

# Sermon: The Compassion of Confrontation

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## Introduction

In 1974 I was fourteen years old and at that vulnerable, easily impressionable stage of adolescence. Prior to that time, my life was tranquil. I enjoyed a happy home and a wonderful relationship with my Christian parents. But then a man came into my life who heaped all kinds of abuse on me every day. Every day after school I would go see this man before I went home, and he would subject me to the most intense forms of physical torture and verbal abuse imaginable. I would leave with my body wracked with pain and indescribable feelings of inferiority because of the verbal abuse he inflicted upon me. Yet, strange as it may seem, I always went back to him. That man was my wrestling coach; and he helped me understand that if I went through this kind of physical torture, if I learned to negotiate the rigors of his practices, then I would ultimately be a better wrestler. I would be disciplined.

I invite you now to a different scene in my life. I am no longer fourteen, but forty, married to a wonderful wife and blessed to be the father of two teenage sons. If you could be an unseen guest in our home, you might see us sitting at the table around a meal and engaging in happy banter or relational repartee; sometimes finding ourselves lost in laughter, sometimes sharing one of those moments that seems insignificant yet defines the direction of one's life or home. You might witness one of those times when we delight in one another more than words could possibly

describe. On the other hand, you might happen to glance in and see us when things are tense, when my sons have violated the will of their father and they are experiencing the tough side of love. Maybe they are being grounded or being lectured to. When they were younger, perhaps they were being—dare I say it?—even spanked. But, if you stayed long enough, you would eventually notice that the rare times when we administer discipline liberate and free our home for the peace, harmony, and mutual delight that usually reigns.

Like every father I love my sons. There has never been a time when I have enjoyed disciplining them (contrary to what I make them believe). I have never said to them “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” I tell them, “It is going to hurt you a lot more than it hurts me.” That is, after all, the point! But recently I received a card from one of my sons that read: “You took center stage in my thoughts today and my heart gave you a standing ovation. I appreciate you so much. Dad, I love you so, so much that not a day goes by when I don't thank God for your wonderful heart for God and your desire to raise Michael and myself to be great people. I know it's no special occasion or anything, but you're a special dad so I just wanted to say thanks. I love you and mom bunches. Seth.” Some might be incredulous that a son whom I have spanked and grounded, lectured and rebuked would write me a card like that, but these two things are connected.

And that is not only true in my physical family, but it is true in God's family as well. It is the discipline He imposes on us that keeps our hearts close to His and in fellowship with Him. The correction that He offers us through the body of Christ, through our fellow believers and church members—keeps us in love with His people, in love with His heart, and in love with His way.

## 1 Corinthians 5

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about an occasion where discipline was necessary because a brother was involved in sexual sin. Paul wrote them, beginning in verse one of 1 Corinthians 5:

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. 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. 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 idola-

ters, 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.

## Two Errors

Individuals and churches usually commit one of two errors when they think about discipline. On the one hand, some say, "Well, this is such a private matter, we have no business interfering in people's lives. After all, we are all sinners. Who are we to judge one sin as worse than another?" and therefore, they exercise no discipline. But where there is no discipline, there is no security, and ultimately there is no fellowship. On the other hand, there are some that take it to the opposite extreme and think that the purpose of discipline is merely to censor, to be harsh, and to keep the church rolls clean. They ignore or forget the redemptive purpose of discipline and settle for an enforced conformity that never penetrates to the heart.

Fortunately, the Bible teaches us the proper way to practice discipline. One cannot argue against something based on its abuse. Otherwise, we would have to argue against marriage because some men beat their wives. We would have to oppose disciplining our children because some people abuse theirs. No, the proper argument is against the abuse of the thing and not the thing itself. Clearly in Scripture, in this chapter, we see unequivocally that discipline is commanded in the Church of the Lord Jesus. The apostle makes it obligatory, not optional.

I speak not as a theoretician, not an academician, but as a pastor. In each of the two churches I served, I taught this principle and led them to begin to practice scriptural, biblical, loving church discipline. Paul, as well as the Lord Jesus Himself, prescribed the procedure. As we work through the text, let us see how to implement biblical church discipline because it is my belief that every child of God ought to believe in the value of church discipline and that every church of the Lord Jesus Christ ought to be obedient to the Lord in this matter.

### *Identify the Impact of Sin*

Paul says in verses one through five that we need to identify the impact of sin. This requires a look at three different areas. First, notice sin's impact on the world. In verse one Paul notes that the church tolerated a kind of immorality that even the world considered gross and sinful. Even the world knows that Christians do not condone incest.

Paul lays out a principle here: not every sin makes a church member subject to discipline. What qualities, therefore, make this sin worthy of such an extraordinary step? First, notice that this sin is public—it is “commonly reported among you.” Second, notice that it is gross immorality. Even unbelievers find it inconsistent with professing Christian faith. Do not ever forget that the Lord gives the world the right to judge the church, though He does not give the church the right to judge the world. Remember that Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). He gave the world the right to judge us by our love for one another. In this passage, the Apostle gives the world the right

to judge us by our commitment to holiness. Even the world knows that there are certain things Christians do not do.

Other categories of sin worthy of discipline are mentioned in scripture besides the particular sin mentioned in this passage. In Romans 16:17-20, Paul says that doctrinal heresy is a ground for biblical church discipline. If someone teaches something that is contrary to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, they must be dealt with.

Once in the church I pastored a member became convinced of universalism, the belief that everybody was going to heaven, that a loving God could not condemn anyone to hell. He believed, therefore, that we were wasting our money on missions, and that we were wasting our efforts in evangelism since everyone was going to heaven anyway. I privately talked about it with him, and I told him, “You are in dangerous error. That is contrary to the Word of God and I warn you that if you attempt to propagate this teaching, the church will need to take action.” Unfortunately, he took that as a challenge and placed tracts that he wrote on all the cars in our parking areas. I confronted him and called on him to repent; I talked with him privately, but he refused to recant. I took some men with me and we confronted him again but he would not repent. Then we brought it before the church for a time of prayer that he might repent of his doctrinal heresy. When he refused to do so, we removed him from the fellowship of the church with tears and with prayers that one day he would recant his heretical beliefs, so that he might be restored to the fellowship of our church. Like gross immorality, doctrinal heresy is grounds for church discipline.

We are also told in Titus 3:9-10 that cre-

ating division is grounds for church discipline. Paul writes, “But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. Reject a factious man after a first and second warning.” Paul, following the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 18, says, “Go to him once, and then go to him again. If he will not hear you on either occasion, if he will not repent, then he should be rejected and put out of the fellowship of the church.” There is also a special case in Scripture—if an elder, one of the leaders of the church, sins, he should be rebuked publicly before all so that others may fear (1 Tim 5:21). We must identify sin’s impact on the world. The world is watching us. The world is waiting to see if we really believe what we say; if we really walk the talk. They are watching. It is up to the church to confront sin.

### ***Identify Sin’s Impact in the Church***

In verse two Paul goes on to say that we need to identify sin’s impact in the church. Paul laments that rather than mourning over this, they are proud. What does he mean by “proud”? How could they be proud about a man having a sexual relationship with either his mother or his stepmother? They prided themselves, not in the fact that he was in sin, but in their tolerance, that they could leave this as a private matter between him and God. They thought they were doing the right thing. Paul says, “No, you have not mourned over this,” and unless you confront it, you become desensitized to sin.

Why should we go to such great lengths to deal with sin in the church? First of all, the Bible is clear on this matter. God in His Word commands that it be dealt with. Believe me, in the short term, it is

much easier to sweep sin under the rug and ignore it. But when we do so, the church preaches the subtle message that sin is not so serious, and that the rules are arbitrary. Furthermore, we avoid any incentive for repentance. Perhaps some do not know how to repent. Maybe they do not realize they are in error. When a church tries to take the shame out of sin, they are engaging in a dangerous enterprise. God wants sin to be shameful.

I ask you a question—who is more afraid of dirt? A mechanic in a pair of greasy old overalls or a man immaculately dressed in a white suit? Which of those two is going to do all he can to avoid dirt? When we uphold the standard of holiness in our churches and say, “This is the way, walk in it,” when we preach and live in a holy manner, then we abhor sin. We love sinners, but we hate sin. That is God’s standard.

### ***Identify the Church’s Impact on Sin***

Third, he says we need to identify the church’s impact on sin. We can sum up what Paul says in verses 3-5 as follows. “The result of your mourning should be obvious. The one who has done these things should be removed from the church.” Now, in this specific text, Paul does not explicitly mention anything about forgiveness. Based on other passages where we are told that the point of discipline is always forgiveness and restoration, we can conclude that this brother was unrepentant, that he was persisting in this sin, and that opportunity for repentance had been refused.

In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus Himself laid out the procedure. If a brother is in sin he should, first of all, be privately confronted. Often as a pastor, people would come into my office and say, “I need to

tell you what brother so and so has done to me.” Inevitably I would say to them, “Have you talked to him about it? You have no business, you have no right, talking to me about it until you have first talked to him about it.” Go to that brother. Then if he does not listen to you, then two or three—perhaps some of the elders of the church—should go and confront him. If he continues to be stubborn, the entire church must be told, and the church needs to call him to repentance. If he still refuses to repent, then both Paul and Jesus make it clear that the brother is to be, as Paul puts it, “turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.”

Pastors must follow the procedure exactly as Jesus laid it out. You dare not skip a step. We must not begin with public confrontation. We do not begin by taking two or three with us. We begin with private confrontation to spare the brother and to give him opportunity to repent. I remember as a boy my father told me he was going to confront a woman in the church, a widow who had allowed a man to move in with her. My dad went to her privately and said, “I just want to read to you a passage of scripture,” and he read to her Psalm 51, David’s great prayer of confession. He said, “I just want you to think about what I have said.” She said, “Just a minute, Pastor. As you read that, God convicted my heart. I know I am in sin and I am going to get out of this.” You see, she was given the opportunity in private to confess that sin, to repent, to cease the sin, and God wonderfully restored her.

In the case recorded in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul says, “I have already made a judgment here. I do not have to make a case by case decision. Whenever someone persists in sin, whenever gross immorality is continually engaged in without repen-

tance, then a brother has to be judged.” Wonderfully, people often repent when they are first confronted. If they do not, and if they persist, the matter must go before the church, Paul says they need to be “turned over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.” What does that mean?

The key is to understand the principle of authority that exists in the Lord’s church. When we are under authority and are properly submitted to the authority over us, we enjoy a supernatural protection that Satan cannot penetrate. But when someone is removed from the church; when they are excommunicated because of sin, then Satan has freedom to torment them. One of two things will result: Either they will hurt so badly that they repent; or, they will demonstrate that their claim to be a believer is false, for their persistence in sin will show that their faith is not genuine. Paul says turn them over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh in the hope that their spirit may eventually be saved by their repentance and restoration.

Notice how closely Paul’s words match the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:20 when Jesus says, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” Though this verse of Scripture is often misquoted, misused, and misapplied, the context is in the realm of church discipline. Jesus says, “Whenever you need to make this judgment regarding a brother who will not repent, I am in your midst. I am with you in making that judgment.” Paul says much the same thing here. “Even though I am away from you in body, I am present with you in spirit.” As an apostle, he encourages them to consider him a partner in this decision and to deal with the brother error. Paul counsels that we must always treat sin as sin will treat you. Sin will be ruthless with

you. Sin will be merciless with you and that is the way you should treat sin—not the sinner—but the sin. We hate it. We have to identify the impact of sin and recognize it as deadly serious. Sin influences both the one who commits it and the church as well. Therefore, Paul not only identifies sin’s effect, but he also tells us to identify the attitude of the church.

Now in verse 6-8, Paul begins to peel back another layer of the onion. Even more significant than this brother who is in error is the impact his sin has on the whole church. He says in verse 6, “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know this principle, that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” Their great problem was that they did not see the seriousness of sin. Paul says, “Don’t treat sin lightly.” They thought that a little sin would not be a great problem. Paul reminds them that just a little leaven leavens the whole lump. When there is just a little sin, it results in members who are just a little guilty, and unmarried girls who are just a little pregnant, and bigots who are just a little bit racist, and men who just commit a little adultery, and churches who have very little impact.

We must do some spiritual house cleaning. Purge out the old leaven. Positive church discipline begins with positive personal discipline. We must stop viewing church discipline as a negative. We must see it as a loving act of confrontation. I say to you pastors—do not back down. On one occasion we had to discipline a man in our congregation who had abandoned his wife and his child to move in with his homosexual lover. He would not repent; he would not make it right. We publicly disciplined him. When we did this, we wrote in the minutes of the meeting that the discipline was imposed

with tears and sorrow, with prayerful anticipation of the day when the sin would be forsaken, so that we could welcome back the sinner with open arms. Restoration was our goal and our hope. Not long after that event I received a letter from a lawyer representing this man. She wrote, “I would like a letter from you telling me the membership status of Mr. So and So.” Knowing that her letter was merely an attempt to frighten and intimidate, I wrote back to her and quoted from 1 Corinthians chapter 6. I said, “The Bible absolutely forbids me from discussing with you any internal matters of this church. But just so you know, I am a man of conviction and this church is a church of conviction and we will always obey God rather than man.” That ended any further attempt to scare us out of obedience to God.

We should administer discipline in a way that is loving, consistent, and impartial. No one receives special favors. Then the world will realize that we are serious about sin. When we treat sin lightly, we are in effect treating the atonement lightly. Do you see this in the text? Why does he put that little phrase in there, “for Christ is our Passover?” He informs us that since our Passover Lamb has already been sacrificed, we should live in a perpetual feast of unleavened bread. Our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed—not once a year, but once for all. And therefore, we are always enjoying the feast of unleavened bread. When the feast was implemented, according to the book of Exodus, they were not only forbidden to have any leaven in their meals, but they also were required to remove it from their houses. Leaven was a type or picture of sin. God wanted his people to see the necessity of purity. Since our Passover Lamb has given Himself and

suffered as the sacrifice for our sins, we must respond by getting rid of any leaven in our lives. The atonement demands our holiness. We are not holy to earn atonement, we are holy because we have atonement. Put out the leaven; the atonement has been made! First the sacrifice, then the purging. We must get rid of the leaven of malice and evil. We eat the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

### *Identify the Church's Ministry*

The final movement in the passage is in verses 9-13 where Paul says we must identify the church's ministry. It is a ministry of biblical separation. He says, "You folks have it backwards. You are trying to separate from the sinners of the world. You cannot do it that way. You have no ministry." Biblical separation is not from the sinners but from sin. Like Jesus, we should be a friend to sinners. But when it comes to one who is called a brother, the situation is different. When a brother will not repent of sin, we respond by removing him from the fellowship. Paul says we must not even eat with him. We wonder if he refers to eating a meal with him or whether he refers to eating the Lord's Supper, but in either case it is clear that the brother must now be shunned.

The church has a ministry of biblical separation but not of judging the world; judging the world is God's prerogative. Too often we preach the wrong message. We preach against the wrong sin. It is easy to stand in the pulpit and talk about the sin in Washington D.C. and the problems with the National Organization of Women or the ACLU. We are not to judge the world. Don't ever get mad at the world for acting like the world. What else are they going to do? That is who they are. We need to confront the sin that is within

the walls of our churches, within the lives of our people. That is our ministry, that is the message we preach. He speaks not of judging the world, but of judging within the church. Here Paul says, "Is it not your responsibility to judge those within?" He asks the question in Greek in such a way that the answer is clearly, "Yes." He assumes that this is so widely known as to be indisputable. I think if he were writing this to churches today, he would explain what he means in more detail since many Christians mistakenly think that we should not judge those within our fellowship.

I have obtained permission to share a personal story with you that serves as an example of how confrontation works. Some years ago I received a letter from a lady member of the first church I pastored. She told me that Bob, who had been my chairman of deacons and my closest friend in the church, had left his wife and was living with another woman. I could not believe it. It was as shocking to me as if you told me that one of my beloved colleagues at Southern Seminary had done that. I called Doreen, his wife, and asked her to tell me what had happened. Confirming my worst fears she said, "It is true. He has left me. We are not divorced but he is already living with another woman." I said, "Give me the phone number at the house where he is staying." She gave it to me and I called. Bob's illicit lover answered and I asked for Bob. She said, "Yes, may I tell him who is calling?" I said, "Yes, tell him this is his friend and former pastor, Hershael York." As I heard her relay those words to him I could hear a gurgling, choking sound coming from his throat as he decided whether or not to even take the phone.

"Hello," he managed to say sheepishly.

My voice betraying the fervency of my disappointment and my righteous indignation, I said, "Bob, what are you doing? What are you thinking?" Mustering his defense, he answered, "Well, I just got tired of being the only one making the effort. What do you do when you give and give and get nothing in return? What do you do when you try to express love and she will not? What do you do when you give everything you've got and she never even says thank you?" In a moment of insight supplied by the Holy Spirit I said, "Here's what you do Bob. You make a cold, hard, rational decision to obey God anyway. That's exactly what you do."

When the hard truth I offered received no further excuses, I continued, "Now you listen to me—I want you to pack your things right now. I want you to go home to your wife. I want you to get her and I want the two of you to drive all the way up here to Lexington, Kentucky, and I want you to spend the weekend with Tanya and me."

I cannot explain exactly what happened. Either God gave me the boldness to confront him like that, or, gave him the grace to be compliant, but he did exactly what I told him to do. He went home, got her, and they came up to our house and that whole weekend Tanya and I just ministered to them from the Word. Three days later they went back home and said they were going to try and make a go of it. Three weeks later they came back to Lexington with their two children and said, "We want you to marry us again. We want to repeat our vows and start fresh and new." Last night I called and asked, "Doreen, how is it going?" With her voice cracking from grateful emotion she answered, "If anyone had ever told me marriage and life could be this good, I

would have never have believed it."

Do me a favor. If you find me in sin, confront me. Love me that much. Do not let me go and think you have done me a favor. "*Weep o'er the erring one. Lift up the fallen. Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave.*" Jesus found me in my sins and He loved me, but He loved me too much to leave me there.