

Clean Sweep

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

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Introduction: Marian Guinn, 36 year old registered nurse and mother of 4, was treated kindly by her church in Collinsville, OK. After hearing persistent rumors that she was involved sexually with the former town mayor, the church leadership asked to meet with her who confirmed the rumors true. The elders urged her to repent and break off this illicit relationship. Marian refused. When the church finally exercised church discipline, Marian sued. A Tulsa court awarded her \$390,000 in damages. *Newsweek* quoted Marian as saying, “*What I do is between God and myself. I don’t need the church to work as a medium for me. It was none of their business.*”

We’re not tackling the topic of suing a church – that’s Pastor Jerry’s subject next Sunday. Today we conclude Paul’s instruction on what is one of the classic passages on church discipline found in the NT – 1 Cor 5. The term *church discipline* has an unpleasant sound; punitive, critical, judgmental. Called by some excommunication, it refers to removing a person from church membership and Christian fellowship. To many this sounds anti-Christian and smacks of medieval inquisitions. However, a careful reading of the NT reveals the church is commanded to excommunicate anyone remaining in unrepentant sin. Now we must be very careful not to swing to extremes: churches that abuse such texts by having a Gestapo mentality – or churches who completely ignore sin the lives of believers.

A believer in the Corinthian church was involved in immorality, v. 1. This church member had an on-going sexual relationship with his step-mother. Such activity was out-lawed in a permissive Roman culture. This man’s behavior shocked unbelievers – he had out-paganed the pagans! What was worse – the church’s attitude toward this sin was one of arrogant tolerance, vs. 2a, 6a. *What must the church do when it becomes aware of flagrant sin within its membership?* Paul calls on the church to take drastic action - 4 times he makes his plea: vs. 2b, 5a, 7a; 13b. The fact that he calls for the discipline of the man and not the woman would indicate she wasn’t a believer.

Two vital principles are found in our text:

1. Addressing Sin is Not Optional – It is Essential

Note vs. 9-10. Apparently the Corinthians had misinterpreted Paul’s previous advice about associating with immoral people. The word “*associate*” means ‘to mix it up’ – we would say today, ‘mix-n-mingle.’

It is the believer’s responsibility to model Christ’s standards of morality before a watching world - not to hide in a holy huddle. Many churches today have completely reversed Paul’s instructions – we shun unbelievers and make excuses for believers living in blatant sin. As Jesus said in his High Priestly prayer – we must live *in* the world, but not *of* the world, for we are sent *into* the world. We are to be “*blameless and pure, children of God, without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which [we*

are to] shine like stars in the universe” Phil 2:15. It is the immoral unbeliever to whom we are called to witness.

A group of believers bought farm and woodlands in an eastern state. There they built a town called Rivendale (taken from the Lord of the Rings). Their purpose was to shield their children - and themselves from our disintegrating culture. The movie *The Villiage*, had this same theme. We must separate – no, isolate ourselves from the evils of society. Dear friends, this is not God’s method. While we must never mimic the world; we must have contact with it if we’re to fulfill our duty of evangelism.

To whom then does Paul forbid us to mix-n-mingle? Note v. 11. Faithful believers are not to keep company with fellow believers who persistently practice sin. Paul expands his previous list – adding “slanderer” and “drunkard.” Such vice lists were never meant to be exhaustive (list varies in chapter 6). He is describing his culture – all godless cultures, our own culture today.

“Sexually immoral” is the Greek word ‘porneia’ – general sexual sin, which would include pre-marital sexual activity, adultery, homosexuality, pornography, incest, sexual abuse, etc. “Greedy” describes one who wants more than he/she has. It is often translated ‘covetousness.’ We often think of idolatry as bowing before little wooden or stone statues but idolatry is anything that comes between us and God: family, career, hobby, possessions, etc. “Slanderer” speaks of being verbally abusive – coarse talk associated with the world. What we call alcoholism was rampant in the ancient world – drunkenness is still a major problem today. The word “swindler” is translated in the Gospels - “ravening wolves.” It means using deceit to take from others what we desire to possess ourselves, ie, to cheat, defraud. Some of these sins seem more serious to us than others. Paul’s point is that all sin in the life of a believer hinders the reflection of God’s holiness before a watching world. No one is perfect but human imperfections must never become an excuse to tolerate sinful living. Hypocrisy damages the credibility of the gospel.

Paul is not demanding that we shun the offender as the Amish - refusing to speak to them, pretending they’re non-existent. In Matt 18:17, Jesus told us once a person has been excommunicated we’re to treat them as a pagan. *How do we treat pagans?* We love them – we urge their repentance. The point is we must not go on relating to believers under church discipline as if nothing happened. This involves even social contact, v. 11b. Relationships will indeed be strained – that’s the point. The pain of isolation is to be a motivation to repent. The goal is to shock the offender at the severity of his/her sin; to stimulate repentance; to awaken them to sin and its consequences. The goal of church discipline is never to ‘kick the sinner’ out’ – it’s always remedial, v. 5b. Jesus said it is to gain our brother/sister. Gal 6:1 states it is to restore them – word used to set a broken bone.

2. Judging Sin is Not Wrong – It is Biblical

Note v. 12. The rhetorical answer is “yes, we’re to judge those inside.” Someone protests, “Wait a minute! Jesus taught us that we’re not to judge others.” True, in Matt 7:1 Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” How do we reconcile Paul’s words with those of Jesus?

The context of Matt 7, rebukes the sin of self-righteousness and hypocrisy. There’s never a place for that type of judgment within the church. Jesus is not forbidding believers to make godly evaluations. In the same chapter, Matt 7, Jesus challenges his disciples to look out for those who pretend to be sheep but who are really vicious wolves. This would definitely call for some sort of judgment, therefore, not all judgment is wrong. Jn 7:24, “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.”

Again, Paul speaks of our relationship with the unbelieving world. We have no responsibility to judge the lost – we are to witness to the lost. We must take the world as we find it. The time of judgment is coming and that judgment belongs to God. He will judge the world. Dear friend, one day you will stand before a holy God. Are you ready? Only by faith in Christ will allow you to stand. Only in Christ’s righteousness will you be spared of that terrible judgment.

As for believers, we must make righteous judgments within the church when unrepentant sin becomes evident. Such righteous judgments are not inconsistent with love – in fact they are proof of love, Heb 12:6, “because the Lord disciplines those he loves.” Paul’s final word is a quotation from Deut 17:17. Note v. 13b. The church must act decisively with unrepentant sin.

Are we saying we must have sinless churches? No, this is not a matter of struggling with a particular sin – we’re addressing those who persistently commit sin and who refuse to repent from it. So how must we judge sin?

- I must examine myself. That’s the message of Matt 7. Jesus’ words caution us against self-righteousness. 1 Cor 10:12, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”
- Go in humility, Gal 6:1, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”
- Follow the steps of Matt 18. We must go to the offender privately. Only if they fail to repent must we involve others.
- Be loving and firm, “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” 2 Thess 3:14-15.
- If forgiveness is sought – forgive, 2 Cor 2:7-8, “Now instead, you ought to love and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore to reaffirm your love for him.”

Conclusion: Church discipline is not a matter of everyone in church must be perfect. Everyone sins. The church of Jesus Christ is a hospital for the hurting – not a museum for those who think they're perfect. The question is - How will the church deal with one who is in persistent, unrepentant sin?

Believers must treat sin within the church seriously taking drastic steps to confront it.

Many will continue to see this whole process as harsh and unloving but such criticism only comes from those who fail to grasp God's holiness. Church discipline is always painful and difficult. Successful discipline occurs when the church obeys God's instructions – regardless of the outcome, regardless of the cost. But when the offender does repent it is cause for great celebration. The church must respond in love and grace.

We must not tolerate persistent, unrepentant sin within the church. A good place to start cleaning house is in our own personal lives. The church would not have to take such drastic measures if God's people dealt with their own sin. Church discipline would never have to occur if we all kept our focus on Christ and our walk with him consistent with his Word. Sin is aggressive – its desire is to master us. It cannot be tolerated, rationalized or minimized. We must deal with it in our own lives, as in the lives of those we love.

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