

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: Satan's Greatest Scheme
SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 2:5-11
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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What would you say is the most representative symbol of the Church of Jesus Christ? Would you suggest a cross? If so, you're probably in the majority. What about a fish? The ICTHUS symbol of the early Christians would not be far off either. Or maybe you thought of the open Bible or the Bread and the Wine or the helping hand. All of these are positive, even sacred, symbols of the Church, and they have profound meaning and significance for all who name the name of Christ.

But there's another symbol, neither positive nor sacred, which unfortunately is also very representative of the Church. In fact, a good argument might be made for the view that it has been *the* most representative symbol of the Church, at least during some periods of her history. The symbol I am thinking of is the pendulum. What does a pendulum do? Basically it swings from one side to another. By its very nature a pendulum is always moving to extremes.

Unfortunately the history of the Church has been similar to the activity of the pendulum, always moving from one extreme to another, never halting in a state of equilibrium or balance. A few examples might illustrate the point. The Church has traditionally either completely ignored biblical prophecy or has become obsessed by prophetic detail and futuristic guessing games. The Church has often either taught salvation by works or has so stressed the grace of God that believers saw no need to live a godly life. The Church has often either split itself into factions over the most minor of doctrinal differences or pursued unity through compromising ecumenical efforts.

Always it seems that large segments of the Church are out on the fringes, at opposite poles on key issues. And almost always both extremes are equally wrong. What the Church needs is balance. What it needs is to stop the pendulum, to teach the whole of God's truth, to avoid unbiblical extremes. The example of pendulumism in the Church which we are concerned with today involves church discipline and the tendency of Christians to either neglect discipline entirely or to overdo it.

In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul discusses a member of the church who has caused a significant offence. It appears that at first this member's behavior was tolerated by the congregation. People apparently were thinking to themselves, "He's done something terrible, but who am I to point fingers? Some day I may screw up, and I don't want people to judge me. Let's just look the other way." But eventually, through the strong urging of the Apostle, they disciplined the individual and even excommunicated him. That was good and proper, and it apparently brought about its desired result, for the individual repented.

But then, instead of receiving him back and restoring him to the fellowship, the church continued to shun him. In other words, at first they wouldn't discipline him; now they won't forgive him. This is the problem Paul addresses in our text today. Let's read the account, beginning in chapter 2:5 through 2:11:

If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that

he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

Professing Christians, even genuine ones, are capable of gross sin.

The man of whom Paul is speaking has caused grief to Paul and to the whole church. The examples in Scripture of believers behaving badly are numerous, beginning with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, etc. They committed murder, adultery, drunkenness, lying, covetousness, betrayal, idolatry—you name it. If it's identified as a sin in the Bible, you can find some believer, even some leader of God's people, who has done it.

Now who is this individual whom Paul is talking about, and what has he done? Some scholars believe he is one of the antagonistic leaders who succeeded Paul when he left Corinth. We saw last Sunday that these leaders accused the Apostle of lying and deceit, certainly about his travel plans but maybe about even more serious alleged offences. Maybe one of these antagonists is the subject of our text.

But I am inclined to think that Paul is referring to an individual we already know from 1 Corinthians. Turn with me, if you will, to 1 Corinthians, chapter 5:1-5, 9-13:

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.

Then beginning in verse 9 Paul gives the background and rationale for his rebuke to the church:

I have written 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, 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.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

Here are some of the reasons I believe 1 Cor. 5 and 2 Cor. 2 are speaking of the same individual:

1. All the facts dovetail. The man in both passages is a professing believer and has sinned

grievously. Discipline is demanded and carried out. A hope for repentance is held out in 1 Cor. and the repentance actually occurs in 2 Cor.

2. Satan is mentioned as a principal figure in both passages.
3. The presence of Christ is mentioned in both as a fact to be reckoned with.
4. The disciplined man of both passages seems to be well-known.
5. The very nature of 2 Cor. is to look back at the church's response to the first epistle and discuss it in the past tense.ⁱ

Now, proceeding on the assumption that the two passages are talking about the same person, it is clear we have here a clear example of a professing Christian committing a gross sin.

Tolerance of gross sin in the Church is grossly sinful as well.

Having put his finger on sin in this church member's life, the Apostle continues, with amazement in his voice: "And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief?" Paul perceives an arrogant attitude and a boastful spirit in the church, something this church was known for. Now I simply can't believe they are proud that they have a case of incest in their congregation—that's beyond imagination. Most likely they are proud that they are open-minded and tolerant of this man's personal choice—a choice, mind you, that they wouldn't make themselves, but then who are they to tell him what to do? It's not unlike the church leaders today who are so proud of their tolerance of homosexuality that they have church celebrations of gay marriages and invite the press to witness them. After all, they ask, isn't that what Christianity is all about—loving everybody, even those who choose a lifestyle different from ours?

For a long time I wondered how the Corinthian Church could ever have developed such tolerance toward sin. But just when I was about to give up at ever understanding it, I got a letter, Tuesday I believe it was, from a friend of mine who has been doing archeological work in the ruins of ancient Corinth. Lo and behold, he had just discovered what purports to be the minutes of some committee meetings dating from A.D. 52-54. He sent me copies of these priceless manuscripts, and after a hasty translation from the Greek I discovered that one of these documents is of particular import to our present passage. It is entitled:

*Minutes of the Elder Board's Sub-committee on Church Discipline
of the First Apostolic Evangelical Fundamental
Church of Corinth*

Date: Ides of March, A.D. 53

The chairman called the meeting to order at half past the 9th hour. All members were present except for Andronicus, who is suffering from Asiatic flu. A brief prayer was offered for his health.

Old business included the discussion of how to finance bail money for Deacon Julius. His arrest for mail fraud fortunately might turn out to the benefit of the church, for he has agreed to

increase his tithe to 15% if the committee will allow him to continue to serve as a deacon. It was moved, seconded and passed that the censure motion against Julius made at the last congregational meeting be tabled.

The only item of new business involves the church's paid tenor soloist, Demetrius. Someone overheard him at the Four Carnations Tavern last Saturday, bragging about a sordid relationship with his step-mother. A reporter at the Corinthian Gazette has called the church office for further details.

The chairman first of all asked for an airing of all the facts in the case. It seems that Demetrius' mother died when he was 12 and his father remarried a woman much younger than Demetrius' mother. Several months ago his father joined the merchant marines and has not been heard from since. The step-mother is a worshiper of Aphrodite and once even served a stint as one of the temple prostitutes. No one seems to know how long this relationship between Demetrius and his step-mother has been going on, but apparently for several months at least.

At this point the chairman asked for alternative solutions in dealing with Demetrius. One committee member suggested public reprimand and offered a resolution to that effect. However, another member objected that such a harshly worded resolution might result in Demetrius' refusal to sing in the Easter Cantata, in which he has two lead parts. After considerable discussion it was decided that whatever action was taken, the committee must be careful not to offend Demetrius, for his is the best tenor voice in the church.

When the committee member who suggested reprimand objected to the soft handling of such a serious matter he was reprimanded himself for not having a loving attitude. Appeal was made to the fact that Jesus himself was a friend of sinners and once told a sinful woman at Jacob's well, "Neither do I condemn you." It was also suggested that he who is without sin must cast the first stone, and that all members of the committee have shortcomings of their own. Urbanus quoted a proverb to the effect that "Judge not that ye be not judged." And a number of others seemed persuaded by the argument that "what he does in his private life doesn't concern us. We need to get back to the people's business."

A motion was made to ask Demetrius to stay out of the Four Carnations Tavern and to clean up his act until after Easter, at which time the committee will look at the matter again. The motion was seconded, but during the discussion of the motion Aristobulus asked what Paul would say about the whole thing. Narcissus responded that Paul was getting old and crotchety, and didn't seem to understand what Jesus taught about loving one another. Besides he shouldn't even find out, since all committee decisions are supposed to be confidential. The motion passed.

Another motion was made, seconded and passed to sue the Corinthian Gazette if they print anything further about Demetrius.

There being no further business, the sub-committee adjourned for refreshments and the chairman offered a prayer, thanking God for unity on the sub-committee and asking a blessing

on the food.

Respectfully submitted,

Tertius, Secretary

Now I can't vouch for the authenticity of this document, but I wouldn't be shocked if it were genuine. And if the foregoing seems to you to be slightly sacrilegious, good. For sacrilegious is the mildest possible term to describe the attitudes of the Corinthian believers. Paul denounces the church for their attitude, and demands to know why they aren't filled with grief and why they haven't put this man out of their fellowship. I would ask, what would Paul say to the mainline churches today who tolerate so much immoral behavior? What would he say to the Catholic hierarchy which has tolerated pedophilia among the priesthood for so many years? But while we're asking those questions, perhaps we should think about unbiblical behavior *we* evangelicals may be tolerating. We are pretty quick to denounce sexual sin, particularly homosexuality and child abuse, but we seem to be a lot less harsh toward fornication, and we downright wink at sins like pride and greed and gossip and legalism.

Paul orders the church at Corinth to hand the man over to Satan so that his sinful nature might be destroyed. What in the world does that mean? Well, it's not equivalent to sending someone to hell, for Paul never had the authority to do such a thing, nor does the last half of the verse allow for such a meaning— "that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." It probably means expulsion from the Church into the world, for that is the region where Satan holds sway. Paul is anticipating that when the man loses all Christian fellowship and discovers how lonely it can be out in the world, he will wake up spiritually, go to God in repentance, and his sinful nature will no longer control him. Paul is prescribing a 2 x 4 upside the head.

This discipline is, of course, not the first step of discipline the Bible demands in the life of a believer—rather it is the last. The situation in Corinth had gone so far that only radical surgery could correct it, but the Scripture indicates that under normal circumstances there are at least four previous steps that should be taken before a situation ever gets to the degenerative point we find here in Corinth. The church leaders had apparently taken none of these steps.

1. The sinning Christian is first to judge himself. (1 Cor. 11:31). If we all did that regularly, there would never be any need of further discipline. But sometimes a person doesn't judge himself, in which case . . .

2. A mature believer is to confront the sinning Christian and seek to lead him to repentance. Gal. 6:1: "If a man is caught in *any* trespass (not just a personal offense to you), you who are spiritual restore such a one. . . ."

3. If going to the person privately doesn't work, the mature believer is to take one or two others with him and again confront the sinning Christian. (See Matthew 18). The hope is that the offender will be more inclined to respond to the exhortation of several believers than to just one.

4. If even that doesn't work, the Church body is to be informed of the situation, presumably leading to excommunication or the taking away of the privileges of membership. (See Matthew 18).

5. Finally, if informing the church doesn't bring the offender to repentance, there is the final step of social isolation or shunning. This is very rarely employed in the church today, but there are times when it should be, as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 5. .

Well, what's the ultimate purpose of this biblical process? It's twofold:

Church discipline has the goal of correction and restoration of the sinning member *and* the protection of the church's health.

Please notice again Paul's goal—"that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." If church discipline is not corrective, redemptive and remedial, then it is not discipline at all—it is punishment. Paul is interested in saving this man, and in this case it worked! But another goal of discipline is always the protection of the purity of the Church. Just as yeast permeates a whole batch of dough, just as cancer cells spread rapidly through a body, so sin spreads its corruption through a church. So it must be removed.

Unfortunately, in the rare case when godly discipline *is* practiced, the Church has often failed to exercise forgiveness upon repentance. Too often people have been excommunicated and then just abandoned. "Good riddance" has been the attitude. But in 2 Cor. 2 Paul chides us about this tendency.

We *must* be sensitive as to when discipline has accomplished its purpose. (5, 6) This is the point that is made in 2 Cor. 2:6: "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is *sufficient* for him." It has accomplished its goal but they are insensitive to that fact. They aren't watching for repentance. They have disciplined the man *and* written him off. I think Christians have often been guilty of writing fellow-believers off too soon. We have been known for shooting our wounded.

Well, when *is* discipline sufficient? How long should it last? Three months, 6 months, one year? I believe the reason Paul never gives a set amount of time is that it depends upon how long it takes the sinning member to thoroughly repent and to demonstrate the fruits of repentance. We all know individuals who find it very easy to repent of sin. As a matter of fact they can repent of the same sin 30 days in a row, and each succeeding day commit it again. And the Church must be wary of that kind of phony repentance. The key is probably to refrain from giving a person ministry responsibility too soon. I'm of the opinion that one year is generally none too long for a person to be out of ministry if they have been guilty of sin that brings disrepute upon the Lord, even if repentance is almost immediate.

We must be willing to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm our love for the repentant.

(2:7,8) When discipline has accomplished its goal, then the task before the Church is forgiveness. And that doesn't mean sending a letter saying, "We forgive you but please find another church home." Or, "We forgive you but you'll never be able to serve the Lord here again. If you're real good you may be able to take part in work day." No, forgiveness must be accompanied by comfort. The word here is the same word used by Christ to describe the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. It speaks of encouraging and strengthening the heart of the one who is down.

Verse 8 adds that forgiveness and comfort must be joined by a reaffirmation of love. The word "to reaffirm" was a legal term used of ratifying covenants (it is so used in Gal. 3:15), and it suggests that the Apostle is urging them to make their love clear and certain. "Help him to feel the security of knowing he is loved by the Body. Don't leave him wondering about whether he is accepted. Don't make a second-class citizen out of him."

Why is it so important that the Church forgive, comfort and reaffirm its love for a repentant member? The answer is given at the end of v. 7: "so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." The process of discipline, especially the ultimate discipline of excommunication and isolation from the Church and friends, is a traumatic experience in and of itself. Coupled with the shame and reproach brought upon one's family it could drive a person to the breaking point—in fact, that is its purpose. But, if at the breaking point the person repents and asks God's forgiveness but at the same time is refused forgiveness by his friends, he may be swallowed up by excessive sorrow. He may have a nervous breakdown, he may turn bitter against God, and he may even commit suicide.

Obviously none of those results are the goal of discipline. The goal is restoration and the way to get there is forgiveness.

Church discipline and restoration, when biblically practiced, can prevent Satan from taking advantage of the Church with his "pendulum scheme." (11)

In case I didn't make it clear in my introduction, the pendulum is not the Lord's symbol for the Church—it is Satan's. That last verse in chapter 2 is powerfully stated in *The Message*: "After all, we don't want to unwittingly give Satan an opening for yet more mischief—we're not oblivious to his sly ways!"

Can you see Paul's point? If you don't forgive this man now that he has repented, you have allowed yourself to be tricked by Satan. He doesn't care whether you refuse to discipline at all or whether you over-discipline. Either way he is victorious in destroying the sinning member and in ruining the reputation of the Church.

Satan is so clever. He *never* cares which side of the truth you are on so long as you're on one side or the other. What he doesn't want is for you to be right *on* the truth. He doesn't care whether you preach baptismal regeneration or ignore baptism altogether. He doesn't care if you are a hair-brained Calvinist or a hair-brained Arminian, just so you're hair-brained. He doesn't care

whether you are a full-blown Charismatic or one who goes around calling all charismatics demon-possessed. He doesn't care whether you are tolerant toward all divorce or treat all divorced persons as having committed the unpardonable sin. Just so you're out on one extreme or the other—that's all he cares about, because that will make you ineffective as a servant of Christ.

Church discipline and restoration, when biblically practiced, will restore purity to the Church, along with the power that inevitably goes with it. (2 Cor. 7:8-11)

Turn with me, if you will, to 2 Cor. 7:8-10:

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

What we find here is that Paul wrote a letter in which he rebuked the church. How grateful he is that in this case the sorrow produced was a godly sorrow that led to a change of heart. Unfortunately there is a worldly sorrow that brings death. Judas experienced that kind of sorrow. The Scripture says in Matt. 27:3 that

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Did his remorse lead to repentance? No. It led to suicide. But when remorse leads to repentance, that is a beautiful thing to behold. In 1 Cor. 5 the church is arrogant and proud; here in 2 Cor. 7 they are exhibiting godly sorrow and repentance! Church discipline, when followed by forgiveness, works both for the sinner and for the church.

In conclusion this morning, there's an important truth here in 1 Cor. 5 for each of us today. First of all, some are not a member of any church and therefore are not under any church's authority or subject to any church's discipline. That may be just fine with you, especially after hearing this sermon. But friend, the last verse of our chapter makes it clear that you're still not off the hook. If the Church's judgment is severe, what do you think God's is going to be like? 1 Peter 4:17,18 tells us: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the Gospel of God? And, 'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'" The only way to avert God's judgment is by placing one's faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, there's a message here for the church member living in sin. Maybe you haven't been caught yet. Now is the time to correct the situation, before public shame is brought upon you and your loved ones, before God steps in with His own chastisement, which He will.

Third and finally, there's a message here for the believing Church. Discipline of fellow members is unpleasant and painful, but God's Word demands it—for the good of the Church, as well as for the good of the sinning member. But forgiveness and restoration is just as important. The motivation for forgiveness comes from a very simple fact, GOD HAS FORGIVEN us! Eph. 4:32 says, "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." We are called upon to forgive as God has forgiven. Each of us is a sinner, without any righteousness of our own. Guilt plagues us because we know that we have broken God's laws. But God intervened and sent His own Son to die for our sins. He offers us forgiveness if we will put our faith and trust in Jesus.

But He will not force us to accept Christ. We must do it by an act of our wills. And you can do it right where you're sitting. You can also forgive others once you recognize that you are only a forgiven sinner yourself.

i. Now these reasons do not necessarily amount to a proof, but the fact of the matter is that we don't need to prove identity of the two individuals in order to make our point this morning. Even if the two passages are talking about two different persons, it is still true that discipline must be carried out when required and whenever a disciplined person truly repents he must be received back into the fellowship.