

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

A Disciplined Church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 19, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ Over the last month, we've been in a sermon series in 1 Corinthians that we're calling "A Letter to a Troubled Church". And so far, we've seen a lot of trouble in the Corinthian church, especially as it related to divisions and factions forming within the congregation. That was the focus of chapters 1 through 4. And now, starting in chapter 5, we're introduced to even more troubling issues facing the church. All of it can feel overwhelming.
 - **Some people might conclude that the church is hopeless.** If one of the earliest of churches – founded by the Apostle Paul – has this much trouble functioning as a healthy, loving community, then what hope is there for the church today? **That's why some say that they want little to do with the church.** They've been hurt in the past. They've had bad experiences with troubled churches. And 1 Corinthians just confirms their fears of what might happen if they get deeply invested in a church again.
- ❖ If that describes you, I want you to know that I grieve for you and your painful experience with the church. Now the mere fact that you're here tells me you're not completely done with the church. **But I'm not surprised if you're hesitant to get deeply involved again – to open yourself up again.** I get it if you'd rather keep your interactions with people here on the surface. I understand if you'd rather not commit yourself to this church in a formal way.
 - But my concern is that – if you're just scratching the surface in your relationships with people here – if you're not deeply engaged and connected with other believers – **then you won't experience the life transformation that's offered in the gospel.**
- ❖ **Look, you can take a handful of rough stones and line them up next to each other once a week.** They can be in regular proximity to each other. But if they're just sitting there – if there's no close interaction happening between them – nothing is going to change.
 - If you want those stones polished – if you want the rough edges smoothed out, if you want to see noticeable change – you have to put those stones into a tumbler. Add some water and some grit. **Let them tumble around with each other, rub up against each other for a good while – the result will be smooth, polished stones.**
- ❖ In the same way, just showing up here on Sundays – just being next to each other – that's not enough. **We need to be connected with each other; in each other's lives; smoothing out each other's edges.** At times it'll be uncomfortable. It might get awkward. These relationships might hurt. **But that's how we experience life transformation in the local church.** That's how we get polished into the image of Christ.
 - Now, in this morning's text, Paul addresses a practical way in which this tumbling and polishing effect in the life of a church gets worked out. **It's through a healthy practice of corrective church discipline.**
- ❖ Now I know that term "church discipline" can sound harsh and archaic. Churches still do that these days? Isn't that a medieval church practice – excommunicating people, left and right? **Actually, Scripture presents discipline as something as normative in the life of a church as discipleship.** I don't think anyone would argue about discipleship taking place here.

- ❖ **But did you notice the common root in the terms *discipleship* and *discipline*?** That root word (*discipulus*) has to do with education. Think about how, in education, there's always an element of *instruction* as well as *correction*.
 - Think back to when your kindergarten teacher taught you how to write your name. She showed you how to hold your pencil and write your letters. She was discipling you in handwriting. She was giving instruction.
 - Now when it was your turn to give it a try – if she never corrected your five-finger grip on that pencil or your backwards J – then she's not really teaching you. She would be failing to disciple you. **Because both instruction and correction are vital if you are to ever master the discipline of handwriting.**
- ❖ **In the same way, for you to grow as a disciple into the image of your Master, then you need both instructive and corrective discipline.** Now a church's *instructive discipline* involves all the ordinary means of grace – gathering for corporate worship, sitting under the right preaching of the Word, teaching and discipling each other, counseling and praying for one another. All of that seems normal to us and expected in the life of the church.
 - But a church also needs to exercise corrective discipline. **That's where an individual believer – or the church as a whole – confronts a church member who remains in a pattern of sin, calling them to repentance.** And if they refuse to turn away from that sin, then they would be removed from the church. **But with the goal of restoration.** Restoring the individual's damaged witness or restoring any damaged relationships with either God or fellow church members.
- ❖ That's what is addressed in this morning's text. **If you want to develop a culture of discipleship in a church, then you equally need a culture of discipline.** Now for that kind of culture to take root, Paul lays out three expectations. That means, as a church, the expectation is that we're (1) Disciplining each other out of redeeming love; (2) Exhorting each other to become who we really are; (3) Judging each other for the purity of our witness.

Discipline Each Other Out of Redeeming Love

- ❖ Here's the first expectation for a healthy church with a robust culture of discipleship. In that church, you'll find church members disciplining each other out of redeeming love. We'll see that taught in vv1-5. But, first, let's recall what came before our passage.
 - **We saw how one of the primary problems in the church of Corinth was their spiritual pride.** There were factions dividing the church. Some in the church were boasting about being more spiritual than others (2:13, 15; 3:1; 14:37).
- ❖ And yet this same church so easily tolerates sin. **In v1, Paul mentions an egregious form of sexual immorality in their midst that they've turned a blind eye to.** Which baffles Paul as to how they can still be so spiritually arrogant. Listen to vv1-2, *"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?"*

- ❖ Now, as we'll see, the sin in question is serious, and the offender needs to be immediately disciplined. **But notice how Paul's gripe is more with the congregation than with the culprit.** He's shocked that they've neglected to discipline this man, and they continue to treat him as a member in good standing. **It's not only a failure to love your brother as yourself. It's a failure to protect your brother from himself.**
 - And what's worse, it's a failure to protect the honor of God's name. In chapter 3, Paul said the church is the New Covenant temple of God (3:16-17). We collectively are the temple. **So to tolerate unrepentant sin in our midst is to desecrate God's temple and to defame his name.** This is serious business that requires a swift response. Look back at v2, "*Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*"
- ❖ Now the sin is described by Paul as "*sexual immorality*", and in his letters, that's a blanket term that covered any expression of sexual activity outside of biblical marriage between one man and one woman. **In this case, there apparently was a man in the church who was in an ongoing, incestuous, sexual relationship with his father's wife.**
 - That's not referring to the man's birth mother. It's his stepmother. Now it's unclear if his father is still alive and married to this woman or if she has been divorced or widowed. **In any case, both ancient Jews and Gentiles forbid a father and son to have sexual relations with the same woman.** That was considered incest according to both OT Law (Lev 18:8) and Roman Law.
- ❖ **What was so disturbing for Paul was the fact that this sin the church was tolerating – was not even tolerated among the pagans!** First-century Greco-Roman society was the furthest thing from prudish when it came to sex. **Their level of sexual promiscuity and permissiveness would rival our culture today.** And yet, this man's behavior was scandalous even according to the loose, non-Christian standards of his day.
- ❖ **Friends, that should make us all the more grateful for the common grace of God.** That even the non-believing world still maintains certain moral standards. No matter how much someone may argue for moral relativism – thank God that no one actually lives that way. **Even today – while so much of what Scripture describes as sexually immoral has been normalized and celebrated by our culture – at least there are some sexual sins that both Christians and non-Christians today would equally condemn.**
 - Thank God that our culture would still oppose all forms of sexual abuse, most forms of incest, and even most cases of adultery. Even though adultery is so common nowadays, everyone would sympathize with the victimized spouse or very few would try to excuse the behavior of the adulterer. So there still is some common ground.
 - But let's be clear: **The church doesn't take its cues from the culture.** We're not saying the church should only exercise discipline in cases of sin that would equally offend the culture. No, there are plenty of sins that we should be correcting because Scripture demands it.

- ❖ The point in our text is this: **The church ought to be vigilantly practicing corrective discipline for all sins defined by Scripture, and especially for those sins that secular culture would not even tolerate.** What kind of witness would we be bearing if our moral standards appear to be even lower than the world's?
- ❖ This is why Paul was so shocked by the report he heard. **Instead of feeling grief, the Corinthians were feeling pride!** It's unbelievable. Now because he can't physically be there to deal with the situation, Paul hopes his letter will serve as a substitute. He says he is with them in spirit – as his apostolic commands are read to the congregation. Look at v3. *“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.”*
 - But notice what Paul says next. **An apostolic judgment has already been made, but the local church still has a responsibility to exercise.** They have a job to do. Listen to vv4-5, *“⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵you 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.”*
- ❖ **So when it comes to church discipline, one man's decision is not enough – even when that one man is the Apostle Paul.** The whole church needs to be involved. Members need to assemble in the name of the Lord – and with the spirit behind Paul's written words and the power of the Lord Jesus present – the members are to remove this man from among them. Paul is urging the Corinthians to take swift and immediate action to put this man out.
 - You might be thinking that's a bit hasty. “What about Matthew 18? Aren't we supposed to approach the sinner privately at first. And if he says sorry, we should drop the matter and not escalate it further?” **Some wonder if Paul is contradicting how Jesus taught us to handle sin in the church according to Matthew 18.**
 - But there is no contradiction. Paul is dealing with a situation where you don't need to rely on private communication before telling it to the church. **The entire church already knows about this sin, and they're doing nothing about it.** That's the problem. So essentially in 1 Corinthians 5, we've already arrived at the last stage of church discipline as Jesus taught in Matthew 18.
- ❖ Now what's challenging in our text is how to interpret such phrases as in v5, *“you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.”* I don't think Paul wasn't expecting or hoping for this man to be physically attacked or destroyed by Satan. **He is telling the Corinthian church to excommunicate this man – to expel him from their membership.**
 - That means to no longer affirm him or treat him as if he were a citizen of God's kingdom. And the implication of that would be to turn the man back to the world. **The world being understood to be Satan's sphere of influence** (Lk 4:5-6; Eph 2:2; 1 Jn 5:19). So delivering him to Satan is another way of saying, “Put him outside of the spiritual oversight of the church and back into the world ”

- ❖ Let's be clear: **Removing the man from the membership of their church is not a declaration that he's certainly *not* a Christian.** We can't see into his soul. We can't definitively know whether he is truly regenerate. **But what excommunication does declare is that *this* congregation is no longer sure if *this* man is a Christian.**
 - It says we agree this man is behaving like a non-Christian, and until he repents (like a Christian), we'll treat him as we would any non-believer. That means he's still welcomed to our public services where we hope he's confronted with the promises and demands of the gospel. **But he should no longer participate in the privileges of membership.** That would include barring him from partaking in the Lord's Supper.
- ❖ I know to modern ears that sounds harsh. **But the purpose behind corrective church discipline is never to punish but always to redeem.** Look at the end of v5, "*so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*" (2 Tim 2:24-26) **The hope is that such a formal declaration by his church will serve as a wake up call.** That, by God's grace, he'll repent and put to death his fleshly desires. That's what "*the destruction of the flesh*" likely means.
- ❖ It may not seem obvious to you, but it's redeeming love that compels any church to take such action. **I think anyone who has raised children knows that it's love that compels our discipline.** Imagine a father warning his toddler not to stick her finger in an electrical socket, but she does it anyways. Shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Oh well, to each their own" is *not* a loving response. Not correcting dangerous and harmful behavior is *not* loving. It's indifferent at best; hateful at worst.
 - Listen to how Scripture describes our heavenly Father's heart towards his children when we sin. **Hebrews 12:6** says, "*For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.*" **None of us would dare claim that we know how to love Christians better than God himself.** So if his love for us includes discipline, then our love for each other ought to include the same.

Exhort Each Other to Become Who We Really Are

- ❖ So the first expectation of a healthy church is that we're disciplining each other out of redeeming love. Here's the second: **We're exhorting each other to become who we really are.** This is Paul's point in vv6-8. He appeals to an analogy that illustrates both the problem in the church and the solution. **Starting in v6, he points to leaven to illustrate the corrupting effects of undisciplined sin in the life of a church.** "*Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*"
 - Leaven is fermented dough. Normally, you would save a little clump of last week's dough, allow it to ferment, and that's your leaven. Then you would add it to this week's dough, and that little clump – as it gets rubbed in and spread around – will leaven the whole lump. And you end up with sourdough bread and the like.
 - **Paul's point is that any sin that's not corrected – that's not disciplined – will have a corrupting effect on the entire church.** Someone might argue, "But it's only one man's sin. It's an isolated case." But like a little leaven, it'll eventually spread through the whole dough.

- ❖ Now maybe you've never baked bread, so here's another analogy. **Think about a highly contagious virus.** In this post-pandemic world, we all know how this works. This sin is like a virus that has infected the body of Christ in Corinth. Now in a healthy body, the immune system would immediately kick in and deal with it. **But if there's a systemic failure in the body's immune response, then that one isolated virus will continue to spread and will eventually destroy the body altogether.**
 - So Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to remove the man – not just out of love for him and concern for his salvation – but also out of love for the body of Christ. We want God's church to continue as a new creation, a holy temple, set apart from the world – which is necessary for our mission to bless the world with the gospel.
- ❖ **The sad reality is that many of our non-Christian friends and family want little to do with Christ's gospel because Christ's church is a mess.** We bear a poor witness to the world. We haven't put our own house in order, so we've lost our gospel distinctiveness. For the sake of the gospel and our gospel mission, we've got to go back to it.
 - That's what Paul does in v7. He goes back to the gospel. Notice the connection he makes with the Passover. *"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."*
- ❖ Every year, the Israelites would celebrate the Passover meal to commemorate how God redeemed them from Egypt. And that celebration would bleed into a week-long holiday called The Feast of Unleavened Bread. Where all meals were served with unleavened bread.
 - **Now in addition to the spiritual significance of the holiday, The Feast of Unleavened Bread had a public health benefit.** That process of saving a clump of dough every week, over the course of a year, had a high chance of introducing contaminants into the dough. So once a year, leading up to the Passover and the start of the Feast, everyone had to purge their homes of all leaven (Ex 12:14-20). **So families would go on a search throughout their home looking for any trace of leaven in any drawer or cupboard, any crook or cranny.** And after getting rid of it all, they would go a week of eating only unleavened bread, and then afterwards, they could restart the leavening process with a clean lump of dough.
- ❖ So with that context in mind, look back at v7. **Paul's emphasis on the fact that Christ, our Passover lamb, *has been* sacrificed is meant to imply that we should've already purged our home.** At this point, there should be no leaven among us. In other words, the church is a new batch of dough – a converted people, a holy people – so we should be done with the old contaminated leaven of the world. *"Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump."*
 - But Paul – as the preeminent apostle of the gospel of grace – is quick to qualify. So that no one misinterprets him as saying, "Get rid of the old *so that* you can be new," he quickly reminds them that they're already new. *"As you really are unleavened."*

- ❖ In other words, he's *not* telling you to do something to become something – but to do it because of who you already are. **The moralism of this world says: *Do this so that you can become that.* But the gospel of grace says: *Do this because you already are that.***
 - Church, our Passover Lamb has already been sacrificed in our place, so Paul would claim that, for all Christians, we already are unleavened. We have already been purified and cleansed. We already are a holy, redeemed people. **So let's start behaving like who we really are!** To tolerate sin in your own life or in the life of your church would be antithetical to who we are as Christians.
- ❖ **That concept is at the core of Paul's theology and the way he motivates Christians to live holy lives.** Notice how he's not appealing to fear or shame. He's not hoping Christians deal with their sin out of fear of church discipline. He's not saying – you better put off your sin to avoid the shame of being put out of the church.
 - **No, Paul motivates our holiness by pointing to Christ and what he has already done for us on the cross.** In light of Christ crucified for us, let's cleanse out the old leaven in our own lives and in the life of our church. Let's become who we really are in Christ! That's what the gospel of grace exhorts us to do.

Judge Each Other for the Purity of Our Witness

- ❖ So we've talked about how a healthy church with a strong culture of discipleship will be a church that disciplines each other out of redeeming love; that exhorts each other to be who we really are; **and a church that judges each other for the purity of our witness.** That's Paul's point in vv9-13.
 - Notice how he's turning his attention to clarify a misunderstanding that stems from a previous letter he wrote them. Apparently, Paul had already told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. **But he wants to clarify that he was *not* referring to people in the world – but specifically to people in the church.**
 - Listen to vv9-11, *“⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰not 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. ¹¹But 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.”*
- ❖ I appreciate Paul's clarification because it's so important to state that a church's concern for its own purity should *not* result in a stance of hostility or separation from the world. **If our pursuit of holiness is pulling us away from meaningful associations with non-Christians, then we're missing the point of the church's holiness.**
 - God's people, whether in the OT or NT, have always been set apart *from* the world for the sake of our mission *in* the world. We're to be a witness to the non-believing world of the glory and greatness our King and his kingdom.

- ❖ **Church, on a practical level, that means Paul expects us to have meaningful interactions with the sexually immoral, the greedy, the swindlers, and the idolators of this world.** Now I'm sure some of you are uncomfortable interacting with such people. You don't know how to act around them or what to talk about. And, on one hand, that's a good sign. It means you're a foreigner in this world. It means your true home is in heaven.
 - **But like any good missionary, our goal should be to learn how to interact with people *in* this world without becoming *of* this world ourselves.** And that might mean carving out more time to spend with non-Christian friends and colleagues.
- ❖ But Paul's particular emphasis here is not on the personal witness of individual Christians but on the corporate witness of the whole church. **If there's going to be any separation, it should be a church separating from those who call themselves Christians and yet persist in a clear lifestyle of sin with no repentance.**
 - Paul is not saying don't associate with anyone who calls himself Christian and yet is guilty of committing any one of these sins in my list. No, he's describing people whose lives are characterized by this sin. By their own refusal to repent, they've made it clear that they don't belong to the new dough of God's church. Their unrepentance would suggest that they're still filled with the old leaven of the old life.
- ❖ So in regards to such individuals, do not even eat with such a one. Now at the very least that means not sharing the Lord's Supper. It's not as clear if that applies to privately eating with someone who has been put out of the church. **But the main principle here is that church members should refrain from any kind of social interaction with the person that gives the impression that that person is in good standing with God and with his church.**
 - Again, Paul's main concern in this section is on the purity of the church's witness. He commands us to separate from such individuals so that the watching world doesn't get a confusing message about the King and his kingdom.
- ❖ Paul is concerned about outsiders. And not because he's think they'll corrupt us if we interact with them too much. **No, he's concerned that we'll confuse *them* if we allow corruption to go unaddressed inside the church.** Look at vv12-13, *"¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*
 - It's sad how, in our day, Christians can flip Paul's words around – **where we can be very judgmental of the sins found in non-Christian world and yet very tolerant of the sins found in our own churches.** Shame on us.
- ❖ Church, let's commit ourselves to the purity of the church and the clarity of our witness to the world. **And that starts with each of us taking individual responsibility to purify our own lives. Just like the Israelites, let's diligently search every crook and cranny of our hearts for any trace of leaven.** Let's begin by asking, "Are there any sins in my life that I've grown too comfortable with?" What do I need to purge out so that my life – and our life together as the church – can bear clear witness to the power and promise of the gospel?