

SERIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE IN THE CHURCH

INDIFFERENCE TOWARD IMMORALITY

by Doug Goins

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus says, "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

The body of Christ needs to hear these words so that we can take seriously the corrosive, destructive nature of sin in our midst. When we find someone in the body who is consistently living in sinful failure, we are called to redemptively, lovingly, and courageously wade into their life and challenge them for their own good and for the good of the body as well.

This passage in Matthew 18 describes a four-step process in church discipline. The third step in the process is telling it to the church, drawing the entire community into it so that the whole community can pray.

In the fifty years that PBC has been in existence, that step of public discipline has been exercised only four times. In my nineteen years here as a pastor and then as an elder, it has been exercised only twice. Below is a letter that was sent to a man in our body a few years ago. This man was in a position of much-trusted teaching leadership and spiritual direction for the body. In this letter the elders confronted him in preparation for public discipline:

"It is with great sorrow and personal pain that we, the elders of Peninsula Bible Church, inform you of our decision to complete our Lord's directions in Matthew 18 and "tell it to the Body" concerning you and your situation.

In our letter to you of [three months ago] we urged you to 'truly repent and make no provision for the flesh' and to 'stop playing games' of lying, deceit, and adultery. The events of recent weeks clearly indicate you have not repented nor changed your pattern of wrongdoing before God, your wife, and the Body of Christ.

The action we are taking now is to follow our Lord's direction which is designed to be redemptive in your life. We believe this will enlist the PBC Body to pray for you which is a powerful tool for the breaking down of evil strongholds. Again, we urge you to choose genuine repentance which means a turning away from sin.

[At the end of the month] at all PBC services we will share with the Body a summary of the facts concerning your spiritual wrongdoing. This will be done in the context of biblical teaching on this subject."

The church at Corinth was faced with a similar problem of immorality. But the church leaders there, unlike the courageous PBC elders, were unwilling to do anything about it. In chapter 5 the apostle Paul deals with their indifference to this moral problem in their midst. (Chapters 5 and 6 comprise a new section in the letter. The first four chapters dealt with the issues of divisiveness, competitiveness, pride, and prejudice in relationships in the church. These next two chapters deal with moral and ethical issues in the church.)

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in *The Message* captures the apostle Paul's passion. You can almost hear the trembling of Paul's voice. He is very concerned about these people he loves so deeply:

"I also received a report of scandalous sex within your church family, a kind that wouldn't be tolerated even outside the church: One of your men is sleeping with his stepmother. And you're so above it all that it doesn't even faze you! Shouldn't this break your hearts? Shouldn't it bring you to your knees in tears? Shouldn't this person and his conduct be confronted and dealt with?"

I'll tell you what I would do. Even though I'm not there in person, consider me right there with you, because I can fully see what's going on. I'm telling you that this is wrong. You must not simply look the other way and hope it goes away on its own. Bring it out in the open and deal with it in the authority of Jesus our Master. Assemble the community-I'll be present in spirit with you and our Master Jesus will be present in power. Hold this man's conduct up to public scrutiny. Let him defend it if he can! But if he can't, then out with him! It will be totally devastating to him, of course, and embarrassing to you. But better devastation and embarrassment than damnation. You want him on his feet and forgiven before the Master on the Day of Judgment.

Your flip and callous arrogance in these things bothers me. You pass it off as a small thing, but it's anything but that. Yeast, too, is a 'small thing,' but it works its way through a whole batch of bread dough pretty fast. So get rid of this 'yeast.' Our true identity is flat and plain, not puffed up with the wrong kind of ingredient. The Messiah, our Passover Lamb, has already been sacrificed for the Passover meal, and we are the Unraised Bread part of the Feast. So let's live out our part in the Feast, not as raised bread swollen with the yeast of evil, but as flat bread-simple, genuine, unpretentious.

I wrote you in my earlier letter that you shouldn't make yourselves at home among the sexually promiscuous. I didn't mean that you should have nothing at all to do with outsiders of that sort. Or with crooks, whether blue- or white-collar. Or with spiritual phonies, for that matter. You'd have to leave the world entirely to do that! But I am saying that you shouldn't act as if everything is just fine when one of your Christian companions is promiscuous or crooked, is flip with God or rude to friends, gets drunk or becomes greedy and predatory. You can't just go along with this, treating it as acceptable behavior. I'm not responsible for what the outsiders do, but don't we have some responsibility for those within our community of believers? God decides on the outsiders, but we need to decide when our brothers and sisters are out of line and, if necessary, clean house."

First-century Corinth was almost identical to western society today. People then were just as committed to self-gratification as the culture that we live in is. Sexual permissiveness was the norm. The skyline in Corinth was dominated by the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sex, and temple prostitutes plied their trade throughout the city. Worship of sex dominated the life of that city. And the Christians struggled just as we do today to maintain sexual purity or chastity in that corrupt culture. The passage that we just read makes very clear that the church was deeply affected.

TOLERATING SIN IN THE CHURCH

The first two verses in 1 Corinthians 5 really present two problems. There is the problem of the immoral man who is practicing incest. But secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, from Paul's perspective, there is the sinful failure of the church to take it seriously. Let's look at verses 1-2 (from the New American Standard Bible):

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 one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.

Paul refers to incest here using the word "immorality," which is the Greek word *porneia* from which we get our word "pornography." From God's perspective, any sexual relationship outside the sanctity of marriage is

pornographic. Here is a man living in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother. (In Leviticus and Deuteronomy God said that to have sexual relations with your stepmother is just the same as having sex with your physical mother—a wicked, destructive abomination.) The passage also says that this doesn't occur even among the Gentiles. It means that this church member in Corinth was guilty of sin that even his non-Christian neighbors wouldn't enter into or tolerate. We know from reading Cicero that incest was illegal in Roman law.

But as I said before, even more shocking than the sin itself, because the sin is only mentioned in passing, is the church's complacency, its unwillingness to do anything. We have to guess what was behind the lack of involvement. Apparently they had either rationalized or minimized the immorality. Instead of grieving over it, they were pridefully boasting. This word "arrogant" means puffed up. Paul has addressed this issue of spiritual pride over and over again in his opening appeals to the Corinthians. They're so self-confident in their spirituality that they have somehow explained away this incredibly wicked behavior. Perhaps, and we can identify with them at this point, they don't want to be judgmental or condemning. Somehow they see their tolerance as Christian acceptance. Perhaps they want to give the individual plenty of space to work the problem out on his own. Perhaps they're boasting in the fact that their church is so open-minded that even this sinner can be a member. Whatever the motive, and we really can't read their hearts, their arrogance has blinded them to the clear truth of God's standards.

But Paul says they should have been experiencing the most anguished kind of struggle, mourning as if this man had died—feeling shock, hurt, and personal loss. Paul models what he calls them to here in 2 Corinthians 12:21. In that letter Paul is broken-hearted over sin in that congregation. When he anticipates coming to visit them a second time, he says, "I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble [humiliate] me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged." That kind of brokenness, grieving, and willingness to be embarrassed for the sake of another is where the Corinthians should be as a congregation, but they are indifferent.

In the remainder of the chapter, beginning in verse 3, Paul is going to explain how and why they must face into the problem. He gives three reasons why we need to take sin among us very seriously. In verses 3-5 it's for the sake of the individual. Their very soul is at stake. In verses 6-8 it's for the health and life of the church, which is the holy temple of God. We are saints of God, the called-out and sanctified ones. And in verses 9-13 it's for the sake of the lost world around us.

REDEMPTIVE DISCIPLINE

Look at verses 3-5, where we see Paul's concern for this "wicked man," as he calls him at the end of the chapter:

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.

The goal of church discipline that we saw in Matthew 18 is ultimately redemptive and restorative. So this sorrowful prayer is for spiritual renewal in the life of the stubbornly sinful person.

The judgment that Paul says he has already made is very decisive. His evaluation is not in the least bit subjective or personal. It doesn't depend on the agreement of the elders or even on congregational consensus about the individual. It's based on the clear word of Jesus Christ, and that word is reinforced by Paul's apostolic authority. Verse 4 says, "in the name of our Lord Jesus...with the power of our Lord Jesus...." And Paul as an apostle says, "I have already made a judgment," and "I will be with you in spirit."

The Corinthian leaders should have known what to do. They had the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18. And Paul has already spoken to them in a prior letter about dealing with immoral people in their midst (see verse 9).

That first phrase in verse 5, which seems so harsh, "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan..." describes the nature of spiritual discipline to which we're called. What Paul is doing is summarizing that final step in the process of discipline in Matthew 18. After you've gone to your brother in private, appealed to him, and prayed with him, and he's rejected that; and you've taken one or two people with you and again appealed and expressed grave concern, and he's ignored that; then you tell it to the entire church family to recruit them to be praying, to let them know what danger the individual represents. And then finally you're called to change your attitude toward him and treat him as an unbeliever.

The church in Corinth isn't moving through the process. They all know about the sin but have done nothing about it, and are tolerating it. The implication is that they may even be reinforcing it by refusing to deal with it. But Paul says here that they must come to the final step, even though they have ignored the preceding steps. Remember, Jesus said in Matthew 18, "...Let him be to you as a Gentile [pagan] and a tax-gatherer." Paul describes it in several graphic images in this chapter. Verse 2: "...The one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst." Verse 5: "...To deliver such a one to Satan..." Verse 7: "Clean out the old leaven..." Verse 11: "...Not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person...not even to eat with such a one." Verse 13: "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves." That word "wicked" means active harmfulness. The continued presence in the church means a destructive influence, the same effect that Satan himself has in the life of an individual or in the life of the body of Christ.

The world outside the church is Satan's area of influence. So the discipline of the church simply says to this person, "The fact that you can live in such blatant sin after repeated appeals and warnings suggests that you have never left Satan's world. Your lifestyle contradicts your confession of faith in Jesus Christ. We release you from the spiritual protection of the church. In your case that protection amounts to unhealthy avoidance of facing the consequences of your sin. We don't believe it is any longer in your best interests to relate to you as if you were a Christian." It sounds harsh, but the purpose is redemptive.

The goal of the spiritual discipline is, in the words of Jesus in Matthew 18, to win your brother. That's expanded in the second half of verse 5 here: "...For the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." The New International Version (NIV) has translated that first clause, "...So that the sinful nature may be destroyed." Paul is hoping that the fleshly rebellion and the lustful control will be broken in this man. In being given over to his out-of-control passions, he'll end up like the prodigal son. He'll see himself in the pig-pen of Satan's control. And the hope is that through the sinner's sense of alienation from the body of Christ, he will come clearly to see the enormity of his loss, the seriousness of his sin, and will repent and return to fellowship.

Further, when he's away from the influence of the body, it will become clear whether he ever did belong to Christ or not. Ultimately, Paul says, his eternal destiny is at stake. Remember the Peterson paraphrase: "It will be totally devastating to him, of course, and embarrassing to you. But better devastation and embarrassment than damnation. You want him on his feet and forgiven before the Master on the Day of Judgment."

We are still committed to this kind of loving, confrontational discipline at PBC, and we will continue to exercise this redemptive activity because our Lord Jesus commands it, and the apostles reinforce his command. It's difficult to do, and it's terribly complicated. It isn't very popular today. There is always the threat of lawsuits and going outside the limit of the law. And the results are never guaranteed. Of the four cases that I mentioned that have been dealt with at PBC in the last fifty years, two of the brothers have come back into fellowship. Two of the men are still running away from the Lord. But the other two men have repented, both after several years of being out of fellowship and living self-destructive lives. God has restored them to their families and to effectiveness in ministry. They both continue to be valuable contributors to the life and witness of PBC to this very day. In June Candy and I had dinner with the man to whom the letter was sent, and his wife. They were fully reconciled several years ago, and now they minister to couples whose lives are torn apart by infidelity. At the heart of discipline is the absolute confidence that God is a God of forgiveness, restoration, and healing. And you always pray that this is what the stubbornly sinful person will hear and understand through the process of discipline.

I'm not going to say more about that at this point. Discovery Paper 3711, *If Your Brother Sins Against You* ,

is a more detailed study of Matthew 18 based on one of the cases that I mentioned, in which there was a public congregational meeting with many questions and answers. I commend the paper to you if you want to further investigate this process of discipline.

PRESERVING THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE CHURCH

We're also called to discipline because the consequences of not doing so are bad for the life of the church. Sin, the Bible teaches us, is a spiritual malignancy that won't stay isolated in an individual. Unless it is removed, it will spread its infection, and the entire fellowship will become diseased. Look at verses 6-8:

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.

Paul begins the section with another rebuke. In essence he is saying to these people, "Look where your arrogance and your boasting have brought you. Because you still love human wisdom and human recognition and the things of this world, you are completely blind to the blatant sin that will destroy the church if you don't remove it."

He uses the illustration of a piece of leaven. Leaven is a little lump of bread dough that is saved out of the batch. You allow it to ferment or sour, and then it's used in the next batch of bread so that it will rise. The Jews associated fermenting with rotting, so leaven became a symbol of corrosive evil. Paul's point is that just as a small amount of leaven penetrates an entire batch of dough, so too both the incestuous immorality of that one man and the arrogant indifference of some in the church will affect the whole church and will eventually will come to dominate it. Both are sinfully evil and dangerous. Here it's one man and the sin of incest. But in the passage we read in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul is concerned about "the many" who have sinned in impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery. That is the leavening influence of sin in the body of Christ.

He says in verse 7 that we don't have to live this way. Christ already dealt with this issue of sin. Remember, Passover is the Jewish festival celebrating the deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. On that night of Passover, all those Hebrew slaves put the blood of a lamb on the lintel of their doors. Covered by the blood, they were protected from the angel of death and delivered out of bondage that night. From that point on, Passover lambs were sacrificed every year as an offering for sin. Even today, observant Jewish homes in preparation for Passover will go through their homes ceremonially and toss out any sinful defilement they find. Usually it's yeast that they get rid of as a symbol of purification from evil.

For us, Passover is a picture of our deliverance from the bondage of sin. The Scriptures are clear that Jesus Christ is the final, ultimate sin offering, so we are freed from slavery to sin. And we have the resources in Jesus Christ to live undefiled lives of purity and holiness. Verse 7 says we are unleavened bread. That is our identity by virtue of Christ's accomplished work on the cross. We are saints, a holy temple, so we should live out that reality in our daily lives. The call here in verse 7 is to be what we already are. And because of our deliverance from sin through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Passover is a time of joy and celebration. We the church are to keep an ongoing feast of the celebration of God's forgiveness of sin, and we do that by holy living.

Christ has delivered us from our "sourdough" lives of sinfulness. The two words Paul uses to summarize sin, malice and wickedness, are synonymous umbrella terms for any kind of sinful behavior. We don't have to live that way anymore. And the saving work of Christ allows us to celebrate our purity of life, our "sweet-dough" lives, in sincerity and truth. These words both imply behavior that is fully authentic, that has no pretense or phoniness, that can stand the test of the light of day.

I had a phone conversation with a dear woman who is being folded into our fellowship after many years of bitterness and anger away from Christ. Because of the loving influence of six or eight families in this church-they weren't "witnessing" to her, just loving her in the name of Jesus-she was drawn to that "sweet

dough" of their lives. Describing to me on the phone her gratitude and amazement at how God is putting her life back together, she said, "Those people from your church, they're real." I thought, Those are people without the leaven of sin, with authentic behavior influencing her life.

LIGHTS TO THE WORLD

Let's look at the third reason that the church in Corinth needs to deal with this problem of sin. It's for the sake of the depraved culture in which they are immersed. Someone said that the church can't change the world if the church looks just like the world. Pure, holy people of God look different. Spiritual discipline in the church is about evangelism. Verses 9-10 tell us that Christians are not the disciplinarians of the world. We are to witness, not judge.

I wrote 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 and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world.

These Corinthians have misinterpreted Paul's previous counsel about not associating with immoral people. Apparently they have cut off contact with non-Christians outside the church instead of the unrepentant sinners inside the church! Paul says rather humorously that if you're going to maintain that kind of separation from the world, you'll have to leave the planet. We live in a fallen world that is inhabited by a huge majority of fallen people. Besides, sin outside the church isn't nearly as dangerous to the church as sin within its own membership. The world can't destroy us, but our influence can be very destructive. God placed us in the world, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, to be salt and light, to have a beneficial effect. The Lord Jesus himself prayed for the disciples and all of us who would follow them, in John 17:15,18: "I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one...As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world." We are sent into relationships with depraved people. Paul's list is very strong: sexually immoral people; the covetous and swindlers, or greedy and dishonest people; and idolaters, or those who are unabashedly pagan in their value systems. Why are we called into relationship with those people? Paul writes to the church in Philippi (2:15), "...Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world...." We are to sparkle, be attractive, look totally different, so that those people are drawn to Christ in us.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO SEE IN THE CHURCH

Verses 11-13 summarize all the themes of this chapter:

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 idolater, 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.

Paul has expanded the list of serious sinful behavior that can't be tolerated in the Christian community. Sex outside of marriage is not the greatest sin. This list that is added to it is talking about anyone who claims to have a relationship with Christ but who persistently sustains a destructive, abusive lifestyle. The person among us who is not fighting against the sin in his life, but almost reveling in it, is the one with whom we're not to associate. When Paul says not to even eat with those kinds of people, he is referring to the Christian practice of worship in homes. They ate together, and usually around the dinner table they would celebrate the Lord's supper together. Paul says, "Do not invite a stubbornly unrepentant person into that circle of worship and fellowship."

Verses 11-13 explain the logic of the commands in verses 9-10. The church's spiritual oversight is limited to its own members. God will take care of the unbeliever in his sin. In fact, the fate of the unbeliever, if they never come to know Christ, is so bad that we Christians shouldn't add to their agony, but should try instead to lead them to Christ. By reversing their misunderstanding of his previous letter, Paul calls the Corinthians, and us with them, to model God's counter-cultural standards before a watching world, rather than trying to impose

those standards on society as a whole.

It struck me last week that verses 9-13 contrast sharply with prevailing political agendas to Christianize the whole society. We are to devote the bulk of our energies to modeling Christian ethics, to speaking out truth in terms of Biblical standards. We're supposed to model a lifestyle that is different, individually and collectively.

Craig Blomberg describes our calling as a church in the context of 1 Corinthians 5. He writes, "[1 Corinthians 5] reminds us of the enormous evangelistic potential of a Christian community...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. To quote [David] Prior... '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.' But 'that will never happen if we refuse to come into costly, compassionate contact with men and women of the world.'"

We must take sin seriously for the sake of the people who are dying in their sin in the lost world around us, but more immediately for the sake of the brother and sister in our own fellowship who is living in sin. And we must take it seriously for the life and health of the body of Christ.

Perhaps you realize you are living in willful, deliberate sin, that there is an ongoing pattern that you need to repent of. You can experience forgiveness and reconciliation to your Father right now. Perhaps you need to work on restoring some relationships in the body that have been broken because of sin on your part.

Perhaps you've realized that you're light-weighting sin, that there are people who are dear to you whom you need to lovingly challenge with the truth, and you've avoided that. You must repent of that. This could be a great time to deal with it.

Notes:

1. Peterson, Eugene. *The Message*. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1993, p. 344.
2. From *New International Version* (NIV).
3. Blomberg, Craig. *NIV Application Commentary (1 Corinthians)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, p. 115.

Catalog No. 4518
1 Corinthians 5:1-13
Eleventh Message
Doug Goins
August 10, 1997

Scripture quotations taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION are identified as such herein. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. All other Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE. © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

- [Peninsula Bible Church Home Page](#)
- [Discovery Publishing: Books, sermons, tapes.](#)

[Copyright \(C\) 1995 Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety

for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.