

"Sin Really is Serious Business" 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Introduction

- In 2004 *The Seattle Times* reported an unusual phenomenon at Seattle's Boeing Field. For some unknown reason engine problems developed in ten brand new Boeing jets. The mechanics, while inspecting the engines with a flashlight, found tiny glass beads, beads about the size of granulated sugar, coating the inside of the engines. The beads were identified as the reflective ingredient mixed with the paint used to paint the runway lines. Boeing officials then walked the tarmac and found one section of recently painted runway stripes where the reflective beads were separating from the paint. Apparently, a defect in the paint allowed the glass beads to loosen from the paint to then be sucked into the jet engines as they powered-up for their initial takeoffs. Those tiny little glass beads not only grounded those ten planes, they ruined every single engine; \$50 million dollars worth of engines on those ten planes.¹
- The church is like one of those planes. Most of the time churches are grounded by the little things. Like those glass beads, it's the accumulation of our tiny granulated sins that collectively get sucked up into the life of the church. And if those tiny granulations aren't dealt with, they build up in the places you can't see, like the church's engines, eventually causing catastrophic failure. For a church to take off and soar, for this church to take off and soar, there must be some kind of accountability one to another, some kind of routine maintenance that deals with the build up of the tiny sins that destroy a church from the inside out.
- Sometimes though, a soaring plane, a soaring church, will suck a bird into its jet engine. That's what happens in the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There are times in a church's life when routine accountability won't cut it. Egregious, flagrant sin, a bird being sucked into the engine, requires an extreme but essential form of accountability—church discipline. I believe, and I think scripture confirms this, it is impossible for a church to be truly healthy and vibrant if it fails to exercise church discipline. The Reformer [John Calvin](#) believed there were only three marks of the true Church: preaching of the gospel, celebration of the sacraments, and church discipline.

Transition

I think the message of 1 Corinthians 5 is crystal clear.

Proposition

- **Church discipline is an essential characteristic of cross centered churches**

Transition

Hang with me as we flesh out what church discipline should look like and why it must be a part of this church.

¹ Submitted to www.preachingtoday.com by Denise Boone Edmonds, an article by Dominic Gates, *Seattle Times*, December 18, 2004.

- The last few weeks we've talked about how and why Christians live like the rest of the world. The sad state of affairs is that we, you and I, really aren't that different from those who aren't Christians—statistic after statistic proves it. Instead of our lives being squeezed into the mold of the cross so that we truly live differently we've let the world squeeze us into its mold. Our lives as Christians should look different than they look and yet they don't. One of the reasons for this is the widespread loss of accountability, which we talked about last week. The other reason is the widespread loss of church discipline. **Church discipline is an essential characteristic of cross centered churches.**
- When you look at the early church in Acts it policed itself in order to preserve its holiness. Think Ananias and Sapphira. High accountability and in extreme cases—strict discipline. In fact, historically speaking, and I don't think this is off the mark; the times when the church has had the greatest impact on the surrounding culture are the times when the church has consistently exercised loving, gentle, redemptive discipline among its members. High accountability to each other and before the Lord who bought us and owns us by his blood.

Transition

Let me try to build the case from scripture as to why church discipline is essential to the cross-centered Christian life. In this passage, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, there are

Organizational Sentence

- **Three (3) very good reasons for making church discipline a part of our church life together**
- Listen to [verses 1-5](#). *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. 2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3 Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. 4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.*

Transition

The first reason for making church discipline an essential part of the Christian life? **A relaxed attitude toward discipline reveals a relaxed attitude toward sin.**

Main Points

- Paul is horrified. Shocked by the situation in the Corinthian church. That there is incest is one thing. That in and of itself is shocking for any church—regardless of the century. But something else has happened that's upset Paul even more than one man's sexual immorality. Notice Paul doesn't even address the man. He addresses the church's response or should we say lack of response.
- What was the Corinthian church's response to this bird being sucked up into the engine? Look at [verse 2](#). Arrogance. Pride. Not prideful arrogance that some dude was sleeping with his mother-in-law. I don't believe that's what they were proud of. It's spiritual pride in

spite of what was taking place around them. The Corinthian church thought they were God's gift of the Spirit filled church. They were proud of their so-called spirituality. Remember they're wise. They're rich in gifts. They're kings Paul says. They're strong. They're honored if you remember his irony from chapter 4? They were boasting of their spirituality in spite of the flagrant immorality around them. And Paul's like whoa-wait a minute. Spirit filled? Spiritual? You've got to be kidding. How can you boast about being spiritual, about having the Spirit, when there's this blatant and outrageous immorality in your midst?² You're nuts Corinthians. You've lost it.

- The appropriate response to sin within the community, especially something that was so public, so flagrant, so glaring, so contradictory to scripture was not arrogance but deep mourning and penitence and brokenness—*shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief?*, [verse 2](#). That's real spirituality. That's what it means to have the Spirit. I think Paul's real horror is not the sexual immorality. Churches are supposed to be full of sinners in need of grace. Please hear me, if you are into something right now that you know is not right, something that you're ashamed of—I don't care if you're in to it up to your neck—you're right where you need to be. God longs to pour out his mercy if you would just humble yourself and turn from your sin and ask for His grace and forgiveness through the cross of Christ.
- From Paul's perspective, the real horror was not that there was sexual immorality in the Corinthian church but that there was sexual immorality in the church and they were doing nothing about it.³ Their relaxed attitude toward sin, which is the reason they failed to censure, to discipline this man, is the real bee in Paul's bonnet. And therein lies the rub. I think the real reason we are so put off by church discipline is because we're just like the Corinthians; we've lost our understanding of the seriousness of sin. Sin just doesn't bother us enough to do anything about it.
- To show you how far we've drifted from the normal pattern of high accountability consider [John Wesley](#) and the early Methodists. You could argue that the modern missionary movement, which impacted the world for Christ in the 18th and 19th and 20th centuries, started with Wesley's societies in England. High accountability and church discipline were regular features of this movement that swept the world. "Wesley himself lived an extremely disciplined life and he wasn't afraid to hold other Methodists to a similar standard. His journal gives the impression that he spent as much time throwing people out of Methodist societies as he did persuading them to come in. During one early visit to Bristol [where one of the largest Methodist societies was], he purged almost 20 percent of the society for sins including drunkenness, dishonest business practices, gossip, theft, arguing in public, and cheating on taxes. Later, when he found a whole group of Methodists whose behavior was substandard, he [told them, and I quote] 'that they were the most ignorant, self-conceited, self-willed, fickle, intractable, disorderly, disjointed society that I knew in three kingdoms.' Evidently the group listened well, for Wesley reported that 'many were profited' and not one was offended."⁴

² Garland, p. 161.

³ Fee, p. 199.

⁴ Charles Edward White, "Spare the Rod and Spoil the Church," Christian History (Issue 69).

- I'm not suggesting this as a model. Wesley's approach leaves a lot to be desired. What I am suggesting is that Wesley and the church in the book of Acts understood something we've forgotten. Sin is serious business. Your holiness matters—more than you realize. This passage in 1 Corinthians 5 isn't about church discipline as much as it is about the serious nature of sin. Sin is sickening. And one reason why, on the whole, the American church looks no different than the culture, why, on the whole, it no longer exercises church discipline is because sin no longer sickens us. **A relaxed attitude toward discipline reveals a relaxed attitude toward sin.**
- Do you really think we're that different from the Corinthian church? Why are we not more broken over our sins? Why are we not grieving and weeping over those things in our life that are displeasing to God? Oh God, break us! Humble us! Prune us! Forgive us for our relaxed attitude toward sin. Do you want this to be different? Vibrant? Difference-making? Do you want to grow spiritually in ways you never thought possible? High accountability to each other and if necessary loving, redemptive church discipline. In the words of [Warren Wiersbe](#), "Church discipline is not a group of 'pious policemen' out to catch a criminal. Rather, it is a group of brokenhearted brothers and sisters seeking to restore an erring member of the family."⁵ Again, the questions need to be asked? Do we love each other enough to tell each other the truth about how we're living? And do we trust each other enough to be able to confess our sins to each other so that it never gets to the point of discipline? Paul cannot imagine an undisciplined church and neither should we.

Transition

We discipline our sons and daughters. Why in the world, in God's family nonetheless, would people who call themselves Christians be allowed to do whatever they please? There must be a place for loving, redemptive discipline. Are you ready for the second reason we need church discipline? From [verses 6-8](#). **All sins are communal sins.** Follow along. *Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 7 Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 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.*

- Verses 6-8 by analogy of yeast and baking bread provide the theological underpinnings for why church discipline is necessary. What the Corinthians failed to realize, just like a little yeast which permeates an entire loaf of dough, is that one man's sin can and will infect the entire community.⁶ *Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?* Maybe the reason church discipline doesn't happen is because somehow we've bought into this fallacy that what happens in private is just that—private. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no such thing as individual private sin. What you do in your bedroom, what you say in private, what you put into your body, what you watch, it doesn't just affect you. It affects us. This. **All sins are communal sins.** A little bit of sin like yeast permeates the entire lump of dough.

⁵ Constable p. 52 quoting Wiersbe 1:586.

⁶ Fee, p. 214.

- It's that way in the Old Testament. Leviticus 4:2. *"Say to the Israelites: 'When anyone sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands-- 3 "If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people. Joshua 22:20. When Achan son of Zerah acted unfaithfully regarding the devoted things, did not wrath come upon the whole community of Israel? I could go on and on and on with scripture to back this up and nothing's changed in the New Testament. We're told to confess our sins to each other, James 5:16. Doesn't get much more corporate than that. There's one body, right? If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. 1 Corinthians 12:26. Listen to me carefully. Individual sins affect the whole community. The appropriate response to individual sin, Old Testament or New, is always corporate. There's nothing private about sin—ever. Personal sins are always community sins.*
- That's why Paul says, continuing with the imagery of yeast, it must be cleaned out. *Get rid of the old yeast, verse 7.* That's what happened at Passover. In preparation for celebrating the Passover, and this is key, before the Passover lamb could be sacrificed, the Israelites were commanded to clear out the yeast. Exodus 13:6-7 *For seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to the LORD. 7 Eat unleavened bread during those seven days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen anywhere within your borders.* Again, nothing's changed—for the Corinthians and for us. We still celebrate Passover. Christ is our Passover lamb. The problem in the Corinthian church was the presence of yeast in the house after the lamb had already been sacrificed. Paul's point is that because Christ has already died we're way past the point of having yeast around. The Passover lamb has been slaughtered. Christ died for our sins, so get rid of the yeast! Do something about this yeasty man in your midst. In the words of David Garland, "There is no such thing as private morality (or immorality) for church members. The sin of one tarnishes all."⁷
- I think what God is asking us to do is, corporately, as the body of Christ, humble ourselves before him. He's trying to get our attention. *If we come near to God he will come near to us. If we wash our hands, and purify our hearts. If we grieve, mourn and wail over our sins. If we change our laughter to mourning and our joy to gloom. If we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will lift us up.*⁸ How are you responding to him right now, this moment?

Transition

What's at stake in all this? Why is church discipline so important? Because, I believe, the nature of the church itself is at stake.⁹ A church that loses its distinctiveness, either little by little through erosion, or all at once through some catastrophic bird sucking incident, ceases to become the church. It becomes something else. That brings us to the third reason we need church discipline. And I get excited about this. I think you will too. From **verses 9-13. A church that disciplines itself furthers its witness for Christ.** Listen. *I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--10 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. 11 But now 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.*

⁷ Garland, p. 181.

⁸ James 4:8-9

⁹ Fee, p. 197.

With such a man do not even eat. 12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

- The obvious question that comes up in this discussion of church discipline is this. If the church takes discipline seriously then how should it relate to the world around it—which is full of sinful people? Withdraw? Separate? Become reclusive? No. Just the opposite. Discipline is necessary to further witness. How is the church supposed to respond to the world? The answer? Fully engaged. Right in the midst of. I love these words from [Craig Blomberg](#). "A holy congregation, which graciously cleans its own house to preserve its purity but which does not expect the same standards of obedience from the unregenerate, can profoundly impact an unholy world."¹⁰
- The reason church discipline is so essential, so critically important is because there is a world around us that's choking on the vomit of its own sin. They need hope. They need to see in your life and in mine that there is another way, a better way. They need to see the way of the cross. When thinking about church discipline, the reaction can be one of withdrawal. "We must pull the holy huddle close so that we're not contaminated." Wrong. That's what the Corinthians thought. *I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--10 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.* Instead, we're to be in the world—just not of it or like it. When you read about what the kingdom of God is like nowhere do you find a holy, reclusive huddle. Instead what you find is something like what [Tony Campolo's](#) describes when he says "God's kingdom [is like] a birthday party for prostitutes thrown in an all-night diner at 3 am."¹¹ And the church, distinct, unique, spotless, without blemish, salty, full of light, disciplined because it takes its witness seriously, is right there in the diner. That's exciting. A church that fails to discipline its members will have little or no impact on the world around it. And a church that takes God's holiness seriously and self-disciplines is poised to make an impact. **A church that disciplines itself furthers its witness for Christ.**
- Again, this passage is not describing a police state where everybody is on the lookout for each other's faults so that they can be reported to the church Gestapo. It's just the opposite. The point is that with routine accountability, with genuine love for one another, with much humility and grace and concern for the body as a whole, in a culture where mutual confession is valued and practiced, where we remind each other of the grace of Christ in our failures, in that type of environment, our individual sins will never mushroom out of control because none of us will ever let the other get that far down the road toward high-handed, hardened rebellion.
- However, the warning from this passage still stands. If you're thinking about leaving your spouse or whatever it is you've thought about doing, be forewarned. If someone who calls himself or herself a Christian refuses accountability and is hardened by their sin to the point that they refuse to listen to the entire body which lovingly screams "this is not right." If that sin becomes a glaring sin, a blight on the church so that the church's witness is compromised. If that sin is repeated and there is no repentance, no brokenness—only hardness. If all means of grace are spurned it is the church's responsibility to enact discipline.

¹⁰ Blomberg, p. 115.

¹¹ Blomberg, p. 114.

- What does that look like? Matthew 18 describes the progression. Loving confrontation on an individual basis. No response? Loving confrontation by a couple of people. No response? After much pleading and begging and weeping, with much humility and sadness, the matter goes before the church. Discipline is not an individual thing. It's not a leadership thing. It's not a political thing. It's not a pastoral thing. It's not a cool, calm, collected decision. It is something the entire church does with great sadness. What does Paul say should be done? *Put the man out, verse 2. Hand him over to Satan, verse 5. Get rid of the old yeast, verse 7. Expel the wicked man from among you, verse 13.* He says it four times in this passage. Excommunicate him. Exclude this man from your fellowship. Not shun him. But remove him from the secure realm of the church. Withhold from that person the benefits of being in a loving, redemptive community. Put that person outside the camp, in the realm of the world, Satan's domain.
- Why? So that this person's spirit, [verse 5](#), might in the end be saved. Discipline is not simply punitive. Its ultimate purpose is redemptive—for the person's benefit—that they might be saved. Somehow, being expelled from the secure confines of the church to be placed in Satan's realm allows for the destruction of the sinful nature so that perhaps, in the end, the result is salvation. "Maybe the most significant thing we can learn from this text," as [Gordon Fee](#) says, "is how far many of us are removed from a view of the church in which the dynamic of the Spirit was so real that exclusion [from the community] could be a genuinely redemptive action."¹²

Conclusion

- In response to what we've heard this week and last. Things have to change. When I look at our church, the way we've structured things, because we're not involved in each other's lives like we should be, through some type of small group experience, we're setting ourselves up for failure. We've got to up the ante when it comes to accountability so that we never get to what I've just talked about.
- As the worship team comes back up to the stage now, I want you respond to what you've heard. Pray individually as they play, but even better pray together in groups of two or three about what you've just heard. And before the music stops, before you leave here today, in obedience to God's word, I want to see ten new small groups formed. I've been praying that the fruit of this message will be 10 new witnessing communities formed right here, right now, today. I'm going to ask you, if you're serious about being hearers and doers of the word, to put your money where your mouth is.

¹² Fee, p. 214.