

1 Corinthians 5 – Love’s Last Resort

This morning, we’ll be continuing our series through the book of 1 Corinthians, covering chapter 5 today.

I’d like to begin with a picture and a question: is this a church?



It’s pretty hard to tell, isn’t it? It has a church-like look to it, but there is nothing that explicitly distinguishes it as a church. Of course, in another sense, the answer is really very easy, because it seems pretty clear that whatever the original purpose of this structure was, it is no longer a fit place for worshippers of Jesus to gather.

According to the photographer, this was a church at one time, so what happened? Again, in one sense the answer is easy: the elements of nature slowly eroded the structure until it reached the state we see it in here. However, there are other churches of presumably similar age that are still in immaculate condition today, so the answer must be a little more complicated.

Yes, the natural elements eroded the structure, but only because no one did anything about it. No one replaced or repaired the stonework as it deteriorated. No one replaced the rotted timbers with fresh wood. No one replaced or resealed the broken windows. In short, a big reason, if not the main reason this church now hardly looks like a church at all is because no one dealt with the erosive elements that assailed it.

I would submit to you that this is a picture of what can happen to the Church spiritually, as well. There are erosive spiritual elements that can destroy a church, if left unchecked. The warnings of Jesus to the churches in Revelation 1-3 are a sober reminder of this reality. One of those erosive spiritual elements He mentions in those letters is sin.

The problem is not so much that sin happens in church; after all, the New Testament makes it clear we will struggle with sin, though hopefully less and less, until the day we meet the Lord. The problem is when a church does not deal with the sin but allows it to permeate and undermine the spiritual structure until it no longer resembles a church at all. Individually, we deal with sin by confessing it, repenting of it, and trusting God to faithfully and justly forgive us our sin and ultimately cleanse us of all unrighteousness, as 1 John 1:9 lays out. Ideally, something similar should be happening corporately as well, as places like Matthew 18:15 lay out.

However, that's the ideal. The reality is that there will be times when repentance is resisted, and that is when we are called to employ a painful last resort, as the verses that follow Matthew 18:15 lay out. "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence 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, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

So, you see, *unrepentant* sin is the problem; in fact, I believe it's a version of the unforgivable sin Jesus mentions, because it is the only kind of sin that Jesus cannot forgive, the sin you do not ask Him to forgive. It's a problem for the individual sinner, and it's a problem for the Church. And, as we'll see in our passage, it must be decisively dealt with in love for the sake of the sinner's eternal wellbeing, and the integrity of the Church's community and witness.

Let's begin by reading verses 1 and 2 of 1 Corinthians 5. "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you."

Now, in some ways the severity of the sin is incidental, other than as a way of underlining how off course the Corinthians were in tolerating it, but, needless to say, it was indeed severely disturbing. Apparently, the man in question was openly sleeping with his stepmother. It doesn't get much worse than that, and what was the church's response? Boasting! The sin is bad, but the response by the church is arguably worse, as it belies a terrible misunderstanding of grace that seems to have recurred in the ancient world, even as it still survives and recurs today.

One of the places it is most clearly addressed and corrected is in Romans 6:1-2, where Paul asks rhetorically, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

What Paul is addressing is a common fleshly response to hearing that all our sins can be freely forgiven by the grace of Jesus, which is to think that means we can sin freely without consequence; in fact, the worse the sin, the better, because the greater the grace to cover it. You can see how such an approach could be justified by people, like the Corinthians. In their minds, they're thinking, "Look how gracious we are! There's no sin that can't be freely and completely covered by the grace of Jesus!" So progressive and enlightened, right? And there's truth to it, because there is no sin that cannot be freely and completely forgiven by Jesus. But Paul makes it clear that anyone who thinks grace is a free pass to sin has fundamentally misunderstood the Gospel: we have died to sin, and now live to righteousness. And so, this misunderstanding raises the question: if we continue to live in unrepentant sin, have we actually been raised to the new life that is in Christ?

The Gospel is that we were set free from sin, not that we are set free to sin. In Matthew 1:21 the angel says to Joseph, "She [Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their *sins*." Sometimes, because of the way we talk in the church, it's easy to slip into thinking that Jesus came just to save us from the consequences of our sins; like He just came to get us out of Hell. Now, again, there's truth to that, but His main goal was to save us from the sins themselves, which is a really important distinction. To paraphrase a favorite Bible teacher of mine, Jesus didn't come just to get us out of Hell, He came to get the hell out of us.

Again, we see this in John 1:29, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and cries out, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the *sin* of the world!” This is an essential part of the Gospel that must be understood: Jesus came to save us from our sins, not just their consequences. If you lose that, you lose the Gospel. Consequently then, it follows that if you view the Gospel as a free pass to sin with abandon, you have not understood the true Gospel, and so, as Paul says later in 1 Corinthians 15:17, “you are still in your sins”. Grace that leaves you in your sins is not the grace of Jesus; grace is not an excuse to go on sinning. This misrepresentation of the Gospel and of grace may lead people into the most dangerous position they can be: thinking they are saved, when they are, in fact, still lost in their sin. This is why Paul calls them to mourn instead of boasting, and to deal with the sin decisively. Which leads us to verse 3-5 in our passage.

“For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, 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.”

Paul has no qualms about pronouncing judgement on this situation. We will see later that he believes it is well within the purpose of the Church to pronounce judgement on those who are not living in accordance with the life and teachings of Jesus. And he now calls on the whole church Body at Corinth to remove the unrepentant sinner from their midst.

There are a number of reasons for taking this course of action that we’ll cover, but pay attention to the one Paul puts front and center. The primary purpose of disciplining this man is “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord”. This course of action is intended for this man’s salvation. I would say this is the most important part of this whole passage, because it frames the entire argument in the context of eternity.

It is easy to read this passage, as many have, and think, “Where’s the love? Where’s the grace?” On the face this seems harsh and cruel. But Paul contends that it is actually in the interest of the one being disciplined. Whether or not this man’s eternal fate hangs in the balance determines which of those views is correct.

If this man’s sin is really leading him to eternal destruction, then, when all else fails, forcefully demonstrating that reality is the most loving thing a church could do, and downplaying it is the cruelest, right? Paul is reminding the Corinthians that there will come a day when this man stands before the Lord to give account of his life, and if on that day he is found wanting, no amount of past earthly freedom or pleasure will make up for the eternal punishment to which he will be consigned. Therefore, in love the church must clearly state, “This way leads to death.” Church discipline is undoubtedly one of the hardest callings of the Christian life, but eternity is at stake and so extreme measures are sometimes called for, measures like excommunication. And, if done properly, it is an act of love, albeit a heartbreaking one.

You may wonder, “How does removing someone from the church lead them to be saved?” It works because sin is innately destructive. Given enough time, every sin will destroy a life. Gossip will eventually leave you friendless. Lust will eventually leave you loveless. Greed will eventually leave you heartless, and so on.

So, to remove someone from a community that offers some check against sin, to “give them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” as Paul calls it in Romans 1, is to unleash the destructive nature of sin. In other words, it is to allow a person’s sin to become its own consequence, in the hope that as they see what sin does to their life they will repent before it’s too late. Unfortunately, this doesn’t guarantee success, there are those who tragically refuse to repent all the way to their grave; this is simply love’s last resort. Next, Paul moves on in verses 6-8 to illuminate another reason why dealing with unrepentant sin in the church is so important.

“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.”

Paul opens a section in which he presents another reason for church discipline: to stop sinful behaviors and attitudes from pervading the whole church community. First, he simply states that bad behaviors, like boasting about sin, spread through churches, like leaven spreads through bread, and so he calls them to get rid of it.

Interestingly, leaven has had something of a resurgence in recent years with the explosion of homemade sourdough. And typically, home bakers are using a starter, or leaven to make their sourdough bread. What’s fascinating about these starters is that they take on the character of the environment they’re in. They absorb the various bacteria that are in the air, whether good or bad, which eventually get transferred into the loaf of bread. Paul is saying that something like this is happening with this bad boasting in the Corinthian church. There are bad bacteria in the air, and it’s infecting the leaven. The only way to deal with it is to get rid of the bad leaven. Paul then fleshes out this idea of cleansing out the leaven by referring to two Jewish rites: Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

A little background on these rites is necessary to understand the point Paul is making. First, both Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread celebrate Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Passover commemorates the night on which God executed His definitive plague upon Egypt that finally caused Pharaoh to set the Israelites free. On that night God passed through Egypt and struck down the firstborns in every house that did not have the blood of the Passover sacrifice on its doorposts. This meant that the firstborns of Israel, who had marked their doors, were preserved, while the firstborns of Egypt were struck down, and this led Pharaoh to relent and release Israel. So, the reference to Christ being the Passover sacrifice is Paul’s way of saying, “The definitive act of salvation has occurred, we are now set free!” He then calls the Corinthians to walk in light of that salvation with his reference to the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

This feast followed on the heels of the Passover and was a reminder of how led Israel out of Egypt. The Passover event didn’t just cause Pharaoh and the Egyptians to begrudgingly let Israel go, so much as it caused them to plead with Israel to leave as quickly as possible before the LORD caused anything worse to happen to them. The Egyptians were so ardent that they leave immediately that they gave the Israelites anything asked for: money, jewelry, clothing, anything just to get the Israelites out of Egypt ASAP, and so it was that Israel was made rich by plundering their once-captors in this way.

Their expulsion was so fast that they didn’t have time to let their bread rise, they just had to throw their kneading bowls on their backs and go, later baking flatbread. And so, for this annual feast they would eat unleavened bread as a way of recalling the forcefulness and decisiveness of God’s salvation, and the rich, new life of freedom that came as a result of it. Throughout the years, it became the common practice in Israel, not just to bake unleavened bread for the feast, but to actually remove all leaven from their homes in the weeks leading up to the feast to ensure faithful observance of this important holiday.

So, Paul is drawing on this common practice to paint a picture of how Christians should live in light of the salvation brought to us by Christ. There was an appropriate way of celebrating the Exodus salvation: you got rid of all leaven. And there is an appropriate way to celebrate the salvation from Christ: get rid of all malice and evil from your life and live in sincerity and truth. The improper response to Christ’s sacrifice of sinful indulgence is malicious and evil, because using the new life purchased for you by Christ’s sacrifice to indulge sin is like using a love note to blow your nose. Would not such an action be viewed as malicious toward the one who wrote that note? And, of course, sinful indulgence will lead to all kinds of evil.

The proper response to Christ’s sacrifice is one that out of sincere faith and gratitude seeks to honor Christ’s sacrifice by making the most of our new life by walking in the truth. What is the truth? Generally speaking, the truth is that there is a God who made us in His image, who desires relationship with us so much that He sent Christ to be the sacrifice we needed. And that salvation has ushered in an incredibly rich, new, and eternal life. To

live according to that truth should produce not sin, but a whole lot of humility, joy, hope, peace, righteousness, gratitude, and so on.

So, to tie this all together, Paul is calling the Corinthians, as God's people, to celebrate their salvation properly, not by boasting and indulging in their former sins, but by living sincerely new lives that accord with the truth revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This means, in part, removing all the leaven of sin from their lives and their church. Finally, it would be understandable if at this point someone were to think, "Ok Paul, so we probably just shouldn't associate with any sinners, right?" Well, Paul addresses this in verses 9-13.

"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.'"

Here Paul seems to reference a previous letter that we do not have, in which he said something to effect of, "Don't associate with the sexually immoral." Apparently, the Corinthians really misunderstood him, and so ended up thinking he meant the sexually immoral outside the church, and not those inside the church. Paul takes the opportunity to clarify that he meant the opposite of that.

Pastorally, when someone comes to me struggling with how to relate to someone they view as living in sin, my first question is typically, "Are they a Christian?" I ask this because it determines much about how I think a Christian should approach them.

If the person in question is not a Christian, then my encouragement is usually something to the effect of, "Love them like Christ, and look for opportunities to talk to them about Him." If someone does not follow Christ, why would we expect them to act like Christ? For such a one, the first issue is introducing them to Jesus by extending them the same grace Jesus has extended to us. Pretty much everything else is secondary to that.

If, on the other hand, the person in question professes to be a Christian, then my advice will include calling them to live in a manner worthy of their calling as a follower of Jesus. If someone claims to be a Christian, then how they live reflects on Christ. For example, if they tell someone they are a Christian and that they're sleeping with their stepmom, that implies that Jesus is fine with them sleeping with their stepmom. As already mentioned, that is a really dangerous misrepresentation of Jesus and the Gospel that needs to be corrected. This is why Paul calls the Corinthians to stop worrying about judging those outside the church, and instead focus on protecting the witness of the church by removing those who obscure the Gospel and the person of Jesus by associating Him with evil.

So, bringing our whole passage together, here's our main idea: the Church must not tolerate unrepentant sin among professing believers, for by so doing the Gospel of grace is misrepresented, the unrepentant sinner is put at eternal risk, the Church is polluted internally, and the Church's witness to the world is compromised. You can see a lot goes wrong when sin is not dealt with. Yes, church discipline is unpleasant, but it is also a necessary last resort for preserving the eternal lives of individuals and the integrity of the Church at large.

And so, the application of this passage is clear for us: As a church, we must deal with unrepentant sin when it comes to light. Pretty straightforward, but I'd like to add a few notes or cautions to accompany this application that will hopefully keep us from erring in other ways as we seek to be faithful to this passage.

First, and most importantly, confronting sin should always be done in love. We see this in our passage: the man in question was cut off from the community in the hopes that he would realize his error and return to God. Our first aim whenever we are dealing with someone else's sin should be to gently restore them, as Paul calls us to do in Galatians 6:1.

Second, confronting sin should always be done humbly. Also in Galatians 6:1, Paul warns them to keep an eye on themselves lest they be tempted. In Matthew 7, Jesus lays out the complexities of judging others' sin, reminding us that we typically have logs in our own eyes, and we should address that when dealing with the splinters of sin we see in others.

Third, confronting sin should be done as gently as possible. I think it's worth mentioning that the scenario in 1 Corinthians 5 was exceptional, and most cases of church discipline will require more of a process to determine whether or not someone is unrepentant. So, if you hear someone loudly boasting about clear sexual immorality, feel free to call them out bluntly, otherwise I would encourage a bit more tact. Even though Matthew 18:15-17 is primarily dealing with what to do when someone sins against us, I still think it provides a decent framework for how the process of calling someone to repentance should look in general: go to them privately, then with a few others, then the whole church community, and finally cut them off, unless at any point in that process they repentant and ask for forgiveness. So, confronting sin should be done as gently and gradually as possible, in general.

And fourth, confronting sin should be done as a means to an end. Confronting sin is not an end in itself; it is a means to the end of restoration. What this means is that we should beware of washing our hands and moving on once we've done the necessary confrontation, because that is not the end goal. Church discipline is not the act of writing someone off, it is the desperate act of love to restore someone. And even after love commits that act, it continues to hope, because, as Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 13, "...love hopes all things...", this is an application of that reality. Which means we ought to be praying for anyone we have had to confront until they have been returned to us anew.

Finally, a word to the ones being confronted about their sin. We all have to go through this at one point or another, and it is painful. It's difficult, embarrassing, painful, and our reflex is to be defensive. But I think that's largely because we're interpreting the experience wrong. When we are confronted with our sin, that is an invitation to life. So, when the time comes for you to deal with your own sin, see it for what it is: Jesus calling you to deeper life.

The Church must not tolerate unrepentant sin among professing believers, and yet, even church discipline should be done in love and for the building up of the Church.