

## Stepping Up To The Plate

### *I Corinthians 5:1-13*

Do you remember at the beginning of this message series on the book of First Corinthians, I said that we would be chewing on some difficult issues? Well, today is one of them. It is the issue of church discipline. I'm not dealing with this passage because there is a need for discipline at Knollwood and this is a sneaky way to address a problem.

We happen to come to chapter five and rather than observe the Jewish feast of Passover and "pass over" this passage, we are going to try to understand what Paul means in this chapter written to first century Christians and to see how it applies to the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The exercise of church discipline today runs squarely into three attitudes prevalent in our culture:

1) Open-mindedness. This attitude argues for an open mind about everything. After all, we should be enlightened in our thinking. Morality is old-fashioned, meant for people of the "older" generation, for Bible-thumpers, and in the language of today: bigots, ignoramuses and religious idiots – all terms that fill the newspapers and media blogs today.

Contributing to this attitude of open-mindedness is the promotion and use of euphemisms (nice sounding terms) to describe aberrant behavior: "choice," "alternative lifestyle," and so on.

2) The second attitude is total acceptance. When you dismiss the existence of moral absolutes, then "right and wrong" is relative and nobody has the right to say differently. And under a misguided and false understanding of "tolerance," it is demanded that we accept any moral behavior as equally valid and right.

This is different than welcoming all people to be part of a process of knowing Christ and of following him. We do not exclude people who are sinners; we are all sinners. But, we do not accept all behaviors as somehow okay in God's eyes. We are willing to call "sin" sin and deal with it both individually and corporately.

3) The third attitude is privacy. This concept, now elevated to constitutional status, says "What I do in private is private. You have no right to judge my conduct." We will address this issue further in our passage today.

Paul tells the Corinthians in chapter four, verse 21, that he desires to come to them "with love in a spirit of gentleness," rather than "with a rod." In a previous letter, which he will

refer to in 5:9, he expected them to deal with some issues of sexual immorality. Word has now come to him that the church in some matters is confused about what he said, and in other matters, unwilling to act.

We are going to see the specific situation of gross sexual sin that has Paul taking severe action. But more importantly and more to the point of this chapter, Paul is expressing his disdain and displeasure towards the church for its failure to exercise spiritual discipline against this sinning member.

He exhorts them to step up to the plate and do what the church must do.

So, open your Bible to First Corinthians, chapter 5, and let's see what is going on in the church at Corinth.

### **I Corinthians 5:1-5**

So, here's the situation. There is a member of the church, a Christian, who is living in a sexual relationship with his father's wife – his step-mother. It may be that his mother has died and his father remarried, probably a woman more his age.

It is possible that this man is a wealthy patron of the church, providing needed funds for its existence. He could even be a leader of one of the factions within the church. We don't know. But you get the sense that there is something about the social status of this man that motivates the church to be "hands-off."

How frequently in churches is there a person or persons who are the financial heavyweights and carry the balance of power? This is a difficult and dangerous situation.

Paul uses the Greek word *porneia*, which was a general term that applied to all prohibited sexual intercourse. The word appears again in chapter 6, verses 13 and 18, and in chapter seven, verse two. All these occurrences are translated "immorality," a term referring to sexual relations outside marriage.

Here we are told that this sexual immorality was incest, behavior that wasn't even tolerated among the pagans. Incest was strictly forbidden in the Jewish law. It was abhorrent even in Greek and Roman law and custom.

Paul takes the church to task because they have not addressed this very public situation, a well-known situation that has brought disgrace upon the church as a whole in the eyes of the pagan world around them.

Paul says that you should have been mourning. This is a very strong word in the Greek language used to describe mourning over a death. Instead, they continued in their arrogance.

The word “arrogance” is the same word translated in chapter four, verse six, as “puffed up.” The church’s casual attitude toward this man and his sin is the same as their attitude of superiority as evidenced in their acceptance of divisions and fights among themselves as to social standing.

It is not, I think, boasting because of the immorality, but rather, in spite of the immorality. What was going on in their midst should have caused mourning and sorrow over the sin. But they continued to be arrogant in their attitudes towards each other and towards Paul.

Paul extends his apostolic authority to deal with the man because the church has failed to do so. Look again at **Verse 3**. Paul has the authority to act because he was their spiritual father from a human perspective.

But he does not want to act alone. And so he calls upon the church to exercise the spiritual discipline they should have already have done. Look what he calls upon the church to do: verse 2 – “remove him;” verse 5 – “deliver him to Satan;” and verse 13 – “purge him from your midst.”

Pretty strong stuff. Did you notice that Paul says nothing about the woman? This is, most likely, because she is not a member of the church and probably not even a believer, otherwise he would have judged her as well. Now, Paul goes on to give the rationale for this severe remedy –

## **I Corinthians 1:6-8**

It is possible that the Jewish Christians had recently celebrated Passover so the terminology Paul uses in these verses would be very much in the front of their minds.

Paul talks about leaven. Leaven was the substance added to dough that made it rise. At the end of the day, a little bit of the dough would be kept and added to the dough the next day. Before the Jews observed the first Passover in Egypt, sacrificing a lamb or goat kid and sprinkling the blood on the doorposts and lintel, protecting their family from the angel of death, they were to remove any leaven from their houses.

It continued to be the practice of Jews to carefully search every corner of their house and remove any piece of leaven they might find before they celebrated Passover. Leaven, to the Jews, is a symbol of sin and corruption.

Paul uses this image to show how tolerance of open, public and habitual sin affects the whole. Just as a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough, letting sin of this sort go unaddressed would affect the whole church. It would say to other members that it's really okay to live as you want to live regardless of what God says. It would say to the world around them, "We're okay with this; we're so open-minded. It's just no big deal. Look how tolerant we are."

Paul says you need to put him out; you need to deliver him over to Satan. Schmitt, a dishonest lawyer, bribed a man on his client's jury to hold out for a charge of manslaughter, as opposed to the charge of murder which was brought by the state. The jury was out for several days before they returned with the manslaughter verdict.

When Schmitt paid the corrupt juror, he asked him if he had a very difficult time persuading the other jurors to see things his way.

"Sure did," the juror replied, "the other eleven wanted to acquit."

This is like sin. It never comes out the way we expect it to. It is the opposite of order. So when we sin, it leads to chaos. This is why Paul says the man must leave. For his own good, the man needs to have the order, the covering, and the insulation of the church removed and let the true effects of his sin come out. He is to be turned back into Satan's sphere where he holds sway. For the church's good, he must be removed.

The church is to live godly lives in the midst of a fallen world in such a way as to witness to God's holiness and grace. Look what the Apostle Peter writes in this regard:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. – *1 Peter 2:11-12*

Look again at **Verse 7**. Do you see what Paul is saying? "Listen, you are unleavened." When he opens this letter he speaks to them as those who have been sanctified, that is, set apart for God's divine purposes; they have been called; they are saints – "holy ones."

As Paul does frequently, he exhorts believers to live like they're supposed to live. Not to become something they are not, but to be what they already are.

Paul closes this section by clarifying something about which he had written previously.

**I Corinthians 5:9-13**

Paul says that Christians are not to disassociate with the world at large, with those who are outside faith in Christ. To do so, you would have to leave the world. Paul's teaching in this chapter is that of separation from the world, not isolation.

God will ultimately judge the world. We are to be in the world as salt and light, appealing to people to turn from their sin and to trust in Christ. But it is not a withdrawal from the world and those who live sinfully.

This doesn't mean we embrace sinful practices and give our approval to such; it doesn't mean that we don't seek to communicate the message of the cross – Jesus died for sinners. It means that we don't deal with the world which God is going to judge in the same way that we deal with our own – members of the body of Christ.

Let's talk about how this applies to us today. I want use several questions that Larry Richards poses in *The Teacher's Commentary*.

### 1) *How dare we judge others?*

Paul already said in chapter four that it was inconsequential that the Corinthians should judge him; he didn't even judge himself. Jesus says in Matthew 7, verse 1: "Judge not, lest you be judged." This has become the favorite Bible verse used against any person who dares say that something is wrong or immoral.

But Paul clearly talks about judging in First Corinthians 5 and calls upon the church to judge this sinning member in their midst. This may appear to contradictory, but it really isn't. Those other passages speak of judging the motives of people, which none of us can do nor should do. That's why Paul, in chapter four, mentions the nature of God's ultimate judgment. He says that when the Lord comes, he –

...will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. – *I Corinthians 4:5*

In the case of open, habitual sin in the life of a church member – this is one area in which we must accept our responsibility, and judge!

### 2) *What kinds of things are valid causes for discipline?*

The Scriptures lay out several situations in which church discipline is to be exercised. Let's take a brief look at those.

- Members who refuse to settle personal grievances – **Matthew 18:15-20**

We don't know in the case of First Corinthians five whether or not this procedure had been followed. Because if was a sin so well known publicly both inside and outside the church, Paul may have used his authority to judge immediately.

- A member who lives in open immorality. That's the case in the passage we have looked at today. This judgment was to be made because it involved what God himself has declared to be sin.

The matter isn't that we have become judge and jury and declared what is sin, what is wrong. God is the one who has spoken about right and wrong. When we discipline a brother or sister in Christ who is living in sin, we are "agreeing with God in the judgment that He has already pronounced (Richards)."

The things Paul identifies as sinful in this chapter are those that God has already declared to be sinful: idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, drunkenness. The Scriptures teach that God sits in judgment upon all these things. The church acts in accordance with what God has said about them.

And the way he speaks of the people committing such sins in chapters five and six indicates that the focus is on these people because they habitually practice these sins

We are not instructed here to discipline a person for a single failure. Obviously spiritual transformation doesn't happen overnight. It's a process and people need grace to grow. But when a member continues to practice sexual immorality, then the church must accept the responsibility to discipline that believer.

- The church must discipline those who hold false doctrine. Paul writes:

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. – *I Timothy 1:18-20*

He speaks in his second letter to Timothy of those "who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some."

- Those who cause divisions. In his letter to Titus, Paul says:

As for a person (that is, a member in the church) who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, having nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned. – *Titus 3:10-11*

- Finally, a member who refuses to work to make a living. Paul gives this instruction in his letter to the Thessalonians:

...If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. – *II Thessalonians 3:10-12*

### 3) *How do we discipline?*

We have the instructions from Jesus recorded in Matthew 18 that involves a personal appeal to the sinning brother or sister to repent. If they refuse, we are to take two or three witnesses. If they still resist, then the matter is to go to the church.

Early on in my time at Knollwood, there was a member who had left his wife and family to live with another woman. Several attempts were made to personally meet with and talk with this man. He rebuffed any efforts made at addressing sin. So the matter was taken before the church and the church disciplined him by removing him from membership. It is a painful but necessary thing the church should do.

In disciplining another member, we must take care to watch out that we not become prideful in even taking such action. It isn't, "Boy, aren't we holy and righteous. We sure got that scumbag."

### 4) *Doesn't discipline violate others' rights?*

This gets to the issue of claiming personal freedom, even freedom in Christ. "Christ set me free. I'm not under judgment, therefore, I can do what I please." But Paul warns the Galatians:

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. – *Galatians 5:13*

Peter gives the same caution:

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as bondservants of God. – *I Peter 2:16*

Christ has set us free, but that doesn't mean we can live as we please. If we do, God will discipline us. Part of that discipline is church discipline.

Richards writes: “While we are free from external bondage, we are to exercise our Christian freedom within the limits imposed by God’s purpose in our lives. When it comes to discipline in the church of Christ, we are not to hesitate to act because we feel we might violate a brother’s rights. Instead we *must* act because God has charged us to uphold *His* rights.”

We must also remember that the purpose of church discipline is not to punish, but rather to restore. It must be done in a spirit of gentleness and humility and done with a view towards reconciliation with God and restoration to the fellowship of the church.

We have to close this morning with an epilogue. You see a story like this and you ask yourself, “Whatever happened to that guy?” Fortunately, we do know “the rest of the story.” Turn in your Bible to the next book – Second Corinthians, chapter two.

Apparently the church followed through with discipline. And, it had the effect that one should hope and pray for – the man has repented of his sin and seeks restoration. But now the church isn’t willing to give it!

## **II Corinthians 2:5-11**

When we do what we are called upon to do, and then when God works his grace and brings about repentance, we must be ready to receive the member back. It doesn’t mean that, if that person was in leadership, we restore them back into that position. But we love them; we accept them; we rejoice over their repentance; we welcome them back into the family.

Well, Paul is moving onto another issue with the Corinthians that requires him to take them to task. We will explore that next week.