

Real love

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- [0 : 0 0] The first reading is from Exodus chapter 12, verses 1 to 20. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, This month shall be for you the beginning of months.
- It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month, every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household.
- And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons. According to what each can eat, you shall make your count for the lamb.
- Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.
- Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it.
- [1 : 1 8] Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning.
- Anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it, with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand.
- And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast.
- And on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments. I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.
- This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. As a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.
- [2 : 2 6] For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day, you shall remove the leaven out of your houses. For if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.
- On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you.
- And you shall observe the feast of unleavened bread. For on this very day, I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout all your generations as a statute forever.
- In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat the unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.
- For seven days, no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he's a sojourner or a native of the land.

[3 : 43] You shall eat nothing leavened. In all your dwelling places, you shall eat unleavened bread. 1 Corinthians chapter 5.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans.

For a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant. Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit. And, as if present, I have already pronounced judgments on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.

[4 : 57] For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler, not even to eat with such a one.

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.

Well, do please keep that reading open, and why don't we start by praying and ask for God's help.

[6 : 06] It's easy to preach a sermon once you've done the preparation. I think it's fairly easy to listen to a sermon, but the hard thing, of course, is taking it to heart and putting it into practice. So let's pray together.

All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Heavenly Father, we rejoice this morning in your kindness to us in so many ways.

We thank you that you speak to us. We thank you for your word, and we pray, therefore, that you would help us to take it to heart and that you would do your work amongst us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now, my aim for this talk is that as a church, we would take sin seriously and live as those who really do belong to Jesus Christ. And to help just focus the issue this morning, I want to begin by asking a question.

I've given this talk the title, Real Love, and I wonder what you'd be looking for yourself in a church that is a loving church. In other words, how would you go about assessing, if you like, whether a greater church, or any other church for that matter, is a truly loving church?

[7 : 18] Well, I guess there might be a number of things you would be looking out for. Perhaps the warmth of welcome. Perhaps being invited to other people's homes for a meal.

Perhaps being noticed when you weren't there. Perhaps the depth of friendships. I guess there could be a whole range of things, couldn't there? But let me ask, would church discipline, a church that is willing to discipline the regulars, those in the church family, would that be on your list of things that make up a truly loving church?

Because if you and I are to take 1 Corinthians chapter 5 seriously, then it should be. Now to some, of course, even the mention of church discipline sounds harsh, censorious, and judgmental.

But just as the loving parent in love disciplines the child, so too, a loving church, we're going to see this morning, should together be committed to church discipline.

Now the presenting issue in Corinth is there in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 1. It's actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that is not even tolerated among pagans.

[8 : 33] For a man has his father's wife. Sexual immorality in the church, it seems most likely between a man and his stepmother. The word has, at the end of verse 1, suggests this is present, it is ongoing, it is continuing.

In other words, it is without shame, it is without repentance, which is why it is ongoing, and it is public. In other words, the facts are beyond dispute.

And what is the response of this church in Corinth? Verse 2, And you are arrogant. Ought you not, rather, to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

We've seen it all along, haven't we, in our series in 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth was proud and boastful. They think they've made it. And Paul's point in verse 2 is that they remain proud despite what is going on amongst them.

It may even be that perhaps they were proud of their ability even to accommodate such a person. So notice, firstly, on the talk outline on the back of the server sheet, notice, first of all, discipline is an act of love, an act of love for the sake of the individual.

[9 : 52] Verses 2 to 5. Now, the action to be taken is described in different ways, but I think it's all describing the same thing. So the end of verse 2, let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Verse 9, I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. Verse 11, again, I'm writing to you not to associate.

End of verse 13, purge the evil person from among you. He is to be removed. They are to break association with him. And therefore, notice that when in verse 5, Paul says, you are to deliver this man to Satan, actually, what Paul is doing there is he is describing exactly the same thing of withdrawing association.

So you may know that in New Testament thoughts, there are two realms or two kingdoms. There's the realm where the rule of Jesus is acknowledged, the church. There's the realm where the rule of Jesus is not acknowledged in the world.

In other words, you see, this man is to be treated as an unbeliever, someone who does not acknowledge the rule of the Lord Jesus. To do so, verse 5, you look down again for the destruction of the flesh, meaning the destruction of the sin, so that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord.

[11 : 19] So then, here is someone who's a rebellion against God, whose sin is so flagrant, so public, doing potentially great damage to the gospel.

They should be treated as an unbeliever. Why? Well, so that they might be brought to their senses, so that they might be in right standing with God on the judgment day.

That is always the loving goal of church discipline. Forgive a personal illustration, but several years ago, I was stopped by a police officer for driving through a red light at a railway crossing.

I was in a hurry. The barriers had not yet come down, or at least not quite yet come down. But I was, I wasn't banking on the fact that actually two cars behind me, this is why you see you're always told to look in your rear view mirror before you do anything.

I wasn't banking on the fact that actually two cars behind me, there was a police car. Now, I was disciplined, and although I'm sure the police officer wouldn't have thought it in these terms himself, it was actually loving discipline.

[12 : 30] It brought me to my senses. My family now tell me I am overly cautious at railway crossings. Now, it's important to see what Paul is, that what Paul is saying here is not new.

So, in the Old Testament, God explained for his people what constituted sexual immorality as he calls it here. Sex is a good thing, it's God's idea, it's his invention, but the place for sex is within heterosexual lifelong marriage.

Anything else is sexual immorality. In the Old Testament, God also commanded that someone engaged in persistent unrepentant sin should be removed from the people.

of God. Moreover, what Paul is saying here simply echoes the teaching of the Lord Jesus himself. So, will you please keep a finger in 1 Corinthians 5 and turn back to Matthew chapter 18 on page 993.

Matthew's Gospel chapter 18 page 993. And let me read these words of the Lord Jesus Matthew 18 verses 15 to 17.

[13 : 45] verse 15.

a Gentile and a tax collector. Notice really the process. First of all, verse 15, you go to the person alone. Secondly, if they don't listen, verse 16, you bring someone else along as well.

Only thirdly, verse 17, if they still don't listen, do you then come before the whole church. If they still don't listen, at that point, says Jesus, you treat them as a Gentile or tax collector.

In other words, you treat them as an unbeliever. Notice, it is a process which means that the knowledge of the sin is kept to the very smallest group possible.

This is a loving thing, which of course makes repentance easier. And notice, too, it's a process whereby the discipline increases in strength, always seeking a solution.

[15 : 04] this is loving church discipline. So you see, back in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, we've clearly, haven't we, we've clearly got to the very end of that process that the Lord Jesus prescribes.

And so you see, what is Paul doing in verses 3 and 4? Well, as an apostle, he is simply calling upon the church in Corinth to do what God commands them to do.

There doesn't need to be debate about what God's will is, they are simply to stand with Paul under the authority of God's word and act in obedience to it.

Now you say, what's that going to mean in practice? Well, I think it's very helpfully unpacked for us in verse 11, where Paul says, do not associate with them, not even to eat with such a one.

I take it in the context of a church gathering, then that must at least mean they'll be denied the Lord's Supper at a communion service. But I suspect it would also include any other church gathering for a meal or social event, where if the individual were invited and came along, then it would give the impression both to them and to everyone else present that they were included and part of the church family, when Paul's point, of course, is that they should be excluded.

[16 : 30] Likewise, I take it they wouldn't be welcome at a growth group or a prayer gathering, but I take it they would be welcome here on a Sunday morning, because everyone is welcome on a Sunday morning, regardless of where they stand and their personal convictions in relation to Christian faith.

Could you meet up with them for a coffee or a meal as an individual? Well, I think I see no reason why not, but if we do, I take it, we will make the most of that opportunity to call them back and to repent and to put their trust in the Lord Jesus once again.

This is very counter-cultural, isn't it? You hardly need me to say that. In our non-judgmental culture, where we dare not interfere with the lives of others.

So I put a couple of questions out on the outline just to help us to really focus a little bit further on this. First of all, are you willing to speak? Are you willing to speak?

You see, what will you do when you fear that a friend who calls themselves a Christian may be involved in some unrepentant sin or lifestyle which actually imperils their salvation?

[17 : 52] What will you do? Can I tell you what the very worst thing would be? The very worst thing would be to say nothing. The very worst thing would be to think, if I have to say something, it's going to be an uncomfortable conversation.

I don't want to have the conversation. I'll leave it to the church leadership to sort it out. Can I say, that is the very worst thing that you could do or think.

Because the fact is, by the time the church leadership has found out, things will have been going on for much, much longer and so repentance, of course, will be much, much harder.

In a previous church we went to, sadly, there was a man who was having an affair. People, of course, rightly, didn't want to gossip, but those who knew about it did nothing.

And by the time the church leadership found out about it, it was too late, as is usually the case. Do we love people enough to say something when we see a Christian brother or sister in spiritual danger?

[19 : 03] Perhaps to risk the friendship. No doubt to say it with tears, but to do so for the sake of their spiritual health and well-being.

You see, the point is that if all of us are committed to church discipline, if all of us are involved in one another's lives such that we are prepared when needed to give that rebuke, gently at first, but perhaps then a warning in due course, then actually very little formal church discipline of the kind that Paul is describing here will be necessary.

The danger comes when we say nothing, when we do nothing, when we allow sinful habits and lifestyles to become ingrained, because of course then repentance and change is so much harder.

Are you willing to speak? Secondly, are you willing to listen? In other words, are we willing to humble ourselves under church discipline?

You see, the point is there may only have been one church in Corinth. If you were removed from the church in Corinth, why? you were removed. But in 21st century London, you can always leave the local church in a huff and go somewhere else, where they'll turn a blind eye to whatever it is, or they'll tell you that you no longer need to pay attention to the plain teaching of the Bible.

[20 : 34] So all of us, you see, I hope we are in the habit of heeding and listening to the warnings of others when they come our way, rather than simply hardening our hearts.

This happened wonderfully to us in a previous church. I remember a couple, they were not married, they were sleeping together. Their Bible study group spoke to them and met up with them. They did nothing about it.

He then spoke to me, and we both talked to them. It was, of course, a difficult meeting. None of us were looking forward to the meeting. We talked about a particular issue. We looked at 1 Corinthians chapter 5 together.

We talked about the steps, which as a church we would have to take, sadly, but for their good, of course. But actually, wonderfully, they were willing to listen. And a few weeks later, one of them moved out of the flat they were in and moved in somewhere else with some friends.

They subsequently got married, and they said afterwards how very grateful they were, because, you see, that conversation forced a decision upon them.

[21 : 39] In other words, would they continue to drift away from Jesus, or would they live under the rule and kingship of Jesus? And they said how very good that decision was, and how very good it was they had to face the decision.

Discipline is an act of love for the sake of the individual. But secondly, discipline is an act of necessity for the sake of the church.

Now, I wonder if you have something like this at home in a cupboard, perhaps locked away or under the sink somewhere. It's called One Shot Instant Drain Cleaner, and on the back it tells you what's in it.

Sulfuric acid, it is corrosive, and it's a big warning sign on the back. I wonder if you also have something like this, probably in a different cupboard. It's called Ribena, no sugar added.

You can see our teeth are not in a very good state. We've drunk most of that already. But imagine for a moment that I swap the labels, and imagine for a moment that the Ribena label went on the bottle that is at home that lives in there, and imagine that the One Shot Instant Drainer label went on the Ribena bottle.

[23 : 03] Now, I take it I hardly need to spell out, do I, the potential damage that would do to my family when they're thirsty and they've come home from exercise and need something to drink.

But you see, that is effectively what is going on in Corinth. By doing nothing, the church in Corinth is taking something that God has labelled sin, and they are labelling it sinless.

And it is a very dangerous thing when the church does that, when they do it with something that God says is poison to the human soul. And that is just what the church in Corinth is doing.

You see, consider for a moment, the impact on the youth group in Corinth. How are the youth group going to flee sexual immorality if this individual is being treated as part of the church family and welcomes?

Consider the person in the church family who experiences same-sex attraction, who's wanting to flee sexual immorality himself, but consider the impact when this individual is regarded as part of the church family and welcomed, and when his sin is, people simply turn a blind eye.

[24 : 22] Do you see? Discipline is an act of necessity for the whole local church. Look at verse 6. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that little leaven leavens the whole lump?

Leaven or yeast spreads. It's what it's meant to do. Just as one rotten apple, if left in a tray with a whole lot of other apples, why all the apples will end up being rotten.

Sin spreads. My attitude to sin actually affects your attitude to sin. Churches have corporate sins where together things which we turn a blind eye to.

And that is a very dangerous thing. So what does Paul say? Verse 7. Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump as you really are unleavened.

For Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

[25 : 27] He takes us back to the Exodus, that reading which we had from Exodus chapter 12. We saw last year in Exodus how God's people were enslaved in Egypt and how one night God came in judgment on the nation of Egypt, how he passed over those houses where a lamb had been killed and where the blood of the lamb had been daubed around their front doors.

But the Passover was not simply about escaping God's judgments. They were not then to stay in Egypt. It was about being rescued from Egypt to leave Egypt to go and serve God to live a new life.

And so for the next seven days what they were to do, they were to eat only unleavened bread as evidence of their willingness to leave Egypt without delay and to go and live their new life serving God.

And each year as they remembered the Passover they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread, bread without yeast. They'd go through their houses looking for yeast, getting rid of it. A picture you see of them turning their backs on their old life of sin, wanting now to serve the God who has rescued them, who has delivered them from the judgment to come.

Well in the same way, verse seven, in God's eyes you see the person who has put their trust in Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross is unleavened already, forgiven, cleansed from sin.

[26 : 54] And so says Paul, live out this new life that you have in Christ. Verse eight, let us therefore celebrate the festival. In other words, if we put our trust in Jesus Christ, there is no place for our old pre-Christian sinful lifestyle.

There's no place for sin that is persistent and unrepentant. Remember, says Paul, Christ has died. We're to make sure our lives reflect that and celebrate that, verse eight.

Not living the way we used to live, but living as the kind of people Jesus has now made us, belonging to Jesus, standing in the right with God.

At which point, I can't resist the illustration at Andy's expense. I think he's in Sunday Club, so it's terribly unfair. But nonetheless, you'll know that he's getting married in three weeks' time.

In fact, he will be married, God willing, in three weeks' time. But imagine once he gets back from his honeymoon, it's a Saturday morning, he's in the habit of regularly playing football on a Saturday morning, so he gets up, he puts his football kit on, ready to go off and play football on his day off, but then he catches himself.

[28 : 09] And he suddenly remembers, I'm married, he says to himself. I can't just go on living exactly the same life I lived before. I've got someone else to think about. No, my days off need to be marked by the fact that I'm now married.

I've got someone else to serve, someone else to please. I cannot simply do my own thing. I have a new life to live out. Those wedding vows, I need to live them out.

You see, the Christian message is not clean up your life and God will accept you. Can I say, if you've come to church this morning thinking that the message of Jesus is clean up your life and God will accept you, please don't leave this morning thinking, the same thing.

The Christian message is put your trust in Jesus Christ, the one who died for you as a sacrifice for sin. And having come to him, having received forgiveness from him, now go and live out this new life he has given you.

And you and I need each other's help to do that. And corporately together, we need each other's help to do that. Love for the sake of the individual, it is also an act of necessity for the sake of us as a church family.

[29 : 34] Now briefly, as we finish, two misunderstandings to avoid. First of all, avoid a focus on the world and not the church. Verse 9, I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters.

Since then, you would need to go out of the world. Notice, Willie, 1 Corinthians 5 is not about judgmentalism and finger-wagging of the non-Christian world or withdrawing from the world into holy huddles and monasteries and that kind of thing, such that we don't associate with the world.

No, verse 13, as Paul says, we leave the judgment of those who are outside the church to God. Rather, verse 11, this is about the discipline of those who would call themselves a Christian brother or sister.

We do not expect a gospel lifestyle of those who don't believe the gospel. So, if you're here this morning and you're not not a Christian, please do not think we are pointing the finger and wagging the finger at you.

We are not. Sadly, all too often, Christians do exactly the opposite of what Paul commands. So, tolerance of the sin that God hates within the church, but judgmental and finger-wagging of what's going on outside.

[31 : 01] I think Christian leaders in particular are very prone to this. So, they tut-tut over fair trade or carbon emissions or the profits that companies make and all the rest of it. Well, all along, they're tolerating the sin within the church.

Sadly, it's what the Anglican communion has been doing at least for the last ten years or so. So, that's the first misunderstanding to avoid. Avoid a focus on the world rather than the church.

Secondly, avoid a focus on one particular sin. Because so far, the focus of the chapter has been on this one man in a sexual relationship with his stepmother.

But what if you don't have a stepmother? What if you're not attracted to her? Well, verse 11. But now I'm writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of a brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler, not even to eat with such a one.

You see, the application of this chapter includes a whole variety of things. Paul is not hung up on sex. He also mentions greed. Idolatry, where we put something else in God's place.

[32 : 16] Financial wrongdoing and reviling, which is slander, the way in which we speak about other people. Again, of course, notice these are ongoing activities. Paul is not simply addressing those who sin, who lapse into sin, who are repentant.

If he was, then Grace Church would be empty. But he's speaking about those whose lives are characterized by these things, rather than simply by those who struggle with sin and are genuinely repentant.

They are publicly known. They are outwardly evident. They've continued for a period of time, and there's been no repentance. And action is required for the sake of the individual and for the sake of the whole church.

Let's have a few moments for reflection, and I will then lead us in prayer. Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are.

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for the Lord Jesus, our great Redeemer, the one who died on the cross, such that we might have our sins forgiven, be in right standing before you, both now in this life and the world to come.

[33 : 38] And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you enable us to live out this new life that you have given us, and to do so both individually, but also corporately as a church family.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.