

Church Discipline: Lesson Three

Public Sin

By Benjamin J. Williams

This situation is different from Matthew 18. It has different rules and different procedures. However, many of the same principles apply, as discussed in the first two lessons. We must never lose sight of the fact that all discipline is to be an act of love.

The Problem

I Cor. 5:1-2 It is reported commonly *that there is* fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. [2] And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.

The problem faced by the church at Corinth was that there was a man guilty of fornication that was a member of the local congregation. The sin was not private, but instead was “reported commonly”. Everybody knew what was happening. They knew both parties in the sin. Both parties probably openly admitted their sin without hiding it. Furthermore, in this particular situation, the congregation was puffed up with worldly wisdom and vain pride. They believed like Israel of old that their sin and their tolerance of sin would bring about no divine retribution. They should have felt shame. They should have mourned for this sin that would cost a brother his soul.

Now, there are many possible variations on this same situation. You could have a situation where the matter was public, but the facts were uncertain. In this scenario, it is best to make sure you have the facts straight. It would be prudent to go to the individual alone or to a knowledgeable party to get the information you need. Do not make any decisions on how things look, but on how things are.

You could have a situation that is not as far advanced as the problem at Corinth. In Corinth, the members were puffed up by the sin. If, on the other hand, the sin was public but everyone was prepared to do what is right, then the last part of Matthew 18 would be appropriate. Personal and congregational admonition should precede any withdrawal of fellowship. In Corinth, the sinner was openly rebelling against God. He was to be dealt with in a sharper way than one who has sinned and does not have the spiritual maturity to correct it. Remember, we are to be sharp with the rebellious heart but gentle with the weak and tender hearted.

These situations must be handled on a case by case basis. Prudence would suggest that a small group of trusted, mature Christians go to the sinner and evaluate the situation. If they find that there is no sin at all, then the mistaken information can be corrected. If they find a person with sin but a tender heart, then gentle admonition can begin. If they find a person who is openly rebelling against God, as in Corinth, then the course laid out in this chapter is appropriate.

The Judgment

I Cor. 5:3-5 For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, *concerning* him that hath so done this deed, [4] In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, [5] To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Paul, though not present, had a full knowledge of the facts of the situation and could evaluate it with apostolic authority. He commands by the authority of Christ, that at their next assembly, the matter was to be addressed. Some mistakenly try to apply this judgment to a situation where all the facts are not known or where the sinner is not shown to be guilty of pride and callused rebellion. This kind of swift and sharp response is only given because Paul knows all of the facts and knows the stubborn will of the sinner (and the congregation).

The matter is to be handled immediately and specific instructions are given on how such a matter is to be treated. They were to “deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh”. This phrase confuses many. Similar terminology is employed of Hymenius and Alexander in I Tim. 1:20. The idiom becomes clear if the doctrine of the kingdom is understood. There are only two kingdoms. If one is removed from the fellowship of the kingdom of Christ, then he is left in the fellowship of the kingdom of Satan. The destruction of the flesh refers to the carnal, social ties that bind us. The person being withdrawn from will suffer serious distress, but that shame may produce repentance to the saving of his soul. He will suffer in a worldly way that his soul may be spared. This person is to be taken out of their midst by the shame that they will place on him. He will be made to feel as an outsider in an assembly of brethren.

This is not guaranteed to cause him to repent. It is only a possibility, indicated by the apostle suggesting that he “may be saved”. It is possible that the sinner’s heart will be hardened by the withdrawal of fellowship. However, despite the terrible consequence this has for the sinner, it is still healthy for the local congregation, as the next verses explain.

The Explanation

I Cor. 5:6-8 Your glorying *is* not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? [7] Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: [8] Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.

The sin in the congregation did not only affect the sinner. It also affected the entire body. As Achan of the Old Testament, the sin of one person hinders all of God’s people. Like leaven, the sin affects all that it touches, even though it may seem small and

insignificant. In this case, the sin caused pride. Others believed that they could sin without consequence. This kind of worldly pride will always cause sin.

To explain what must be done, Paul continues the analogy of leaven by referring to the Passover. The Passover bread had to be without leaven. We are part of the Passover of the church. Christ is the Lamb and we are the bread. If we are leavened bread, filled with malice and wickedness, then we are not fit for the Passover. If we are unleavened bread, filled only with sincerity and truth, then we are acceptable and will be passed over by God's judgment.

The Clarification

I Cor. 5:9-13 I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: [10] Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. [11] But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. [12] For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? [13] But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

To explain the matter more precisely and head off objections, Paul tells more about this withdrawal and what it entails. These Christians knew not to associate with fornicators. However, how can people keep from associating with fornicators in a world full of sin? The answer is that Paul was only referring to members of the church. While it should be remembered that "evil communications corrupt good manners" (I Cor. 15:33), it would be impossible for us to have absolutely no association with sinners. For one, we must be trying to convert them and that requires some sort of interaction. Also, in tending to the necessary affairs of this life, we also must interact with sinners. We are furthermore commanded to be a good example before them. The distinction is made in that God will deal with all mankind, but it is up to the church to try to discipline its own before it is eternally too late.

While this does not altogether apply to the world, it does absolutely apply to our brethren. If one is withdrawn from as a sinner, then we are not to have social interaction with them, "no not to eat". As in Matthew 18, such a one is a heathen and a publican. The only contact that should be with him is that which is absolutely necessary (by family obligation for example) and that which is required to admonish the brother.

The Conclusion

II Cor. 2:6-11 Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. [7] So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. [8] Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. [9] For to this end also

did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things. [10] To whom ye forgive any thing, I *forgive* also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave *it*, for your sakes *forgave I it* in the person of Christ; [11] Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Some will always obstinately deny that such a procedure could ever work. However, we should be reminded of three simple facts. First, God commanded it and that overrides whether it works or not. Second, God commanded it and that means that it will work. Third, God commanded it and it did work!

In fact, it worked so much that it had to be corrected in II Corinthians 2. The Corinthians withdrew from their brother, but they did not know to forgive him when he repented. The man of I Corinthians 5 did repent, and Paul tells them to forgive him by the authority of Christ even as they withdrew by the authority of Christ. Otherwise, they were still letting Satan win by dividing Christ's body and destroying the spirit of the one that sinned. Would he continue to live right when his brethren still rejected him for past sin? Would we be acceptable to God if we did not forgive such a one? We are not ignorant of Satan's devices, and we must not allow him to hurt the church in this way. This method will properly deal with public sin with the best results possible. God's way is best for us and our brethren.