

LESSON EIGHT

RELATIONS IN THE FAMILY OF GOD: Fellowship and Discipline

"If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor 12:26).

DAY 1: READ & SUMMARIZE

The following verses encapsulate the lesson to follow. Read them carefully, meditating on their message. Express the key concept of each passage as it applies to our relationships within the family of God.

A) Romans Chapter 14 –

B) 1 John 1:3 –

C) Hebrews 12:6 –

INTRODUCTION

No fellowship based on people will ever work. John says, *“Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”* If this fellowship with the Lord is right, then we will find the true basis for fellowship *“with one another”* (1 Jn 1:3). We will love whom the Lord loves, and receive all whom He receives (Rom 16:2; Phil 2:29).

FELLOWSHIP DEFINED

The Greek word *koinonia* in the New Testament refers to a mutual sharing or common interest in something, and is used of sharing a truth, a burden, a common bond, a joy, a provision, or a responsibility. Believers are called:

- *fellowcitizens* (Eph 2:19) with the same Homeland
- *fellowdisciples* (Jn 11:16) who

follow the same Master

- *fellowheirs* (Eph 3:6) with the same inheritance
- *fellowhelpers* (3 Jn 8) “to the truth”
- *fellowlaborers* (1 Thess 3:2) in the gospel
- *fellowservants* (Col 4:7) with the same commission
- *fellowsoldiers* (Phil 2:25) who oppose the same enemy
- *fellowworkers* (Col 4:11) who seek the same kingdom

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP:

A study in contrasts

It is helpful to keep in mind the difference between becoming a member of Christ’s Body through salvation and choosing to link myself with a local gathering of believers.

	MEMBERSHIP	FELLOWSHIP	
(Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27)	in the universal Church, the <i>“one body”</i>	in a local church, of which there are many	(Acts 2:42; 1 Jn 1:7)
	compulsory and immediate upon believing	voluntary, and hopefully after understanding	
	only believers (recall that the true Church is invisible and indivisible; Christendom is visible and divisible)	unfortunately sometimes includes <i>“false brethren”</i> (Gal 2:1-4); and <i>“ungodly men”</i> (Jude 4) See also Rev 2:2, 6, 9, 14, 15, etc.	
	nothing can separate us from the 7-fold unity in Ephesians 4:4-6	we may be separated through choice, unholy living, circumstance, false teaching, man-made restrictions, assembly discipline, or death	

HOW SHOULD WE COME INTO LOCAL FELLOWSHIP?

Our link with other believers is not based on race, personal preference, social status, or other human criteria, but on our common life in Christ. Some Christians feel no need to “join” themselves (Acts 5:13; 9:26) to a local church, attending at whim. But this is not the teaching of the New Testament. We need to be in a local family of believers, under godly shepherds who care for us as part of *“the flock, over which the Holy Ghost has made [them] overseers”* (Acts 20:28). We need the mutual care, teaching, fellowship, and opportunities that a biblical local church can provide.

HOW DO I DECIDE where I should be in local fellowship?

Our decision should be made, not on personal preference, but with the Bible in hand to evaluate the degree to which this local church conforms to the divine pattern. There is not always an easy answer to this question since there is no perfect church

on earth. Some churches may have certain admirable and biblical characteristics while other features of the New Testament plan may be missing. In the end, we must believe that the Lord places us in a local fellowship for His own purposes. This confidence will help us through difficult days and keep us from wandering about, always looking for a local church that is more acceptable.

When I join in with a local church I am to shoulder the responsibilities of shared life with the Christians there. I also embrace the privileges. Thirdly, I express my willingness to submit to the leadership of that flock. Some want privilege without responsibility. Others crave a significant role in the assembly but will not submit to the elders. If so, how can they truly be in fellowship if they are unwilling to “walk together” in the direction the shepherds are taking the flock?

But HOW DOES THE ASSEMBLY DETERMINE those whom they

receive? Some churches accept all who enter their door, no questions asked. We applaud their charitable spirit, but the local church should be composed of believers only. Those received into church fellowship should already have been received into the fellowship of God. Of course we are not talking about someone attending to hear the gospel; all these should feel most welcome.

SO WHO, THEN, SHOULD BE RECEIVED (not by the elders but by the whole congregation)? All those whom *"God has received"* (Rom 14:3). Listen to a fragment from a First Century letter of recommendation (a common courtesy which ought to be practiced among all churches). It was written to introduce Phebe to the Christians in Rome. Paul writes: *"I commend to you Phebe our sister, ...that you receive her in the Lord (as is appropriate for) saints..."* (Rom 16:1-2).

Unfortunately some elders seem

to have higher standards than the Lord Himself! They refuse those whom Christ has received. To them the Word declares: *"Therefore receive one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God"* (Rom 14:7). How deeply solemn for those elders to stand before the Lord some day to answer for this. In another context, we hear Him say to those who would not receive His people, *"I was a stranger, and you did not take me in"* (Mt 25:43).

SOME PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF LOCAL CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The New Testament is full of references to local church fellowship. Here is a partial recording of them:

1. Confession of faults one to another and the restoring of such a one by lifting up the hands that hang down and strengthening the feeble knees (Jas 5:16).

2. Gathering together to exhort and edify one another, and to

provoke to love and good works (Heb 10:24).

3. Partaking of the Lord's Supper in His way according to 1 Cor 11:24.

4. Bearing the infirmity of the weak (Rom 15:1) and discipling young believers.

5. Coming together for prayer for one another, as well as the lost. *"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that you may be healed"* (Jas 5:16). And showing hospitality to one another.

These might be called the fellowship of gathering (see Acts 2:42). There is also the fellowship of the gospel (Phil 1:5), of grief (Phil 3:10), and of giving (2 Cor 8:4).

RIVAL FELLOWSHIPS

One important reason to seek the regular fellowship of believers is the strong pull (especially for new Christians) in another direction. The world we knew be-

fore salvation calls us to come back. But the Lord says, *"Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness"* (Eph 5:11). Unfruitful, for they have no lasting benefit to me, others, or for God's glory. More ominously, they are "works of darkness." When we go back to the old way of living, we are actually taking up weapons against Christ. But the Spirit will produce goodness, righteousness, and truth (Eph 5:9). Concerning a doubtful pleasure, ask: Will it bring goodness, righteousness, and truth into my life? If not, leave it alone.

Of course it's good to be like our Lord who offered genuine and wholesome friendship to sinners (Mt 11:19) in order to bring them to salvation. But this is different from befriending the old world where we once were at home, a world that rejects our Lord Jesus. James talks straight about the matter: *"You adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whoever therefore will*

be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jas 4:4). If I am enjoying fellowship with the Lord, then nothing will be important enough to come between us.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCIPLINE

(Help was derived for this section from "Local Church Discipline" by W. H. Burnett in the Mar 2001 Up-look)

The word "discipline" generally means a careful training of the individual to produce wise living and mental and moral health. The English word's root means to instruct, teach, tutor. Note two important words in Hebrews 12:5-6, *"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him: for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."* To chasten means all that is involved in child training. Scourging is more intense, referring to the Lord's harsher treatment (still done in love) when we refuse to listen to

His tutoring. The Lord uses both the rod and staff, to correct us and direct us. The local church, as His earthly agent, must first use all methods of child training to help us learn the ways of God. But if we fail to learn this way, they are required to exercise a more intense form of discipline. This, of course, when necessary, is grievous to the persons involved, to the assembly, and to our heavenly Father. But note, it is an evidence of the Lord's true love for His children.

LOCAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

There are times when sterner forms of discipline must be administered in love not only for the individual(s) indirectly involved but because unjudged sin will jeopardize the life of the entire assembly, as the Corinthians discovered.

Sadly, the grief of such occasions is often made worse by the fact that people misunderstand the purpose of discipline and the necessity for it. There are several

reasons given in the Word of God:

1. Restoration: All discipline has restoration as its prime objective. When Paul deals with the serious matter of fornication in the assembly at Corinth, he instructs them, *“Put away from among yourselves that wicked person”* (1 Cor 5:13). But when he writes his second epistle, after repentance has done its good work in the offender’s heart, he writes, *“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore... confirm your love toward him”* (2 Cor 2:6-8). The discipline has worked; repentance has resulted; restoration is now happily possible.

2. Protection: Leaven (yeast) in the Bible is used as a picture of the spread of evil. So sin (or false teaching) allowed to work in an

assembly will eventually hurt the whole assembly. Paul says the presence of the unjudged sin of fornication in Corinth is like leaven and commands: *“Purge out therefore the old leaven”* (1 Cor 5:7; see also Gal 5:9).

FOR WHAT REASON?

The New Testament epistles give at least six types of offense that require the more intense forms of discipline. These can be divided into two categories: those which can be remedied without removing the person from the fellowship and those where it is prescribed. First note those which can stop short of excommunication.

1. When an offense is unpremeditated: *“If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself lest thou also be tempted”* (Gal 6:1). This is not a person unrepentantly practicing an evil habit, but someone ambushed in a moment of weakness. In such cases,

restoration by spiritual shepherds is warranted, rather than sterner discipline. Peter demonstrates this type of offense and its remedy. He “denied the Lord with oaths and curses” when caught off-guard the night of the Lord’s trial. Peter “went out and wept bitterly” in remorse. Three days later the Lord sought him out, restored and recommissioned him. Note that those doing the work of recovery must be men of discernment who balance firmness with tenderness, and sin’s seriousness with heaven’s grace.

2. Nuisance offences (1 Tim 6:3-5; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6-15; Titus 1:10-11): These plague assemblies, causing unnecessary distress: the unruly, the disorderly, vain talkers, and deceivers. The main characteristic of these people is that they “speak unadvisedly with their lips.” Paul says that such people have to be warned; we should not keep company with them (that is, go along with their unprofitable talk, criticism, and gossip), and they

have to be rebuked sharply. In this case, the offense has not yet reached the point where excommunication is prescribed, however we can see that this offense, if persisted in after being admonished, could deteriorate to “railing,” which merits removal.

3. Offenses between two believers—initial stage (Mt 18:15-17): In this case, the offense is of a personal nature between two parties. This type of offense is perhaps the most prevalent in assemblies. Most assembly troubles do not involve important doctrinal or moral issues, but petty personality clashes. In such cases, the technique is to keep the matter to as small a circle as possible. The offended party is told: “Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone” (Mt 18:15). Unfortunately, the natural tendency is to immediately tell the matter to others, with a view to gathering support. When this is done, the assembly aligns itself with either of the parties and the unity of the assembly is de-

stroyed. No, says the Lord, “between thee and him alone.” If, however, this approach is unsuccessful, the offended brother is advised to take one or two more with him as witnesses, and to make a second attempt at reconciliation. Note that in both of these instances, if repentance occurs, no further action is needed.

**SAD CASES REQUIRING
REMOVAL FROM THE
FELLOWSHIP**

1. Personal offences—advanced stage (Mt 18:15-17): If matters go beyond the second attempt at reconciliation, it is brought to the assembly. If the offender hears the assembly, he can be restored on the basis of his repentance. If he refuses to hear, he is put out. The Lord says: “...let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Mt 18:17).

2. Home neglect (1 Tim 5:8): In this case, a brother fails to provide the necessities of life for his family. Clearly this is not addressing conditions of hardship where a

brother lacks the resources or the opportunity to support himself or his family. In such a case, the assembly would surely assist. In this instance, a brother has the ability and opportunity to provide for his family, but lacks the will to do so. He prefers a life of indolence and ease. This is viewed as one of the serious offenses, demanding excommunication. *“He has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel”* (1 Tim 5:8).

3. False Doctrine (Titus 3:10-11; Gal 1:7-9; 5:10-11): The difficulty here is to determine when the label “doctrinal error” should be applied. It must be recognized that there are certain areas where differences of opinion are permissible and allowable, and areas where they are not. For example, if a brother holds a different view on eschatology than is popularly accepted, we might not wish to have him teach it in our assembly, but we cannot label divergencies on prophetic interpretation as “doctrinal error.” Also, it is important to understand whether the

error is the result of ignorance, which should be remedied by corrective teaching, or if it is being used to purposely divide God's people. The issue demands caution; even a heretic is to be warned twice before extreme action is taken (Titus 3:10-11).

2. Moral Offenses (1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Cor 2:4-11): The passages referred to give lists of offenses which are to be considered serious enough for excommunication to be exercised. These are fornication, covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, and extortion. This list is clearly not intended to be exhaustive because other items which would require excommunication are not listed. For example, murder and extortion are not included but would clearly qualify for excommunication. The listing is intended therefore to be typical, and elders are required to exercise great discernment when identifying moral issues. In the case of public moral offense, known in the community, the action is clear—putting away and denial of social contact until the discipline has run its course and has brought repentance.

HOW DISCIPLINE IS APPLIED

Should an offense merit the public discipline of the church, who should do it? Paul writes, *"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus..."* (1 Cor 5:4). He anticipates that the exercise of discipline will be an action of the church, not only of the elders. He refers to the disciplinary action in Corinth as having been *"inflicted of many"* (2 Cor 2:6). It was a corporate action of the whole church. It is the church who receives into the local fellowship, and it is the church that puts away. The overseers would typically present the case to the church with the prescribed discipline, for the agreement of local believers. Similarly, when repentance and reconciliation have resulted, the offender should be publicly received back into fellowship.

Whatever low standards might be in the world, God's standards must be upheld in His house. And blessed is the local church that longs for the full recovery of every wayward sheep.

QUESTIONS

FOR DISCUSSION...

1. What are some of the scriptural benefits of membership in the One Body and of fellowship in the local assembly? Which benefits feel neglected in your

thinking, and how can those be emphasized more?

2. How does the topic of discipline relate to the person of Christ?

Review:

1. Explain this statement from the notes: "No fellowship based on people will ever work."

2. What are the three things I agree to when I join a local fellowship?

i) _____

ii) _____

iii) _____

3. Complete this statement from the notes: "Those doing the work of recovery must be men of _____ who balance _____ with _____ , and sin's _____ with heaven's _____ ."

4. What should the goal of the local church be in connection with "wayward sheep"?

DAY 3: WATCH & ANSWER

Fill in the blanks as you watch the video. TIP: It's helpful to pre-read the questions before watching. You can check the answers in the Answer Key (Appendix 10).

Fellowship defined

The principle in the local church is not how much we know, or how holy we are, but is our .

Membership ... Fellowship

1. Membership has to do primarily with the Church ("one body").
2. Fellowship in the local church is not automatic but .
3. Our local fellowships should be as closely as possible, a of the universal Church.
4. The local church is intended to be your where you have responsibilities. We are not to be spiritual .
5. The New Testament pattern of gathering is and .
6. Elders should be concerned about who joins a church fellowship for these reasons:
 - A) The of God is involved.
 - B) The elders must give account for the under their care.
 - C) To protect from the that might be done to the flock.
7. is what comes out of my life after the Word of God has gone into it.

Practical Aspects:

1. Part of fellowship in a local church is being

i) able to

ii) able to one another's burdens

iii) able to

2. We are to provoke one another to love and good works. Provoke means to

us to do good works, to encourage us to find ways of reaching into our community.

3. We have designed our gospel meetings to make ourselves .

In Acts, they went to reach the unbelievers – into the markets, homes, and street corners.

4. The most effective way to reach people with the gospel today is

people into our homes: Open , open , open .

5. WE should give prayerfully, personally, proportionately, faithfully, cheerfully, generously and thoughtfully. Giving is a privilege, part of our .

The Importance of Discipline

1. Discipline is an evidence of: relationship, of love, God's for us.

2. Elders cannot discipline so that other people will .

3. Heresy means to . It is found when someone pushes an issue so as to get a following.

DAY 4: WRITE & REMEMBER

1. Record three significant statements from this chapter. Why are they significant to you?

A) **Statement One:** _____

B) **Statement Two:** _____

C) **Statement Three:** _____

2. Memorize **James 4:4**.

DAY 5: REFLECT & PRAY

Respond in prayer: Having looked carefully at relations within the family of God, reflect on your own life in the following ways:

Praise: _____

Repent: _____

Ask: _____

Yield: _____

PRAISE: What specific blessing have you discovered in this lesson? Thank the Lord for it! **REPENT:** Is there something in your life that is hindering you from experiencing what you have just learned? **ASK:** What specific way would you like the Lord to help you live out these truths? **YIELD:** Is there a particular area in your life that needs to come under the Lord's rule?