

“The Why and How of Church Discipline”

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“Search me, O God, and know my heart today” (Psalm 139:23).

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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Non-Bob?

Nathan White, the Chair of our Board of Deacons and a member of my Tuesday morning Bible study group, emailed me Monday as soon as he saw the Bible study sheet for this week. He said, “This passage seems so ‘non-Bob.’” I answered that it is also “non-Bob” to skirt the difficult passages.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable” for what we believe and how we live (2 Timothy 3:16). We can’t just pass over the parts of the Bible that leave us uncomfortable. I have found through the years that digging into difficult passages of Scripture with the help of commentaries and colleagues and Bible study groups helps me gain a deeper insight instead of dismissing them carelessly.

As Pastor Amy told you while I was away, we’re going back through 1 Corinthians to look at some of the texts we skipped over while studying the Apostles’ Creed. Since I’ve never preached through 1 Corinthians in my 26+ years at Corinth (think about the irony!) I didn’t just want to hit the passages that address essential doctrines. We had missed some other important texts – but had also skipped some sticky ones. Over the next few weeks we’ll also cover what Paul says about the gift of tongues and his infamous line in chapter 14, “Let the women keep silent in the churches.” Stay tuned!

Today we tackle this text where Paul uses very strong language about “church discipline.” He says, “you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people” (11). Where’s the grace?

A member of my Thursday Bible study group wrote, "(I) can't attend this week, but after reading the lesson it sounds like I'd be tossed out...if anyone was still left to toss me out!" Another person asked, "When was the last time that Corinth told someone they could not attend our church because they were a believer who was acting sinfully? If not, why not?" Let's get to the text.

What

Paul opened this letter by affirming the Corinthians as gifted saints of God. From the first 11 verses one wouldn't know this church had any problems at all. Then Paul quickly turned to the divisions among them.

What we don't know through the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians is what has divided the church. What issues cause some of them to like Paul instead of Peter, or Apollos over Paul? What are their specific squabbles? Chapter five gives the first one.

Among the church members, "a man is sleeping with his father's wife" (1). That's all the text says, but as you can imagine the commentaries add to the story, usually from educated guesses – but still guesses. This is almost certainly not the man's mother but his stepmother, and most seem to think his father is deceased. The couple may or may not be married to his lover. Some suggest this man is wealthy, a benefactor in the church, possibly a church leader. We don't know for sure.

Again, this is partly a guess on our part, but it seems at least some of the believers at Corinth had taken the idea of Christian freedom too far: "We can do anything we want because Christ has freed us from the law."

What Paul says is that the man must be put out of the community. In fact, he should be shunned. The Corinthian believers should not eat with him or associate with him. Perhaps even more troubling to us is the list of additional vices for which Paul advocates the same treatment. This same action should apply to anyone who is "sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler" (11). That's a broad list of sins.

Here's the first and main principle we should draw from this passage. The Christian community can and must have boundaries. The church is not for everyone. Leadership in the church is not for everyone. I draw that principle not just from this text but broadly from all over the Bible, especially the New Testament. Yes, we believe in grace, but grace doesn't mean anything goes.

This is not only true of the church, it's true of every human organization and institution. Perhaps most broadly, every American citizen has freedom, but freedom has limits. They're called laws – and they're set by the federal, state, and local authorities. The same is true in the microcosms of our society – where you work, your neighborhood, your school, your civic organization. You can belong or even lead, but

only if you keep the rules. If you don't pay your dues, you get kicked out. If you cheat on tests, you can't have that degree. If you don't produce results, you can't keep your job. If you violate standards of ethics, you can be removed from leadership.

It would be rather odd for the church, even as a voluntary organization, even as a purveyor of grace and forgiveness, not to have boundaries. Members of Corinth profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, or they can't join. They also covenant to live the Christian life and to worship and give. Of course we have standards.

To the question of whether we have ever removed someone from membership, the answer is yes, hundreds of times since I've been pastor – most commonly for those who have completely withdrawn from the community. They don't come, they don't give, they don't respond when we reach out to them. We remove them from the roll.

Other than that, what sins would prompt an action like the one Paul advocates in 1 Corinthians 5? Is Paul saying that any sin by any person needs to be dealt with in this way? Some answer that he means any unrepentant sin. Really? Unrepentant pride or greed or laziness or gossip? What if you think someone else's behavior is sin but they don't? And where does grace fit into all of this? Jesus hung out with Pharisees, tax collectors, and prostitutes, at least some of whom considered themselves believers.

In Colossians 3:13, Paul himself says, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another." He tells Timothy to "gently instruct" his opponents who have been "taken captive" by the devil to do his will. There's hardly a consistent New Testament blueprint with a 1-2-3 to do about any and every sin in the church. There must be some humility and patience and wisdom applied as each situation arises.

Paul gives us some clarity in this passage that's easy to miss. We've looked at the what, but Paul also gives the why and the how.

Why

Here's why Paul advocates the strongest possible actions against the offender.

(1) *The sin is public.* The chapter begins with "It is actually reported..." (NIV), but a better translation might be, "It is widely reported..." The adverb is related to the word "whole." It's as if he's saying, "Everyone knows this." A public, flagrant sin needs a public response.

(2) *The sin is egregious.* While every sin is an offense against God, and every unrepentant sin is serious business, Paul clearly sees this man's sin as unusual. Why? It's "of a kind that does not occur even among pagans." That's a critical statement.

There always have been and always will be gray areas where Christians disagree among ourselves and/or where most Christians disagree with most non-Christians. One of the clearest indicators that severe action is necessary is when the Bible and the culture broadly agree. I can rather quickly give you a sample of sins which in today's world would evoke the same response as Paul's: human trafficking, rape, terrorism, child pornography, polygamy, embezzlement, and blatant racism. If we knew a Corinth member were publicly and arrogantly doing any of those things, we would act decisively.

Because part of the standard is what "pagans" think, in my view, there has been and should be some shift over time in which sins rise to this level of excommunication and exclusion. If I knew today that one of our members or especially leaders owned slaves, my response would not be that different from Paul's in 1 Corinthians 5. But before the Civil War, some of our elders did own slaves. However, in the late 19th century there was widespread consensus among liberals and conservatives that alcoholic beverages were evil and socially destructive, so our church leaders exercised discipline in that area. Today we understand alcohol and substance abuse in a different light and treat the issue with more grace and compassion.

Does that mean that we allow the culture to define what's sin? Not at all. But part of our concern in church discipline is how that discipline – or lack thereof – impacts our witness. If an unrepentant sin would force resignation in a public office and we just look the other way, that damages our credibility. On the other hand, if and when we publicly discipline for sins where there's widespread debate in the public arena, that also harms our ability to draw others to Christ.

(3) *The sinner needs to be saved.* Even though Paul advocates strong action, he says that the reason is "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (5). Church discipline should never be punitive. It is not our job to punish sins. That's God's prerogative. It's not our job to punish crimes. That's the role of government. We are not in the punishment business. We are in the grace business. Christians should never say to others, Christian or not, "I'm done with you." If a separation is needed in extreme cases, the goal should always be restoration.

(4) *One person's sin affects all.* Paul again: "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?" (6) As in so many areas, we're looking for balance here. Nobody has permission to go after every sin you observe in other believers. But the opposite extreme would be to say we need to let everything go. That's where Paul found the Corinthian church: "So what's the big deal in a church full of grace if one of us is engaged in incest?"

It's a very big deal, Paul answers. In verses 6-8, he connects Christian community and perhaps the Lord's Supper (that's a little less clear) to the purity of the church as a whole. The Old Testament law requires removing every trace of yeast from the home in order to properly celebrate Passover.

While we were in Hawaii, I offered to do several chores for my son and his family – the kinds of things I may not have time to do in my own home for the same reason he doesn't. One of those chores involved a bed of beautiful tropical fern that had been totally overtaken by Bermuda grass. Bermuda spreads three ways – through seeds, runners on top of the ground, and a very invasive underground root system. There was nothing to do but dig the whole thing up. You don't do that every time you see a few strands of Bermuda, but in some situations extreme action will be necessary.

(5) We are accountable to each other. Paul says, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?" (12) The one argument we can't make in the body of Christ is that no Christian has the right to say what's sin, or to confront another believer. Once again, I caution that this is not about going on a sin hunt over everything that bugs you or even everything you think is wrong about someone else's behavior. That's not what Paul is advocating here. He is simply making the point that by joining a community – and, as I said, this can apply to any community you join – your job, a school, a civic group – you accept the rules of that community. Why would that not be true of the church?

How

The how in 1 Corinthians 5 is as important as the why, but easier to summarize quickly. How is church discipline to be administered?

Humbly. What apparently has caught Paul's attention about the situation in 1 Corinthians 5 is not only the offense. He adds, "And you are proud!" (2) He adds in verse 5, "Your boasting is not good." Any action that leads to deeper pride, whether it's pride in a false freedom to do what I want or pride in having dismissed the offender because he's so much worse than the rest of us, is just adding more sin to the mix. Paul says another's sin should lead us to grief (2).

Jointly. Paul says, "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit..." (4) you should take this action. Jesus says in Matthew 18 there are times for individual believers to confront others privately, and Paul is borrowing from that text which also says "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them." Privately is the most common way sin should be dealt with.

In this extreme case Paul is talking about, a public rebuke for an egregious, unrepentant sin, Paul advocates that it be done in the public assembly. The reason it must be done jointly is to restrain personal vendetta and impulsive action.

Prayerfully. Paul adds, "...and the power of the Lord Jesus is present" (4). You need to be sure this is something about which the Lord himself would be just as adamant as you are. Time spent individually and together in prayer and study of Scripture is another essential. You can't make it about what bugs you.

The devil's work

I hope that helps as you reflect on this text. If you read it thinking Paul is advocating a culture of condemnation and fear, or teaching a theology of perfection – that nobody should ever sin and if anyone does, we give them the boot, he's not.

It's quite possible that a passage in 2 Corinthians is a follow-up to 1 Corinthians 5. I hope it is, because I love what Paul says in this passage. It answers the question, "Where's the grace?" Sometimes grace shows up in patience, sometimes in action.

The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

The devil wants to divide, to discourage, to defeat us any way he can. He can take an otherwise good motive to live holy lives in a church family with a reputation for goodness and turn it into a lynch mob – at least in the eyes of the world around us.

This area of mutual accountability and church discipline is a difficult one. There are pitfalls in doing too little too slowly and maybe more pitfalls in being proactive and determined. If you believe we at Corinth have done too little or too much during my tenure as pastor, I probably won't disagree with you. I can tell you there have been situations that as pastor I've had to confront, but most of them privately. It's never easy. There are certainly churches with a stricter code than ours and churches more lax.

What should be your response as a church member? Fortunately, most of you will not have to wrestle with whether to take the kind of action Paul advocates in 1 Corinthians 5. Here's the prayer to pray in response: "Search me, O God, and know my heart today; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24). And then, as the Lord points out our sins, we respond with the exclamation of John Newton: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Amen.