



Catalog No. 786

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Eighth Message

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March 25, 1990

HANDLING A SCANDAL

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

In chapter 5 of his first Corinthian letter, to which we come this morning, Paul now tackles the second major problem—sexual immorality—underlying the immaturity of the believing community in Corinth. The struggles in Corinth were not merely intellectual, they were moral as well.

J. Allen Peterson has invested almost 40 years of his life ministering to marriages and families. A few years ago he wrote a very helpful book, *The Myth of the Greener Grass*. In one paragraph he writes:

A call to fidelity is like a solitary voice in today's sexual wilderness. What was once labeled adultery and carried a stigma of guilt and embarrassment now is an affair—a nice-sounding, almost inviting word, wrapped in mystery, fascination and excitement. A relationship, not sin. What was once behind the scenes—a secret closely guarded—is now in the headlines, a TV theme, a best seller, as common as the cold. Marriages are “open”; divorces are “creative.”

Like the church in Corinth, the church today faces a growing problem in handling the disturbing increase in sexual immorality among Christians.

Recall that Corinth was a sex-obsessed city. Hardly a Corinthian convert would have been left untouched, either directly or indirectly, by immorality. Sexual deviations were common in that city. As one Roman put it, “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, and wives to bear us legitimate children.” Corinth was the site of the Temple of Aphrodite, and as such was devoted to the worship of sex. Thus it was quite common for Christians to be tempted in this area. Since sexual immorality was a part of the lifestyle of many Corinthians before they became Christians, it was difficult for them to break these habits.

You can see how relevant this issue is in Silicon Valley. In this sobering passage we will find much to help us in our own struggles. Paul states the specific problem in the church in Corinth in verses 1-2.

I. The problem stated (1:1-2)

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst. (1 Cor 5:1-2 NASB)

The particular problem presented to Paul is stated in verse 1: “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.” The Greek says literally, “A man has his father's wife,” probably indicating this man had his stepmother either as a wife or as a concubine while his father was still alive. We don't know whether it means the offender had seduced his stepmother or that she was divorced from his father or that the father

had died leaving her a widow. What is clear was that it is an illicit union, a case of incest, and even pagans were appalled by it.

The Greek word for immorality is *porneia* (from which we get our word “pornography”) which has the literal meaning, “resorting to prostitutes.” In Corinth, the priestesses of the temple to Aphrodite were sacred prostitutes, and the practice of *porneia* was prevalent. Through consistent usage the word came to mean any sexual behavior which transgressed the Christian norm, i.e., all premarital, extramarital, and unnatural sexual intercourse. The word is used in the comprehensive sense, and it includes all violations of the seventh commandment.

As serious as this sexual sin is, what concerns Paul most here is the absolute lack of concern among the Christians at Corinth about the implications of what was going on among them. Indeed he seems, if anything, less shocked about the immorality itself than about the blase, arrogant attitude being displayed towards it: “And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead.”

Remember this arrogance was one of the besetting sins of the church at Corinth. In this passage, as we will see, Paul is rebuking not only this man's sin, but the Corinthians' sin as well. They were proud of their liberal tolerance of the matter, and their arrogance blinded them to their sin of failing to deal with this issue. Paul shows them, and us as well, that true love is tenacious, especially in the face of a scandal.

The proper attitude toward such issues, Paul reminds us, is neither tolerant acceptance nor self-righteous condemnation. These seem to be the responses of many Christians when such a case arises. The correct response, however, is one of sorrowful prayer. It is the attitude expressed in Galatians 6:1, where Paul tells us, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.”

Having stated the problem, and shown us the proper attitude we ought to have toward it, Paul now proceeds to show us the proper action we ought to take. Verses 3-8:

II. The problem faced: The need for discipline (5:3-8)

For I, on my part, though absent in body am present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan, for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ, our Passover, also has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with

the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (5:3-8)

There are two major principles in this passage about church discipline. But before I share those, notice that the responsibility of discipline is given, not to a few leaders, but to the church. It is not the responsibility of a few elders to get together and decide among themselves what they think is best. Paul indicates that they already ought to know what to do. He says that he is speaking “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” and “by the power of the Lord Jesus.” In other words, we already have a divine and an apostolic word that deals directly with this area. Therefore, obey it!

In Matthew 18, the Lord Jesus tells us how to handle such situations:

“If your brother sins against you [the older manuscripts say simply, “If your brother sins”] go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matt 18:15-20 NIV)

In that passage Jesus gives us four steps to take:

Step #1. When I see my brother living in continual, flagrant sin—not something that merely offends my sensibilities—then I should go to him privately and talk to him about it, seeking to clarify if what I think is going on actually is. I should not talk about the issue with anyone else, nor should I ask for prayer about it. If he responds to my gentle confrontation, I don’t need to go any farther. But if he doesn’t hear me, then there is a second step.

Step #2. I should take one or two others along with me and talk to him about it again, after first clarifying whether he is in fact involved in wrong actions. These others then become witnesses to what exactly is said and not said. If he listens, that is the end of it.

This kind of thing happens all the time around here—and it needs to happen. Much immorality has been corrected by brothers and sisters speaking the truth in love to each other. That is the healthiest thing we can do for one another. One reason why the church fails here is that we don’t know each other well enough to be aware of what is going on. It is often an indictment of our lack of transparency.

Now if he does not respond to the small group, Jesus says there is a third step.

Step #3. It must be made public. We must share it with the believing community. Everyone in the community must share the responsibility of helping that person recover. And if he does not respond to the church, there is a fourth step.

Step #4. We must change our attitude toward him: we must treat him as an unbeliever. He has responded as though he were not a Christian at all, and so we must treat him as such. He has deceived

himself. He may not be a Christian. He does not know the basis for purity, and so we conclude he needs to be born again.

Those are the four steps. And, I might add, these are not to be taken in a week’s time. We give the person time, going to him or her individually and in groups, over and over again. These are actions which are not easily or hastily taken. Much patience and humility are required.

In the situation at Corinth it is clear that they could not start at Step #1 because the whole church knew about it and had by its tolerance participated in it. Therefore it had come to the final step.

The specific action of discipline is repeated in a number of different ways in this passage: 5:2: “in order that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst” 5:7: “cleanse out the old leaven”; 5:11: “do not associate with a so-called brother if he should be an immoral person”; 5:13: “remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

These commands appear to be rather harsh, and it sounds as if we are to physically throw the man out of the church meeting. But I do not think that is what the apostle had in mind. We will get a better understanding when we see the two major points Paul is making in these verses:

A. Discipline is essential for the benefit of the person

The benefit of the discipline for the individual is best summarized in verse 5: “deliver such a one over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Scripture teaches us that the world is Satan’s dominion. What we are doing is simply releasing this person back into Satan’s domain, which is the world. He has never really left it. The fact that he can persist in such blatant sin without any repentance demonstrates that he has never really left Satan’s world. And so we release him from the spiritual protection of the church, for the purpose of destroying his flesh.

Now we have already seen that when Paul uses that term flesh, he is referring not to our bodies, but to our sinful nature. Although some commentators have taken this phrase “destruction of the flesh” to include physical death, using Ananias and Sapphira as examples, I think what Paul is referring to is defeating a sinner’s fleshly desires by letting Satan push those passions to extremes, creating such an anguish in the sinner that his lust is destroyed. The goal is salvation and restoration, not punishment. We are lovingly correcting, not vindictively punishing. The action does mean physical rejection. In the Corinthian church, which met in homes where they often shared communion with their meals, it would mean that this individual would not share in that occasion. In our setting, however, an individual would be free to attend a church meeting. But almost invariably he would feel so alienated he would leave—and we would allow him to do so.

There is tremendous pressure in our day to not take such strong actions. Churches have been sued for doing so. But we must remember we are not dealing with a human organization that is voting on one of its members, but with the church of the living God, among whom the Lord Jesus is present as he said he would be to control the results, whatever happens. It is on his authority and power we act, not on our own.

In my 12 years on this staff I am aware of only two occasions when we had to take this action. In both situations after a number of years there was repentance and reconciliation. Let me share with you a let-

ter one of those individuals wrote which will help us see the benefit of such an action:

My fellow Christians,

Several years ago the congregation of Peninsula Bible Church took public action against me in accordance with Matthew 18:15-20. The charges against me were true. I cannot reverse history and relive the events that led up to my downfall. I have harmed many people and brought ruin to myself. Because I was an outspoken, prominent member of the Christian community, my sins have been all the more deplorable and horrendous. After I became a Christian some 18 years ago I failed to deal thoroughly with lust, covetousness, and immorality. In time I became self-deceived, proud and arrogant. Moreover, eventually God shouted upon the housetops that which I had tried desperately to keep hidden... Twice I went through the horror and hell of manic-depressive psychoses (as Nebuchadnezzar did) that I might learn that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. I am very fortunate to be alive. I came very close to suicide and should have died in ignominy and disgrace... I am in need of your forgiveness, for I have wronged you all. I earnestly desire your prayers for wholeness and complete deliverance... It is impossible for me to retrace my footsteps and right every wrong. However, I welcome the opportunity to meet and pray with any individuals who have something against me that needs resolution. I am looking and waiting for the further grace and mercy of God in this matter. What you have bound on earth has been bound in heaven, and I know your actions were done in love for my own good and that of the body of Christ.

Sincerely...

There is a second principle which is equally important in Paul's mind. Not only is discipline essential for the benefit of the person,

B. Discipline is essential for the benefit of the church

Paul is concerned for the health and salvation of the individual. He is also concerned for the health and salvation of the church. This is seen in verses 6-8.

Perhaps the apostle is writing these words in anticipation of the celebration of the feast of Passover. At Passover each year, the Jews recalled how God delivered them from bondage in Egypt. One feature of this celebration was the searching out and removing of all leaven. Leaven is normally used in the Bible to refer to something evil which affects everything it touches. This purging out of leaven was done prior to the Passover sacrifice being offered in the temple. Leaven is yeast, and even today Jews will go through their houses and look for any form of leavened bread that may be present before they celebrate the Passover.

Passover is a joyous celebration of the believing community; and Paul is drawing attention to this devastating condition among believers at Corinth in their tolerance of leaven in their midst. The Passover lamb (Jesus) has already been sacrificed; the celebration of the festival (which normally lasted a week for the Jews) has already begun, and this celebration should be a permanent characteristic of the redeemed community. But there is still leaven present—and a big piece at that.

Note that Paul is speaking about deliberate, repeated sin within the fellowship. One commentator describes it as “doing evil with delight and persistency.” We all commit sin; we all need cleansing. But we are also bound to be ruthless with anything that betrays our calling and mars our fellowship with Christ.

In his book *Healing the Wounded, The Costly Love of Church Discipline*, John White writes:

Unless someone in the church decides to go lovingly to the person involved in the scandal with the object of establishing the truth, effecting righteousness and seeking to bring about reconciliation, every single member in the church who is aware of the situation is sinning every moment—is in fact a participator in the sin of the “identified sinner” in one way or another. The church is sinning by avoiding corrective church discipline.

Paul is not expecting perfect holiness or absolute purity, but “sincerity and truth.” In those days, dishonest merchants would paint over cracks in pottery so as to hide questionable merchandise from unwary buyers. The Greek word for sincerity was used of allowing sunlight to shine through pots to see if there were any cracks in them. As Christians, we should allow the sun to test our motives as well as our behavior. We must stop wearing masks and pretending to be something we are not.

“Sincerity” means openness and honesty. It means walking in the light of God's presence and wanting, by his light, to expose areas of darkness so that we may come closer to one another as well as to him. In an atmosphere of openness, sincerity, truthfulness and integrity our sins and failures can be properly dealt with in the body of Christ; not in a spirit of judgment, but openly, courageously and consistently as we speak the truth to one another in love. This is the kind of transparency that makes the Christian community distinctive. That is why we meet together in Home Fellowships—so that we can be open and transparent with each other. We can allow those cracks to show so that we can help each other.

A powerful motivation for this kind of life is found in Paul's amazing statement, “you really are unleavened.” It clearly summarizes in Paul's mind the essential conviction about all Christians: “You are unleavened, purified from the evil which is yours by nature, so become what you are.” Look at what God in Christ has done for you, and now get on with becoming what he has made possible. The Corinthians were failing to see the implications of God's calling.

Because of what we have become, Christians are exhorted to “celebrate the feast.” Paul may have been thinking about the joy of Easter. If he was writing this at the time of the Passover, he was concerned that because of the sin in their midst the church would be prevented from experiencing the true joy of that season. As long as we cling to old habits and sins we cannot celebrate the joy of the resurrection. Celebration ought to be a continual mark of a healthy body. For the Christian, the Passover feast does not last a week, it lasts an entire lifetime! Chrysostom put it like this, “For the true Christian it is always Easter, always Pentecost, always Christmas.”

The world is looking for such a church that takes sin seriously and enjoys forgiveness fully; a church that, when it meets together, combines joyful celebration with an awesome sense of God's presence. When we as a body live with that kind of victory over temptations that destroy others, people will begin to see that there is purpose for this salvation which we profess.

But that will not happen if we refuse to have intimate, costly contact with the world. Thus Paul concludes this chapter with an important warning that corrects a previous misunderstanding.

III. A misunderstanding corrected: The limits of discipline (5:9-13)

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then

you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.” (5:9-13)

We see clearly in these verses how easy it is for Christians to opt out of the kind of contact we should have with unbelievers. Down through the centuries Christians have often chosen not to participate in God’s call to be fully involved in his pattern of influence, which is incarnation—fleshing out and modeling truth before a hurting world. The most revealing evidence of this avoidance is the way we fill up our schedule with Christian meetings rather than making ourselves available for friendships with unbelievers.

The apostle’s principle is clear: we are to have strict discipline within, complete freedom of association outside. Whenever we become arrogant, that principle reverses itself: we become very tolerant among ourselves and very critical and condemning toward others.

We must not avoid the world. We were sent into it! That is where we belong. Sure, the habits of non-believers may be offensive to us, but we need to have understanding. They do not have the truth and the resources to be any different. We should not judge or condemn people. We are to love them and reach out to them, to care about their needs, and through that friendship to lead them to the One who can meet the hunger of their hearts. We are not to judge the world; we are to judge the church.

Notice that as important as the sin of fornication is, Paul refuses to allow any priority list of sins to form in the Corinthians’ minds. In verses 10-11 he lists several sins which must be taken with the same seriousness when they occur persistently in the Christian community. Whether it is sex, money, possessions, substance abuse, violence, or the tongue, consistent transgression calls for discipline because we are called to be distinctive in our behavior.

Church discipline is essential both to the individual believer and to the church. I pray that we will grow in our ability to be open, honest and courageous with each other, that we will love one another enough so that we will speak the truth to one another in love. That is our challenge.

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