

Shepherding Through Sin — Lesson 17

Dealing with Sin in the Church

Thesis

A faithful church must confront sin with truth and love, aiming at repentance and restoration, while protecting the church from the spreading damage of unaddressed transgression.

The Problem of Transgression

Churches are made of people. People are weak. People are tempted. People fail. Because of that reality, transgression will surface in every local church sooner or later. That does not mean a church is hopeless. It means a church must be sober and prepared.

Sin is not only a private danger. Sin is a threat at the church level.

Some sins are subtle. A member becomes inconsistent. Worship attendance fades. Bible study dries up. Prayer becomes rare. The heart cools. The conscience dulls. The person still smiles, still talks, still blends in, but the inner man is shrinking. That spiritual decline can quietly spread to others. Children notice. Friends adjust their own standards. The church becomes used to weakness. The fire goes out by inches.

Other sins are scandalous. They shock the body. They discourage faithful souls. They poison the church's reputation in the community. They create division. They invite mockery. They damage evangelism. They make weak people justify their own sin by pointing to someone else's.

The worst mistake a church can make is to treat sin like a problem that will solve itself if ignored. Time does not sanctify rebellion. Neglect does not heal a wounded soul. Silence does not restore the fallen. In many cases, silence is permission.

A church must understand what sin does.

Sin spreads if it is tolerated

1 Corinthians 5:6

“Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?”

Leaven does not stay in one corner. It works through the whole dough. When sin is excused, defended, or left unchallenged, it becomes normal. What becomes normal becomes contagious.

Sin hardens the sinner

Hebrews 3:12–13

“Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day... so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Sin does not merely stain the outside. It shapes the inside. It trains the heart to resist God.

Sin endangers the soul

James 5:19–20

“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

When a member strays, the goal is not punishment. The goal is rescue. The goal is turning back. The goal is salvation.

Sin damages the whole church

A church is not a collection of independent islands. It is a body. One member's sickness can infect the whole body.

1 Corinthians 12:26

“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it...”

When sin is active and untreated, the church suffers. Faithful families suffer. Young Christians suffer. The witness of the church suffers.

So the church must deal with sin. Not harshly. Not carelessly. Not proudly. But clearly, firmly, and lovingly.

The church Without Elders

Many churches without elders rely heavily on business meetings to handle church affairs. That arrangement often drifts toward physical matters. Building issues. Bills. Scheduling. Repairs. Routine decisions. Those are legitimate concerns, but spiritual danger can be overlooked.

Sin is not usually solved in a public business meeting. The members who are drifting rarely wake up and repent because their name was brought up among a wide group. In fact, exposing sensitive matters publicly can create resentment, embarrassment, anger, and deeper resistance.

Why spiritual discipline is often neglected without elders

The difficulty of personal spiritual matters in a broad group

When the meeting includes many people, the weak member is often related to someone present. A husband. A wife. A parent. A child. A close friend. Addressing personal spiritual needs in that setting can become awkward. It may feel like a public attack, even when it is not intended that way. That awkwardness leads to delay, avoidance, and silence.

The problem of mixed spiritual maturity

A business meeting often includes brethren at every level of maturity. Some have wisdom and discernment. Some are timid. Some are inexperienced. Some are opinionated. Some are suspicious. Some are easily offended. Trying to navigate a delicate spiritual matter in that environment can become exhausting. Even small decisions can become bogged down. How much more a sensitive effort to restore a brother.

The problem of “everybody’s job” becoming “nobody’s job”

When there is no official oversight, responsibility becomes foggy. People assume someone else will handle it. Or they worry that if they act, they will be accused of taking charge. Over time, the weak drift farther away, and no one steps in early enough to help.

The fear of being blamed or accused

Approaching someone about sin creates vulnerability. The one who speaks may be accused of meddling, judging, gossiping, or trying to control the church. A friendship may be strained. A family may be offended. A relationship may grow cold and never recover.

Those risks are real, but they cannot become excuses. Love for a soul must be stronger than fear of discomfort.

The danger of waiting too long

Weakness rarely stays weak. It either heals through repentance or it hardens into rebellion. The longer a sin is tolerated, the more bold it becomes, and the more difficult it is to uproot. Many tragedies in churches did not start loud. They started quiet.

A drifting member seldom wakes up suddenly and returns with strength. Most of the time, drift continues unless someone intervenes.

Courageous brethren can still lead restoration

It is admirable when a church without elders practices discipline faithfully. Often it depends on two or three strong brethren who step forward and urge repentance and faithfulness. They may not meet every elder qualification, but they are willing to sacrifice comfort for the good of the flock. Their courage should be respected, not resented.

The church With Elders

A church with qualified elders has a built-in structure for spiritual oversight. That oversight is not optional. It is part of God's design.

Elders are not appointed to manage money and property only. Elders are appointed to shepherd souls.

Acts 20:28

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock... to shepherd the church of God...”

1 Peter 5:2–3

“Shepherd the flock of God among you... exercising oversight... not lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples...”

A church with faithful elders should develop a culture of accountability. Not intimidation. Not suspicion. Accountability. That means people understand that sin will be addressed, not ignored. Weakness will be pursued, not abandoned. Souls will be protected, not neglected.

Why some resent faithful oversight

Many resent shepherding because they do not want to be corrected. They want independence without responsibility. They want membership without submission. They want the benefits of the church without the boundaries of holiness.

Faithful elders make secret sin uncomfortable. That discomfort is a mercy. Some complain because they fear being discovered, confronted, or disciplined.

A church should not appoint elders to make everyone feel safe in sin. Elders are appointed to keep the flock safe from sin.

Elders are not the only ones responsible

Elders oversee, but the church as a whole must care for souls.

Galatians 6:1

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...”

Matthew 18:15

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private...”

Restoration is not only an elder task. It is a Christian duty.

If spiritual brethren can correct a matter early, privately, and successfully, that is a victory. It prevents escalation. It spares embarrassment. It preserves unity. It strengthens trust.

When elders become involved

When private effort fails, elders eventually must be involved because the church cannot tolerate open sin. The church must protect its holiness and pursue the sinner’s repentance.

1 Corinthians 5:13

“Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

This is not cruelty. This is obedience. This is love with boundaries. A church that refuses to discipline becomes a church that trains sinners to remain comfortable.

Elders must use wisdom, not haste

Even when discipline is necessary, shepherds must be careful. They must gather facts. They must avoid rash conclusions. They must avoid favoritism. They must avoid personal revenge.

1 Timothy 5:21

“I solemnly charge you... to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.”

A shepherd must be courageous and fair. Weak leadership hides behind delay. Harsh leadership hides behind speed. Faithful leadership walks in truth with patience.

Elders may recruit the most effective influence

Elders are shepherds, but they may not always have the closest relationship with the offender. That does not mean they are weak. It means they are realistic. Sometimes another brother has more influence. Sometimes a close friend can speak in a way elders cannot. Sometimes a family member can make a plea that breaks through pride.

In those cases, elders may take the lead, set the direction, and recruit wise help.

Ephesians 4:11–12

“He gave... pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service...”

The saints must be equipped to help with ministry, including restoration work. The elders lead the effort. The church participates in the effort.

When elders decide, the church must respect it

When a decision is made by qualified elders, members must respect it. Elders will give account to God for what they decide.

Hebrews 13:17

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account...”

This does not mean elders are infallible. It means God built a structure of oversight for the health of the church. Members should not sabotage discipline because they do not like confrontation. Members should not undermine shepherding because they prefer peace at any price.

Peace purchased by ignoring sin is not peace. It is decay.

The bigger danger is laxness, not too much oversight

Most churches do not suffer from too much shepherding. Most suffer from too little. Too many churches are lax, lazy, and spiritually lethargic. That happens when there is no accountability, no follow-through, and no courage to confront sin.

A figurehead eldership is a tragedy. It creates the appearance of oversight without the reality of shepherding. The flock drifts while leaders remain silent.

Faithful elders do not seek to control. They seek to protect. They do not chase conflict. They chase souls.

Why Discipline Is a Shepherding Work

Church discipline is not a side topic. It is part of shepherding. A shepherd who refuses to confront danger is not a shepherd. A shepherd who will not pursue the wandering is not faithful.

The Bible gives several purposes for discipline.

Discipline protects the purity of the church

1 Corinthians 5:7

“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump...”

A church cannot preach holiness while tolerating open sin.

Discipline produces godly fear and sobriety

1 Timothy 5:20

“Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.”

This applies especially to public ongoing sin that refuses correction. It teaches the church that sin is serious. It warns the weak. It restrains the careless. It protects the young.

Discipline aims at repentance and restoration

2 Corinthians 2:6–8

“Sufficient for such a one is this punishment... so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him... reaffirm your love for him.”

Discipline is not revenge. It is rescue. When repentance occurs, the church must be ready to forgive and restore.

Discipline exposes the difference between the church and the world

When a church refuses to address sin, it becomes indistinguishable from the world. When the church corrects sin with love and firmness, it shows that God is real, holiness matters, and repentance is necessary.

A Biblical Path for Handling Sin

The New Testament does not leave the church guessing. God gives clear steps. These steps require courage, patience, prayer, and restraint.

Step 1 — Private confrontation

Matthew 18:15

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”

Private correction is an act of love. It prevents gossip. It prevents unnecessary exposure. It honors the person as a soul, not a spectacle. It aims at quiet repentance.

This step requires humility. The goal is to win a brother, not win an argument.

Private confrontation also requires clarity. Vague hints do not help. Soft excuses do not help. The sin must be named plainly, using Scripture, with a call to repentance.

Step 2 — Bring witnesses if necessary

Matthew 18:16

“But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you...”

Witnesses are not there to gang up. They are there to confirm facts, protect everyone involved, and strengthen the appeal. Two or three godly people speaking with unity can break through stubbornness.

These witnesses must be spiritual, wise, calm, and trustworthy. This is not a job for hotheads or gossipers.

Step 3 — Tell it to the church when necessary

Matthew 18:17

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”

Some sins remain private. Some become public. When a matter must reach the church, it should not be treated like entertainment. It should be handled soberly. The church is not being invited to a debate. The church is being called to a spiritual responsibility.

Step 4 — Withdrawal when repentance is refused

Matthew 18:17

“...let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

1 Corinthians 5:11

“...not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person...”

2 Thessalonians 3:14–15

“Take special note of that person and do not associate with him... Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

Withdrawal means changed fellowship. It means the church cannot pretend everything is fine. It means the relationship is redefined so the sinner feels the seriousness of his rebellion.

It is meant to shock the sinner awake. It is meant to produce shame that leads to repentance.

Step 5 — Restoration when repentance occurs

When repentance happens, forgiveness must be real. Restoration must be pursued. Trust may take time to rebuild, but love must not be withheld.

Luke 17:3–4

“If he repents, forgive him.”

The church must not discipline as though it is eager to lose members. The church disciplines because it refuses to lose souls.

Common Sins That Require Shepherding

A church must be careful not to confuse personal preference with sin. Discipline is not about controlling personalities. Discipline is about confronting transgression.

Some sins that frequently damage churches include:

Sexual immorality

This sin destroys families, shames the church, and hardens the conscience. It must be confronted clearly.

1 Thessalonians 4:3

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.”

Divisiveness and faction-building

Some do not commit “scandalous” sins, but they poison the church through gossip, suspicion, and division.

Titus 3:10–11

“Reject a factious man after a first and second warning...”

A divisive spirit can destroy a church slowly and steadily.

Unrepentant bitterness and unforgiveness

Bitterness destroys peace. It leads to slander, coldness, and spiritual decay.

Hebrews 12:15

“See to it... that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.”

Persistent neglect and spiritual drift

Not all sin is loud. Some sin is simply consistent refusal to grow, refusal to serve, and refusal to submit to the Lord.

Revelation 2:4–5

“You have left your first love... repent...”

A church must not normalize spiritual apathy.

Doctrinal corruption

False teaching spreads. It harms the weak. It fractures faith.

Romans 16:17

“Keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching... and turn away from them.”

The Spirit Required for Restoration

Correct discipline without the right spirit becomes cruelty. Correct spirit without correct discipline becomes weakness. God demands both truth and love.

Gentleness without compromise

Galatians 6:1

“Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...”

Gentleness does not mean softness toward sin. Gentleness means the manner is humble, patient, and controlled. It means no pride. No cruelty. No enjoyment of confrontation.

Watchfulness

Galatians 6:1

“...each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.”

Those who confront sin must remember their own weakness. Pride makes a man careless. Humility makes him careful.

Love that seeks the soul

James 5:20

“He who turns a sinner... will save his soul from death...”

The goal is not to prove righteousness. The goal is to rescue a brother.

Fear of God, not fear of man

Many failures in discipline come from fear of backlash. Fear of families. Fear of losing numbers. Fear of conflict. Fear of being misunderstood.

A church must fear God more.

Proverbs 29:25

“The fear of man brings a snare...”

A church that refuses to confront sin will eventually lose peace anyway. The only question is whether the church will lose peace while obeying God or lose peace while disobeying Him.

What Shepherding Through Sin Looks Like in Real Life

Shepherding through sin is not one conversation and done. It is patient pursuit.

It looks like elders noticing drift early. It looks like checking on the weak before they disappear. It looks like prayerful engagement. It looks like asking direct questions. It looks like warning, pleading, and teaching. It looks like calling for repentance, not offering excuses.

It looks like refusing to pretend. It looks like refusing to enable sin through silence.

It looks like the church learning to speak the truth in love. It looks like saints learning that restoration is not someone else's job.

It looks like a church that takes holiness seriously, but also takes mercy seriously.

The Church Must Not Confuse Mercy With Tolerance

Mercy is not permission.

Mercy calls sinners to repentance.

Romans 2:4

“...the kindness of God leads you to repentance.”

The kindness of God does not flatter sin. It confronts sin and offers forgiveness.

The church must never become a place where sin feels safe. The church must become a place where repentance feels possible.

That is what shepherding is meant to produce.

Final Warning

A church will either discipline sin or be disciplined by sin.

A church that refuses to deal with sin will eventually deal with:

- broken homes
- corrupted children
- divided members
- destroyed credibility
- weakened worship
- empty pews
- hardened souls

That is not strength. That is slow death.

But a church that deals with sin biblically, patiently, and courageously will grow stronger. Even when it hurts. Even when it costs. Even when people resist.

Holiness is never cheap. Faithfulness is never effortless. Shepherding is never comfortable.

But it is right.

Final Charge

If you are an elder, shepherd. Watch souls. Pursue the weak. Protect the flock. Do not hide behind silence. Do not fear backlash more than you fear the Lord.

If you are a member, be spiritual. Restore the fallen. Warn the drifting. Encourage the weak. Do not gossip. Do not enable sin. Do not treat discipline as harshness.

If you are the one in sin, do not harden your heart. Confess it. Forsake it. Return. The church is not your enemy. The Lord is calling you back.

A church that deals with sin in God's way remains alive, pure, and strong.

And a shepherding church becomes a safe place for repentance.