

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

Dr. George O. Wood

Our Scripture today is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians 5:6–13. Rather than reading the passage at the beginning, this morning, I will make continual reference to it as we progress through today's message.

Two weeks ago, I shared from the last part of chapter 4 and the first five verses of chapter 5 concerning the theme, "Caring Enough to Confront." One of the central issues that's happening in the Corinthian correspondence is that the Corinthian church had tolerated in their midst the uncorrected presence of open immorality. An immorality of a kind that was even condemned among the loose-moral pagans. An immorality which was the immorality of incest. A son had his father's wife. Paul is correcting the smirky attitude, the self-satisfaction, of the Corinthians in this area, who had basically said, "What this man does is his own private business. We're glad that this congregation is spiritual enough to tolerate this brother without making a big to-do about it." Paul's saying, "This is a wrong kind of arrogance, you should have dealt with this matter. And you should have cared enough to confront."

One of the sensitive matters that I find as I pastor the church—and also that you find as you live in relationships that from time to time may need correction—is to know when to keep quiet, because a matter is really resolving itself and does not need open confrontation, and when a matter has come to the point where the time for confrontation has arrived.

There are situations which the Lord is working out that we'd be well-advised not to dig up. But the Corinthians had a situation that had been dug up which smelled to high heaven and needed to be dealt with. And that's why Paul writes.

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

When there has been open sin or a scandal in the church body, in correcting it like—we looked at two weeks ago—there must be a right attitude, an attitude of grief. Not, “We need to put people in their places. Those terrible people!” There’s always a balance between permissiveness and Pharisaism. It’s easy to slide over into Pharisaism, as it is to slide into permissiveness. There must be a right attitude.

There must be right action. We must follow what the Lord has taught in Matthew 18 about talking one-on-one, then two to one, then before the whole church. 1 Corinthians 5 talks about bringing it before the whole church.

Then there must, as well, be the right purpose. The last part of verse 5 talks about the fact that, if discipline is exercised, then this person’s spirit might be saved on the day of the Lord. The whole object of discipline is not to freeze the person off into the corner, but by placing in them discipline, to make them more aware of their need for God. In not treating them like a brother, perhaps they will come to a personal recognition before the Lord that He Himself does not regard them as His child unless they repent of this matter.

I. Paul continues this theme in verses 6–13. The first thing he says about his continuing taste for church discipline is that, without discipline, the problem is going to grow worse.

“Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?” (verse 6, NIV). What Paul is literally saying is, “Your puffed-up-ness is not good.” It’s striking that he would then use the metaphor of leaven. Leaven is something that puffs up.

“Don’t you know that a little leaven, leavens the whole lump?” In biblical days, I understand they made leaven by taking old dough that had been left over from the last baking and letting it ferment. They put some of that dough into that new batch and it would cause the dough to rise.

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

What Paul is saying is that a little leaven, a little pinch, will leaven the whole lump. If that's the case, his comparison is that at Corinth, you've got more than a little leaven. You've got a big problem. If a little leaven will mess up the whole bunch, just think about what this problem has done to the church, it's so big. The old leaven signifies the presence of evil. In fact, leaven, in Jewish thought, was continually a symbol of putrefaction or evil influence or corruptness. And the feast of unleavened bread, which is spoken of in Leviticus and which is practiced to this day, is a feast that occurs seven days before the Passover. It begins by cleansing out all the leaven from the house. Even lighting a candle and searching the corners of the house to make sure all the leaven is gone so that the Passover might be celebrated. What Paul is saying here, in this passage, is, "You haven't dealt with this problem and it's leavening the whole lump. And unless you get it dealt with, things are going to get worse and worse and worse." There are some problems that have that nature to them. If you don't deal with them and deal with them pronto, they're going to be very difficult to correct. You would just have to assess what things you're going through to know how to apply that.

I remember, as a college student, reading a line by Machiavelli. He said a political revolution is like an illness. I think, to extend that one step further, it's like a problem in our relationships with one another in the body, or it's like the problem of sin. Machiavelli said that a political revolution is like a disease: In its early stages, it's very, very hard to detect, but it is very easy to cure. And in its later stages, it is very easy to detect but almost impossible to cure.

Doesn't that solve problems that we let build up, year after year, or in some cases, week after week? In their seed stages, they were very hard to detect, but very easy to cure. But now, they've grown very easy to detect and very hard to cure.

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

Putting off dealing with problems only makes the situation, in most cases, worse. Paul is saying that here to the Corinthians. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” Now is the day of salvation. Now’s the time to do something about it.

II. The second thing he says about discipline here is that effective discipline in the church and in our lives allows us to be, in fact, what Christ already sees us to be in faith.

Let’s look, for a moment, at the first part of verse 7. “Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are” (NIV). Notice what Paul is doing here, a very subtle play on words. He wants people to be like the new batch. Then he says, “But you’re already that new batch.” If you’re already the new batch, why should you be exhorted to be like the new batch? It’s because of the doctrine of justification. That is, Christ has stood in our place. He’s borne the penalty for our sins. And He, by His own life, has declared us righteous before God. We are righteous through the eyes of faith. Through His faith in us.

In actual fact, we do not act righteous at all. But we must be called upon, and discipline calls us, on the fact that we must recognize the presence of the new nature and confess that we are really what our new nature is, not our old nature.

Have you ever done something wrong, as a believer, and after you’ve done it, said, “That’s just like me.” I would suggest a correction to that. The next time you do something that is wrong and you’re tempted to say that, apply Pauline theology and say, “That wasn’t like me at all. That wasn’t like Christ, and I am now like Christ.” Therefore, I am going to say that my new nature does not want to follow that inclination at all. The Lord has given me a new nature and I want to be like that. That was just the old lump that was leavened. The old dough from the old life.

Several years ago, a young believer in the church was telling me they had been having a great deal of struggle with the emergence of some effect of their old life—of before they became a

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

Christian. They said they had a revelation one night while watching some old Humphrey Bogart movie on TV. As they watched, they came to the realization that that was made when Bogart was young and that he doesn't look like that anymore. He recognized that what was being played out was an old reel. "That's exactly what the enemy keeps trying to do in my life. He keeps trying to play on the screen of my mind the old life and saying, 'That's you. That's the way you really are.'" He said, "Oh, no I'm not. I have a new life. Christ has come."

Discipline forces us back to the standard of perfection which is modeled in Christ, which is made available to us.

We talked a great deal about having faith in the Lord. Before we ever had faith in the Lord, He had faith in us. The Lord has a lot more faith in me than I have in Him. We must really hold on to the faith the Lord has in us.

III. The third thing that Paul says is that discipline brings restoration of joy in the Christian experience.

Verses 7–8 say, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the festival not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (NIV). One almost has to get a clear understanding of the sequence of Old Testament feasts to be able to appreciate what Paul is saying in this passage. In the Old Testament practice and in modern Judaic practice, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is a period of seven days coming before the Feast of Passover. Passover marking the terminating point of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was given by the Lord to indicate that, as a personal preparation for the Passover lamb being sacrificed, the children of Israel must do what they could to eradicate that symbolism which stood for the presence of evil. In other words, before you eat the Passover lamb, take care to get rid of the evil influences.

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

Paul here says, though, “It’s time for you to get rid of the leaven.” Why? Because the Passover lamb is about to be sacrificed? Or because the Passover Lamb *has* been sacrificed? It’s obviously the later. It’s time to get rid of the leaven because the Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. That’s just reverse of centuries of training. You always got rid of the leaven first and then had the Passover. Paul is saying one of two things here. Either, “You Christians are a little late getting around to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover’s already happened.” That may be one thing he’s saying.

Another thing, which I think is a beautiful thought that I can personally appropriate, is that our relationship with God has never been dependent on whether or not we’ve totally got our act together before we sit down at His table. But He has, first of all, redeemed us and given us the Passover Lamb. It is by virtue of His life given for us that we go to work on the process called sanctification. Christ, the Passover Lamb, has been sanctified, therefore, cleanse out the old leaven. In other words, don’t say, “I’ll wait till I’m good enough to relate to Christ.” Christ has already received you. Now, cleanse out the old leaven.

This, then, allows us to keep the festival. I know, from time to time, there are persons who feel very awkward at a communion Sunday, they feel that they are not worthy to take communion. Of course, the devil likes to have a field day with that. We’ll see later, in Corinthians, where Paul talks about not eating and drinking in a manner unworthy. What he was talking about, by the way, was a potluck dinner where some were getting drunk in the love feast. Some were sitting down with their steak and others with their bologna sandwiches. Not caring enough to share with one another. He says then, “What an unworthy way to take communion.”

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

But keep the feast. Christ the Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. Go to work, cleansing out the leaven, but keep the feast. Keep the celebration. Let joy be restored as you recognize that leaven has been there. Deal with the leaven.

While I do not believe at all in a gospel of works, I nevertheless believe that the gospel does work. I know, from my own personal experience, as do most of you who have been Christians any length of time, that if you do something that you know to be wrong in your Christian experience, you're miserable until you get it corrected and get it right. When you do, joy returns and you're able to keep the feast in an exhilarative sense.

I think I've shared before that, in my college years, I stole a history test and successfully negotiated the test. I didn't tell anybody about it except my roommate, who had stolen it with me. I went on being a Christian. I didn't feel all that good about it. But if somebody asked me to stand up and pray in class, I could. I had kind of a nodding acquaintance with God during that time. The question might be asked, if the Lord had come during that time, would I have gone up to meet Him? I suppose that depends on whether you believe in salvation by works or salvation by faith. Or Rapture by works or Rapture by faith. If one unrighteous deed can keep me out of the Kingdom, can one righteous deed get me in? I had no joy in my Christian experience.

Months later, while kneeling in prayer and trying to make progress with God, the Holy Spirit said, "You're not making any progress until you take care of this." The hardest thing I've ever had to do was go knock on that professor's door and apologize and repent for stealing the test. Talk about restoration of joy! A tremendous experience. If you need to repent, repent! Keep the feast. Don't have long collectible accounts on your conscience.

Passover feast is not for a week, not for day, but it's for a lifetime. Therefore, keep the feast.

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

IV. The fourth thing Paul says in this section about discipline is that discipline then defines the limits of Christian fellowship.

He speaks, first of all, about clearing up a misunderstanding that some have about associating with people in the world. He says, “I have written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case, you would have to leave this world” (1 Corinthians 5:9–10, NIV).

A parenthetical note for a moment: Paul groups the world into three classifications. Those that are dominated by the body, the sexually immoral. Those that are dominated by the mind and heart—attitudes of greed and conning people. Then those who are dominated by sins of the spirit—idolatry or substituting one’s own ideas about God in the place of God’s revelation of himself in the Scripture. Idolatry can simply be classified as any idea of God which is our own opinion and doesn’t correspond with the Scripture. Basically, that’s idolatry. It’s not just a some stone image. It’s whatever concept is false.

Paul’s saying, “I wrote you a previous letter.” It’s a letter, by the way, that we do not now have. But he says not to associate with, not at all meaning the people of this world, lest you’d have to come out of the world. Sometimes believers come along and say that we shouldn’t even talk to a non-Christian. And if you talk to him, you should never have one in your house. Sometimes, people’s understanding gets perverted concerning what it means to come out and be separate. The separation is not isolation, but it’s an insulation. It’s the presence of salt in the world. Paul says, “I don’t mean for you to break off your association with those who don’t know the Lord. What I mean for you to do is to not associate with those who are claiming to be believers and yet are acting like this.”

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

Then he goes on to give a list of six things that are qualities of false brothers. “I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat” (1 Corinthians 5:11, NIV). “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside” (verses 12-13, NIV). Then he quotes from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, “Expel the wicked man from among you” (NIV).

The six things that Paul has listed of believers may be countenanced in the world, but they’re not to be countenanced among believers.

A. The sexually immoral. The root cause of sexual immorality may be perhaps identified as a false view of human nature. It views man as a beast whose life is dominated and dictated by purely physical needs and desires rather than by being a child of God, made in His image, with higher goals and concerns. The believer is to withdraw association from those who are living a life of sexual immorality and still claiming to be a Christian.

I don’t know if you’re aware of this going on in our area, but I am. Couples that are living in sexual promiscuity, or adulterous relationships going on, and people saying, “I still go to church. I love the Lord. It’s working out and everything’s alright.” We just simply have to say, as a fellowship and without being Pharisaical or anything else, “We don’t want you to get in the trap of feeling, falsely, that you’re a believer when you’re acting like that. You cannot be treated as a believer and live in sexual promiscuity. You cannot be treated as a believer and be involved in an adulterous affair.” We have to be grieving as we say that. Not censorious. Not coming down on people as some high and mighty Pharisee. But from a spirit of saying, “For you to have that concept is an act of idolatry, substituting what you believe for what God believes. We cannot

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

give you the comfort of treating you as a brother or sister at that particular point unless you repent.”

There's a person who I deeply respected who let their name be used on a board of reference for a group of gay evangelicals. I was grieved at that because it reflected such a tremendous misunderstanding, a disobedience towards what the apostle Paul is saying here. Do not let those who are involved in sexual immorality presume that they have good standing in the faith. Disassociate with them.

B. And the greedy as well. And by the way, sexually immoral is the number one ranked sin. And the number two ranked is greed and number three is idolatry. They're all in the same rank.

The greedy. Those who have this spirit never have enough. Grab, grab, grab. Acquire, acquire, acquire. They have not learned to model Christ, who came, not grabbing, but releasing and giving.

C. Don't associate with such a one, don't associate with an idolater. That is a person who is dead set on following his or her opinion of God rather than the Scriptures.

D. Don't associate with a slanderer. A slanderer is one who brings reproach, one who insults, one who reviles. In practical terms, I'd say, "Beware of the believer who's always running other believers down. Everyone they touch, sooner or later, there's something wrong with them. That is a slanderer.

E. A drunkard. A person who has lost control of their rational self and has simply become addicted. And I'd say that there is a subtle distinction that's needed here. I'd say the last thing a person in alcoholism needs at that particular moment is someone thundering down on them, saying, "You alcoholic, you!" when they know they are trying their dead level best. I think, at that point, there is difference in attitude, whether a person wants to be healed or they want to

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

simply continue as they are. Wherever the want is, there God is going to bring the deliverance.

Paul is speaking to the person who simply is sated with alcohol and wants to still claim to be a believer, but is making no attempt to change his or her condition.

F. And a swindler. Here is a person who can be described as a ravenous wolf looking for the misfortunate, and ready to pounce. That's the idea of this word. Ready to seize someone at their disadvantage. Paul says, "Don't even associate with such a one." The word "associate," by the way, literally means "to mix ourselves up together with." It's more than just saying hi.

Why are we to draw off and why are we to exercise discipline? Because some in the church are better than others? No. But rather, because we must not, as faithful believers, allow persons to consider themselves brothers and sisters in Christ, when, in actual fact, their life is a living demonstration that their commitment is not to Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. I think it's possible that some may be committed to Jesus as Savior, but they have yet to discover what it means to be committed to Jesus as Lord.

We dare not assume the role that God asks of us as a church body or as individual person unless we have a right attitude. Grief over sin and a right action and a right purpose. Sometimes surgery is necessary to save a life. That's why Paul closes with, "Expel the wicked man from among you." By the way, later in Corinthians we see this action work. The man was restored. That's maybe one of the beautiful points, that one of the reasons why the surgeon's knife cuts is not because the surgeon is some cruel guy who likes to cut into flesh, but because the surgeon is concerned with the preservation of life. It's been necessary to cut in order to heal. Surgery has been the last resort.

God has loved us enough to cut into us. And we're to have the same tough love toward one another, recognizing that when we have moments in life when He has cut into us, He also binds

THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

1 Corinthians 5:6–13

up and heals and forgives and restores. We ought to really appropriate that, take a hold of that, as we come to communion. Recognizing that, for everything God cuts away in our life, He is seeking to pour the oil of His presence into us, to bring healing.

Closing Prayer

Now, our Lord, we do thank You for Your Word, which is faithful to us. It calls us, not to follow our emotions or our feelings, but tells us to beware of the sweet trap of seduction. It calls us in faithful and loyal service to You. It calls us to worship You, not only with our heart but with our mind, with our soul, and with our strength. We thank You, Lord, that You've provided a way for us to come to You through Your cross. You forgive all of our sins. You make us new. You long for us to come put our head upon Your shoulder. You long to embrace us and receive us. We thank You for how much You esteem us. That Your love never lets us go. Your love never quits talking to us. Your love never gets so put off by our lack of response that You walk away and say, "I'm never going to talk to that individual again!" But You keep talking, even though Your words may be very difficult for us to embrace or to hear. Yet You're speaking through all of our confusion, our hurt, our sin, our anger, our rebellion. You keep talking to us and saying, "I'm talking to you because I love you. Because I see a vision for your life of what it can be. If you only knew how much wholeness I have for you, if you would but walk toward that." We see that as Your destiny and Your goal for us, and we embrace it. And we thank You that You love us and that we can care enough about one another to confront. Now, Lord, as we gather about this table, we pray that Your Spirit will be here among us in a new way and that we will give honor and glory unto Your name, through Jesus. Amen.