

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

By Steve Zeisler

Recently I have enjoyed watching my thirteen-year-old daughter coach her eleven-year-old brother in how to become a teenager. Even if it kills her, she is determined to make him an effective version of what a teenager ought to be. As I recall my own teenage years, I remember how important it was to be part of a peer group. The ritual of knowing what to wear and what kind of music to listen to could not be deviated from lest it be noticed that you were different in any way from your group.

The teenage years are a time when young men and women learn certain skills which they will utilize throughout their lives. Every culture has patterns of behavior that must be learned and abided by. Christians, as well as non-Christians, are members of human society, even if only as sojourners. Jesus' followers have an additional responsibility, however. We have to stand for something that distinguishes us as Christians. We must be different than the rest of the world. We are not to abandon the world, but to be distinct from it as we live out our lives in this world.

How can we be "in the world but not of the world"? The apostle Paul addresses this issue in the fifth chapter of his first Corinthian letter, where we take up our study this morning.

I have come to regard this chapter as a commentary on some of the startling things which Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Much of what our Lord declared in this famous address is challenging, to say the least. For instance, he said, "Blessed are those who mourn." How very different than the usual salutation given to mourners! Imagine saying "You are blessed" to someone who is mourning a great loss. Jesus said that it is those who mourn, those who experience painful, difficult circumstances and yet don't cover it up and deny it, but rather mourn over it, who are comforted. Learning to mourn is a very important part of growing up, therefore. Our Lord also said this in the Sermon on the Mount, "If salt loses its savor, it's no good for anything and ought to be trampled under foot." Cities which ought to be beacons to the lost should be set on a hill, not in a valley where they cannot be seen from afar. Jesus is making the point that Christians must be salty and tangy. They must be beacons of light so that people in need will be attracted to come to them. If, on the other hand, Christians are without savor or light, they are good for nothing.

Here is another startling saying by Jesus in that sermon: "If your eye offends you, pluck it out. If your hand offends you, cut it off." If you are contaminating yourself by what you are looking at, then slam the door on those things. If what your hand touches causes you to sin, then you are better off without that hand. If you don't fully reject temptation, the resultant contamination will be much worse than the restriction you will suffer from having but one hand. Jesus is referring to the deadly quality of sin and the tragedy of its contamination. Furthermore, he is pointing out the dire need for Christians to be truly different and to be available to people who are looking for light and flavor. If we are just as contaminated as everyone else, then there is no hope for seekers.

What would become of the church in Corinth, or any church, if they continued to compromise in the matter which Paul now brings to their attention?

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the man who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous or swindlers, or with idolators, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolator, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. (1 Cor.5:1-13)

One of the their members, a young man, was living in brazen rebellion against God. Even worse, they had chosen to overlook his actions, despite the fact that the sin he was participating in was considered heinous even by the non-believing world.

If we consider the kind of conduct that was typical of the residents of the city of Corinth, where sexual immorality of every kind was acceptable, it's rather remarkable to discover that this specific type of sexual misconduct was considered to be abnormal and shocking. This is akin to doing something of a sexual nature in San Francisco that would result in a sense of outrage among San Franciscans. So much is considered acceptable in that city one would have to be very creative in order for something to be regarded as shocking. So for a man to offend the Corinthians by his sexual conduct took some effort indeed.

And yet, here in the church in that city, a young man was involved in an openly incestuous relationship and the church was turning a blind eye to his behavior. The Corinthians considered themselves to be so sophisticated that even such grave sexual misconduct was passed over. Apparently nothing could faze them. Far from causing them to mourn, which was Paul's response to the news, they probably took pride in having such worshiping with them. They did not seem to care what was happening to the name of Christ, to the people involved in this relationship, or to themselves in their passive tolerance of it to do anything about it.

The man involved in this relationship with his stepmother had broken two of the commandments: he was an adulterer, and he was dishonoring his father. In the Old Testament, David's son Absalom chose to proclaim his rebellion against his father with such arrogance that he took women who were committed to David and cohabited in public with them. David was dishonored by his son's actions, which proclaimed that neither God nor he would have anything to say regarding Absalom's rebellion.

I imagine the individual in question in Corinth was a relatively young man. He probably was an attractive person, clever and self-centered. The church may even have enjoyed having a celebrity sinner in their midst. We have already seen that they prided themselves in their tolerance of all kinds of wrong actions. They had become puffed up. They were not mourning over this man's behavior.

When people decide to rebel, one of the most frequent manifestations of their choice is that they become involved in sexual misconduct. But notice the apostle has spent the first four chapters of this letter castigating the pride of the Corinthians, which was manifested in their competitiveness, love of knowledge, etc. Paul therefore is not harping on sexual sin to the exclusion of other kinds of sin. Achen, in the book of Joshua in the Old Testament, and Ananias and Sapphira in the New, forfeited their lives because of their love of money. So sexual sin is not the only form of rebellion which requires open censure. Paul's hard words, rather, are directed against the kind of sin that prompts people to use their sexuality to demonstrate their rebellion against God.

As I prepared for this message, I realized that the most deceitful people, the most brazen frauds, the most vicious liars, the most flagrant sexual sinners I have met in my life are church members. I have encountered some thoroughgoing liars and deceivers among Christians. That is why some people say they hate to do business with Christians; they justifiably expect better treatment from people who claim the name of Christ. It was not just the church in Corinth, it is the church in this country, in this city, in this day that is capable of these kinds of things.

The action that Paul advocated for this young man in Corinth ought to be instructive for us also. Without hesitation, the apostle directs the Corinthians to take the young man and set him outside the fellowship of the church; to not regard him as a Christian; to not allow him to avail of community, brotherhood, worship, and the resources which the body of Christ had to offer in that city. If the man in question was to be saved, that would happen only if he came to his senses.

If someone deliberately rebels against God, he can vicariously feed on the faith and life of others. Such a man can buffer himself from the worst consequences of his actions by allowing the faith and growth of others in the Lord to absorb what should properly be his lot. When the prodigal son demanded his inheritance, the father did not seek to cushion him from the consequences of his choice. He did not retain part of the son's inheritance and set him up in a house in the city. He did not check on him all the time and bail him out when he got into trouble. No, he let him do whatever he wanted to do. Then, when the rebellious son had spent everything in loose living, when he was eating with the swine, the consequences of his rebellion finally came home to him. "He came to his senses," says Luke, and took the first steps toward reconciliation with his father.

This is what Paul wants for this man in Corinth who had so deliberately chosen to sin: that some of the consequences of his sin begin to descend upon him. The suffering that would follow would eventually be the means of his salvation in the day of the Lord Jesus. "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan" (i.e. set him outside the church, into the world, where Satan rules), "for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." There, away from the comfort and encouragement of the Christian body, the man would have to come to terms with what he was doing and face alone the consequences of his actions.

Perhaps I can illustrate what a heavy sentence this is. Last week I spent far too much time trapped in self-pity. I was grumpy and complaining. On Friday evening, however, I attended the Ambassadors' dinner at the church and had a wonderful time. It was a joy to see godly people serving one another in a beautiful setting. The food was lovingly prepared; the fellowship and music were marvelous. I was fortunate to be seated next to a delightful couple (the wife would later give a stirring testimony), and we discovered we had mutual friends. When the dinner ended and I was leaving, I said to myself, "You fool. Why did you waste most of the week feeling sorry for yourself?" I had nothing but thankfulness for the privilege of being part of a community of believers who accepted me and loved me even when I was in the flesh. How painful it would be to me if I suddenly was told that I was no longer welcome among that fellowship! But that is Paul's recipe for this man in Corinth. He would have to face alone the consequences of his sin.

Matthew 18 sets out a series of steps by which the church may identify people who should be treated as "Gentiles and tax-collectors." This is what the apostle is directing the church in Corinth to do. And this, of course, is the final step of a long process. This man was to be treated as an outsider. He must be told, firmly and without hesitation, that the time had come when he was no longer welcome as part of their fellowship. That did not mean that they were not to love him. Christians must be loving and accepting of everyone. But outsiders are not to be treated in the same way as brothers and sisters in Christ. They are not part of that fellowship.

This final step (which Paul advocates here) should happen infrequently, and only after much prayer and many appeals to the person in question to repent of the sin in which he or she is involved. We are not to be vigilantes who seek out sinners among us and exclude them from fellowship. There is to be no enthusiasm for taking this drastic step, only pain that such a decision must be arrived at occasionally. We have had to take this step three or four times in our history as a church. After a long period of prayer and reflection, we had to conclude that a certain individual was so high-handed in his rebellion that he had to be publicly named and treated as an outsider.

This was Paul's decision with regard to the man in Corinth. The time was at hand when he should be treated as an unbeliever. That is not to say that he was to be reviled and hated, but that he must no longer be regarded as a brother in Christ. "If your eye offends you," said Jesus, "pluck it out." At times, radical surgery is necessary to save both the individual and the church.

Notice, finally, that the woman involved in this relationship is never mentioned. The reason is that she probably was not a believer. Paul is very clear in saying (vs.12,13) that a non-believer will be judged by his or her specific refusal to know God. It is not the business of the church to judge non-believers.

In verses 6 through 8, Paul turns his attention from the individual to the church community. In order to save the individual, he must be delivered into the darkness. In order to save the church, the leaven that had been allowed to accumulate must be cleaned out. The Passover is the event which Paul has in view here. Passover is the feast which recalls the judgment of Egypt and rescue of God's people from bondage. In memory of that, Jews were to search out all the leaven in their homes once each year at Passover and dispose of it. Leaven was a symbol of sin, and the clearing out of leaven symbolized the clearing out of sin in their lives.

The saving work of the Lord should lead to purity in the lives of believers. Even a small amount of leaven causes the entire lump of dough to rise. This process happens in secret. There is no way to know that the dough has been leavened until the leaven has done its work and spread throughout the dough.

Perhaps we can draw an analogy with fruit flies. If a single female fruit fly were introduced into this county, the fruit harvest could be devastated. The fruit fly does its work invisibly, reproducing in massive numbers and destroying valuable crops. Leaven works in the same way. Paul charges the Corinthians that they are an arrogant people. One rotten apple among them was threatening to rot all of the other apples and they had to do something about it. They were clean and unleavened, the Lord having paid a price for them. If they were to have an impact for good on their world, they had to be willing to make the hard choice to clean out the leaven, to not put up with it any longer.

Paul calls the Corinthians to worship in "sincerity and truth" (verse 8). He is not speaking of perfection, but of sincerity. Rather than hide and pamper their sin and allow it to fester, they should be willing to deal with it. David Prior writes of these verses, "The world is waiting to see such a church, a church which takes sin seriously, which enjoys forgiveness fully, which in its time of gathering together combines joyful celebration with an awesome sense of God's immediacy and authority."

Verses 9 through 13 deal with the world in which churches are planted. Paul had evidently written an earlier letter, which we do not have available to us, in which he told the Corinthians that they should not associate with one who was immoral. They wrote asking Paul what he meant, and so here he clarifies his word. He was not saying that the church should pull up its skirts and hide in the desert, steering clear of idolators, swindlers and revilers. Christians are meant to live in the world, to have non-Christian neighbors and friends, to serve on the local PTA board with them and allow our children to play in their homes. But we are supposed to be different enough that our lives and our words offer something to them. We are to be the city set on a hill whose light beckons others to the Lord. Here Paul directly contradicts the notion that Christians should band together and associate only with one another.

If, however, there is a so-called brother who is an idolator, a drunkard or a swindler, and he is not fighting against his sin but rather is reveling in it, that man should not be invited to their worship meals when Christians celebrate the Lord's table. The Christian church, says Paul, should live in society but be so different in its behavior that people will notice the difference and be drawn toward it.

In the final analysis, this chapter is about salvation. The apostle wants to see an arrogant young man saved in the day of the Lord, and the only hope the man has is to be forced to live with the consequences of his own choices. Paul fears that if the man continues in his sin, and others also become enmeshed in his rebellion, he may suffer eternal consequences. Paul desires to see this individual, and the church in Corinth, and the whole world saved. Christians must associate in the world with drunkards and frauds, but they must be so different that non-believers will be attracted to Christ.

Chapter 5 of this first Corinthian letter makes a series of hard statements about painful things, an honest admission of failure. Paul is saying the same thing that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, that the offending hand should be cut off, that salt should not lose its flavor, etc. But he is saying these things because if we fail to hear them, we will lose the arrogant young sinner, we will lose our influence as a church, and the world will lose the only source of light by which it might be saved.

Although we might wish there was another means of doing this, there is no way other than painful surgery, a willingness to be cleansed, an admission of who we are and what we could become, a confession of those things and a rejection of them following confession.

Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

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