

Would We Stand the Test?

† **A case of church discipline (vv.5-6)**

† **An opportunity for comfort (vv.7-11)**

In the name of Jesus, who shows us the smiling face of God, dearly redeemed fellow sinner-saints:

Have you heard this? “The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.” This quote was attributed to Socrates (469–399 B.C.) by Plato, according to authors in 1953. Popular in the 1960s, quoted by politicians and Malcolm Forbes, but no one can prove Socrates said it.

Does it matter? 400 B.C....1950s...60s...2013? The more things change, the more they stay the same. Children and congregations are still sinners today. And we all still need a Savior from sin. Today we have to ask, **Would We Stand the Test** by the Lord’s Apostle Paul in Corinth?

† **A case of church discipline (vv.5-6)**

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus (16:8) on every congregational problem you can imagine. But the worst was “*sexual immorality...of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. And you are proud!*” (1 Corinthians 5:1f) This sickness of open sin should have been treated by loving Christian discipline. Instead arrogant (4:18-21) members who were willing to publicly sue each other in court (6:1-8), failed to deal with a public sinner in the congregation.

Faithful Pastor Paul pointed out the problem and called God’s people to repentance. Sanctified grief over this sin should put the man out of their fellowship. Excommunication is the last act of love by the assembly of believers: “*Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.*” (5:5) This is how New Testament Christians “*keep the feast*” of Christ, our Passover Lamb. “*Get rid of the old yeast...of malice and wickedness,*” and “*keep the Festival*” with the unleavened bread “*of sincerity and truth.*” (1 Corinthians 5:6-8)

Surrounded by “*sexually immoral people,*” we are in the world, but not of the world. Judgment on the outside we leave to God. Inside the congregation, Christians have the responsibility judge according to God’s Word. Anyone who claims to be a Christian brother, yet lives in unrepentant and open sin, cannot remain in the fellowship. He is to be removed from the circle of Christian friends even to the point of not eating with him. Paul writes, “*Expel the wicked man from among you.*” (5:9-13)

It worked! God’s people at Corinth dealt with the openly unrepentant sinner as instructed by Jesus (Matthew 18:17) through His Apostle Paul. Best of all, the sinner repented. Now the congregation should have been friendly, eagerly welcoming him back. Instead they turned a cold shoulder, leaving him in near despair. So the Lord’s Apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia (1:16; 2:13; 7:5), explaining, “*For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.*” (2 Corinthians 2:4)

During my two years teaching high school I served as assistant girls’ track coach. One hot young runner decided she would not run the sprints I assigned. I checked with my former coach to see if I was being too strict, but he said, “If you don’t hold firm, you may as well step down.” The girls coach was in tears when I kindly told her this. We met with the girl. She said she was sorry. She promised to run her sprints before the meet that afternoon. So I forgave her, and she left. Then the coach scolded me for being too easy! Friends, this does not come naturally. It’s hard to apply Law and Gospel God’s way.

† An opportunity for comfort (vv.7-11)

Paul's tone has changed. He's being very careful not to be "piling on." God's people now have the blessed duty of comforting the repentant sinner. So after admonishing their laxity in discipline, now the Lord's apostle must scold their lack of forgiveness. Congregational pride overlooked incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), but now by not taking him back, they're applying Law and Gospel backwards! Because of our sinful condition the Lord teaches us to repent of our own sins first, then help our fellow sinners. The only escape is through the wounds of Christ by sorrow over sin and faith in forgiveness. Repentance is a gift of God as King David prayed: ***"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."*** (Psalm 51:10–12 NIV84)

"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." God's forgiveness is energetic. And He wants our forgiveness energetic too. Failing to forgive brings down God's wrath as Jesus says, ***"If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others [their trespasses], neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*** (Matthew 6:14f ESV)

Paul sweetens this with spoonfuls of encouragement not just to get members in line. His pastor's heart is aching for them to know God's comfort as the dear Holy Spirit warms their hearts. Paul knows from personal experience how hard our hearts can be. God's grace softens our hearts and makes them overflow with grace for others, especially repentant members. We just need to keep kneeling at the cross.

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." (7:10) Guilt can gulp us down in grief and regret. Satan does not care how he destroys souls. Snaring them by gross immorality to run into the flames gleefully, or fall in by despair makes no difference to our enemy from hell. The dear Holy Spirit uses this sad situation in Corinth to arm His saints of all ages for warfare. With God's saving message of Law and Gospel, sin and grace, soldiers of the cross snatch souls from the flames and save them. And the gates of hell, Christ promises, will not prevail against His Church. Pastor Paul was like a rescue commander urging his team to reach down and pull a victim from a whirlpool. There is no time to waste saving souls for heaven.

"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."

It's hard enough for us proud sinners to say, "I'm sorry." But tougher still to come right out and say, "I forgive you." Paul is taking the congregation one step further by urging them to show their forgiveness in smiles and hugs – whatever would be appropriate to take away his pain. The Good News of forgiveness in Christ is real. God wants us to know it by experience as we express God's loving kindness and tender mercy toward repentant sinners in ways that can be felt.

Christ-like *agape*-love is behind every word of this, something we need to remember if our time comes to admonish a friend or relative about open sin. It often helps to say it softly, but plainly, "I would rather lose your friendship here and gain your soul for heaven. I don't want to go on like this and lose you forever." And when our fellow sinner is sorry, express forgiveness sweetly, but humbly.

More literally Paul says, "I forgive in the glow of Christ's smiling face." This letter was to be read aloud in the congregation. Paul wants the man to feel the warmth of God's love, reflected in the kindly eyes of the congregation. Law and Gospel warms like the smile of a loved one that lights up seeing you. God heals us where it hurts. ***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 4:7) The devil can do no damage to hearts and minds guarded by God's peace. In Christ alone we do **Stand the Test** in **discipline** and in **comfort**. God keep us kneeling together at the cross of our dear Savior. Amen.