

October 19, 2008

Dealing With Sin in the Church

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Bryan Clark

I love the Church. I've given my life to the Church. So, it grieves my heart when I hear the very thing that God put into this world to be a place of hope and healing instead becomes a place of woundedness and pain. I hear these stories far too often. There's probably many of you here this morning who could tell your own story – ways you've been deeply wounded by a church. Different stories, different circumstances, different events, but one thing every single story would have in common: you were wounded because sin went unaddressed. And when sin goes unaddressed, people get hurt. Every time we as leaders are forced to deal with a sin issue, there's always somebody who says, "Why can't we just let it go? Why can't we just let it go?" And the answer is, "Because when sin goes unaddressed, people get hurt." Sin by its very nature is always destructive, and it's always infectious. There are no exceptions to that. Sin is always destructive, and it's always infectious. It has to be dealt with. How do we do that, is the question?

Well, that's a fine question. If you have your Bible, turn with us this morning to 1 Corinthians chapter 5. Paul deals with the topic often referred to as "Church Discipline." It's important to note that 1 Corinthians 5 doesn't tell us everything we need to know on this subject. There are several passages that we would have to go to, to understand the full picture, but there's a lot for us to think about just in this text. 1 Corinthians 5 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...(*NASB, 1 Corinthians 5:1)

Let's just go that far. There are several things we need to understand to set a context for our discussion today. When he says "actually reported," the verb tense would be "is being reported." In other words, there is something going on that has been going on, and continues to go on, and it's known by people in the church, it's known by people outside of the church, and word of this particular issue is spreading. That's the intent of the verb there. We know it's immorality. That's the Greek word *porneia* from which we get "pornography." The Greek word is just a real general sense that it's sexual sin. But then he goes on to say it's such a kind that does not even exist among the Gentiles. What he's saying - the nature of this sin is such that it doesn't even happen among the unbelievers. It's even offensive to them!

Now you have to understand, Corinth was a very immoral city. The landscape was lined with Greek temples, and most of those temples included temple prostitutes. Sexual immorality was a way of life for these people. It was a very sexually immoral city. So when you're talking about an offense that is even offensive to the people of Corinth, you're talking about a significant issue.

As soon as we start talking about church discipline, it's easy to go into panic mode, where, "Oh no, here it comes. If I make a mistake, if I blow it, if somebody finds out, they're going to kick me out." That's not what we're talking about at all. I think we've demonstrated clearly, especially over the last couple of months, that this is a safe place to come and to name your stuff and to find healing. This is a place where those who are struggling can fail and struggle over and over again, and

somebody will love you and extend grace to you, and walk with you. All of us struggle, all of us sin, all of us fail. That's not what this is about at all.

This is about an issue that has become a very public issue – where the sinner has no intent to repent – is in essence flaunting that sin in the face of the church and in the face of God, and it is of such a nature that even people outside the church are aware of it and are offended by it. So, keep that in mind as we go through our discussion – it's that type of an issue. What is it?

...that someone has his father's wife.

In other words, a member of the church of Corinth is having a sexual relationship with his stepmother. One of the ancient historians, Cicero, mentions that this was unheard of even among the most promiscuous cultures. This was still considered to be way out of bounds; so obviously a very serious issue. Verse 2:

You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

How did they respond to this? Rather than mourning – mourning because sin is always destructive – rather they've become arrogant. They determined some way to tolerate it. Somehow in their spiritual framework, maybe a twisted sense of grace, they've determined that we allow such things, and it's ok here.

The idea of arrogance really goes back to Genesis chapter 3. The offer that was made to Adam and Eve is that you can be your own god. And what that meant for them is you can decide for yourself what is good and evil. You can decide for yourself what is right and wrong. One of the most common manifestations in our culture of people determining to be their own god is this idea that we can all determine for ourselves what is right and wrong. We can determine for ourselves what is good and evil. In other words, somewhere along the way, someone gave us authority to rewrite the rule book. But, the Bible would be very clear that's not the case. There is no evidence that God at any time gave us the authority and permission to redefine what is right and wrong. There is a moral standard and it is defined by God. And God defines what is right and what is wrong. Somehow in their arrogance, thinking themselves to have the authority to redefine that, they were allowing such behavior. As I mentioned before, maybe this was some strange twisted view of grace.

Over and over again, I've heard people's greatest fear of grace is that grace turns into license. Grace creates an environment where people are free to sin. As a matter of fact, every time, when we push this issue of grace, there is always somebody who raises the fear that it will turn into license. What I've heard for years – I saw it drawn on a piece of paper, I've seen it drawn on a chalkboard, about every way imaginable – is this continuum: That one end has legalism, at the other end is license. And so if we're going to err, we need to err to the side of legalism, because that's better than license. It was in essence a justification for legalism, because the other option was just this license to sin.

But I would suggest to you that continuum is totally wrong – it is completely false! When you read through the New Testament, you find that what's on the two ends of the continuum is the flesh at one end, and the Spirit at the other end. We saw that in Corinthians – Paul talked about that in chapter 3. You have the flesh at one end, you have the Spirit at the other end. On the end that is the flesh – that which I can do in my own strength, in my own power – that's that something within me

that wants to be my own god. There's two manifestations of the flesh. One is license, one is legalism. Both of those are evidence of the flesh. Legalism is just as fleshly as license.

There's an irony that in our movement there was so much time spent with people in license and people in legalism pointing fingers at one another saying the other was wrong, but nobody understanding that both were manifestations of the same problem and that is the flesh.

At the other end of the continuum is the life of the Spirit – the concept of grace. It's on the basis of God's grace that God has saved us – that we have the empowering Spirit in our lives – that he's changed us purely as a gift of His grace. And the Spirit is what changes us. The Spirit is what empowers us to live life at a completely different level.

There is no such thing as license in the Spirit. When you are surrendered to the life of the Spirit, you are walking in ways that are pleasing to God. License always flows out of the flesh, and is a manifestation of the flesh. They had become so arrogant, that they somehow had created an environment where such behavior was acceptable and even boasted about the fact that they found it acceptable. Verse 3:

For I, on my part, though absent in body but 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...

Paul says even though he's not there physically, he's already passed his judgment in terms of what needs to be done to this particular individual. Paul says he's already judged them. You remember in chapter 4 he said, "I do not concern myself with other people examining me" and I made the comment that you have to take that in its context. In its context meaning ultimately, God is our judge. But that is not saying that we as Christians don't examine one another. It's not saying that we as Christians don't confront or admonish one another, that we don't judge one another.

One of the most popular verses that people quote in our culture, is "Judge not, lest you be judged." But the people who quote that have absolutely no idea what the context is and what that verse means. The context is: *If you have a huge tree branch in your eye, then don't be trying to pluck a twig out of somebody else's eye.* It has nothing to do with the fact that we are, as believers, called to examine, confront, admonish, and even judge one another. As a matter of fact, Paul is very clear here – that's what he's done. Verse 4 is really important to understand in terms of how this is all fleshed out.

I always hesitate to bring other passages into a book study, but I will tell you that Matthew 18 is quite helpful to the discussion here. Jesus is dealing with the very same subject matter, and much of the language is similar. We're not going to look at it this morning. I suggest you do that at your leisure. But, I will make a few references to that passage. Verse 4, when he says "in the name of our Lord Jesus," what he means there is when we act in accordance with the plan and purpose of Jesus – when it says in the name of Jesus – it is saying this is in effect: When the actions that are taken are in sync with the plan and purpose of Jesus, when you are assembled – which is kind of New Testament language for the Church – when the church is assembled, when we are the people of God gathered, the church is gathered. It's not specifically limiting it to those moments when we are gathered. It is saying, though, that this is reflective of a local church, and the authority that God has placed there.

It is true that there is such a thing as the universal church, that anyone that trusts Jesus as Savior is part of that church. But there is a tendency in our Western, very individualistic culture, to say that at the end of the day, that's the Church, and to push back against any sense of the organized or institutionalized church – that any believer is free to go out and do what he or she pleases in the name of the church. You need to understand, there is no such concept of that in the New Testament. The imagery is that of a body. That would be like an ear, or a foot, or an eyeball trying to go out and function removed from the body – it makes no sense! Over 80% of the references to the church in the New Testament are references to the local church, which is God's expression in various communities. So when the New Testament talks about the Church assembled – when it talks about the Church gathered – it's talking about the authority and the purpose of the local Church, and it's the local Church that carries out what he's going to talk about here.

In the language of Matthew 18, it says “when two or three are gathered in my name.” That's what he means there, when they are gathered as the Church. Three Christians gathered in a coffeehouse do not make up the Church, and they do not have the authority to carry out discipline. It's the Church gathered under the purpose and authority of God. He says:

...and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus...

Meaning that when the Church, in alignment with the plan and purpose of God, carries out what God has called us to carry out, that it's done in the power of Jesus. Similar language in Matthew 18 – *what is bound on earth, is bound in Heaven. What is loosed on earth, is loosed in Heaven.* It's saying that we act with the power and authority of Jesus – we represent Jesus on earth in this action. So what's the action? Verse 5:

I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus.

You say, “Wow, what does that mean?” Well, let's break it down phrase by phrase. “I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh...” Think of it this way. When the Church gathers, and I'm not limiting that to just when we're together, but when you're a part of the Church of Jesus Christ, there is extended to you a special sense of God's presence. We have that in chapter 3 and 4 when he talked about we're a building, we're a temple together – plural. We together are a special dwelling place of the presence of God. You have it in Matthew 18, “Where two or three are gathered, there I am in your midst,” meaning in a special way. So we might define that presence of the Spirit as the Church being under the protective umbrella of God's grace in a very unique way.

We know that there is an enemy, Satan himself, who is like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. If Satan had direct access to you today, he would kill you in a heartbeat. But, God does not grant him that access. As a matter of fact, God has greatly restricted Satan's access to those who are part of his Church. Even though he may have some role in trying to influence your life, it is greatly limited, as you are under the protective umbrella of God's grace. But what he's saying here is when this person who is involved in very open, public, gross, unrepentant sin is dealt with, they are in essence removed out from the protective umbrella of God's grace, and are much more accessible to the destructive powers of the enemy.

Sin is always destructive, and that's never going to be more true than when someone is removed out from under that protection. I think that is exactly what Jesus means in Matthew 18, “What is bound on earth is bound in Heaven” – that's under the protective umbrella. “What is loosed on earth is

loosed in Heaven,” meaning that if you act in alignment with the plan and purpose of God – if it’s done correctly – then those people are loosed out from under that protective umbrella and are extremely vulnerable to the destructive forces of the enemy. It has nothing to do with a building.

One of the problems we have in this day and age, is when somebody is disciplined by the Church, they simply go down the street to the next church. And, in their minds, that solves the problem. But this has nothing to do with a building. They’re free to go into any building they want to. But that does not put them back under the protective umbrella of God’s grace until that sin is dealt with. Up until that point they are extremely vulnerable to the destructive powers of the enemy.

Now, what does he mean when he says, “For the destruction of his flesh.” At first glance, that may seem to indicate that his body would be destroyed in the process, but his Spirit would be saved. But we have to be really careful with that. That’s getting really close to first century Gnosticism – the idea that the body is evil and it belongs to the devil, and the spirit is good and it belongs to God – bad theology.

You remember last spring, and we’re going to hit it again when we get to chapter 15, that both the body and the spirit, the material and the immaterial, are redeemed. And they are all part of God’s redemptive plan. If he meant body, he would have used the Greek word for body that he used in verse 3 – that’s clearly what he’s talking about there.

What he’s talking about here is flesh in the exact same way that he talked about it earlier in Corinthians in chapter 3. Flesh is that part of us that is determined to be our own god, determined to do things in our own strength, determined to do things our own way. What he is saying, is because sin, by its very nature is destructive, the only way to get this person’s attention is to allow him to experience the full consequences of his choices in order to destroy that part of him that is determined to be his own god, in order that he might experience the salvation of God.

Now, we aren’t really told if this person is a believer or an unbeliever. At the end of the day, only God can make that call. This is a person who calls himself a Christian, but is living like an unbeliever. A little later in the text, he’s going to call him “this so-called believer.” It’s not our place to try and figure that out. Whether this person is experiencing salvation, or whether this person is just reconciling back to that relationship with God, the point is: The reason we must act towards those people who are involved in that level of open, gross, public, unrepentant sin is for the sake of the sinner. In order that they would experience the consequences of their choices, in order that the part of them that is determined to be their own god would finally die, and they would surrender to the life of the Spirit and experience God’s salvation.

Several years ago there was a very large article in the Lincoln paper about this whole topic of church discipline. There were many churches interviewed – we were one of many. There were many liberal churches that identified that this practice of discipline is like medieval shunning. And they were very clear that they don’t do that. You know – they are far too progressive for that. The umbrella that they put their action under was God’s love – that because we are a church that is really all about God’s love, that we form an umbrella where anything goes. That’s a very strange definition of love.

I would suggest to you that isn’t love at all. It’s indifference. And, it’s actually rather cowardly. If it’s true that sin by its nature is always destructive, the mostly loving thing to do is address it. Imagine a car going 70 miles per hour down a highway, and you know the bridge is out. What’s the

most loving thing to do? To sit back and watch the car plunge into the river and do nothing? Or to do what you can do to stop them? Of course, the answer is obvious.

What's the first reason why we must deal with this level of unrepentant, public, gross sin? It's for the sake of the sinner. Because, without our action, that sinner is going to destroy himself, and our desire is that they would experience God's salvation. Verse 6:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The problem with their boast in this particular statement is not the boasting itself, it's the subject of the boasting. The subject of the boasting is somehow we've become so spiritual that we tolerate this. And Paul is saying, "I wouldn't be boasting about that if I were you." As a matter of fact, we need to think about who we are as the people of God and live consistent with that. He moves into this illustration taken from the Jewish Passover.

As the Jewish people would prepare for Passover, they understood that the idea of leaven represented impurity, it represented sin, it represented uncleanness among them. So, part of the preparation was to examine their lives and to remove anything that was offensive to God – anything that was unclean. There was an understanding that a little bit of this leaven, if it gets into the lump of dough, will quickly permeate the entire lump. It's an agent like yeast. It will cause the dough to rise, and part of the celebration was that they ate unleavened bread without the impurities, and it also represented the haste in which they would go through the event. The idea, then, is the infectious nature of leaven, the infectious nature of sin. That sin, if it is allowed to exist, is always infectious. It will quickly penetrate the entire lump of dough.

I'm sure there are some of you this morning who have areas of your life where you know you are in sin – you know what you're doing is wrong, but you've convinced yourself you can kind of put this in a pocket of your life and kind of compartmentalize it, and nobody's going to know, and you can kind of keep it hidden there. If that's the case, you are sadly mistaken. You have no more chance of keeping that area of sin in that compartment than you have keeping an infection in your body in one part of your body. By its very nature, it is infectious – it will spread and destroy if it is not dealt with.

And that's what he's saying here. Not only is that true of each of us individually, it's true as a body. If it is not dealt with, it will spread, and more people will be destroyed. So he says it must be dealt with.

But then he says a very interesting thing,

...that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.

He's saying, as a matter of fact, you already are a new lump. You already are unleavened, you already are without impurity before God. Based on what? Based on Jesus who has become the Passover Lamb. Jesus has become the sacrificial lamb. He died for your sins, and on the basis of God's grace, God has granted you forgiveness for your sin. So, regardless of your ability to perform this week, as you stand before God, you stand before God right. You stand before God clean. You

stand before God pure. His conclusion is: Therefore, if this is true, we should live like it. We should celebrate this Passover feast. How should we do that? Go back to the feast?? No! He says, that isn't the way. And we don't do it with this wickedness and this evil that is among us, but we do it with sincerity and truth. In other words, we live what is actually true of us. What is authentically, genuinely true of us in Christ should be lived out in a way that defines the church. Therefore, those behaviors that are inconsistent with that need to be dealt with, individually and corporately.

Now, let's review a little bit. What we're talking about here is very serious, open, public, unrepentant sin. Someone is determined to continue this behavior with no intent to change. Why do we have to deal with it? For the sake of the sinner. The sinner is on a path of destruction unless something changes. For the sake of the sinner, we have to deal with it so that he can experience God's salvation and forgiveness. But also for the sake of the body. Sin by its very nature is infectious. And, if it's not dealt with, it will spread, and others will be destroyed in the process. For the sake of the reputation and integrity of the Church - as the people of God, that's not who we are, and we have to protect that as part of our affirmation of truth.

Now, the more liberal churches, and the culture in general, would have a heyday with a message like this. They often refer to it as this medieval practice of shunning. But let's stop and think about that. Is this so different than the way people in the culture operate? Any group of people that becomes a community has core values that define a community, and those are protected – that's what community is. You see this in many ways.

This past week, when the University of Nebraska made known that they had invited Bill Ayers to come, the Governor stood up and said, "That's completely inappropriate. It's unacceptable. That does not represent the values of this state." What he is saying is that's not who we are as Nebraskans. That's completely inconsistent with the value system, it doesn't fit. By the way, a letter to the Governor would probably be appropriate.

Think about a business. A business has a list of core values – a list of things that define them. If you have someone in your business who intentionally, consistently is determined to live in violation of those core values, that person is removed.

Think about a liberal church. Liberal churches are very tolerant with people who agree with them. But imagine that there was someone on that board who had a radical experience with God and said, "You know, I've had a radical experience with God, and I've changed my mind on some things. I now think that Jesus is the only way of salvation. I now think that the Bible is the authoritative word of God. I think now that there are all kinds of things in this church that we need to address. We need to clean things up around here!" Do you suppose they would say, "Hey, nice to have you here?" They would say, "You've got to go! You don't fit anymore."

Think about an organization of gay and lesbian people – what would be considered in our culture to be very inclusive. Imagine that one of their board members changed his mind. Said, "I've now decided that heterosexuality is the only thing that's right – and that only within the confines of a marriage," and began to push that agenda. Eventually, they would have to say, "You know, you don't fit here anymore. You've got to go." Why is that acceptable, that that is done in every other arena? It's no different in a church. We have a core set of values, a core set of beliefs. We have a sense of who we are as the people of God. And when there are people who are deliberately, intentionally, unrepentantly choosing to live contrary to that it has to be dealt with.

How do we do that in practical terms? Well, verse 9:

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 is 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.

Apparently Paul wrote a previous letter and talked about not associating with this immoral person, and they either intentionally, or unintentionally, misrepresented what he said, and basically said, “We shouldn’t associate with anyone who is immoral – anyone who sins” – very Pharisee-like. That we kind of form this holy huddle that becomes this fortress and only the high performers are allowed. And we kind of circle the wagons so that we aren’t contaminated by those nasty sinners out there. And Paul is saying, “That’s not what I meant at all! As a matter of fact, if you’re going to avoid sinners, you’re going to have to leave the earth.”

There is an understanding of our behavior toward unbelievers around us versus our behavior to those who claim to be Christians. He says, it’s really not our part to constantly confront the people we work with, and the people we go to school with, and the people next door. Our job is not to go out there and constantly be judging everybody else’s behavior. Our responsibility is to take the message of the gospel to a lost and dying world, and follow the model of Jesus when we do that.

But he goes back and says, “What I was referring to is that so-called Christian – someone who calls himself a Christian, but is living like an unbeliever; that we not associate (the word means ‘mix it up with’) one like that. You shouldn’t even eat with him.” What does he mean by that? You have to understand the first century culture – eating with someone meant a significant level of identification. They referred to it as “table fellowship.” There was a sense of commitment to one another – a sense of identification that goes far beyond what we would understand to mean today.

I think the principle is this: When there is a known Christian who is determined to live in open public sin with no intention of repentance, it’s very important that we not do anything that would communicate to people: “I’m ok with this.” That we not do anything to communicate to people: “it’s fine.” There is a sense in which that behavior is going to break fellowship. And there has to be a sense inside and outside of the Church that it’s communicated that this is not what we’re about as the people of God.

Now practically speaking, what does that look like? Could I invite that person into my home for the express purpose of confronting that sin and trying to exhort that person to make some necessary changes? Yes, I think so. Could I have lunch with that person in a public restaurant and be perceived in some way that I’m ok with this behavior? Probably not. You have to think through that for yourself. But the principle is: I cannot do anything that would communicate to other people, both in the Church and out of the Church that I’m ok with what’s happening because we’re not. This in no way represents who we are as the people of God.

He reminds us that we penetrate out to a world of lost people to introduce them to Jesus, but the standard in the church is higher. And, because of who we are on the basis of God’s grace, it’s right to expect that we would live in accordance with that truth.

Why do we not just ignore open, unrepentant, public, gross sin in the church? Number 1, for the sake of the sinner. That's not love, that's indifference. That's just allowing a person to go down a path of destruction with no intervention. We have to intercede. Why do we get involved for the sake of the church? Sin, by its nature, is always infectious. And, if it's not dealt with, it will continue to spread, and more people's lives will be destroyed.

Obviously, the most important thing would be for each of us individually to consider our own lives, and seek to live in a way that rightly represents who we are as the people of God. When there are those who choose not to do that – those who choose to be involved in open, flagrant, unrepentant, public sin – God calls the Church, for the sake of her mission and integrity, to deal with it.

Father, we're thankful for your grace. We're thankful for the fact that you love us so much that, when necessary, you discipline us to bring us back onto the path. Lord, each of us need to examine our own hearts that we would each seek to walk uprightly before you, that we would walk in light of what's really true of us. Lord, I pray that you would give us the courage and wisdom in those moments when we must deal with open public unrepentant sin, that we would do so in a way that is honoring to you, that it may bring about the salvation of the sinner. For your glory, in Jesus name, Amen.