

How to Practice Tough Love in the Church

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The Church and Christian Relationships Series

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

I am going to continue the series that I have been doing on the church and our relationships with each other. One of the toughest issues facing the church as we enter the new millennium is the issue of church discipline. There have been two very well publicized cases of church disciplines that have been in the papers and national magazines in the last few years. One of them involved a woman named Marian Guinn. She sued the 160-member Collinsville Church of Christ back in the mid-1980's for \$1.3 million dollars for exercising church discipline against her.

She alleged an invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress. According to the trial transcripts, Marian Guinn's sister was a church member and introduced her to the congregation. The church reached out to Marian in a loving and generous way. It moved her and her children to the community after she went through a divorce. It paid her rent for a period of time, took care of her utilities, gave food and clothing to her children.

Marian Guinn joined the church and became a regular attender. While there she learned about the church's process for withdrawing fellowship from people who persisted in public sin. Sometime after Guinn joined the church, she began drifting away. It became public knowledge in that little bedroom community that she was having an affair with the town's former mayor, a man by the name of Pat Sharp.

The church elders approached Guinn regarding the rumors on three different occasions and urged her to break off her relationship with this married former mayor. But she continued to maintain her relationship with the married man and the elders wrote to her calling her to repent or else they would report the matter to the congregation the following Sunday and request that they remove her from membership.

The next Friday, two days before the congregational meeting, Marian Guinn sent a letter to the elders resigning her membership. But the elders, who believed they still had spiritual responsibility for Marian Guinn, reported the matter to the congregation.

Her lawyer during the trial argued before the jury that it doesn't matter if Marian Guinn fornicated up and down the street [these were his literal words]; it's nobody else's business but hers. The jury of her peers apparently agreed, as did a sizeable portion of Tulsa's population. Most people felt that it was not the church's business to get involved in the private lives of its members. The jury awarded Marian Guinn \$390,000. The Oklahoma Supreme Court later reversed the lower court on several of its rulings, but returned the case for retrial on an invasion of privacy charge. The church ended up settling out of court with Marian Guinn for an undisclosed sum.

Another case, which just arose last year, involved a United Methodist pastor named Gregory Dell, who decided to defy the United Methodist Churches' official ban on blessing same-sex marriages. The way his denominational trial came about was that the United Methodist Church issued a judicial ruling from its highest judicial body clarifying the denomination's ban on blessing same-sex union.

But Dell decided to have a test case and so he publicly married two gay people. Dell's liberal Bishop, who sided with Dell, decided to file charges against him. Dell and his Bishop, therefore, manufactured the whole trial. And Dell immediately went to the press saying that what was going on against him was the practice of "denominational cleansing".

40 years ago, and you would have said it was McCarthyism in the past, he might have alleged that it was a witch-hunt. But in an age of ethnic cleansing, Revelation Gregory Dell attacked his own denomination as practicing "denominational cleansing."

There are many, many people that do not believe that the church should ever exercise corrective discipline in the lives of its members or its leaders. You regularly hear people voice the opinion that what a person does whether they belong to a church or not, is no body else's business. The church shouldn't judge. People have said that the church is the only institution in the world that shoots their own wounded. Strong language.

We certainly have come to a time in history where the vast majority of American churches virtually never practice corrective church discipline. Churches are afraid of lawsuits in a litigation happy society. Churches are concerned about their reputations. They want to be sure that the community understands that the church is a loving, healing place and not a harsh, punitive judgmental place.

Churches wonder if discipline does anything in any case, since church members who may be correctively disciplined simply leave the church and go down the street where they are embraced with open arms by churches within their own denomination. And what is true for church members is also true for church leaders when leaders are fired or removed from one church, and find a welcoming home in another church and, indeed, a job offer at another church.

If America has swung toward one end of the spectrum of morality, we are engaged in a kind of extreme moral laxity in the church. We need to remember that all of history hasn't been like the present time and there have been periods of time in the church where the pendulum was way over on the other side toward extreme moral rigor and moral severity. We read in church history that St. Gregory, who was the Bishop of Neo-Caesarea in Pontus, indicated in the year 260 that there were four grades or classes of penitents prior to their restoration to full communion. They were what he called the weepers, or mourners, who had to stand outside the door of the church crying out to the faithful to intercede for them. There was a second class called the hearers, who were placed in the Narthex out in the lobby of the church. There were the kneelers, who were allowed into the Nave of the church, the main auditorium, but they had to kneel while everyone else stood. And finally there was a fourth class called the co-

standers, who could join in the service with others, but they couldn't take communion.

So people who sinned in the early church would be divided up according to these four classes. And as time went on this system of dividing people and having long periods of time before a person could be restored into full relationship, full fellowship with the church, these systems of discipline grew more elaborate. By the time of St. Basil of Caesarea in the year 374, St. Basil prescribed 15 years of discipline for the sin of adultery. Four years you had to be outside the church joining with the weepers. Five years you had to be kept in the Narthex in the lobby of the church with the hearers. Four years you had to spend on your knees with the kneelers. And two years you were a co-stander.

The church throughout history has swung between a moral laxity and an unwillingness to exercise corrective discipline of anyone for anything and the moral rigor of severity that seems so far from the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, who said, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me, for I am meek and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Where in all of this language of the weepers and the kneelers, and the hearers and the co-standers is there any invitation to the repentant to come to me?

It doesn't sound like Jesus. It sure sounds a lot more like the Pharisees that Jesus regularly battled with.

Back in the 1970's some family counselors coined a term that I like. They began talking with parents of teenagers about the concept of tough love. There were lots of parents who had teens who were out of control, teens that wouldn't listen to reason or gentle correction, teens that were defiant and in your face. These family counselors began to talk to insecure helpless parents, parents who were literally put on their backs by their teenagers. They began to talk to them about the concept of tough love.

What I observe in the church today across America is that the church has been put on its back by an aggressive, militant kind of individualism; an individualism that says what I do is no one else's business. The church has been put on its back by a fear of litigation. The church has been put on its back by pragmatic concerns for its own growth and its own popularity. And it seems to me as I read the Bible, that if the church is going to be the church; it needs to embrace this concept of tough love with its members.

Tough love. There is a wonderful paraphrase of the Bible that I often use in my own devotions in the morning. It is called The Message by Eugene Petersen. It is the Bible put in a very up-to-date language. I found The Message to have a freshness that allows the words of the Bible to retain their sting. After you become familiar with a text of ten words lose their sting. But listen to Gene Petersen's rendering of Philippians 1:9-11. Here it is from The Message version of the Bible:

"So this is my prayer: that your love would flourish and that you will not only love much, but love well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not

sentimental gush. Live a lover's life circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus would be proud of, bountiful in fruits from the soul making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God."

You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Tough love.

And when Petersen's renders Romans 11:22, here is what he says:

"If God didn't think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches, why would he hesitate over you? He wouldn't give it a second thought. Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exists side-by-side in God. Ruthless, as in dead wood. Gentle with the grafted shoot. But don't presume of this gentleness. The moment you become dead wood, you are out of there."

Ruthless, gentle, and tough love. Tough love. That is what corrective church discipline is all about. Church discipline is love because its goal is restoration, not punishment. Church discipline is tough because it insists that the price of restoration is repentance. It is love because it ministers to people where they are. It is tough because it doesn't allow people to stay where they are.

It is love because it goes after people who are disobeying God's Word. It is tough because it refuses to cater to people by bending God's Word. It is love because it embraces sinners who are crushed by their sin and it is tough because it hates the sin that crushes sinners. It's love because Jesus, who is love, energizes it. It's tough because Jesus, who is holy, energizes it.

Today as I move forward in my discussion of the church and our relationships with each other, we are going to look at the issue of corrective church discipline. I have called my message, "How to Practice Tough Love in the Church." Let's pray.

We read in 1 Cor. 5 these words:

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."

Paul is talking about removing a person from the church's fellowship, something we might call corrective church discipline. Some churches would call it excommunication, disfellowship. I am talking about practicing tough love.

Now what is the occasion for this corrective church discipline or tough love? Well, Paul says that there were two great sins occurring in the church. In verse 1 he speaks of the sexual activity of a church member. It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife.

But the sin that Paul was most concerned about, and we will look at it in a moment, is the sinful arrogance of the church in not disciplining this immoral

behavior. Verse 2, “And you are proud. Shouldn’t you have rather been filled with grief and put out of your fellowship the man who did this?”

What is going on here? It appears that a man had an ongoing sexual relationship with his father’s wife. The woman is apparently not the man’s mother, but his stepmother. Now it is possible that the woman was considerably younger than his father, but even in the morally lax environment of the Greco-Roman world, this kind of incest was rare and was condemned even in the world.

Now, it is important to note that the occasion for corrective discipline was not some one-time activity, some one-time departure from an otherwise moral life. We are not talking about a slip here – someone who is endeavoring to follow Jesus and just stumbles, made a stupid decision, some lapse of judgment. We are not talking about a one-time act here. We are talking about a lifestyle, a committed lifestyle of sin.

And this tells us one thing about the occasion for corrective church discipline. Generally, before a church would exercise corrective discipline that might lead to disfellowship, removing someone from fellowship, a person must persistently and willfully engages in a pattern, a lifestyle of sin.

Now listen, let me say this as clearly as I can. Corrective church discipline is reserved for the unrepentant. People who after repeated correction simply refuse all offers of help. I know and God knows in a church like this many of us are struggling with sinful habits and addictive patterns. Corrective church discipline is not for those who are seeking help. It is not for those who are going to some kind of recovery group, who are going to counseling and who are walking out a process of repentance. It is not for those who are straining to change their behavior. It is for those who willfully, after repeated attempts at correction, refuse to change. It is for those who are defiant and the rebellious and the hardened. It’s for people who keep saying “Yes” to God with their mouths but “No” to God with their behavior. It is for those who look at what God’s Word says and say to the Lord, “Thanks, but no thanks. I have decided to go my own way.”

It is also important to quickly point out that the only sin for which we might remove a person from a church’s membership is not sexual sin. This particular man was living in a lifestyle of what Paul calls “porneia” where we get the word pornography. Porneia is a lifestyle of sexual uncleanness. But that is not the only sin for which a person might be disciplined in the New Testament.

Look down with me, if you will, to verse 11. Paul says, “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral [that is what is going on here in Corinth, but he adds], or greedy, an idolater, or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.” People’s whose lifestyles are characterized by greed. They are persistently lying to clients or double billing people. They are embezzling money. They have all these ethical shortcuts to acquiring wealth. They are selfish. Even though they have tremendous wealth, they don’t share it with the poor.

I think these sins that are listed here are merely representative ones, as illustrations. They are not an exhaustive list of all that we might exercise corrective discipline for. The apostle Paul in the book of Titus, Titus 3:10, says

that we might remove someone from fellowship for being divisive, someone who tries to split the church, spreads a bunch of rumors, attacks the church's leaders. He says of a divisive person; warn them and then have nothing to do with them.

And in 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul speaks about not fellowshiping with someone who is idle. He says, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle." People who are lazy and will not work to and who fail to provide for their own upkeep and the upkeep of their family. He goes on to say, "Even when we were with you, we gave you this rule, if a man will not work, he shall not eat." He is not talking about someone who cannot work, who is disabled, or cannot find a job because there is high unemployment in the area, but someone who will not work. Somebody who will not work, someone who is physically able, but makes lots of excuses why they don't have to go to work. He says regarding such a person, "Make special note of him and do not associate with him in order that he might feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

So there are these lists of representative sins, and they are there not because they are the worst of all sins, many people believe that corrective church discipline is only exercised for particularly notorious sins like incest or child abuse. But Paul would add to that list things that are socially acceptable sins such as greed, slander, laziness. It is not the severity of the sin, but the persistence in it without repentance that leads to corrective discipline. Let me say it again – It is not the severity of the sin, but the persistence in sin without repentance that leads to corrective church discipline.

Now there was a second problem in the church and it is the sinful arrogance of the church in its refusal to discipline one of its members. Paul says in verse 2, "And you are proud. Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"

It is wrong for a teenager to use drugs. But there is something even worse about parents who know their teenagers are using drugs and then refuse to do anything about it. I know a young woman who said her mother found pills in her purse when she was a teenager. She said her mother took the pills out of her purse and put them on her dresser and never said anything to her. She said, "At that moment, I realized my mother hated me. She didn't care enough about me to talk to me about my drug use." And so the woman in rebellion and anger spiraled down into serious drug addiction.

There is something wrong when a person has an affair and commits adultery against their spouse. But there is something even more wrong when their mate says, "I don't care." The refusal to confront sin, the flabbiness and weakness of America today in demanding more from our leaders - our political leaders, our church leaders, the general shrug of the shoulders, the almost arrogant, "Oh, come on now, are you still so hung up? Everyone does it." Paul says what grieves him more than the individual's incest is the church's refusal to deal with the incest. He says instead of being so arrogant, so proud of their freedom in Christ, and their refusal to judge anyone, they really should have mourned. "But shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"

Our lack of grief regarding the real condition of church members' lives really suggests to me a lack of seriousness with which we treat certain biblical subjects. You see, to the extent that everything the Bible says is treated with a light touch – “Oh come on now, let's not get too heavy, let's not make anyone uncomfortable, or have anyone at any time feel the least bit bad” – well, of course, in such a setting no one would grieve. It is only when we take certain subjects seriously that we might experience grief.

Like what?

Well, when we take discipleship seriously, we might grieve over the condition of the church. Becoming a Christian is a radical call into following Jesus. The fundamental call to the Christian is “follow me. Walk in my steps.” Christians are people who follow after Jesus. When Jesus in the Bible or by his spirit tells you to do something or not to do something, the Christian is someone who follows Jesus' commands.

But unfortunately, the vast majority of us church members do not take discipleship very seriously. Most folks take Jesus' words to be impossible ideals. Jesus really doesn't intend to be obeyed, when he tells us not to lust and that when we lust in our hearts, we commit adultery. Or, not to rage and blow up in anger because when we do, that we commit murder. Most followers of Christ assume that Jesus' words must clearly be aimed at someone else like religious professionals or missionaries. They are nice words. They are lofty concepts. We love to put them in greeting cards. But I couldn't possibly strictly tell the truth in the dog eat dog business I am in at work. I couldn't possibly hold the moral line with the guys in my dormitory or the women around the lunch table.

How many of you in your heart of hearts really have come to a place of saying that for one reason or another Christ cannot be followed completely and radically in your life because of your circumstances, your singleness, your kids, the pressures that are on you to make a buck, your past, the wounding you have experienced? How many of you, let me ask you a personal question: Do you believe that there is some reason that Jesus Christ cannot be fully followed given the circumstances of your life?

Well, now that I am divorced and no longer a virgin, Christ couldn't possibly be asking me as a 40-year old woman or a 40-year old man to refrain from sexual relations. You don't understand Jesus. My fiancée and I, my boyfriend and I have to live together. It's too expensive to have two places.

At my job, or with my ex-spouse, or with my parents, Christ couldn't possibly be saying to me that I should turn the other cheek and not return evil for evil against this other person who has attacked me, slandered me, gossiped against me, abused me. I mean he just wants me to bear this? No way.

One reason we, as a church, aren't often grieved about the condition of people is that we really don't take discipleship very seriously and we mentally lower the bar. We say, “This clearly couldn't apply to me.” We lower the bar. And we don't exercise corrective church discipline because we don't take sin very seriously.

John White, a Christian psychiatrist years ago said that sin causes two types of damage in your life – what he called primary and secondary damage. Primary

damage as a result from sin is damage to the sinner and anyone else the sin affects. Secondary damage is damage to your inner being, damage to your capacity to relate to God. So there is a person who is cheating at work. They are double billing people, cooking the books; they are submitting fraudulent filings to the government, lying about compliance with various government relations. They are lying to clients or to customers.

Well, the primary damage, using White's words, would be to the clients, to the customers, to the business. If a man is addicted to pornography and he is married, he is doing primary damage to his wife, who may be humiliated or angry by his pornography use. An alcoholic does primary damage to his liver, to his family. If the alcoholic is a woman and she is pregnant, she will do damage to her unborn child. If they are driving on the road, they might do primary damage to people on the road.

But there is another kind of damage that goes beyond hurting one's self and hurting others. And that is that people do secondary damage to their inner beings and to their relationship with God by persisting in sin. How do you cope if you keep doing what you know is wrong? You are doing something that you know is wrong and you keep doing it over and over and over again, despite the internal warnings of God, the Holy Spirit. Despite the disapproval of your conscience, and despite what God's Word says and what you hear in various messages. How do you cope when you keep doing what you know is wrong?

Well, the only way to cope is to learn to turn your conscience on and off. You learn there are certain times and situations where you just need to deaden your conscience, turn it off. And this continual flipping on and off of your conscience creates a divide in your soul, a kind of internal schizophrenia, where you learn to live with this double life and significant internal divide. Over a period of time, the person who persists in sin learns to lie to themselves really well. You become good at covering yourself up and lying to others. Maybe you compartmentalize. You say, "Well, I know this is wrong, but look at all the good things I am doing and this is just one little area, it doesn't affect anything else. I still am helping a lot of people in my kinship group. I still do a lot of good with the poor. I still am a good mother or father, even though I trip up over here." The more you compartmentalize, there is this growing corruption that rots out the structure of your inner spiritual life. Over a period of time as you continually violate your conscience it becomes seared and scarred.

Here's the deal. The longer a person lies to themselves and keeps trying to convince themselves through some process of rationalization that they are okay when they aren't okay, the longer someone lies to others and pretends they are alright when they are not alright, the more imaginary is their relationship with God. Primary damage hurts you and other people around you. But secondary damage destroys your relationship with God. You can say you are having a relationship with God, but after a while, the only relationship you are having is with a God of your own imagination. A God you have invented because the real God is hidden behind a wall that you have created by your own sin.

So people are constantly faced with a choice. Do I hide in myself in my rebellion against God, which maybe no one can detect and maybe no one will

detect until the Day of Judgment, or do I accept the consequences of my moral erosion, come out in the light with someone and try to gain a real relationship with God.

We don't exercise tough love because we don't take discipleship seriously. We don't take sin seriously and the horrible damage it does to us. Ultimately, we don't take God seriously. Paul says, "Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."

How many warnings from God do we need to stop dangling our toes over the pit of hell before we will take God seriously enough to pull back from the brink? Proverbs says the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom. Talk with people with whom God has let go for a period of time. Sit down with someone who has been chastened by the Lord where the Lord said, "I will let you go. I will allow you to sink, if that is what you desire." There is a cleanness of spirit that comes about through the fear of God, where we recognize that God is not a cosmic patsy, some infinite bowl of Jell-O that has no stuff to him. Talk with people, as I have, who have been allowed by God to wander far from him, like the Prodigal in the story that Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son, where the father just for a season says, "okay, go. Wander in the far country." And Jesus says the boy wandered and spent all that he had and eventually was reduced to eating the food that the pigs had to eat and no one helped him. Talk to someone who has eaten food with the pigs for a while, and you will hear someone who has gained an appreciation for the fear of the Lord.

We do not exercise tough love because sadly friends, most of us don't take God seriously. God is so kind. He will warn and warn and correct and correct before he lets someone go. God is so kind that before the tree blows over in the forest, its rotting out for years internally without anyone else being able to see it.

So why do we go to someone with tough love? And by the way, Jesus lays out the process, it is one that we would use here in Vineyard Columbus. You might want to jot in the margin, Matthew 18:15-17. Jesus says, "One of you goes and talks with the person. And then if he listens, you have gained that individual. But if they refuse to take correction, you bring some others with you as witnesses to speak and if that doesn't happen, you tell it to the church."

We use a similar process here. It is written out in our church by-laws. We have from time to time exercised church discipline. One goes, then a couple goes and then the New Testament pattern, of course, regarding what the church was, was not a mega church like Vineyard Columbus with 5000 people. The church met in homes. It was similar to a home fellowship group or kinship group. We would go to the individual kinship group and say, "Here is the deal. This is what is going on in this person's life."

Why would we do that instead of the live and let live American philosophy? Why should the church put its head on a chopping block and open itself up to charges of abuse by its members? Why not close our eyes to sin in the church,

pretending that everything is okay, quietly tell people, “Well, you may want to consider counseling” and then meekly walk away. Why engage in such an un-American activity as going to someone speaking lovingly, but truthfully to them about their sin, having them dislike you, spread rumors about you and then taking someone else and going again, speaking again and then taking it up to our leadership team where judgment would be rendered. And then we would take it to their kinship. Why would we go through all of that?

Well, let me give you the first reason. Tough love wants to bring reality to the dishonest. When do we exercise corrective church discipline? When people are living a lie, when their whole existence fundamentally is a lie, when they are lying to others about how well they are doing and how spiritual they are and how much they are serving and giving. And they lie to themselves and convince themselves that this is just one thing, one weak area and everyone has their weak area. Everyone has his or her particular problem. This is mine and it is not so bad. They not only lie to others and to themselves, but they lie to God while their relationship with God is more and more just a product of their own imagination. And they say before God that they have a real relationship with God while they disobey God’s warnings and refuse to heed God’s corrections and treat God as if God will not ever expose and bring to the light.

Corrective church discipline is meant to be a wake-up call. It is a pail of ice water in the face. It is the simple statement of truth that, friend, your life is completely out of sync with your profession of Christianity. Whatever else you say, think, profess, and pray, here is the reality of where you are living.

We exercise corrective church discipline because we know people’s lives go better when they live in the truth. We can’t make up our own universes. We can’t make up our own rules for life. We exercise church discipline, tough love, to rescue the unrepentant. Verse 5, “When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of the Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

In other words, remove this person from the warmth of Christian fellowship. Turn the person out into the world. Let them go their own way, away from the protection and the care and the affection of the church. Do we hate the person? Shun the person? No. He is not an enemy. But you can’t continue to relate to the individual as if everything is normal.

The apostle Paul says in verse 11, “I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother, but is sexually immoral or greedy, or an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man, do not even eat.”

In that day eating together was a sign of intimate relationship. He is saying that you cannot continue to have intimate relationship with someone. So for a period of time, that person is pushed out of the network of their relationships, with the hope that they will mourn the loss of those relationships and that they will become ashamed, especially if the church has gone through the biblical process of one then two, then the church council, their fellowship group – especially if the

church has been long suffering and there has been integrity in the process. We do this with the hope that the person will come to their senses and repent.

Rich, have you ever seen this work? Have you ever seen someone not just blow the church off and go down the street and join another church and say, "Who cares what those stupid folks at the Vineyard think? They are so judgmental and self-righteous." Have you ever seen this work?

Yes, I have. On a number of occasions, I have seen someone genuinely grieved at the loss of the warmth of our fellowship. I have seen people start telling the truth to themselves, to others like their spouses, and to their roommates. I have seen God allow people to really fall into the pit and experience in their own being the horror of their sin. I have seen God use the devil, since the devil is God's devil, and turn someone over to what the Bible says are the torturers emotionally, physically and spiritually. We have had people come back to us in softness, in humility, in repentance.

Paul is not only concerned about the individual and whether they laugh it off and go to some other church or blow Christianity off entirely. He is not just concerned about the individual. Paul is concerned about the church as a whole. We exercise tough love to bring refining and purity to the church. Look at verses 6-8, "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast, as you really are. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed, therefore, let us keep the festival not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."

The apostle Paul is saying that sin is like yeast. Actually, a better translation for yeast is leaven. See, what people would do in the ancient world is they would keep a portion of last week's dough and allow it to ferment and then add it to this week's dough. They would keep that up week after week. They would make what we call sour dough bread. Anyway, if you keep this up too long, bacteria can spread and make people sick. So once a year the people were ordered to purge their houses of all leaven and start up the process all over again. This was the Feast of Unleavened Bread that corresponded with the Passover.

Paul is saying that sin in an individual is like that leaven. It has a tendency to infect everything. It poisons the atmosphere. If sin is left unchecked in a church, it can kill a church. And doesn't our experience tell us that one person's sin can affect more than himself or herself, that we are not autonomous. That gossip will affect our ability to trust each other and our ability to trust the leaders of the church. Someone gets divorced and other marriages that are teetering will also begin to fall over.

Paul, later in 1 Corinthians, says, "Bad company ruins good morals." We say that to our children. We are concerned when our children begin to hang around with the wrong crowd; we know they are going to be influenced. And when you get a bunch of people in the church who don't take discipleship seriously, don't take sin seriously and don't take God seriously, and they lower the overall tone of the church and their influence spreads poison in the church.

The Lord Jesus Christ wants to come back for a bride, a bride called the church – a pure and spotless bride, not some streetwalker. He deserves a clean church.

Here is the last reason we exercise tough love in the church. And that is because it preserves the church's reputation in the world. The apostle Paul says that what is going on in the church was actually scandalous in the world. It has been reported, become notorious, that there is sexually immorality among you and of a kind that doesn't even occur among pagans: A man has his father's wife.

Then he goes on and says, "I have written to you in my letters not to associate with the sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat."

Paul is saying that we need to apply a different standard to the outside world than we do to the church. The principle is that you freely associate with everyone in the world, but in the church we relate to one another with tough love.

See, I said this last week and I will say it again. The church is to be an alternative to the outside world. It is to be a haven, a refuge, and a place that is really different – a place where people can watch relationships the way that God designed relationships to function. Where we are not always gossiping about each other or complaining about each other. Where we don't just avoid unpleasant truths. We treat one another with kindness; we forbear with each other's weaknesses. The church is to be an alternative society.

And I think church discipline is essential if the church is to maintain its evangelistic appeal to the outside world. Listen to me, now. Why don't people go to church anymore? Why have figures for church attendance been declining over the last 30 years, particularly among the young? Why is the church so ugly to so many people?

I think one reason very definitely is because people look at the church and say, "Why bother. This group of people is no different than me. Christianity obviously does not change people. The church is filled with slander and gossip and businessmen who cheat their clients, who inflate their bills. It is filled with people who don't pay when a bill is due. Why should I get up on Sunday morning or go on Saturday night, if it doesn't make a difference?"

Brothers and sisters, there are lots of folks who know that their life is not so hot. There are lots of people who have come to a place of saying that they really don't have answers. Most people feel there's something missing; they don't have a piece of the puzzle. You don't have to tell people about unhappiness or relational breakdown. They have experienced it in their own lives. They have been through the divorces and the fights and the custody battles. They have watched family fights over wills and estates. They have seen their careers go up and down with bosses who have changed and new corporations that have

bought them out. Maybe they've seen their parents divorce and they don't want to go through that themselves.

What folks are looking for is a genuine alternative to their lives. Most people do not want their own lives with religion on top of it. They want different lives. They want changed lives. They want to believe that it is possible to live better, more noble, more loving lives than they are living. I can look you in the eye and tell you that the reason I turned away from my own Jewish background and dealt with the anger and upset with my parents, and the confusion and rejection of my Jewish friends, my girlfriend and my best friend – the reason why I gave my life to Jesus Christ when I was 18 years old was because I met someone who was genuinely living a better life than me. I saw someone live life the way I always hoped life could be lived – healthy, clean, no lies, no immoralities. That is what attracted me to Christ.

My own conviction is that corrective discipline, tough love, when it is properly administered, when it is done in the atmosphere of all that the church does to counsel people and love and all of our groups and recovery groups, that corrective church discipline instead of decreasing our attractiveness, actually increases it. Listen, it is never easy to correct someone. If it is easy, we are probably not doing this with the spirit of Jesus. It always grieves us when we have to correct. We do it with humility and a sense of our own frailty and our own weakness. We approach people with kindness. We remember that, as the book of Hebrews says, "No discipline is pleasant at the time, but it is painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Let's pray.