn't know why. It wasn't till I started working at the church that started Cornerstone, Immanuel, that I heard about church discipline regularly or saw anything that resembled it. So I don't have much hands on experience on this topic. What I know comes from my time in seminary, my time at Immanuel, reading and studying, and from talking it over with other pastors and our Elders.

So why are we having this conversation? Back when we were planting Cornerstone our leadership team recognized that we needed to have some guidelines for church discipline. Instead of writing out the guidelines then and there we kicked the proverbial tin can down the road. We listed a few bible verses in our By-Laws and codified that the Board of Elders would create a policy for how to do it. That was 2015 Jonathan. A tin can just came flying out of the sky and hit 2020 Jonathan in the head.

Immanuel Church, our parent church, knew our intention to eventually write a church discipline policy. Earlier this year when we approached their leadership about purchasing the building, they said they'd love to have the conversation, but would like us to finish our church discipline policy first. Having done church discipline themselves, they knew how helpful these guidelines would be.

At first I can say that I didn't have a good heart-attitude about it, but on this side of things I'm really grateful Immanuel asked us to do it. It made us get it done, and not take forever on it as sometimes policy writing can really drag out. What I think we created is not only faithful to Scripture, but is pastoral and kind. I'm actually

kind of excited to share it with you. This sermon series is meant to introduce what's in much of the policy before we actually share it, to explain it from the Bible first.

To get us started I want to answer my son's question, "But... why?!" Why do accountability? Why do church discipline? This actually provokes a bigger question than we might expect. "But why?" actually gets to the core of Christianity...

What does it mean to be a Christian?

We find our answer to "why" when we look at what it means to be a Christian. Is Christianity simply pray a prayer and you're good to go? Or is there more to it? I think Christianity, at its most basic form is 1) *recognition of sin*, and 2) *repentance leading to life*.

1) Recognition of sin

We need to realize what sin is and that we've got it. Sin is "missing the mark." It comes from the Old Testament idea of missing when slinging your stone at what you were aiming at (Judges 20:16). Sin is like going to the bowling alley and throwing a gutter-ball every time. Have you seen that video of the kid drawing the perfect circle in geometry class and the students go wild? Sin is like trying to do that, but never quite getting it right. Sin is like playing a game of darts and never hitting the bullseye. But you got to ask, "Okay, so if sin is missing the mark, what are we missing?" We're missing the bullseye of God's holiness. We're not measuring up to God's perfect goodness.

God told his people all the way back in Leviticus to be holy like he is holy. The disciple Peter, writing in the New Testament, affirms this.

1 Peter 1:15-16 (ESV)

15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

There is no hint of evil or wickedness in God. All he does is good. He is completely holy. Yes he's loving, but he's also pure, and won't allow unholiness in his presence for long. Sin is not only when we offend God, but when we introduce brokenness into the good things he has created. Anytime we act contrary to God's laws and character (1 John 3:4), we're introducing more unholiness more sin, into what he created, his world. Not only is that bad for the world. It's bad for us. Our sin actually leads to death.

James 1:14-15 (ESV)

14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James tells us there's something inside us that lures us away from God's goodness and into our own sins. Other parts of the Bible call this our "flesh" (Rom 8:16; Gal 5:16). Our flesh tempts us. It draws us away from a life-giving relationship with God. It tells us life is better without God, but it leads to death.

I was playing over at the playground in Chelmsford the other day and I saw an ice-cream truck. Maybe you can hear the ice-cream truck jingle in your head right now. Is your heart beginning to pound? Do you want that ice-cream. What if you went up to that ice-cream truck and the man inside said, "You can have any ice-cream you want for free."

You're like, "That sounds amazing! ...But what's the catch?"

He'd say, "You can have any ice cream flavor for free. I'm just going to top it off with Batrachotoxin." (pronounced ba-tracho-toxin)

You'd be like, "What!? What's Batrachotoxin?"

He'd say, "Nothing to worry yourself about. It's the sweat of some colorful jungle frogs."

"You want to put frog juice on my ice cream?"

"Yes, but only a little bit. You won't even taste it."

"I don't know..."

"We got chocolate chip cookie dough, butter pecan, cookies and cream, rock road, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry... We got Ben & Jerry's..."

And then you'd start to think, *that sounds so good... frog juice doesn't sound so bad...*

What you need right now is a friend who knows Batrachotoxin is one of the top five deadliest poisons in the world. You need a friend, maybe a biologist or chemist, to tell you not to mess with colorful jungle dart frogs because just two micrograms of Batrachotoxin can kill you. That's the size of two grains of salt. You don't want frog juice on your ice cream! You need a friend to warn you, and then call the cops!

Sometimes it's hard to recognize sin for what it is, sin. Sin likes to come pre-packaged in a very enticing waffle cone. It feels good to sin, to not live up to God's standards. It's much easier to create our own standards and live up to them. But here's the problem. Sin leads to death. Poison leads to cardiac arrest.

Romans 6:23 (ESV)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The final affect of our sin is not cookie dough ice-cream, but frog poison—death. The first part of what it means to be a Christian is recognizing we're born sinners. I am someone who constantly misses the target of God's holiness. And although it feels like, "No big deal" in this life; it really is a big deal in this life, and in the life to come. One day we'll all face God's judgement; and if we leave our sin un-dealt with, it will lead to eternal spiritual death. The reason we don't believe in accountability and church discipline is because we don't really believe sin can kill us. We don't really understand God's holiness. We think sin is no big deal, not realizing God will put us to death for it.

Maybe you're thinking, "Okay Jonathan, I won't eat the frog juice." The bad news is we've all already eaten it, we just haven't hit the floor yet (Rom 3:23). That means there's still time to call the doctor, call a savior, and get well. *First, being a Christian means recognizing your sin; and second it requires...*

2) Repentance leading to life

Let's go back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. At the beginning of Mark we find Jesus preaching the gospel, which means "good news." Jesus' good news is that the "kingdom of God" is coming.

Mark 1:14-15 (ESV)

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

The kingdom of God means Jesus has come to do nothing less than turn our world as we know it upside-down. A world and people broken by sin are going to be made new again. They'll be given a new mission, a

new ethic, a new way of life. To get on board with this kingdom Jesus calls all people to repent and believe. Repentance is the first step we can take to personally welcome this new kingdom into existence. It's not the only step, just the first, so what is repentance? Repentance means turning from sin to God. Repentance is recognizing frog juice for death juice, and not eating the ice-cream.

Acts 3:19-20a (ESV)

19 Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, 20 that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...

Before we recognize our sin, we're ignorant, we don't know. But when we do see our sin, repentance means to turn away from what your doing and try to follow the ways of Jesus. Repentance is not the same thing as perfect obedience. There's only one person who ever obeyed perfectly, Jesus, and we're not him. But we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, begin to live life God's way instead of our own. Repentance starts with that initial prayer, but then it never stops. We keep repenting and turning to Jesus our whole lives. But... why? Because it leads to eternal life with Christ. Maybe you've heard this verse before.

John 3:16 (ESV)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God gave his Son to us so that whoever repents and believes in him will receive eternal life. Jesus bore the poison of our sin on the cross so we don't have to. Jesus died, and rose again, so that we might live. Because of what Jesus did, God doesn't put us to death for our sins, but actually welcomes us into his family as children of God. There's no other way to gain eternal life but through him.

The first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, from whom we get the name "China," wanted to gain eternal life, so he drank mercury, and as you might imagine, it had the exact opposite effect. In 212BC he started calling himself, "The Immortal" and he died two years later.¹ That's what we're doing if we ignore our sins. Sipping on mercury, hoping to live forever. Come to Jesus. He drank the poison and won eternal life for us all.

First, being a Christian means recognizing your sin; and second it requires repentance leading to life. Maybe you're wondering, "What does this have to do with church discipline?"

Christians need help.

To be a Christian means to repent of your sin and believe in Jesus. We repent continually. It's an ongoing process. Over time we turn our whole lives over to him, every little part. That can be really tough to do because our hearts are deceptive.

Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it?

You and I have a tough time seeing our own sin, the way we behave, the attitude we have (Matt 7:5). We'll do anything to justify our own sins if we enjoy them. We need a brother or sister in Christ to tell us not to eat the cookie dough ice-cream, even if there are only two grains of frog juice.

- I know it's adultery, but it makes me happy... frog juice!
- If it doesn't hurt anyone, why does it matter?... frog juice.

- Nobody saw. Only I know... frog juice.
- They are the enemy. I hate them... frog juice.
- I just wish everyone would shut-up and listen to me... frog juice.
- Did you hear what he did?... frog juice.
- If I can just buy one more thing, I'll be happy...frog juice.

I bet that emperor Qin would have lived a lot longer if a friend had told him it was a bad idea to drink mercury. To be a Christian is to be saved, not to be sinless. That's why the Bible tells us over and over again we need help, we need people to help hold us accountable, to stay on the path

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (ESV)

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

Christians lift each other up when we stumble into sin. We help each other confess, receive forgiveness, and move forward. Here it says it in the New Testament, in a passage most known for church discipline.

Matthew 18:15 (ESV)

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

If someone's sin is against you, if it's personal, go to them. Talk it out. Confess your own sins. Work it out.

Galatians 6:1-2 (ESV)

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

If we see another brother or sister in Christ caught in sin, we're to "restore" them. We do so gently, with compassion. God calls us to "bear one another's burdens." We're to help each other through, and boy, do we need it. That's what God intended us for, to help hold each other accountable.

Going and talking with a brother or sister in Christ caught in sin is called accountability. We hope that that first step works all of the time, but when others reject our help, that's when we start to move towards church discipline. Church discipline is for when help is completely rejected. Our policy is not a "Church Discipline Policy" but a "Church Accountability and Discipline Policy." It starts with accountability, and rarely should rise to the level of discipline.

In closing, here's the question I want you to answer, "How far would you go to stop a friend from eating Batrachotoxin, frog juice (ba-tracho-toxin?" Would you be willing to privately tell them it's lethal? Would you put your friendship on the line? Would you bring a friend to try and help you convince them not to eat it? Would you be willing to publicly tell your friend its dangers? Would you be willing to recruit a whole chorus of voices to shout, "Don't eat the frog juice!"? If they ate it and kept eating it would you be willing to tell them they're dying but there's still time? How far would you go to save your friend's life?

Jude 24-25 (NIV)

24 To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What is sin? Why does it matter?
2. What is repentance? Do you need to be perfect to repent?
3. What does it mean that Jesus offers eternal life?
4. What is accountability and why do we need it?
5. What is church discipline?
6. How does the gospel offer grace for sinners?

¹ Wikipedia contributors. (2020, September 6). Qin Shi Huang. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 17:42, September 9, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Qin_Shi_Huang&oldid=976979546