

Guarding Grace by Protecting Purity

The church I attended as a teenager had to deal with a very difficult situation a few years after I had moved away. A man in the church left his wife and the church, only to return to the church 6 months later with another woman on his arm. The effect of this man coming back to the church his wife still called home with another woman at his side was very troubling to the congregation and understandably so. I do not know how the church eventually responded to this scandal, but situations like this one raise some really hard questions:

- How should a church respond to flagrant sin being openly committed by one of its members?
- What does grace look like in such a situation? Does it extend forgiveness to the unrepentant sinner and just move on? Or does grace take a stronger stand against the sin?
- What does love look like? Is it loving to simply accept the unrepentant sinner and his actions or does love hold this person accountable?
- Is it, ultimately, any business of the church at all or are these just private matters that need to be worked out by the people involved? After all, does it really hurt anyone other than those directly affected?

We are in a series in 1 Cor. called *Letter to a Really Messed Up Church*, and in the first four chapters Paul addresses the infighting, division, and spiritual cliques that are tearing the church apart. In chapter 5, Paul turns his attention to another issue that has the potential of destroying the church, the issue of open sexual immorality going on within the church.

1 Cor. 5:1-13

The report has reached Paul's ears that a believer in the Corinthian church is having sexual relations with his step-mother (his father's wife), a scandal that made even the pagans in Corinth blush – and that wasn't easy to do! But what bothers Paul even more than the immorality is that the church is ok with it! In fact, they're not just ok with it, they are arrogant (there's that word, *puffed up*, again) about it! Somehow they found a way to be proud about sexual scandal going on in their church, a scandal that was damaging their witness far beyond the walls of their church. Instead of feeling shame, they looked at it as a badge of honor. In some convoluted way, they saw their acceptance of this sin as a sign of how spiritually mature they were. In chapter six we'll see that one of their favorite quotes was "all things are lawful for me" which to them meant that grace made everything ok to do! They weren't under the law, they were free to do whatever they wanted to do. And so their acceptance of scandalous sexual sin was evidence of how much grace they had. In a weird way they thought that grace made sin OK with God.

Water purifier

Years ago I went to Guatemala with some pastors, and one of them brought this super-duper, carbon filtered water purifier. He was bragging on it and claimed that you could draw water from a cesspool and drink it after it went through this purifier. He may have been right but I was happy to take his word for it! The Corinthians thought that grace purified an incestual relationship so that it was acceptable in God's sight. Pushing the envelope on sin was a way they could promote grace. "All things are lawful for me."

But that's not how grace works. It's true that the blood of Jesus Christ has power to cleanse us from all our sin, but it doesn't make our sin clean. The power of grace is to purify us from sin, not to purify our sin. Grace is an amazingly beautiful and powerful thing. As a church, grace is much more than just a part of our name - the grace of God given to us through the Lord Jesus Christ is our life and hope. We always want to promote and protect the grace of God at work in our midst but one of the ways we guard grace in the church is by protecting purity in the church.

When we talk about protecting purity in the church, I'm not talking about the kind of purity where the church becomes a place where sinners aren't welcome. We all sin, none of us are perfect, and we never will be this side of eternity. If we were to cast everyone out of the church who sinned, we'd have to close the doors and call it a wrap. The church should be a place where God's grace meets and cleanses people who mess up constantly, people like you and me. As we walk out our Christian walk we all get dust on our feet and the blood of our Lord Jesus washes our feet from that dust. A community of grace freely extends grace to people. It extends grace to those who are new in their faith and stumbling, even if they're stumbling pretty badly, giving them a patient and loving context to grow in their faith and through patient biblical discipleship helping them come to a place of conviction and repentance.

A community of grace gives grace to older believers who are struggling, falling, or even backsliding. A community of grace isn't quick to isolate a believer just because he or she is struggling. I remember reading some heartbreaking accounts of a church that ostracized families who had teens who went through a rebellious season. At a time when these families most needed the support and love of a church family, they watched families pull away out of fear of being "contaminated" by the sinful behavior of the teen. It's understandable that parents would not want their teens to be influenced by another teen's rebellious behavior, but the effect was that whole families were cut off from support and fellowship at a time when they needed these things most. In our journey of faith, we will all experience times of struggle and failure and sin and we need to be strong enough in grace and thick-skinned enough to love, support, and care for one another in those times! Protecting the purity of the church doesn't mean we fail to have an abundance of grace for struggling sinners even as our Lord Jesus had.

But there are sins that are so serious they threaten the purity, health, and witness of the church and not dealing with those sins puts the future of that church in jeopardy. The sin this man in Corinth was committing was flagrant, scandalous, and persistent. This wasn't a one time fall. The verb used here indicates this was an ongoing thing. It was a flagrant sin – one that even pagans wouldn't tolerate – and it was a sin that affected the entire community of faith and put the church at risk. Realizing this, Paul brings a strong correction in three steps, steps that don't undermine grace but guard it:

1. Guarding grace leads us to grieve over serious sin

Ought you not rather to mourn? (Vs. 2) Rather than be puffed up over how accepting they were, they should have grieved over what was going on in the church. They should have shed tears for the soul of this Christian man who was so entrapped by such a wicked sin (and by the way, the fact that Paul only refers to the man in this indicates that the step-mother wasn't a part of the community of faith). They should have been heartbroken over the effects of this sin on the church. And they should have grieved over the damage done to their reputation and witness in the surrounding community.

Thinking about this sad subject of sin damaging a church reminded me of a pastor I knew many years ago. I heard him speak at a pastor's conference and felt drawn to his message and his spirit, so I asked him to come and speak at the church I was pastoring at the time. Twice we flew him up from Texas to

speak and I spent a lot of time with him and felt like he was a mentor to me. He described the church he had founded as large and energetic. Years later I tried calling him, only to find that he had fallen in sexual sin and had to step down as pastor. The church tried to continue on but apparently the devastation was too great to overcome and they eventually disbanded.

I know God will be faithful to the members of that church and to that pastor and his family, but there is a sadness in my heart. We should grieve the damage and hurt that sin wreaks. Rather than pride, and rather than anger, we should mourn, but we need to do more than mourn. That brings us to the second very difficult step Paul calls us to take:

2. Guarding grace requires removing the offending sinner from the church

Let him who has done this be removed from among you...When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus...with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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. Vs. 2,4-5

Paul calls the church to do the hard thing of cutting this man off from all fellowship and connectedness with the church. It is a step so serious that Paul likens it to delivering this man to Satan, in other words removing the spiritual protection of the church from this man, which is the same as removing the protection of Jesus from him.

This is *not* a step the church is to take lightly or often. I believe this is a step reserved only for the most hardened sinner committing the most egregious of sins. There are church communities that excommunicate members – sometimes called shunning – over things that God never meant members to be excommunicated for. Paul addresses a lot of serious sins in his NT letters, but rarely does he call for this kind of drastic action. There are some sins that, persistently engaged in, have the potential of tearing apart the fabric and the witness of the church if condoned or accommodated in the church. This is really the “nuclear option” for the church.

Jesus said that if a brother sins and refuses to listen to the escalating appeals of members in the church, to the point that he refuses to hear even the combined appeal of the church, then he is to be considered an unbeliever. Then Jesus says these chilling words: *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Matt. 18:18* In other words, when this is done for biblically sound reasons, in the spirit and power of the Lord Jesus, it has powerful spiritual implications.

When the church removes its fellowship, God will remove His protection over this man and he will be exposed to Satan’s full force and fury to the point that it may destroy his life, but the purpose isn’t to destroy him but to save him. Better that his life becomes hell than his eternal destiny becomes hell. It’s like amputating a man’s arm to save his life – it’s hard but the most loving thing to do. Paul is convinced that the shock of being put out of the church family, not being allowed to take communion at the table of the Lord, not being welcomed into fellowship with the church family, being treated as one who is not a follower of Jesus, will eventually shock him out of his suicidal direction. It is NOT for his ultimate destruction but his ultimate redemption. If he continues to be accommodated in his sin by the church, he will be left with the fatal delusion that all is well with his soul.

But the other reason Paul requires this is to guard the grace in the church community: *Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 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. 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. (1 Corinthians 5:6-8 ESV)

Leaven was a symbol for sin and leaving a little will eventually spread throughout the whole community. Flagrant, scandalous sin in a church community is not a private matter that doesn't involve anyone but the people immediately involved. It spreads and contaminates in a hundred different ways. The effect of the man who left his wife and came back to the church with another woman wasn't limited to three people. There was a spiritual pall that fell onto the entire church until it was dealt with.

The church will always be full of people who stumble and mess up. But Paul says that the church needs to do everything in its power not to celebrate Christ and his grace with the leaven of malice and evil but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. That word sincerity means to be able to stand the test of daylight, to be authentic, not a sham. There's a big difference between a church that is full of stumbling, imperfect people who admit they mess up but sincerely love Jesus and want to walk in the light, and a church full of corruption, deception, scams, and scandals and yet claims that all that is ok because of grace. The church guards grace by protecting purity!

So out of love for the sinner and the church, the scandalous sinner is to be removed from the church.

3. Guarding grace means dealing with those in the world differently than we deal with those in the church

Finally, Paul corrects for them and for us an important differentiation: guarding grace means dealing with those in the world differently than we deal with those in the church:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—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. 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. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:9-13 ESV)

The church is not to isolate itself from the world in an effort to stay pure. We should love and reach out to and befriend people in the world even though they commit sins that are scandalous in our eyes. Far too often the church holds up the cross to keep lost sinners away in the same way the people held up the cross to keep vampires away in the old horror movies I watched as a kid.

Tim reminded me this week of the story of Rosalia Butterfield. Butterfield was an open lesbian and

literature professor at Syracuse University who wrote a critique of Promise Keepers in the 90's and she was flooded with two kinds of responses: fan mail and hate mail, but she got one letter that didn't fit either category. It was written by a pastor who was respectful and kind but asked probing questions and it fascinated her. He invited her to have dinner with him and his wife and she went and there were two things they didn't try to do: they didn't try to convert her, and they didn't invite her to their church. They just built a relationship and a friendship and over time she became a Christian and is now married with children. We need to associate with the world, if we ever going to win the world. That's what Jesus did.

Letter to a Really Messed Up Church
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But those who persistently engage in open, extreme sin and yet claim to be Christians, wreak havoc on the church and damage its witness to a watching world. We aren't to judge those outside the church, but we are to judge those who are violating clear, biblical commands. Years ago I heard of a man who would go to a church and build relationships, and then convince people in the church to invest in some kind of financial scam he had going. Then, when he had fleeced a large number of people, he would depart the church leaving a trail of broken relationships and financially ruined people. Whether or not he was a true Christian is debatable, but the church cannot allow such evil to be accommodated in the name of grace.

Paul doesn't say "purge the stumbling person" or "purge the struggling person from among you". He says, "purge the evil person from among you". There are people committing evil and they need to be purged, for their sake and for the sake of the church.

So...how do we apply this to our lives and church right now, today? Obviously this is an extreme situation that don't happen in churches every day, and by the grace of God it's not a situation we are currently facing as a church. But it's important that we have this teaching in our hearts for the day when we might face a similar situation.

But in this teaching is truth that can help us guard grace by protecting purity in such a way that we might never need to face this. This man's sin being welcomed into the Corinthian church didn't happen in a vacuum. The church atmosphere was ripe for this because it was an atmosphere of prideful arrogance on so many fronts and this just became another front where that arrogance manifested itself. Let's eat the bread of sincerity and truth – seeking to walk by the light, not of perfection, but of sincerity, pursuing holiness and quickly asking the Lord to forgive us when we sin. This is what grace is: Jesus died to save us from our sins, first by cleansing and forgiving us of our sin, and second by empowering us *by grace* to stop sinning and walk in humble obedience to the Lord. The grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness (Titus 2:12). Grace purifies us from sin, it doesn't purify our sin.

Is there a secret sin that no one knows about? God knows about it. Bring it to the light by confessing it to the Lord and repenting of it. Are there ways that you are sinning against your conscience and getting used to a feeling of hypocrisy? Bring it to the cleansing flow of Calvary and allow Jesus to cleanse you of that sin, not only forgiving you of it, but freeing you from it as well. That's God's grace at work.

In our lives, and in our church, let's be careful to guard the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ at work in us by protecting the purity of our faith and lives and church.