

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Separation I Corinthians 5:9-13

The moral and doctrinal standards of the Christian church in America have never been so low as they are today. Doctrinally the church is in trouble. A person can almost believe whatever he wants and still call himself a Christian. This will lead ultimately to spiritual shipwreck. Did you know that 104 out of the first 119 colleges in the USA were established for the express purpose of training evangelical preachers? Over the centuries we have watched these colleges abandon Christianity as set down in the Bible and become liberal or totally secular. Many of the great denominations, rooted in the biblical doctrines of the Reformation have gone liberal or apostate within this generation. It is not uncommon to hear people in liberal churches say, "They don't preach the Bible in our church anymore," or "Our church stands for nothing but falls for anything," or "The church is full of hypocrites." All this reflects the low spiritual condition which actually exists in most American churches.

The church is also in trouble morally. One of the pressing problems is what to do about the increase in sexual immorality among Christians. It is common news to hear of Christian leaders who have left their wives to have an affair with another woman, or of ministers coming out of the closet to declare their right to be an active homosexual, or of seemingly spiritual Christians filing for divorce, or of so-called Christian teenagers who are up to their ears in sexual promiscuity. Every local church is facing one moral crisis after another. Why? Because the church is weak and worldly.

What is the need of the hour in the church in America? It is to exercise discipline on its members so that doctrinal and moral purity are maintained. The local churches must do what Paul exhorted the Corinthians to do when they had sexual immorality invade their local church.

If the church is ever again to be revived in America and have a dynamic impact upon society, it must observe the rules for church discipline set down in First Corinthians five and other parts of the Bible. The church cannot always prevent evil, but it can exercise church discipline over its members.

Most denominations and local churches would agree theoretically that the three marks of a biblical church are: 1) faithful preaching of the Bible; 2) faithful dispensing of the sacraments; 3) faithful exercising of discipline. If this is true, then there are many churches in America which are not true churches, for there is little or no discipline exercised.

In the Corinthian local church there was a man guilty of having a adulterous, incestuous sexual affair with his stepmother. This sexual immorality was being tolerated by the Corinthians because they thought they were being loving and broad-minded. They should have been mourning over this sin in their midst, but instead they were filled with intellectual pride, accepting a libertine approach. Paul made an Apostolic judgment on this offender and found him guilty. Therefore, the church was to remove the offender from their midst by excommunication and he was to be turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh; that is, he would be put into the realm of Satan's control as an unbeliever. Satan would inflict some disease or bodily injury that might shake up this incestuous adulterer and bring him to repentance so he might be saved in the day of judgment.

All church discipline has as its objectives the following: 1) the restoration of the erring brother or sister to full fellowship with the Lord Jesus and with the local church; 2) the protection of the doctrinal and moral purity of the church; 3) the preservation of the church's testimony before the unsaved world; and 4) the recognition by the Christians in the church that discipline will come to them if they transgress God's moral law and fail to repent. Following Christ and being part of a local church is a serious, God-given responsibility, and it is not to be taken lightly.

"The member of a church that is not willing to submit to the authority and discipline of it should not be a member of a church. On the contrary, a church which is not willing to discipline its members, should not be called a Christian church" (Victor Cruz).

SEPARATION FROM THE UNSAVED 5:9-10

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. Paul had written a previous letter to the Corinthians which is lost to us today. God never intended that first letter to be in the Bible. The Church has all the inspired scripture which God designed for her edification, and with this we should be content. In that previous letter, Paul evidently said something about not associating (mixing it up with) immoral people, and the Corinthians took it to mean they were not to have anything to do with the unsaved people who lived immoral lifestyles. They wrongly thought they were to have no contact, no dealings and no associations with unsaved people whatsoever.

There are many sincere Christians today who are hyper-separationists who will have no or certainly as few as possible, dealings with the unsaved. Ironically, once they are saved, they want nothing to do with the unsaved world out of which they were saved. We must make a distinction between doing the same things as the unsaved do and not associating at all with them. We know Jesus ate with publicans and sinners, and the Apostle Paul told Christians it was permissible to accept invitations into heathen homes. "If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience"(I Cor. 10:27).

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. Paul corrected their misunderstanding. He was not talking about association with the unsaved, for if he were, then the Christian would have to leave this world because the vast majority of this world is made up of unsaved men and women. The "immoral" are those who are sexually immoral and we know this includes the majority of single and married folks outside of Christ. "Greedy" refers to those who desire to have more; those who have money as their god. The love of riches is just as vile a thing in God's sight as indulgence in ungodly lusts. "Swindlers" refers to those who are robbers in any shape or form. "Idolaters" refers to those who worship idols or false gods whether of wood or of the imagination. Paul was not forbidding some social relations with the unsaved or business and everyday contacts. It is impossible to live without having some contact with the unsaved world. Christians may find themselves living next door to people who are ungodly, or working in an office with unsaved folks, or sitting down to eat at a restaurant where fornicators, adulterers and homosexuals are also eating. Christians obviously cannot withdraw themselves from all such persons without leaving this world physically. Actually, Christians cannot avoid the world because they are sent into it. They must penetrate the world, not separate (isolate) themselves from it.

Paul was not advocating hyper-separation or isolation from the world by Christians. They must have contact with the world if they are going to reach the unsaved for Christ. Even solid evangelicals have a tendency towards extreme separation at times. When people say, "I'm not going to invite unsaved people over to my house because they smoke," they are not being Christlike. How many Christians there are who refuse to work for non-Christians, and there are Christian businessmen who want to work only with other Christians. Now it is not wrong to have a Christian business or work for a Christian company, but most of us will have to work and associate with the unsaved at some time. Christians are to witness to their employers by being good at their jobs, doing their work without complaint. So many Christians are addicted to mediocrity because they don't like working for the unsaved. Surely there is a balance between being with and working with the unsaved so as to witness to them and doing the same things the unsaved do. The unsaved may have habits which are offensive to us, but they must be reached. Most unsaved people have never seen Christians in action because the Christians have committed themselves to a false view of separation. The key in witnessing is to find the balance between hyper-separation and worldliness, and only Christ can teach this to us through a His Word and the school of hard knocks. Our task as Christians is to show friendship, kindness and love to a hurting world, reaching out to help them see their need, and to see the Lord Jesus who can satisfy the hunger of their barren hearts.

SEPARATION FROM THE SAVED 5:11-12

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. What Paul meant was that if a brother or sister in Christ has an immoral life there is to be no contact at all with a person who professes (so-called brother) Christ and lives an ungodly lifestyle, indicating he may not be a real Christian at all. If a professing believer is having an immoral life or is teaching false doctrine, then that one ought to be marked out and set apart from the other Christians.

"I urge you, brothers, to watch out (mark out) for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Rom. 16:17).

The Corinthians, as many Christians today, had it all backward. They thought they should not associate with sexually immoral unsaved people while they could associate freely and even approvingly with Christians who were immoral. Paul's principle is: involvement for witness; isolation for discipline.

Paul was not only talking about professing Christians who are guilty of sexual immorality but also about those professing Christians who are guilty of being "greedy" (those who love money more than Christ and who live opulent materialistic lifestyles), of being an "idolater" (those who worship idols of wood or idols of the mind, for anything placed ahead of Christ is one's life is idolatry, so a man's idols may be his house, his boat, his wife, his children, his job or whatever), of being "a slanderer" (those who are vicious talkers, evil speakers, gossips who can destroy the reputation of another just as a murderer drives a dagger into the heart to destroy a life), of being "a drunkard" (those who are excessive drinkers, using alcohol to get a buzz), of being "a swindler" (those who take advantage of another's poverty, or of his necessities to secure exorbitant gain; therefore an employer can steal from his employee by not paying adequate salaries or an employee can steal by not giving an honest day's work).

Paul makes it clear that it is legitimate to bring church discipline upon a brother or sister who is in sin over sex, money, possessions, drink and tongue. Other New Testament passages give additional reasons to bring discipline such as doctrinal error (Rom. 16:17-18), an insubordinate spirit (II Thess. 5:14), and laziness and gossip (II Thess. 3:6-15).

With such a man do not even eat. A brother or sister who is in sin and who has been confronted about this sin and yet refuses to repent of the sin is to be excommunicated from the local church. This involves not associating with him. Christians are not to keep company with other Christians who are in sin. For clarification, Paul is not talking about withdrawing fellowship from a Christian who falls into sin; all Christians do that at times. He is talking about withdrawing fellowship from a brother or sister who has a habitual lifestyle characterized by sin with no desire for repentance. The Greek word "associate" means "to mix it up with" or "to have intimate social intercourse." In context, "not even eat" most likely refers to ordinary meals

and not the Lord's Table, even though an excommunicated Christian would not partake of the Lord's Table with God's people. Christians are not to invite an excommunicated brother or sister over to the house for tea and cookies because they feel sorry for the person. Why? Because the person is under discipline by the local church with the goal that he or she will come back into fellowship with the Lord and the local church. How far does this go? If Christians casually meet a brother under discipline in God's providence, they are not to look at him as an enemy but as a brother, but they are to admonish him to repent of his evil deed.

"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (II Thess. 3:14).

An excommunication ban does not necessarily apply to a family relationship. A wife would not shun her husband if he were under discipline. Parents would still associate with a daughter if she were excommunicated because family relationships take precedence over church relationships.

For emphasis, it should be stressed again that discipline should be meted out not only for sexual immorality but for greed, idolatry, drunkenness, gossip and rebellious attitudes. Such actions might cause consternation in most churches today which have become very complacent, but it might also bring stirring and a surprising awakening. It might even bring revival! LaTourette, a church historian says this about Tertullian, an early church father,

"Tertullian challenged the critics to find one Christian who had been accused of sacrilege or seduction or who was an assassin, a cut-purse or a stealer of the clothes of bathers. He declared that Christians were guiltless of lust and of some of the misdeeds of which pagan philosophers had been accused, or that if Christians fell into such sins they were cut off from the fellowship of the church" (A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. I, p. 125).

One time when I visited California, I visited one of my friends who was on the staff of a very large church (1500). He shared with me all the ministries of that local church and I was spellbound. Then I asked him if the church ever disciplined its membership, for that is one of the biblical marks of a New Testament church. He stopped and thought for a long time and said, "We don't really exercise church discipline because the church is too large to do it." I then thought to myself, "This church, then, is really not a biblical church no matter how many ministries are going on in that place." A large church is often a hindrance to good discipline, especially when there are not active, ministering elders who know something of the lives of the flock.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? Paul made it very clear it was not his responsibility, nor is it any Christian's responsibility, to bring any kind of discipline upon the unsaved in the world. Christians are to preach Christ to the world and show them the love of Christ through their actions. Yet, Paul got all over these Corinthians because it was their responsibility to carry out church discipline on its members who fail to repent of sin and come back into fellowship with Christ and the local church.

Almost every non-Christian social organization or club has ways of disciplining its members. Both the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs have fines or the right to put a person out of the organization if they do not attend and participate. But the church rarely disciplines anyone because they want to show love, compassion and understanding, or they want to keep the collection plates full. Yet, the church should be the first to discipline because it is commanded to do so in the Bible. However, we must make sure we are disciplining for biblical reasons and not for man-made reasons.

SEPARATION THROUGH EXCOMMUNICATION 5:13

God will judge those outside. God alone judges the unsaved world. His judgment will be fair, accurate and swift on those who reject Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Our task as Christians is to preach and tell of God's judgment to the unsaved. It is God's task to judge them, so leave the judgment to God.

Expel the wicked man from among you. Paul told the Corinthians they were not to tolerate the presence of evil in their midst. They were to excommunicate the unrepentant sexual offender from the fellowship of the Corinthian Church. The purpose of the excommunication was that the guilty party might truly repent and come back into fellowship with Christ and the local church. We know from First Corinthians five, we are to discipline for moral error, and from Titus 3:10 we are to discipline for a spirit of divisiveness over doctrine: "Warn a divisive person (a heretic) once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him."

Excommunication is the final step in the discipline process. Before this there is confrontation, admonition, suspension from duties and the Lord's Table. Private sins should be dealt with in private but public sin often has to be dealt with publicly. The process of loving discipline may go on for months. The goal in every step of the process is restoration of the erring brother or sister.

A Presbyterian pastor shared with me an interesting discipline problem he faced. There was a son of a well-known Christian who claimed to be a believer in Christ. He was living with a woman who was not his wife and she too claimed to be a Christian. They came to the pastor and asked him to marry them. He refused to do so but sought to bring them to repentance because premarital sex is sin. The couple after several months did repent, but everyone in the church and many others outside of the church knew about this sexual liaison. The pastor agreed to marry them providing they would make a public announcement during their wedding service that they had been living in sin and had truly repented,

confessing their sin, for they wanted to establish a Christian home. Before the marriage ceremony started, the young man made his confession and the young woman then made hers. They both asked for the people's forgiveness since they knew they already had Christ's forgiveness. Then the pastor continued the service. All through the ceremony there was sobbing and groaning by both men and women in the audience who apparently were also guilty of the same sin.

There are only three responses a person will have when brought under discipline. First, he may get angry and drop away from the local church. He may withdraw and bury his spiritual life, becoming very bitter. If this happens, the person is probably not a true believer. Second, he may avoid the discipline by packing his bags and going to another church, and tragically, most churches will take him in without questions asked. No local church should receive anyone into the assembly of believers if that person is under discipline by another local church. Third, the offender might be exercised by the discipline and recognize that he is living in sin. Under conviction, he will repent and confess his sin. Apparently this man in First Corinthians truly repented of his sin of incestuous adultery, but the Corinthians were not ready to receive him back (II Cor. 2:5-8). Whenever discipline is exercised, there must be total forgiveness the moment the person truly repents.

There is only one correct attitude by those exercising the discipline. All discipline must be done in love and with a broken heart. Discipline must never be given in haughtiness, self-righteousness, smugness, censoriousness or with a critical, harsh spirit. Discipline must flow from a broken, humble heart. If it does not, then when the person truly repents, those who have exercised the discipline will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to forgive the offender and restore him to full fellowship in the local church

CONCLUSION

Those of us who are saved must realize what health and vitality would return to the church and to the world if the local churches would discipline their own ranks as God has commanded. It takes faith to believe God in the area of discipline, and the church in America, as a whole, seems to have little faith.

"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" (Craig Blomberg, First Corinthians).

"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" (David Prior, First Corinthians).

The Apostle Paul, right here in First Corinthians 5, says to you who are without Christ as your Lord and Savior, "God will judge those outside." Judgment for your sins and rebellion is certain. You will not escape judgment now and especially in eternity. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment" (Heb 9:27). Why will God judge you? Because you have no Savior to forgive you for your sins! Because you have no risen Lord to give you a righteousness which will make you acceptable to God! Because you have no King to subdue your rebel heart to get you ready for the future eternal kingdom! You will never have to meet Christ as judge if you will receive Him as your Savior.