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Church

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When It's Right To Judge

1 Corinthians 5

Mark Mitchell

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series: crazychurch

Sometimes we paint the 1st century church with a brush of idealism. We see the early church as a nostalgic example of community and sinlessness. The church in Corinth, however, was anything but ideal. Rather than sharing their possessions, they sued each other to get more stuff. Rather than eating meals together, they cut in line during communion to get drunk off the wine. And rather than singing together they were sleeping together. That's why we've called this series "Crazy Church." There were all kinds of crazy things happening there and yet at the same time they were still as Paul called them in his opening words, "the church of God...sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy."

We come this morning to what was perhaps the most distressing aspect of the church in Corinth. The city of Corinth was part of a sexually perverted culture. It may sound a lot like a place you've heard of—where everyone has a lot of tolerance and freedom sexually, where there is even a sense of pride over this. Corinth had a history of being a sexually charged town. It was a classic port city with lots of people coming and going. It's like, "What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth." It had a temple with 1,000 prostitutes serving a part in cultic worship. It was the kind of place that had alternative lifestyle parades. Sometimes the rich would throw banquets and each guest would be assigned a personal prostitute. They had sex before marriage, homosexuality, bisexuality, prostitutes, strip clubs, and open marriages. Just about anything you can think of that happens in our present day happened there. It was so bad that, throughout the Roman empire, if you were a prostitute, they'd call you a Corinthian girl. STD's were widespread. They didn't have the medicine to deal with them, so they built shrines that people would visit to be healed. It was their version of the ancient Greek clinic.

Corinth was a culture you could look at and say, "How disgusting!" But it's probably not quite as bad as the one we exist in. Americans spend more money each year on pornography than country music, rock music, jazz music, classical music, Broadway plays and ballets combined. Pornography is a \$10 billion industry, bigger than the NFL, NBA, and Major League Baseball combined. Annual rentals and sales of adult DVDs is more than \$4 billion a year. There are 11,000 adult movies made every year, more than 20 times the number of other films made. The top word searched for on the net is "sex." 70% of porn traffic occurs between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. while people sit at their desk at work **not** doing their job. The National Council on Sexual Addiction estimates between 6% and 8% of Americans are full-

blown sex addicts who have had hundreds of sexual partners and look online at pornography for an hour every day: addiction. There are more than 2,400 strip clubs in America. Some of them make upwards of \$8 million a year with as many as 200 dancers. And it starts very early; 61% of all high school seniors have had sex. About half are sexually active, and 21% of high school seniors have had four or more partners. Adolescents have the highest STD rates—3 million cases a year.

I don't have to tell you here in the San Francisco Bay Area all of these statistics are greater because we're the epicenter of this so-called sexual revolution. So not just nationally but even more so our Bay Area culture is like the Corinth Paul's church lived in. But here is the real shocker: there was something going on in the church at Corinth that was even over the top for that corrupt city. Even in Corinth there were lines they wouldn't cross and yet the church Paul founded had managed to tolerate and even celebrate a situation not even a self-respecting pagan would have permitted.

The problem stated.

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. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst (1 Corinthians 5:1–2).

That's what Paul says in verses 1–2. He says, "*It is actually reported that there is immorality among you...*" The word "immorality" is a junk-drawer word. It includes any kind of sexual immorality, which means anything and everything besides sex within the covenant of marriage. Anything outside of that is immorality. But he speaks here of "a kind that doesn't even occur among the Gentiles (pagans)." This is bad. When the non-Christians are looking at Christians and saying "That's wrong!" we have an even bigger problem, don't we?

He says, "A man has his father's wife." We call that incest. Is this his mom? Most likely it was his step-mother. Hopefully, his father had died, but we don't know. It's still wrong and it was even a taboo in that culture. We say, "Well, two consenting adults have the freedom to do whatever they want. Who are we to judge? That was the Corinthian response. And not only that, Paul says, "You're arrogant about it. You're proud of it! You have buttons

and bumper stickers and parades to show off your tolerance and diversity and freedom."

Paul was more upset about their response to this sin than he was over the sin itself. He says, "You should be in mourning. You should be heartbroken over this." People who profess to be Christians can become so calloused and filled with pride and perversion they reach the point where they not only have sexual sin, but they flaunt it publicly. They come to church together. They sit next to each other and hold hands and sing songs, and take communion, and the church isn't even grieved but says "Look how tolerant and loving and open minded we are."

What to do? The need for church discipline.

So what should they do? What should we do? At the end of v. 2 Paul says you should have mourned *"so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst."* Then down in v. 13 he quotes from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy which says the same thing, *"Remove the wicked man from among yourselves."* And in between in v. 11 he says he'd already written them in a previous letter that they shouldn't *"associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, not even to eat with such a one."*

This is what for centuries believers have called church discipline. I realize this may be a totally foreign and even weird concept to many of you. Maybe you've heard of groups like the Amish who still "shun" people and you have a hard time swallowing the idea that the church should engage in anything like that today. Let me clarify what we mean and don't mean by this. What it means first of all is the church community is not a free-for-all gathering; it has some coherence in its membership, it has some lines which it's possible to step over, some controls over who participates in its life together. In this sense it's not all that different from almost any other organization in the world. Isn't the same thing true in schools? Every school has boundaries and rules and lines which if crossed can get you expelled. It's true in organizations like the Boy Scouts. Even country clubs do this. I was a guest at a country club recently and they made me put on a tie before I entered the dining room. How discriminatory is that? The church isn't unlike other groups in this regard. We have boundaries. For us, these boundaries are defined in the Bible. His word tells us what's right and wrong; what's pleasing to him and what's not.

So what happens when someone sins? Of course, I never sin and you never sin, so this is just hypothetical, right?! But sin does happen in the church and we all know that. Not a day goes by that we don't sin. Paul called himself the "chief of sinners." John says, "If you say you have no sin you lie and there is no truth in you." So how can we do what Paul says here and not kick everyone out of the church? Everything depends on the attitude towards the sin. When we sin, we're called to confess that sin and repent of that sin and claim the forgiveness and grace that we can only find in

Christ. Sometimes we fight particularly stubborn sins that stick like glue and we need the prayer, counsel and accountability of fellow believers. But the point is we're calling sin what it is—sin! And we're not justifying it and we're certainly not gloating over it; we're dealing with it. But Paul is talking about someone who is living in sin and flaunting it; he's proud of it.

Paul says in those cases to remove the man from your midst; don't associate with him; don't even eat with him. Here is what I believe that means: It's not the rejection of a relationship but a change in the nature of the relationship. It has nothing to do with "shunning" a person. That person is welcome to attend church services like anyone else it, but they are not viewed any longer as believers and they're not welcomed into the intimacies of church fellowship. The word "associate" in v. 11 describes a kind of intimate fellowship. When he says not to eat with them it's very likely he's talking about the Lord's Supper and what the early church called love feasts. The Lord's Supper (Communion) is one of those times when the believing community comes together and shares a sacred meal and time of worship around the body and blood of Christ. These people are not welcome to participate in that. That doesn't mean you're unkind to them or ignore them when you pass them on the street. You don't take them off your Christmas card list. You continue to treat them graciously and lovingly but just not as a fellow brother or sister in Christ. The relationship isn't over but it has changed.

And by the way, you don't get to the place where you do this hastily. In Matthew 18 Jesus outlines a four-step process that takes time and involves many conversations, much prayer, and certainly a lot of pain. Jesus said if your brother sins in the way I described a moment ago you should start by going to him in private and trying to get him to see that and deal with it. You don't talk about it with others; you don't make it a prayer request in your small group; you privately go to that person in a loving and gentle way. Then he says if he won't listen to you take one or two more with you to talk with him. You want to make sure it's not just you against him; your word against his. But if he won't listen to two or three of you Jesus says then take it to the church and if that doesn't do it, then treat him as an unbeliever. So that's four steps with presumably a fair amount of time and prayer and tears between each step. It's not a hasty thing.

What Jesus described will take place all the time in a healthy church. It's not something that only the pastors or elders are involved with. This is the responsibility of each and every person in a church family. It rarely becomes known by the whole because thankfully the intended result of bringing that person to repentance often takes place. Unfortunately, very few churches are committed to this process. Some churches are afraid of lawsuits. Other churches are afraid they're being judgmental and unkind. Didn't Jesus say, "Do not judge lest you be judged"? But Jesus was talking about personal criticism of another person and one

in which you have a log in your own eye that you don't even acknowledge while your friend has a mere speck in his eye. Jesus wasn't talking about believers who persist in defiant sin. But still, didn't Jesus love sinners and hang out with them? How can anyone judge when we're all far from perfect? Let me ask you: Is a doctor considered unloving or judgmental or intolerant if he says you have a tumor growing in your brain and he needs to remove it? Do you want a doctor who tolerates a tumor that could kill you? Of course not! Unrepentant sin is as harmful to us as stage five cancer; the most unloving thing is to ignore it.

Why to do it? The reason for church discipline.

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, so 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 so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (verses 3–8).

That's what Paul tells the believers in Corinth in verses 3–8. He gives two reasons church discipline is necessary. Both are positive.

First of all, the purpose of church discipline is redemptive in the life of the person who is in sin. This comes out in verses 3–5. Paul says, "Listen, even though I'm not with you in body, I am in spirit. And I've already judged this man as if I were there. Now it's up to you to deliver the verdict with all the authority and all the power of the Lord Jesus himself." Then he says "*deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus.*" My goodness, what's that about? Well, handing him over to Satan is the same thing as treating him as an unbeliever. By doing that he's placed under Satan's dominion. There are two dominions at work in life: The dominion of Satan and the dominion of God. These are invisible but they're real. And when you're a believer you're in the dominion of God's grace, protection and provision. But when you're in Satan's dominion you're put back out into the world where the enemy holds sway over people.

But the result is positive. He says you do this "*for the destruction of his flesh.*" By "the flesh" he doesn't mean his literal body as if he'll die. That would hardly be redemptive. But rather "the flesh" is his sinful nature which has taken over his life. We all battle the flesh but when we give into sin and tolerate sin the flesh takes

over. So the idea here is the offender, cut off from the approval and support of the church community, will see what the world is really all about until he comes to reach a change of heart. It's almost like that person is taken out of protective custody and dropped, defenseless and disowned, in enemy occupied territory. As they say in recovery, the hope is he'll hit rock bottom. This is what we call tough love. He'll see that Satan is a liar and murderer. He'll see the wages of sin are far steeper than he cares to pay.

But the purpose of this is redemptive: "*so that his spirit will be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*" There is a lot at stake here, isn't there? We do this so when the final day of judgment comes this person will be among the saved. If he continues on as an unrepentant sinner his salvation is at least in question. We want him to be saved for eternity. This is the hope and purpose of church discipline.

The second reason church discipline is necessary is also positive. If the first reason is for the good of the one in sin, the second reason is for the good of the church. That's what Paul is getting at in verses 6–8. The imagery is borrowed from the Feast of the Passover when the Jews, remembering their deliverance from Egypt, would take the blood of a lamb and sprinkle it over their door posts so the angel of death would "pass over." Then they would gather and eat the meat of the lamb that had been roasted. Before this they would go through the house with a candle and a broom and search out all the leaven that was in the house, for the Lord had said they must never eat the feast with leaven. Even today Jews will go through their house and remove any form of leavened bread before they celebrate the Passover. Leaven is consistently used throughout the Bible as a symbol of evil. Paul says the problem is "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." Sin spreads. It's contagious. One person says, "It's no big deal. I can live with my boyfriend and no one says anything; no one judges me." Her friend then says, "Cool. I guess I'll do the same thing. The church doesn't seem to care. Maybe God doesn't care either." So church discipline is necessary to arrest the spread of sin and compromise through the whole congregation.

Paul says something very important here. He says you are in fact unleavened. Why? Because Christ the Passover has been sacrificed. In other words, he's cleansed you from sin, now you have to live out what you in fact are. This is what sets Christianity apart from moralism. Moralism says "you are what you do." The Christian faith says "you do what you are." You're holy. You're unleavened. You didn't earn that; it was a gift. Now live out what you are. That's what it means to "celebrate the feast." It means to live out your Christian life, knowing that you've been cleansed and set free from sin. It doesn't mean to live in sinless perfection, but as he says here in "sincerity and truth." When we live in sincerity and truth we admit sin, judge sin and repent of sin when we see it in our lives; taking a broom and candle through

our spirit and cleaning out the leaven and thus celebrating the feast. I know Paul wasn't talking about the feast of Thanksgiving or even Christmas, but at this time of year we should be able to relate to this language. What if we were determined to celebrate this season by cleaning out the leaven in our lives? No malice. No wickedness. No leaven. Christ has come! He came to die so that you and I could be new people. And that's what we are! Let's live that way. Let's be what we are.

Who to do it to? The realm of church discipline.

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. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is 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 (verses 9–13).

So we've seen what to do in the case of unrepentant sin. We've also seen why to do it. But in the last few verses Paul clarifies who this is for. In a previous letter, Paul had said something about not associating with immoral people, and the Corinthians thought he meant not to have anything to do with unbelievers who lived in sin. So they stayed away from unbelievers. They turned their noses up at people in the world.

It's amazing how the very attitude Paul was trying to correct has pervaded the church today. I meet people all the time who think this way and refuse to have anybody come into their homes who isn't a believer, or who avoid social functions where unbelievers will be doing things that might be offensive to them. So we create a kind of Christian ghetto mentality where we retreat from the very people we should be reaching out to. We build a life where we really don't have much meaningful contact with unbelievers. We don't like those people; they use bad language and do bad things. But Paul says we can't leave the world. As a matter of fact, Jesus left you in the world so you could be salt and light in their lives. We belong in the world but we're not of the world. That's why Jesus hung out with all those nasty people. We don't judge them; God will do that in his own time. We love them and reach out to them to help them to see their need for Him.

He makes it very clear: We're not to judge the world; we're to judge the church. This is our responsibility to one another. Paul gives a whole list of things we're to judge. It's not because they're hard to live with or annoying. But if they're immoral, greedy,

idolaters, revilers (i.e., constant critics), or drunkards, or robbers then they're to be judged by the actions of the church in the way we've already seen. So it's not just immorality; it's all these things.

Why do we expect more of non-Christians than fellow Christians? Why do we allow all kinds of compromise within the church but we turn away from those on the outside? We have it all turned around. When it comes to those within the church who call themselves believers we're willing to excuse all kinds of sin. "It's no big deal. He knows the Lord. Who am I to judge him?" You're his brother or sister in Christ and if you don't judge him you're failing both him and God. *"Iron sharpens iron"* the Bible says, *"so one man sharpens another."* It also says, *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend."* Confront your brother. Judge your brother. But, an unbeliever? He's just doing what comes naturally to him. Love him. Accept him. Share Jesus with him.

Conclusion

If this passage freaks you out a little bit I think that's good. It's a reminder that we serve a holy God. Throughout Scripture when God's people take sin lightly God doesn't sit by and say "No big deal." He acts. He brings holy discipline to bear on his people.

So this is a challenge to us as this Advent season begins to clean out the leaven. Stop dabbling with sin! Deal with it! As you do that keep in mind that you can't do it alone. You need the help of the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers. We often get stuck in the mud of sin and we can't get out without calling for help. We have people that will pray for you this morning right here after the service. We have a very effective biblical counseling ministry; perhaps that's where you start. You should also be in a small group where you share your life and your struggles and your need for prayer and support. We're in a battle; no soldier goes to war alone. So often in a larger church like our own it's easy to hide. You come to church five minutes late and shoot out the door when it's over and there's no connection. No one knows you well enough to know about, much less talk about unrepentant sin. For many of you the first step is to be willing to be known.

Others of you are on the other end of this. You've been way too passive with your believing friends. You watch them wallow in continual, unrepentant, known sin, and you don't say anything because you don't want to risk the friendship or you're afraid to be called judgmental. You need to repent of your cowardice and the idolatry of that friendship and say something in love. You not only have the right but you have the responsibility to judge your brother.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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