

Study 7. 1 Cor 4:18-5:13

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The church is a community of grace. But sometimes moral cowardice is the enemy of love.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:18-21

- How do you feel when you read these words from Paul?

Sometimes, it is fair to say, St Paul can come across as jerk: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?" (4:20-21)

Michel Foucault argued that claims to truth serve often, if not always, as disguised claims to power. Elizabeth Castelli, drawing on Foucault, claims that Paul's combination of authoritarian assertion with apparent self-effacement is a clever rhetorical strategy of manipulation.

Do you think Paul would have sought petty power in Corinth at the price of undermining and betraying the very gospel for which he daily sacrificed life and limb?

Thiselton points out:

"Once we argue, with Foucault, that even appeals to acting as a servant can be manipulative, virtually any altruistic action can be construed in this way, not least the political strategies of Foucault himself. It is Paul's gentleness that is to be copied, not a self assertion that demands freedom from constraints... [T]he criterion of Christlikeness pinpoints acceptance of constraints as a mark of authenticity in Christ's messianic temptations. Paul does not impose on the Christians in Corinth criteria that he does not accept for himself."

- What is Paul's attitude towards the Corinthians (4:14)? How has this been demonstrated in his life?
- Paul wants to show the difference between mere talk and the real power of the gospel. What do you think the 'power' is that he's speaking about (4:20)? How is it different to what is at work at times amongst the Christians in Corinth?

Tim Keller writes:

"His active concern is for our joy and well-being. Most people love those who love them, yet God loves and seeks the good even of people who are his enemies. But because God is good and loving, he cannot tolerate evil. The opposite of love is not anger, but indifference. "The more you love your son, the more you hate in him the liar, the drunkard, the traitor," (E. Gifford). To imagine God's situation, imagine a judge who also is a father, who sits at the trial of his guilty son. A judge knows he cannot let his son go, for without justice no society can survive. How much less can a loving God merely ignore or suspend justice for us—who are loved, yet guilty of rebellion against his loving authority?"

- Love is not indifference to others – it seeks their good. But sometimes moral cowardice is the enemy of love. What did Paul risk by speaking to the Corinthians in this way, out of love? When do you find it hard to seek the good of others?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

- What immediately strikes you as hard or challenging about this passage?

All of the 'you's in this passage are plural. Paul is speaking of the actions of the church collectively, not of individuals.

- Paul describes 2 groups: those who the church is to exercise judgement over, and those who the church is not to exercise judgement over. Who are these two groups? Why is the responsibility of the church different towards each? Why is the church to judge one? Why not the other?
- Paul says that there are people who '[claim] to be a brother or sister', which implies that they aren't actually Christians. What does this mean for the connection between behaviour and salvation?

Application / Implications

- What does it look like to judge within the church?
- What is the goal of judgement within the church? What is the danger of not judging?
- The church is a community of grace. How can we be both this, and a community in which judgement is exercised?

The Reformers agreed that there were three marks of the true church of God. For example, the Belgic Confession (1561) says:

"The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church – and no one ought to be separated from it."

'Church discipline' refers to the kind of judgement Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 5.

- How does church discipline, exercised rightly, protect those inside and outside the church? Exercised badly, how can it harm?
- What should church discipline look like at Barneys? What about in this growth group?