

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on 1 Corinthians 5 on August 14, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb.

**Series: 1 Corinthians—a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church**  
**Today's Focus: We Need to Talk**

**“When You Need to Have a Crucial Conversation, Remember the Cross!”**

What could possibly go wrong as people run around hunting down little digital creatures while staring intently at their phones? Well on July 13<sup>th</sup>, one week after Nintendo launched its wildly popular app Pokemon Go, two men actually fell off a cliff near the ocean in California. Did you hear about this? One of the men fell the full 90 feet to the cliff base, while the other somehow stopped his fall and clung on three quarters of the way down. Firefighters attended the scene and hoisted the man clinging to the cliff to safety while recovering the other man from the cliff base.

So how'd they end up falling off the cliff? Weren't there any warnings? Actually they walked past a No Trespassing sign and then a Do Not Cross sign near a cliff edge. But after ignoring the warning signs, of course the inevitable happened. They fell off the cliff and needed to be rescued.

Now let me ask you this? If you were one of their friends and you saw them heading towards the cliff and you watched them walk past one of those warning signs because they were so consumed by what they were pursuing, wouldn't you have tried to stop them? Wouldn't you have run over there and at least said, “Look out! Hey, watch where you're going!” Of course you would've! That would have been the *loving* thing to do, right?

Well in the same way our sermon text today from 1 Corinthians chapter 5 is about the extent to which we should be willing to go, if we truly love each other, to prevent one of our brothers or sisters in Christ from going over the spiritual cliff of soul destroying, deliberate sin. It's about being willing to have crucial conversations motivated by love to help save someone who is headed towards their own destruction. And what underlies this is a conviction unchanged by the winds of political correctness that according to the teaching of Jesus himself all people are destined to spend forever somewhere. This life isn't a game. When a person dies their soul immediately goes to either spend eternity with God in heaven or it goes to experience an eternity separated from God's love in hell.

So today we begin a crucial conversation that the church of Jesus Christ must always renew in every generation until he returns. We need to talk. And as we'll see this isn't about calling out the world from the comfort of our nice church chairs. It's not about trying to correct everyone's behavior out there in society. It's not about comparing ourselves with others to make ourselves look better than other people or feel better about ourselves. It's not just about our need to get something off our chest. It's not about our being right or proving a point. And it's not about cherry-picking what sins we think might be conceivably worse than others.

What's this conversation all about then? It's about sincere love trying to help those who call themselves our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to see the consequences of deliberate sin no matter what that sin is. It's about helping prevent someone in our church family from being carried away by their own pursuits when those pursuits are clearly outside of God's will where God's word has clearly spoken. It's

about reaching out to a friend who is heading towards the cliff of spiritual death in the hope we might see them fall instead into the arms of our gracious and forgiving and life giving God.

So if there is one thing I want you to take home today it's this: *"When You Need to Have a Crucial Conversation, Remember the Cross!"* Because there we see how seriously God takes all sin. And because there we see how seriously God desires to save us all. So let's get into chapter 5:

**5 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. <sup>2</sup>And you are proud!**

So Paul brings up the topic of sexual immorality and because the Bible doesn't shy away from talking about it we won't either. Basically sexual immorality in the Bible includes all sins against the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment where God says: **"You shall not commit adultery"** (Ex. 20:14). The big idea is that God created sexual intimacy as a blessing for human beings to enjoy and then he protected it for us as something wonderful by placing it within a special safe only to be unlocked with a key called marriage. Marriage as God designed it is the lifelong union of a one man and one woman—each one who seeks not their own self-fulfillment or selfish satisfaction but each other's ultimate well-being above their own. We'll talk more about this the next couple weeks as we look at God's blueprint for experiencing true intimacy, and how purity is what leads to intimacy. But in Corinth, as in our society today, few found this kind of intimacy because they had a very casual and cheap view of sex. They looked at it more like a commodity to be exchanged as if it were a mere transaction.

So what was going on here in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 that drew the attention of the apostle Paul? Specifically, there was a man who was having hugs and kisses with, sleeping with, his stepmother. He called himself a Christian. The woman it seems did not. And apparently their bedroom behavior became common knowledge among the Corinthian congregation. Except not only was this situation being tolerated, but some in the church were actually boasting about it as if this were a perfectly acceptable way to express one's self. Some had the attitude, "It can't be wrong if it feels so right." You ever fall into that way of thinking?

Here we get a little glimpse how sin can progressively impact people just as a little yeast spreads quickly into a whole batch of dough. If you've ever watched someone make bread or you've ever made cinnamon rolls from scratch or something like that, you know how this works. A little yeast pretty quickly leavens a whole lump of dough. So also sin in a church. This sinful situation in Corinth progressed from being tolerated to being celebrated. It was only a short time before this would impact everyone's values and beliefs in the church as it was already starting to do. Especially new believers, what were they to think? Can you see why Pastor Paul had to speak so strongly to this? What people tolerate they begin to celebrate. What people celebrate they begin to imitate.

Where have you begun to see this progression take place in your own life? Have you begun to celebrate what you once only used to tolerate? Have you begun to imitate what our culture wants you to celebrate? What then will this mean for the next generation? Remember this, we are always only one generation away from completely losing our heritage of God's Word and the Gospel. Could this happen?

It starts when we begin to tolerate sin in the church or in your family as if it's no big deal. Because if it's no big deal then why make a big deal about a Savior? Why attend a church named after the one who came as a perfect sacrifice for our sins so we could go to heaven if all we're looking for is a personal life coach to help us each achieve our own version of success here on earth? See how this works?

At the same time, it's really important that we understand that our text today is specifically talking about sin that is willful, deliberate, and defiant. It's not talking about sins of weakness. Sins of weakness are sins that we all fall into every day but we don't want to. Pastor Bill will talk more about this next week. When we fall into sin, even the same sins over and over again, they cause us to feel sad because we know that we have sinned against God and we're sorry. This leads us to repentance which is trusting in Jesus for full and free forgiveness and with his help seeking to battle daily against that sin in our life. But our text today is warning against deliberate sin which, without repentance, drives out the Holy Spirit so that there is no longer any sense of guilt or shame. Deliberate, defiant sin is incompatible with saving faith in Jesus Christ.

That's why Paul says, **Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?** <sup>3</sup> **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.** <sup>4</sup> **So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,** <sup>5</sup> **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.**

Sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? I hear you. "Put him out of your fellowship." "Hand this man over to Satan." Later at the end of the chapter Paul will say, "Expel the wicked person from among you." Well what's he talking about? This is excommunication here. Excommunication is the church telling a deliberate, defiant sinner as a last resort of love that you can no longer be considered a Christian. It is the church saying to someone with whom they used to have fellowship, "Because we love you, you need to know that unless you repent of your sin and amend your way of life, you are headed over the cliff that will one day land you in hell. You have trampled on the grace of God by turning into a license to keep sinning. You are thereby throwing away the sacrifice that Jesus made for you on the cross and the doors of heaven are most certainly closed to you unless you repent...and that is our greatest, highest hope for which we will continue to pray." This is what it means to hand someone over to Satan **for the destruction of the flesh.**

"Flesh" is a technical term in the Bible for the sinful nature that we all have. The thought here I believe is that by announcing to someone that the doors of heaven are shut to them unless they repent...their conscience might finally be pricked with a sense of guilt and shame and sorrow. And why? To lead them to despair? No! But rather that their genuine sorrow produced by the law of God might lead them back to Christ where they can find again true joy in the love of God that leads to a change in behavior. Paul clearly states the goal...**So that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.** So that they might get to go to heaven! This is why excommunication is the last resort of *love*. It's to lead someone back to God just as he himself declares: **Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no**

**pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’ (Ezekiel 33:11)**

How do we know God is serious here? How do we know God doesn’t want any one of us to die and go to hell? Because his own Son Jesus Christ came and lived and died and suffered hell in our place! Friends, that’s why *when you need to have a crucial conversation with someone, remember the cross*. That’s what Paul does too with Corinthians: <sup>6</sup> **Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?** <sup>7</sup> **Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.** <sup>8</sup> **Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.**

The backdrop here is Old Testament history when the Israelites removed all the yeast from their homes in preparation for celebrating the Passover meal (cf. Ex. 12). The point that Paul is making here is that a little yeast has tremendous impact on whatever it is in. So like a tiny pinch of yeast spreading through a loaf of bread, unchallenged sin can soon contaminate the whole church. So like the Israelites who swept clean out of their houses every pinch of yeast before the Passover, so we should sweep out of our lives every impulse of sin. And why? Because once and for all, Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb, has come. He has come for us all! Our true Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. When did this happen? At the cross where the sinless Son of God took our place and shed his blood so that eternal death would pass us over and we could pass on one day into the promised land of heaven.

This is why *when you need to have a crucial conversation with someone about sin, remember the cross*. There we see how serious God is about sin. All sin. Every sin. **The wages of sin is death** (Ro. 6:23a). Jesus would not have had to die if God wasn’t serious about sin. But there we also see how serious God is to save. To save us all. Jesus died on the cross so that we wouldn’t have to. His robe of righteousness in exchange for our filthy rags. Because it’s God’s Son who suffered and died his death was sufficient to pay not just for a few people’s sins, but for all. There is no stain blot of sin so enduring that his blood has not already washed it away. So even if you’ve been living a lie, even if this sermon has hit your heart like a torpedo, friends, this means there is still time for you to come clean, to repent, and to come home to God and rediscover his grace. This isn’t cheap grace I’m talking about. This is God’s riches at Christ’s expense.

<sup>9</sup> **I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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 or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.**

<sup>12</sup> **What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?**

<sup>13</sup> **God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”**

Let me close with a story. There was once a man who thought, "It can't be wrong if it feels so right." He was living in sin but he didn't care. After all he had friends at church who didn't say a thing. Why would they? Not only did they tolerate what he was doing, they celebrated it. Until one day they realized this was like letting their friend walk right off the edge of a cliff. So they told them what he was doing was wrong. They said it was sinful. They told him he should repent. But he wouldn't. So his church finally excommunicated him. And he was furious. "How could they!? How dare they!?" But after a while his conscience started to convict him. His guilt started to weigh on him. What used to feel so right, deep down, he knew was wrong. Tears of remorse sometimes kept him up at night. Until he came back and confessed and once again heard the good news that in the name of Jesus he was acquitted of all guilt not only in the eyes of his church family but in the eyes of his heavenly Father.

You know who that man was? The same man we heard about today in 1 Corinthians chapter 5. You can read about in 2 Corinthians chapter 2. But it could as well be about anyone, maybe even one of you who is here today ready to come clean and to come home into the arms of your gracious God. Because there is always hope. The goal is to win another soul. Friends, *when you need to have a crucial conversation, remember the cross*. There we see how serious God is about sin. And there we see how serious God is about saving.

Let's pray. Jesus, Lamb of God, you have truly taken upon yourself the sins of the world. For that we are grateful because we know that means ours too. Forgive our waywardness and make our hearts pure. Renew us by your Spirit through word and sacrament today and lead us to have those crucial conversations with one another so that we might enjoy unbroken fellowship with you both and forevermore. Amen.