

# The Practice of Church Discipline: Sin and Purity

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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We are finishing our series on What are the Marks of a True Church this morning. We have heard a true church preaches the pure gospel – all of it...the good, bad, and the ugly of the work of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners. We have heard what it means to rightly administer the ordinances of baptism & the Supper – their signs, their meaning, their correct order, their gospel pictures. And we have been introduced to the practice of church discipline these last 2 weeks – it’s an act of love, it’s commanded, it’s rooted in Christ’s delegated authority. Today I will touch on the sin’s severity & a church’s role to maintain purity.

I’m going to read an excerpt for you from a May 3, 2004, LA Times article. Listen closely.

With clapping, cheers and hugs, a Protestant congregation Sunday defied its denomination’s rule against ordaining active homosexuals in the ministry and installed a gay man to serve as pastor of Hollywood Lutheran Church.

Daniel M. Hooper, 56, of Silver Lake, said he’s been in a committed, non-celibate relationship with his partner, Carl Hunter, for nearly 28 years. “This congregation has welcomed me and has welcomed my partner,” Hooper said to more than 100 supporters... “This congregation has torn down the barriers and asked other Lutheran churches to do the same.”

The article goes on to state this: “No protesters attended the ceremony.”

What I just read should shock us...it should stir in us feelings of anger...it should make us want to shout out in protest.

But the shock isn’t over the sin of homosexuality...And make no mistake...it is a sin. No, what should outrage our hearts and cause our lips to protest is that *a church would permit sin and encourage the practice of it.*

Listen again: “With clapping, cheers and hugs...supporters” at that church “welcomed” 2 men actively practicing the sin of homosexuality “without protest.”

What kind of church would turn a blind eye away from sins committed by their members? What kind of church would ignore sins plain and evident to all? What kind of church would tolerate and even *celebrate* over the sins their people engage in?

...This is the church of Jesus Christ, and we don’t act like that!!! We are His spotless bride! We are His pure virgin! We would *never* engage in such arrogant, rebellious, & treasonous acts against Him!.....*would we?*

What we find in 1 Corinthians 5 is exactly that – a church engaged in arrogant, rebellious, & treasonous sin against her Lord: Verse 1 says, “*It is actually reported...* [it is unbelievably reported...it is shockingly reported...] “*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.”

...There is a Corinthian church member – a Christian - who is engaging in sexual sin that is so gross, so filthy, so obscene, that even unbelieving pagans will not tolerate such behavior.

The man is having sexual relations with “*his father’s wife,*” ...in other words, he is having sex with his mother.

Absolutely shocking...it’s sin of the grossest form... “I am astounded,” says Paul, “that it is actually reported in a church of Jesus Christ, founded on His gospel, formed under the banner of His name,” ...this is inconceivable.

At this news, Paul uses severe language in verse 2, “*And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn?*”

*Why does he call them arrogant and insist on their mourning?* ...Because they know about this man’s sin...they were all aware of the gross sin taking place in their church...they have been tolerating it.

And Paul is beside himself, indignantly shouting, “*And you are arrogant!* You ought to be ashamed of yourselves for defiling the Lord who purchased you from sin...you ought to be ashamed for profaning the name of the Lord...You should not be arrogant but “*rather you ought to mourn*” over this horrible sin among you!!

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:4 of an *identifying Christian* mark – “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*”

It is of Christ whom Isaiah prophesies of in the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter saying: “*The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to . . . comfort all who mourn.*” That is, He comforts all who mourn over sin.

How is it possible they are not mourning over this act of treason against God? Did they simply believe, “God just loves, loves, loves!” Or maybe they believed the popular notion “God takes me as I am – unconditional love, you know? Perhaps, they were thinking, “Love covers a multitude of sins! Oh, look how we love!”

No...no, Christians mourn over sin...not tolerate it.

Psalms 119:136, the psalmist states, “*My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law!*” And Ezra chapter 9:4 says because of Israel’s faithlessness, he “*sat appalled until the evening sacrifice!*”

In other words, the whole Corinthian church were to mourn over this man’s wickedness ...not celebrate it.

Why are they tolerating the vile plague that put Jesus under God’s fierce judgment? Why would they entertain iniquities and wickedness in the Lord’s church that He purchased by His own blood?

For Christ loves them. He chose them out of the world by the goodness of His will. He had each person in mind as He endured each scorn, each strike, each lash, each nail. He laid down His life for them to render sin defeated and powerless over them. He was raised from the dead for their justification and lives evermore for their sanctification. Why?

Maybe they had not *savored* the work of Jesus Christ. Or they had not *awed* at the holiness of God. Perhaps they weren’t *satisfied* with the sweetness of salvation...all of these reasons are probable...but I suspect something else is at play here.

Admittedly, this man's sin seems extreme to us...so much more sinful than what we experience in our church and so we are tempted to condemn his massive sin and excuse our tiny ones, but as the late J.I Packer once wrote, "There are no small sins against a great God."

I want to borrow some Puritan thoughts at this point to *stir us*. On one occasion Jonathan Edwards preached, "Never did God so manifest His hatred of sin, as in the death and suffering of His only begotten Son."

Can we even imagine this type of hatred? A hatred so severe, so deep, so pervasive, that I am willing to sacrifice my only begotten Son's life to kill it. I am desiring to put my son through pain...through suffering... through agony...through torture, to destroy what I hate most. Sin is so vile & filthy & repulsive to God that He demonstrated His abhorrence for it by putting His Son to death to rid His people of it.

God's hatred of sin infinitely great.

A preacher named John Flavel shines a spotlight on what I believe is at play here for the church at Corinth. He writes, "If ever you wish to see how great and horrid and evil sin is, measure it in your thoughts, either by the infinite holiness and excellency of God, who is wronged by it, or by the infinite sufferings of Christ, who died to satisfy for it; and then you will have deeper apprehensions of its enormity."

The reason the Corinthians didn't mourn over this man's sin is because they measured its horridness against something other than God.

They did not see the sinfulness of sin. They did not hate it as God hates it...they did not have a deep apprehension of its enormity.

And so, they tolerated that gross sin and verse 6 tells us, they even "*boasted in it.*"

Let's take a moment to consider if we see sin as horrid. Do we have a hatred for it...oh, we certainly do for sins outside in the world – those are appalling & outrageous!...but do we possess a hatred for sins *present* inside our church?

I spoke last week about the sin of forsaking the gathering together. It is a sin to willingly neglect corporate worship, according to Hebrews 10:24-25. But it bears mentioning again.

Week after week we have recognized members of our church who will not gather together because they are angry, they are dissatisfied, they are lazy, they are embarrassed, they are caught up in leisure, they are bitter, or any number of reasons...they simply refuse to worship.

But we ignore that sin. We do not apprehend its enormity. We do not see this evil for the wickedness it is. We do not measure it against the suffering of Jesus who died for this sin. We do not acknowledge the infinite holiness of God, but instead say, "It's no big deal."

And so, *they* are allowed to continue in public sin, as we do not mourn. Public correction does not occur, but rather we become arrogant about this sin, as evidenced by our tolerance of it.

And what about other so-called “respectable sins?” You know, those sins we tolerate publicly thinking they are no big deal.

I suppose we could say much about our idols we find our identity in, or the envy we have toward one another’s successes, or the gluttony we manifest in our physical bodies, or the greed that draws us away from the Lord’s Day, or comfort & ease sought above all else, or anxiety that riddles our bodies & minds by a godless controlling fear, or consumerism that is easily & quickly dissatisfied with what programs we have.

But we have another sin prevalent in our midst, one that masquerades as spirituality...one that is passed off as maturity...one that is visible to all who watch & listen – it’s selfishness.

Selfishness is that attitude of being concerned with one’s own interests above the interests of others. One website says selfishness “refers to an overly high opinion of oneself. Selfishness, then, is akin to narcissism.” It is self-love. According to Phil. 2:3-4 & Rom. 12:10, it is the opposite of “*humility*” and being “*devoted to brotherly love.*” And James 3:16 says selfishness leads to “*disorder and every vile practice.*”

It's not always easy to spot, but its character is to “*demand out of craving,*” and James 3 says it is the product of “*earthly wisdom.*”

The reason I say it masquerades itself is because you will hear people in our church couch it through certain phrases that are intended to sound mature & spiritual. Phrases that are meant to be “Trump cards,” you know, the type of answer that trumps what I’ll say & my wisdom because you used spiritual language...and whom am I to doubt your feelings & your wisdom when God’s name is invoked?

“Let me pray on that and see if I can help you.” Or “I feel the Lord is leading me.” Or “The Lord hasn’t given us clear direction on what we should do yet.” And almost always these expressions are used when the selfish person is considering leaving our church, or apathetic towards helping a struggling member, or withdrawing from service to one another...all of which is concerned with me and not you.

This sin is great among us...as we struggle to find volunteers, as we struggle to get people involved, as we struggle to get people on board with where our church needs to go.

Selfishness is as insidious as refusing to gather together, and having sexual relations with my father’s wife... “There are no small sins against a great God.”

Toleration of sin is like a foul odor that you are around continually – You get used to it and no longer are aware of it...To become sensitive to sin again, requires church discipline.

When sin captivates us, we lose our spiritual senses, and we die.

We must listen to our Lord and do His will, or He will remove our lampstand and extinguish us from being a local church.

I pray we gain back what one writer calls “the brilliance of the grace of our salvation...set against the blackness of our sins. As the Puritan Thomas Watson said, “Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.”

As long as we tolerate sin, Christ is not sweet to us.

There’s a more serious matter I need to address. If you are unable to smell the stench of sin...if sin is no big deal to you, you may be an unbeliever. To any here that cannot sense your sin, because you are dead in it, please listen & hear the word of the Lord.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and you deserve death because “...the wages of sin is death... but [listen] “but, the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Trust in Him alone for salvation from sin, death, & hell – Have faith that Jesus will save you from the due penalty of your sin – the just wrath of God. Repent – turn from your sins and turn to the Savior Christ for life. He will save you to the uttermost, “for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Well, the apostle is about to remind the Corinthian church of their duty to discipline members who sin without repentance.

Let’s read vv. 2-5: “*Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 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.*”

This is strong language...severe language, but necessary language. Paul doesn’t exercise his authority, nor does he call on the elders to exercise theirs, but he states how the whole assembly has the authority and duty to correct this man’s behavior.

Verse 4 says, “*When you are assembled in the name of Jesus...you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh...*”

Church, you must publicly put him under corrective discipline...excommunicate this man...remove him from membership...close the Table of the Lord to him, withhold any membership privileges like benevolence monies, voting privileges, member care. Verse 11 even says, “*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.*” Treat him like an unbeliever by putting him under Satan’s authority, rather than the protective graces of the church. Let him be subject to all that his sin requires in Satan’s kingdom...even up to physical destruction of his flesh.

Why would Paul command this action by the Corinthians? Verse 5 – “... *so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*” Paul is concerned for his soul...he says, “Put him under Satan’s care that he may come to his senses and be saved at the coming of Christ.” This is an act of love to use corrective church discipline.

Did you notice that Paul doesn’t follow the steps of church discipline from Matthew 18:15-20 here? He doesn’t tell the Corinthians to go to him *privately*, one on one, then if he doesn’t repent take 2 or 3 witnesses to confirm the sin and call for repentance. But if he won’t repent then take it *publicly* to the whole church so they can collectively call him to repentance...he doesn’t do that...he moves straight to excommunication...in verse 2 again, he commands, “*Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*” WHY?

Because the sin is well-known in the church...it is well established and verified – in other words its already public. The Corinthians have refused to correct it along *privately* along the way, so Paul moves right to the last step in corrective discipline – Remove him from the rolls...excommunicate him and treat him like a Gentile or tax-collector.

There’s a saying: “Deal with private sins privately but deal with public sins publicly.” On these grounds Paul moves to remove the man.

Again, I want to emphasize the church's role in discipline – it is our duty...our collective duty as members to 1) use discipline to make judgment on sins and 2), maintain the purity of Christ's church.

First, vv. 9-13a establishes a local church's authority to judge sin.

*“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.”*

Verses 12 & 13 are clear – Do not judge the lost *outside* the church...of course they will be involved in sin...that's what unregenerate sinners do...they sin: they are sexually immoral, they are greedy, they are cheats, they are idol worshippers...but God will judge them.

But a church is to judge the ones who claim to be Christian. Those who engage in sexual sins, greed, idolatry, blasphemy, drunkenness, who extort money from one another...we are to judge ourselves when we sin. So much so, we are not to *associate with unrepentant Christians* – engage in fellowship as though nothing is wrong – or *eat with them*, pretending that their Christian witness is intact, and they give a credible witness of faith.

Church, we get this backwards all the time...we love to judge outsiders. Look at the world around us and the flagrant sins committed. From homosexuality, abortion, transgenderism, sexual sins, & adultery...to theft, lies, power-mongering, corruption, & greed.

That's what unregenerate people do, yet we love to judge them harshly, while turning an arrogant eye away from the sins our brother or sister commit in Christ's church.

And second, vv. 6-8 & 13b establish a local church's call to maintain purity.

*“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...Purge the evil person from among you.”*

Paul uses an analogy of leaven, which is often used in the Bible as a picture of sin. Leaven or maybe yeast will permeate a lump of bread dough...it will spread to all parts of that bread loaf and contaminate it...therefore, purge it out before it putrefies the whole lump. Purge out the evil person before he infects the whole body.

It's the “one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel” theology.

For we have been cleansed by Jesus Christ – He was sacrificed for us – for every one of you who is born again, He is your Passover Lamb.

His sacrifice purged our sin, and His substitution makes us unleavened bread of sincerity & truth.

Church, we have been given the duty to judge sins in our body and we have been given the role to maintain purity in this body. Church discipline is not only loving, but it is purifying. Corrective discipline is a means of grace whereby God sanctifies us. All discipline is unpleasant, but it conforms us into Christ's image...

But to tolerate sins and to disregard their foul stench is to become arrogant and boastful. Jesus, the Passover Lamb sacrificed Himself for the purging of sins...to remove its awful taste and deadly consequence. Remember, "Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet." Practicing church discipline makes Christ sweet, for the one offended and the offender.