

WHEN DISCIPLINE ENDS

by Ray C. Stedman

In our study of Second Corinthians this morning, we will be dealing with the third of three very practical problems which arose in the church there in Corinth, to which Paul is writing: (These problems frequently arise in California as well.)

The first problem was how to handle stress in your personal life. We saw that Paul's answer was the strengthening that the Spirit of God gives by which these pressures around and within may be met.

The second problem, which we looked at last week, was how to clear up a misunderstanding with someone.

Today we will be dealing with the problem of when discipline in a congregation should end.

In Verse 5 of Chapter 2, Paul says:

But if any one has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure -- not to put it too severely -- to you all. For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough; so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. {2 Cor 2:5-8 RSV}

Clearly this is a case of some kind of judicial discipline going on within the congregation in Corinth. There is a great deal of doubt among scholars as to whom the person in question is:

Traditionally this has been linked with that incident in First Corinthians, where a certain individual was living in a form of incest with his father's wife. Paul had written about that, rebuking them for not doing anything about it, and urging them to take action. Some scholars feel that this was the follow-up on that, that we are dealing now with the case of a man who had repented; and that Paul is urging that love and forgiveness be extended to him.

But other Bible scholars feel that this is another incident, that this man is more likely involved in some kind of rebellion, leading a schism against the apostle's authority, perhaps, and that this had created trouble in the church. I doubt that this is the case of the incestuous man, because Paul had not only written First Corinthians about that and urged the church to act, but he himself had been there since then. (He had also written a very severe letter to them about matters in the church, so it seems unlikely to me that this matter was hanging fire all that time.) I personally feel, too, that this is a reference to some other situation in the church. But, whatever, that is not important.

The point is that some form of discipline had been exercised; and now Paul is urging that, since the man had repented, it is time for a change of attitude toward him. So this is a very helpful study on what a church ought to do when someone responds to discipline.

We have already seen in other messages that the Lord Jesus is the one who instituted a form of discipline within the church. In Matthew 18 he says,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. {Matt 18:15a RSV}

That is always the first step; that will keep a congregation at peace, and happier than anything else I know.

Now you may not be aware of it -- because this kind of thing is not publicized -- but that is happening all the

time in this congregation. Hardly a week goes by that someone does not act on that basis. Someone goes to a person he feels is out of line with what Scripture says, and tells him his fault. Then usually, as Jesus went on to say, what should happen, happens:

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. {Matt 18:15b RSV}

That is all that needs to be said about it. But we are not to go to one another in those areas where we merely feel irritated that someone is doing something in a different way than we would do it. We are to go only in those areas the Word of God has already said are clearly wrong. If, however, there is resistance and unwillingness to face what is clearly wrongdoing, then, as Jesus said, we are to take one or two others so that there may be witnesses to the discussion, with the hope that that will help the one concerned, because the objective of discipline is not punishment, but recovery and restoration.

If that approach is refused, then the third step is to tell it to the church, with the expectation that everybody in the congregation who knows the individual will go and plead with him to reconsider, to face the trouble and admit it, so that peace can be restored.

Now evidently, that is the level to which this church had come. In this problem in Corinth, whatever its nature, the man had resisted correction until it had to be told to all the church. (Paul is referring to that when he says, "For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough.") The church has acted in this regard, and it had been successful in the carrying out of this discipline.

Some, perhaps, may ask, "Why is that kind of thing necessary?" Verse 5 helps us with that. It is because, as Paul says,

If any one has caused pain, he has not caused it only to me, but in some measure -- not to put it too severely -- to you all. {2 Cor 2:5 RSV}

This is the problem with actions that are wrong -- they are always hurtful, not only to a few people, but to everyone. There is nothing more deceiving than the attitude that many people take today of, "Well, this is only between me and another person. No one else is being hurt by it." That is never true in a church. As John Donne has well reminded us,

"No man is an island."

That is true of all humanity, but in a church we are in a family. It is impossible for there to be strife and hurt and grievance between any two individuals that does not begin to spread and touch others as well.

I have been in churches where feuds had developed where one family group would not speak to another. As a result of that, the whole church had been paralyzed spiritually; nothing was happening out in the community, no testimony of love and restoration was going on, and the church in its effectiveness had ground to a halt. That happens many, many times, and that is why discipline must be carried out on a wider basis.

In this case in Corinth, the majority of the congregation had been involved in trying to reach the individual referred to here. But the point, of course, is that it had already happened; it had already worked; this man had repented. He had admitted that what he did was wrong; and that is what repentance is. It is coming to a conclusion about yourself that what you have done is hurtful and wrong. This man had reached that place and had demonstrated it by what I like to call, "the mark of repentance." It is mentioned here in Verse 7. Paul urges them to comfort him that he may not be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."

The sign that you really see that what you did was wrong is that you begin to see the hurt that you have caused by it; and it creates a sense of sorrow, of remorse that you have been the instrument by which many have been damaged in their faith or in their feelings. Therefore, the mark of true repentance is sorrow. I know that we are being taught oftentimes today that if you do something wrong, all you have to do is go and say to somebody, "Yes, I did that," then you instantly demand, in a sense, forgiveness. Well, it is true that the other person should forgive right away, but the mark that shows him that you are really repentant is that, accompanying that

admission of guilt, is a sense of sorrow because of the hurt that has been caused. This is a quite different spirit than what we see at times today where people get angry if they are not forgiven instantly.

The mark of genuine repentance is that you do not really believe anybody ought to forgive you, that what you have done is hurtful, and you do not think you deserve forgiveness. Therefore, forgiveness is something that is always freely extended to someone who does not feel that he deserves it; and that is what is clear here.

You can see this, by the way, if you look ahead to Chapter 7, where Paul refers to this very incident again, and the congregation's treatment of it. In Verse 8 of that chapter he says:

For even if I made you sorry with my letter I do not regret it (though I did regret it), for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. {2 Cor 7:8-10 RSV}

So the mark of repentance is grief and sorrow over what is done. This man had come to that point, therefore, it was time to end the discipline.

Of course, the purpose of the whole process of discipline at any stage is to bring somebody to recovery. The minute he achieves that, it is time to end all the sanctions and degrees of pressure that are being put on, and to begin to extend forgiveness and restoring love. That is what Paul pleads for in Verse 8:

So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. {2 Cor 2:8 RSV}

Any form of correction is never to proceed from anger alone, but from love, and, therefore, the appropriate action is to reaffirm love. Paul suggests how that should be done when he says, "you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow."

Now, because this man had reached this place, Paul goes on to give us a statement of what restoration involves. Verse 9:

For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Any one whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, to keep Satan from gaining the advantage over us; for we are not ignorant of his designs. {2 Cor 2:9-11 RSV}

There are three things of great importance in that paragraph which help us to understand how you bring people to restoration:

The first one, as Paul clearly indicates, is to begin with a faithful confrontation. He says, "I wrote to you to see if you would obey" -- not obey Paul so much as obey the Lord. It was not the apostle giving orders, it was his calling attention to what the Lord had said. Their obedience, therefore, was not to him, but to the Lord. And it always is. No man has the right to give orders in the church, but only to call attention, as a brother, to the orders the Lord has already given. The Corinthians had obeyed; they had done what Matthew 18 required by telling it to the church.

That is always a very painful, difficult thing to do.

One of the reasons so many churches are rife with splits, divisions, and problems today is because their leadership seems to be made up of gutless wonders who have no moral courage and who are not willing to act themselves in obedience to what the Scripture says.

In the instances in the past when this church has had to take action of this sort, we have actually received threats, threats of lawsuits, of bodily harm, against the eldership if they acted. We have had to resist reproof

by many people in the congregation, and around, who misjudged and did not understand the situation, who thought it was wrong to act the way we did. So it has taken courage to stand, sometimes, and obey the Word of God.

But as Scripture says, "the effect of righteousness will be peace," {cf, Isa 32:17}. If you will act rightly, in love, and frontally, with courage, the result ultimately is peace; and this is what was happening here in Corinth. The place to start, therefore, is with a faithful confrontation.

This is true also of individual difficulties. If you have a difficulty with somebody, do what the Lord says: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." {Matt 18:15a RSV}. That is always the basis for working out peace in a relationship. But equally important is the readiness to forgive when there is an indication that he has acknowledged that what he did was wrong, or see the hurt that it caused, and there is grief and sorrow because of it. Then we are to instantly restore such a one.

Here again, the church often offends. I know that one of the frequent causes for hurt and damage to individuals in the church at large today has been unwillingness to forgive things in the past that an individual has cleared up long ago, but they are still being held over his or her head: Take divorce, for instance. I have been in many places where people have gone through a divorce, sometimes on the basis of the biblical reasons for it, but that has been treated as though it was the unforgivable sin. Those involved never could come back to any level of acceptance or leadership because of that. For some reason divorce is made much worse than murder or adultery or anything else. But that is wrong, and great damage is done because of that.

If it is true in this situation that Paul himself had personally been insulted by the individual in question, notice how freely he extends forgiveness (Verse 10):

Any one whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, {2 Cor 2:10 RSV}

There are no hard feelings expressed, no recriminations, no "well, I-can-forgive, but-I-can't-forget" attitude. You often hear that, don't you? That reveals a lack of understanding of what forgiveness is. Forgiveness, basically, is a promise that you make; it is a promise you make to three different individuals. This is true always, in every case of forgiveness:

First, it is a promise that you make to the individual who has offended you and now has repented, in which you are saying to him or her, "I will not let my attitude toward you be governed any longer by this offense. It has been put aside. My treatment of you from here on will be as though this had never happened." It is a promise you make never to bring it up again. In marriage many problems go on for years and years because we tend to go back and dig up all the past, which is an indication that it has never been forgiven. Some mates don't get hysterical, they get historical! That is the problem, and that creates a problem.

Second, it is a promise not to pass it on to anybody else. When a matter is forgiven it is to be forgotten. Now it may be that everyone knows it, because, as in this case in Corinth, it had been told to the whole church. But what it means is that nobody throws it at him again, or holds it over his head, or reminds him of it every time any further difficulty occurs. It is a promise to drop the matter, leave it in the past, and never bring it up to anybody again.

Third, and probably most important of all, it is a promise to yourself that, when your memory goes back to it, as it will occasionally, you are not going to allow it to seize hold of your heart and make you angry all over again. The minute it comes back to mind, you put it aside as something that belongs to the past, you are not going to dwell on it. It is a promise, therefore, to repeat your act of forgiveness, no matter how often the memory comes up. That is what forgiveness is; and Paul is so ready to do this.

The reason, of course, is because he himself had been forgiven. People tell me sometimes, "Well, I just can't forgive in this case. The person said it was wrong, and has asked me to forgive him, but I just can't do it. It hurt me too much." Well, that is a revelation to me that that person has never realized how much he has been forgiven already. The basis for Christian forgiveness is always, "Forgive, because you have been forgiven." If

you cannot forgive it is because you have forgotten that you were forgiven. Paul says this to the Ephesians:

be ... tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. {Eph 4:32 KJV}

That means we are not to be self-righteous and condemning, and assume the attitude, "Well, I could never do a thing like that." In the eyes of God you have already done worse, and been forgiven for it. That is the basis, therefore, for extending forgiveness to others: "Freely you have received, freely give," {cf, Matt 10:8 KJV}.

The third element here, brought out in Verse 11, is the need to keep Satan from gaining an advantage over us, for Paul says, "we are not ignorant of his designs."

- It is Satan who keeps bringing back to your mind the hurts of the past; he keeps interjecting them back into a situation. He is trying to get hold of you through the situation and wreak havoc with you and your loved ones by taking advantage of it.
- It is Satan who makes the leadership of a church quail at confronting some situation, makes them say, "Oh, let's not get involved; let's forget it."

That is Satan. He is seeking to gain an advantage over that whole congregation so he can dilute their testimony and render them powerless in their effect upon the community.

We were discussing a situation just this last week, and one of our pastors said, quite understandably, "Let's get hold of that situation and do something about it so it will never come up again." I knew how he felt, but you cannot always do that, because there is an enemy who will bring it up again, whether you like it or not; he will interject the same situation into circumstances in the future and you will have to fight the same battle over and over again.

That is what Paul means when he says, "we are not ignorant of his designs." When an arsonist is loose, you can expect fires; they are going to break out all over the place. We have an enemy who is like that, and when you have an enemy you can expect casualties. When you are engaged in warfare, you never can decide on your own terms that you are not going to have any more casualties, because the enemy is there; he is the one who keeps it going.

We often say in American history, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

That is true in the spiritual realm as well. It is only as we are aware that we are in a battle, and an enemy is constantly trying to take advantage of the situation, that we must realize that the thing that defeats him is to extend ready and full forgiveness when there are broken relationships within us. That is what keeps Satan from gaining an advantage over you.

Paul said that in Ephesians: "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath," {cf, Eph 4:26-27}. Settle this matter before nightfall, before you go to bed. Don't carry it over to the next day and thus give opportunity to the devil. When you let it go on and on and on, unresolved, you are giving the devil an opportunity to get hold of everybody involved, to create more problems and spread it widely and turn the whole church upside down eventually. Therefore, one of the elements that restoration always involves is that spiritual awareness that we are in a battle, that we live in a crazy world under the control of a madman, basically, so we cannot expect to settle it all once and for all.

As an old movie once described it, *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* . -- I saw that title in Spanish on a marquee down in Latin America: *Todo El Mundo es Loco, Loco, Loco, Loco!*

We are to deal with these problems then in our own hearts. That is the way you turn off the attack of the enemy.

Some years ago I read about a mental hospital that had devised a very effective test to know whether the

patients were ready to go back into life again. The patients would be brought into a room where a water tap was flowing out on the floor and handed a mop and told to mop up the water. If they took the mop and just started mopping away, with the water still flowing, they would be put back in the hospital. But if they had the sense to go and turn off the tap first, and then mop up the water, they knew they were ready to go back into life.

There is no sense in trying to clear up a situation until we have turned off the devil's tap by forgiving that which has been acknowledged as wrong. If we persist in bringing it up, over and over again, we are trying to mop up a situation where the water is still flowing. That is foolish; it cannot be done.

That is why in many marriages, in many family relationships, and in a church, these kinds of hurtful things go on and on and on for decades. Nobody has turned off the tap; nobody has forgiven one another and let it rest in the past, realizing that we all are in need of forgiveness continually. When forgiveness happens, then marvelous healing begins to take place.

I could tell you story after story of how I have seen this happen. Whole congregations have been restored, whole family groups have been opened up by two people who were mad at one another deciding that they would forgive; and when there was any degree of acknowledgment at all that there was injury done, extending forgiveness.

Is there any more beautiful picture in all the Scriptures than the story Jesus told of the Prodigal Son? The story of the old father waiting at home, watching the horizon and knowing that, when that boy had reached the end and was ready to admit his wrongdoing, he would show up at the house again? At the first glimpse of his son on the horizon, the old man is running down the road to meet him, his arms wide open. Before the boy can utter a syllable of his memorized statement that he has been repeating to himself all the way home -- "I am no longer worthy to be called your son" {Luke 15:19 RSV} -- the old man has his arms around him and he is calling out for a celebration, to kill the fatted calf.

(I remember the little story of the Sunday School boy when the class was asked, "Who was sorry when the Prodigal Son came home?" The expected answer was, "The elder brother," but one little boy said, "The fatted calf!")

Well, there was one who was not sorry, and that was the father. He was overjoyed, because he knew that his son would never have been back if he had not acknowledged that he was wrong. And he did not wait for the boy to say that. He had already forgiven him. The very appearance of the lad on the horizon was enough to tell the father that his son was home again, sorry for what he had done. And, "lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow," the father forgave him from a full and free heart. Now that is God's picture of what he does with us.

I think it is fitting that we conclude this service by the celebration of the Lord's table, because that is the symbol, above all other symbols, that reminds us of the basis of our own forgiveness. We have been forgiven, and to do so cost the blood of Jesus. As we partake of the bread and of the cup, we are reminding ourselves by the Spirit that it cost God to restore us to peace with himself; and it is a cost that goes on eternally. The heart of God bears the hurt for the pain we have caused him; and he does not lay it upon us again. We have a restored relationship, beautiful and marvelous to our hearts, because God has borne the hurt for us. That is what the communion service reminds us of.

As you take of the bread and of the cup remember this: This is God's reminder that "freely you have received, therefore freely give." If you have been offended against or hurt or grieved, remember how much God has set aside for you, all the hurt and grief you have caused him and been forgiven for, and extend that to the other person. As Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you go; first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift," {cf, Matt 5:23-24}. Now you do not always have to go physically right now; you can go mentally. Go and forgive him, and then, perhaps, when the service is ended, go and tell him that you have forgiven him, and that this is set aside.

As the bread is distributed, will you remember that our Lord took bread and passed it to his disciples and said, "This is my body. This do as oft as you eat it in remembrance of me," {cf, Luke 22:19}? This is to remind us that the strength by which we are to act is his strength, his life in us. This is why it is possible for a Christian to forgive when a non-Christian cannot do so, because first, the Christian recognizes that he is in the same boat himself; and second, he has the strength of the Lord by which to extend forgiveness. So we remind ourselves by this act that we have his strength and his life in us, and, therefore, we can forgive.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11

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