

Tough Love and Holiness

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[0 : 00] Well, it would be great if you could grab your Bibles and turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 5. And can I also say again, Happy Mother's Day to all those mothers and grandmothers out there.

And sometimes as mothers and even as fathers or even grandmothers and grandfathers, we have to show tough love to our children and grandchildren sometimes, don't we? And so there's an online advice column written by a mother called Abby talking about showing tough love to misbehaving children.

And one grandmother responded to the article by writing this. She wrote, Dear Abby, I've taken your advice about the need to show tough love to misbehaving children. My grandson's parents do not allow me to smack him when he misbehaves.

So I just take him for a drive instead and he usually behaves after that. I've enclosed the picture demonstrating my technique on the next slide. And she finishes her article with, Your sincerely tough love, Grandma.

Now, I assume it's all a bit of a joke, although the trees look blurry in the background, as if the car is actually going. Either way, I'm sure we've all experienced some form of tough love when we were younger and perhaps even given it to others ourselves.

[1 : 13] Tough love is, of course, disciplining someone for their own good, even though it's tough for you and for them. It's very common in families. But is there a place for it in the church family?

And if so, why and what might it look like? Well, as we continue our series on 1 Corinthians this morning, it seems Paul thinks that sometimes tough love in the church is necessary when the situation demands it.

And so given it's quite a serious and heavy chapter that we've arrived to this morning, how about I lead us in prayer again? Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for your word, which speaks your truth and is written for our good and your glory.

And so despite how hard today's passage may be to some of us, we ask, Father, for humble hearts that seek to sit under your word and that would live in light of it.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. So if you've got an outline there, there's two sides to the outline. So just find the one with the point. We're up to point one, the situation. The situation.

[2 : 20] So point one, the situation in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. We read here that it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate.

A man is sleeping with his father's wife and you, Corinthians, are proud. Now, sexual immorality is, of course, any sex outside of marriage, according to the Bible.

But this particular situation is so bad that not even the pagans practice or tolerate it, rather. Now, the woman is called his father's wife rather than mother, which suggests the woman is the man's stepmother, not his natural mother.

Not that that makes it any better. So presumably the mother-in-law, still married to the father, has left the father and is now having an affair with her son-in-law, this man. Now, the woman is probably not part of the church because Paul doesn't comment about her any further.

But the man is part of the church. The son is part of the church. He claims to be a Christian and yet persists in having this affair. Notice how Paul says in verse 1 that he is sleeping with her, present tense.

[3 : 37] And the church knows all about it since the report has made its way all the way to Paul. And so the situation seems to be a man in the church who is sleeping with his mother-in-law in an unrepentant affair that is known to the church.

That's the situation. But what also concerns Paul is not just this man's actions, but also the church's actions or lack thereof. For they seem unconcerned.

In fact, they are proud, it says. And in verse 6, if you look ahead there, they are boasting, it seems. But how does this work? I mean, when visitors arrive to the Corinthian church, they say, Oh, come and meet Mr. Immoral.

We're so proud of him. Well, as we saw earlier, they were actually proud of themselves and boasting in themselves based on which leaders they followed. And so it's likely they are boasting again in themselves, but this time based on this man.

Let me explain. At the start of our series, I said that they had a messed up view of spirituality. Or as Vijay summed it up nicely, they thought they were so spiritual.

[4 : 48] And this meant the body didn't matter to them. They could do what they like. So if you just turn over the page for a moment to chapter 6, verse 12. Have a look at chapter 6, verse 12, middle of the left-hand column there.

This is what they are saying. They say, chapter 6, verse 12, I have the right to do anything, you say, but not everything is beneficial. I have the right to do anything, but Paul says, I will not be mastered by anything.

Verse 13, you say food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both. That's what they say. Paul replies by saying, You see, they think all that matters is being spiritual. So they say God will destroy the body, which means they think they have the right to do whatever they like with the body. So here is this man who's doing something not even the world tolerates, and yet the Corinthians are saying, look at how spiritual we are.

We are so spiritual that even, we even have a church member who is doing this with his body.

That's how spiritual and free we are, they say.

[6 : 05] But Paul says, you've got it all wrong. Instead of boasting, thinking you're so spiritual, you should have been mourning and disciplined this man. So point two in your outlines, and back in verse 2 of chapter 5 in our passage.

He continues to write in verse 2, Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of fellowship the man who has been doing this?

For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this.

You see, instead of boasting, they ought to have been mourning. And ask this man to leave the church. That's how serious it is. As for Paul, he's already come to this conclusion.

He's already passed judgment on him, this man. Paul says that although he's physically absent from them, he's as good as there with them by his spirit.

[7 : 07] It's kind of like having someone present with us live via satellite, if you like. Only Paul is present with them live via spirit. For he has a spiritual connection with them as their apostle.

At the point is, his judgment by letter is as good as him being present there. And he has already passed judgment. So now they should too.

See verse 4. So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

Notice here that the discipline happens when the church is together, gathered. And it's with the authority of the apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus himself.

For us, it would mean doing it with God's word open as our authority. And then they are to ask this man to leave. Or as Paul puts it, they are to hand this man over to Satan.

[8 : 09] What does that mean? Well, it means they're handing back to the world, out of the church, back to the world. For Jesus says in John 12, that the world is Satan's domain. Or in the words of verse 2, they are to put him out of their fellowship.

Or verse 11, they are no longer to associate with him, or even have a meal with him. In other words, they must suspend their fellowship and friendship with this man until he repents.

Now, in my experience, the person who is immoral, who is having the affair, often chooses not to come back to the church. Because it's much easier than facing people he knows.

But even then, the church must not maintain fellowship with them in the same way they did before. The church cannot act as though everything is normal, as though this man's behavior is okay.

I had a friend, or I have a friend, who was ministering at a church in Canberra when something like this happened. And he said to the congregation, look, if this man does come back, we can't force him to not come in the doors, but we need to be prepared to walk out.

[9 : 19] It's a big call, isn't it? So you'd hope there are good reasons for it, which brings us to point three, the reasons. And the first one is at the end of verse five there. It says, hand these men over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

See, the church is to perform such disciplinary action, so that the flesh or sinful nature, there's a footnote in your Bibles which says, flesh often means sinful nature, might be destroyed, and his spirit might be saved on the last day.

You see, what Paul is saying is that the church is to suspend fellowship with this man as a kind of wake-up call to him, so that he might stop giving in to his sinful nature, you know, destroy it in that sense.

Instead, repent and submit to Christ, as his king and saviour again. Because if he refuses to repent, if he persists in deliberately disobeying Christ, then does he really trust in Christ as his king?

And if he doesn't really trust in Christ as his king, if he's not encouraged to do that, then he won't be saved on the last day. In other words, while this is a tough call to make for the church and the man, it's actually a loving call to make.

[10 : 43] It's tough love for this man's good. I mean, it's why parents discipline children, is it not? I still remember my parents disciplining me and saying, this is for your own good.

Did your parents ever say that to you? At the time, you're thinking, yeah, as if. But now that I'm older, I understand it. And as a parent, I practice it.

And so when one of our children grabbed a sharp knife from the bench and started waving it around like a sword one time, I didn't sit there thinking, oh, that's nice. They like playing with knives. Maybe they'll grow up and get on MasterChef one day.

No, out of love for them, I disciplined them, which is tough for me as well as for them. But I did it because I love them and for their good, you see. So also here in the church, Paul says you need to love them enough to discipline them for their good.

And their good here in this passage is the man's very salvation. But like my child with the knife, tough love is not just for their good. It was also for the good of everyone around them who were in danger of being stabbed.

[11 : 52] And that's the second reason Paul gives in verse six. It's for the church's good. Do you see verse six? Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?

Paul here uses a proverb that we all know to be true, don't we? A little bit of yeast works through the whole batch of dough. And the implication is clear. A little bit of unrepentant sin can work its way through the whole congregation.

And so tough love is necessary, not just for the person's good, but also for the church's good. So the church is not led into sin and unholiness as well. When I was younger, I knew of a church where one of the youth group leaders was sleeping with his girlfriend and he claimed it was okay because they loved each other.

But it wasn't too long before the youth started to think the same way. And it led to all sorts of other inappropriate behavior in the youth group. In fact, that's how the leader was found out because one of the youth kids was doing something inappropriate and the parents talked to him about it.

And he said, well, it's okay because the youth leader says it's okay. You see, a little bit of yeast spreads to others. And sadly, the youth leader did not repent and was rightly asked to step down from leading the youth group church.

[13 : 08] And if he did refuse to repent even then, to leave the church altogether. You see, tough love matters not just for the good of the person, but for the good of the whole church. And the good Paul has in mind for the church here is her holiness.

See verse 7 and 8? He says, Now you've all heard of being gluten-free, haven't you?

Well, Paul is saying the church is to be yeast-free. Not literally, of course, but of ungodliness, unholiness, of persistent sinful behavior. And so in verse 8, yeast represents malice and wickedness.

I like this man's immorality. This is what they had to get rid of. Why? Well, verse 7, So that they might be a new batch without yeast, as they really are.

Did you notice that? You see, right at the start of this letter, I think I've got it on the next slide, in chapter 1, verse 2, Paul reminded the Corinthians that God had sanctified them, or made them holy, in Christ Jesus.

[14 : 30] That is, through Christ's death for them on the cross, God forgave them and made them holy in His sight. That's who they already are, His holy people.

And so now they were to act holy. They were to act their age, so to speak. And that's what Paul is saying here, except he's using the language of the Passover festival that we heard in our first reading.

And we heard that the festival was to remember how God saved them from Egypt by the blood of a sacrificed lamb. Remember, it was put on the door frames of their houses. And they had to eat unleavened bread because they left Egypt in a hurry and had no time to add the yeast and so on. So what Paul is saying here is, remember how God has saved you by the blood of the ultimate Passover lamb, Christ. Remember that His blood brought you forgiveness and made you holy in His sight.

Remember who you really are, a batch of holy people, and so now act like it and get rid of unholiness. I was playing around with my children the other week and the girls were showing Michelle and me some of their dance moves for their concert at the end of the year.

[15 : 39] So I thought I'd break out some of my dance moves and show them, you know, the old robot kind of thing. But one of them said to me, Dad, you're not a dancer, so please don't dance.

In other words, don't try and be something you're not. Well, the reverse is true for the Corinthians. They are to try and be something they are, God's holy people.

So Paul says, get rid of unholiness before it spreads and makes you unholy too. Well, Paul closes by reminding them of their responsibility to exercise tough love.

Point four, verse nine. He says, I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral or the greedy and swindlers, idolaters.

In that case, you would have to leave the world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister, but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater, a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.

[16 : 45] Do not even eat with such people. Here it seems that Paul wrote an earlier letter to the church, which we don't have, and he told them not to associate with people who deliberately persist in sin.

But the Corinthians thought Paul meant that was talking about non-Christians in the world. Yet he says, if that was the case, then you'd have to leave the world or become like the Amish because there's non-Christians everywhere.

But Paul says, no, no, no, you've got it wrong. I wrote for you not to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister, a Christian, and yet refuses to repent.

And it's not just sexual immorality like this man in chapter five. Paul also lists those who refuse to repent of greed or idolatry or being a drunkard and a swindler and so on, a cheat and so on, which such Christians do not even eat with them, he says.

In other words, don't give them the impression that what they're doing doesn't matter because it does matter. It's a matter of their salvation and our holiness as a church.

[17 : 50] And so our responsibility is not to judge those outside the church, but those inside. See verse 12? What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?

Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. So expel the wicked person from among you. See, our responsibility is not to judge those outside the church, but those inside.

Now, immediately we think of passages like Matthew chapter seven, where Jesus says, do not judge. And we're going, how does this work? Well, there's two different types of judging. We're to judge those inside, not with an attitude of superiority, you know, with a plank in our own eye, acting as though we're so much better, that looks down on them.

That's the type of judging that both Paul and Jesus condemn. Rather, we are to judge with an attitude of humility that discerns what is right and wrong for the good of people and the glory of God.

This is the type of judging that both Jesus and Paul commend. In fact, someone from my Bible study group last week pointed out that if the wider church actually obeyed God's word here in chapter five, as hard as it is, with its clergy as well, then we wouldn't have the type of royal

commission into child abuse that we're having right now.

[19 : 06] Would we? If we actually obeyed God's word, then many children would have been saved from this horrific abuse. And God's name would not have been dragged through the mud and the newspapers.

Now, please don't mishear Paul. He's not saying we now have to police each other, walk around with clipboards and marking off when we've done something good or bad, like an overzealous parking officer looking out for any infringement.

But he is saying, or rather God is saying, he wants us to help each other to be holy. And that may sometimes mean tough love. Of course, it's much easier said than done, isn't it?

Facades things are rarely as black and white as they are here in chapter five. It often depends on the person, you know, their level of maturity as a Christian, the nature of the sin, the relationship you have with them.

And so practicing tough love is often a case-by-case basis, done in right relationship, with a gentle manner, and a gracious process.

[20 : 12] So on the back of your outlines, I've listed four principles we get from Scripture when it comes to church discipline. The first one is the two types of judging I pointed out.

The second one is, you know, is the sin persistent and do they refuse to repent? Because that really sets in motion the rest. I'm not going to go through all of them now. If you want to, you can look at them later with those references.

Now, in most cases, we won't need to apply this because Christians will hopefully repent rather than refuse to repent. So usually the issue for us is actually taking our own holiness and sin seriously.

But we also, to do what we can to help others when the situation arises. And so it could look something like this. Imagine you haven't seen a good friend at church for some time and every time you ring them, when each week you ring them, they say, I couldn't be bothered coming again this Sunday.

then if they're saying that, then it might mean arranging a time to catch up with them for a coffee or whatever and say, look, sometimes I don't feel like I could be bothered either.

[21 : 24] But it's for our good and for God's glory. So can I really encourage you to come back? That's what it might look like in practice. Or it might mean coming to talk to me, not to gossip or condemn them, but to love them and to help them.

But if it's really serious, like what we see here in chapter five, then I would meet with them over several months, pleading with them to repent, reminding them that there's always forgiveness in Christ, offering them professional counselling, offering to pay for it.

Then I would seek to meet with them, with others from the church to try and persuade them to repent. I would give them warnings of what might happen to them and what must happen with us. And if they still refuse to repent after all that, then I would ask them, well, to leave and the congregation to break fellowship with them.

For their good, their very salvation, and for the church's good, our holiness. And I know this is what I would do because I've done it before once.

So I'm not just making this up. But you see, sin is serious and holiness does matter. So much so that it costs God his only son to pay for our sin and to make us holy in his sight.

[22 : 43] And if that's how serious God takes sin and holiness, then so too oughtn't we? Oughtn't we? If we don't, then we are making light of Christ's death for us and not really loving one another.

Tough love and this passage actually is, well, tough. But thanks be to God that he has given us his spirit and one another to help. Let's pray.

Our gracious Father, we thank you for this tough reminder this morning about the seriousness of sin and how much holiness matters.

And so by your spirit and word, please grow us all in holiness. Please also give us humble, loving, and discerning hearts that we may genuinely help each other to be holy as you have made us to be in Christ.

And may we always rejoice in the forgiveness we have through the Lord Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.