

Church Discipline (Part 2)

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

On their publications and websites, many churches extend this well-known invitation to outsiders:

*To all who are spiritually weary and seek rest;
To all who mourn and long for comfort;
To all who struggle and desire victory;
To all who sin and need a savior;
To all who are strangers and want fellowship;
To all who hunger and thirst after righteousness;
And to whoever will come –
This church opens wide her doors
and offers her welcome in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

It is a good invitation to those outside of Christ, outside of the hope of the gospel, outside of the care of Christ's church, to come to Christ and his indescribably glorious blessings. If we are thinking rightly about Christ's church, it ought to be a place for those who are spiritually weary, who mourn, who struggle, who sin. And, Christ's church ought to be the place in which hope, rest, comfort, victory, forgiveness, mercy, salvation, fellowship, and growth in holiness is found.

The great gospel call of Isaiah 55:1 ought to be the call of Christ's church to the world, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Here, in Christ's church, those who hunger and thirst ought to find gospel nourishment for their souls. As Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28).

Christ's church is a hospital for sinners where the healing medicine of the gospel of Jesus Christ is freely given to weary, wounded, hungry, thirsty, sin-sick men and women... but the church is not a home for sin. In the Corinthian church, sin had found a home.

The particular sin in Corinth was easily defined. Paul says, "a man has his father's wife" (5:1). Paul is here referring to sexual sin, an incestuous relationship that is likely between a man and his stepmother. The sin is public. Paul has heard reports about it. The sin is serious. It goes beyond even what is acceptable in pagan Corinth, rife with sexual sin. Most significantly, the sin is tolerated by the church.

By tolerating this man's sin, the church had failed to offer that very hope, rest, comfort, victory, forgiveness, mercy, salvation, fellowship, and growth in holiness that is so essential to its calling. To continue the hospital analogy, they were guilty of medical malpractice, "gospel malpractice" we might say. While the open wounds of this man's sin festered, no one in the church had any healing medicine to give him. And now Paul writes to offer his own diagnosis and treatment where the church has failed.

As we walk through this passage, the question of first importance for us is this, "How can the church be a true hospital for sinners, instead of merely a home for sin?"

Humility, Not Arrogance

First, if we hope to be a hospital for sinners, we cannot be arrogant. We must instead be humble. In vv. 1-2 Paul basically reveals a two-fold problem. The first problem is rather straightforward, "a man has his father's wife," and the church has tolerated it (v. 1). There is open sin in the church. It is dangerous and potentially deadly. And the church has tolerated it.

The second problem reveals the source of the first. In v. 2 Paul says, "And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?" Because they are arrogant... because in their arrogance they have relied on their own wisdom and strength... because in their arrogance they have determined that they are self-sufficient... they have become blind to the very real danger of God's judgment upon them.

The Greek word for arrogance here literally means, "puffed up." It is a good word to describe a bad mindset. This word occurs seven times in the New Testament. Six of those seven times are in 1 Corinthians. It's already come up three times prior to this. The Corinthians have a real problem with arrogance, pride, and boasting, so much so that they can't see the danger they are in.

A few years ago, flipping through television channels, I saw a program called, "Celebrity Stunts." I watched as one celebrity, well known for his arrogance, prepared for a stunt in which he would drive a car off a cliff. While the car tumbled to the ground he would safely be suspended over the cliff from a wire attached to a crane. Before the stunt he exhibited his famous arrogance, mocking the danger he was about to face,

boasting to the audience that it was nothing. When the car went over the cliff he safely ejected, but the wire he was suspended from swung violently away from the cliff, and then back into it. When he hit the cliff the force was so great that it knocked him out completely. The cameras showed him hanging bloody and limp from the wire.

As it turns out, he was ok. However, I couldn't help but think that had he been a little more humble, he may have had more respect for the danger he was facing, and taken a little more care executing the stunt. The reality was he could have died. That is what arrogance does. It suggests that you can be confident in yourself, that you need nothing else. It blinds you to real danger.

In their arrogance the Corinthians were blinded to the fact that their toleration of this man's sin put not only him, but the entire church in real danger of God's judgment. Beloved church, if we hope to be a true hospital for sinners, we can never be arrogant. We've already seen in the first four chapters that arrogance and boasting brings division and strife into the church. Here we see that arrogance blinds us to the very dangerous realities of sin.

So Paul says, "Ought you not rather to mourn?" (v. 2). He is simply asking, "Shouldn't you be heartbroken over this sin? If the church is supposed to be a hospital for sinners, how can you possibly boast and be proud when such a sin, such a sickness, is left untreated?" According to Paul the answer to arrogance is mourning. In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul speaks of a type of "godly grief that produces repentance that leads to salvation" (v. 10), as opposed to worldly grief that leads to death. Godly grief is not merely embarrassed by sin, but appalled by it. Godly grief recognizes the hideous nature of sin, despises it as a direct offense against God, and longs for sin to be utterly disposed of. Godly grief leaves no room for arrogance and drives us to Christ.

If we do not grieve over sin, we do not hate it as we ought, then our arrogance before the face of God is abundantly evident. J. C. Ryle writes:

How astonishing it is that we do not hate sin more than we do! Sin is the cause of all the pain and disease in the world. God did not create us to be an ailing and suffering creatures. It was sin, and nothing but sin, which brought in all the ills that flesh is heir to. It was sin to which we owe every racking pain, and every loathsome illness, and every humbling weakness to which our poor bodies are liable. Let us always bear this in mind. Let us hate sin with a godly hatred.¹

Practice Church Discipline

The second requirement for Christ's church to be a true hospital for sinners, and not a home for sin, is that church discipline must be practiced. In vv. 3-7, Paul brings judgment against this unrepentant sinner, he requires the censure of excommunication (that he be delivered to Satan), and he reminds the church of her calling to be holy (v. 7, "cleanse out the old leaven"). These are the normal steps of church discipline. Without the faithful practice of church discipline, without actually dealing with sin, the church can offer no real hope for sinners. We must therefore remember that the Lord disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12:6).

Anytime I go to the hospital (which is not often, thankfully), I am usually thinking, "Is this going to hurt?" And often times the answer is, "Yes! Of course it's going to

hurt!” They will cut you open with a big knife, cut something out that doesn’t belong, and sew you back together. It is not pleasant, but for sickness to be healed that kind of surgery has to happen. And the same is true for sin-sick men and women who come into Christ’s church. Submitting to church discipline can be difficult, it can be painful, but at the end of the day it is absolutely necessary. Even when painful, church discipline is ultimately a sign of God’s true fatherly love for his children. If we hope to be a true hospital for sinners, we must faithfully practice church discipline.

Celebrate the Gospel

Third, if we hope to be a hospital for sinners, we must celebrate the gospel. Paul writes:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (5:6-8).

In these verses, Paul transitions from a call to holiness (“cleanse out the old leaven”) to a reminder of the gospel (“Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed”). Paul uses the imagery of the Passover feast, and in v. 7 he says the church must cleanse out the old leaven and be a new lump. Now, here is something we must not miss. Just when it sounds like we are the ones doing the actual cleansing, Paul reminds us that it is God who cleanses us through the gospel. He continues in v. 7, “you really are unleavened.” Paul is basically saying, “Become what you already are by the grace of God.”²

It sounds odd. Become what you already are? But here Paul is very carefully guarding against two errors as he speaks this way. First, Paul knows that God’s favor cannot be divorced from Christian ethics. That is, you cannot reasonably expect to be saved, and you cannot reasonably expect to be a faithful church, if you are blatantly ignoring God’s righteous law. So there is a real, urgent concern for the Corinthians. They must cleanse out the old leaven. But on the other hand, Paul knows for certain that our Christian ethic and our obedience to God’s law does not lead to salvation. In other words, we are not saved by works. The language sounds odd, but it simply reflects the reality of the Christian life. God has saved us through the gospel. We are now truly his children, his holy people. As Paul says in ch. 3, we are God’s temple. *Therefore*, act like it. Become what you already are.

Paul’s calling to be holy, to cleanse out the old leaven, is firmly grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Continuing the Passover analogy, Paul reminds us that Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed (v. 7). Without that truth, no call to holiness will ever make sense. The only reason the church can be a hospital for sinners is because we have the healing medicine of the gospel. You don’t come to church primarily to be told how to live. There are plenty of non-Christians that know you ought not murder, commit adultery, lie, etc. God’s law is written on the hearts and minds of men, and although it is often suppressed or denied, it is always there. It exposes error and reveals right and wrong. Even the most depraved societies in history live under the constant, inescapable reality of God’s law, written on their hearts, instructing them how to live.

When sin-sick men and women come to Christ's church, the answer to their condition is not found in God's law (that is their problem), it is found in the gospel. The only reason we, as a church, are able to offer welcome and healing to sinners in the world is because 2000 years ago God became man, took up our sin, died in our place, and then obliterated the power of sin and Satan by rising from the grave. So, Paul says in v. 8, "Let us therefore celebrate the festival."

Friends, let us celebrate the gospel. Let us celebrate the reality that Christ is the true Passover lamb. He was slaughtered that we might be saved. Let us celebrate the power of the gospel, the very power of God to lift up and redeem sin-sick men and women.

According to Paul, this sin-sick man who has his father's wife must not be told merely to repent, turn his life around, and start obeying God. Instead he must be told to repent and trust in Christ, the true Passover lamb. And then, once you have rested and trusted in Christ, obey God, for he has made you a new, unleavened lump. Indeed, if we want to be a hospital for sinners, we must celebrate the gospel.

In the World, Not of the World

Finally we learn that if we hope to be a hospital for sinners, and not a home for sin, we must be in the world, but not of the world.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one.¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you" (5:9-13).

I suppose it is possible to have heard Paul's call to holiness and think, "If we're really going to separate ourselves from sin, then we must leave the world." In fact, Paul had apparently written a previous letter in which he specifically instructed the church not to associate with immoral people. Here Paul clarifies his meaning. It is not the sexually immoral people of the world we are to avoid. It is not the sinners of the world we are to separate from. If that were the case, we would have to leave the world. Instead, it is those who call themselves Christian, yet persist in open, unrepentant sin, with these we are not to associate. In other words, we are to maintain purity within the church, and contact with the world.

Here we may think of the church as a boat and the world as the water.³ Where should a boat operate? Boats must operate *in* the water. As soon as we take the boat *out* of the water it cannot function as it ought. And likewise, as soon as we try to take the church *out* of the world, as soon as we sever all contact with the world, we can no longer truly be a church.

How can we offer the gospel to sin-sick people if we are not among them? Historically, Christians have frequently tried to so remove themselves from the world that

they avoid sin altogether. We know, of course, this is impossible. We always bring sin with us. So Paul makes it clear, we are not called to simply leave the world.

Jesus prays for his church in John 17:15, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” Jesus himself wants his church to be in the world, but he also wants it to be kept from the evil one. He wants God’s people to remain pure, holy, and set apart from the world. To continue the boat analogy, if I had a boat and constantly filled it with water, what would you say to me? You would say, “Boats should be in the water, but the water should not be in them.” In the same way, the church should be in the world, but the world should not be in the church. That is to say, we cannot receive into our fold those who openly and unrepentantly practice sexual immorality or greed or idolatry or drunkenness or other sin.

We must strive to keep the church in the world, and the world out of the church. Practically speaking, this means that we must make careful judgments concerning those inside the church, but we must not judge outsiders (vv. 12-13). God ultimately judges the world. That is not our job. But we do have the job of rendering judgment inside the church, identifying and dealing with sin. Too often today we are tolerant of sin in the church, and intolerant of sin in the world. Paul commands the opposite. Here is what one commentator says:

The church of Corinth was failing on this vital matter. She was quick to condemn the sins of those outside the church but unwilling to deal with the sins of those within her own ranks. Paul’s words in verses 12 and 13 make it clear that this was back to front. The church is not to judge those who are on the outside. God himself will take care of that in due time. The church is, however, to discipline those who fail to walk in a manner worthy of and consistent with, the faith they profess to hold.

Today’s church seems to be as guilty of this inversion as the Corinthians. She is quick and eager to denounce the sins of society without realizing that such denunciations really amount to a denial of her gospel. If unregenerate people are capable of living righteous lives they don’t need the life-changing power of the gospel. In other words, we shouldn’t expect Christian living from those who are not Christians. But we should expect it from those who claim to be Christians.⁴

For us to truly be a hospital for sinners, and not a home for sin, we must exist in the world, we must be engaged with the world, but we must not be of the world. Friends, like a hospital in the midst of a sick and dying world, we are called to open wide our doors and invite sin-sick men and women in. We alone have the healing medicine of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only true remedy for sin.

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 73.

² Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 219.

³ Roger Ellsworth, *Strengthening Christ’s Church* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 1995), 89-93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.