

## A SITUATION OF IMMORALITY 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter Paul dealt with a sin in Corinth that actually shocked him. Sexual immorality had taken place in the church, but this had not been too surprising. After all, even Christians are sinners awaiting final redemption in Christ. He was shocked, however, at the Corinthians' response to their sin: they weren't repentant or merely obstinate – they were proud of their sin!

### REPORT AND INSTRUCTIONS

The church at Corinth had departed from Paul's teaching by condoning sexual immorality. Paul had received a report that the church was taking pride in the fact that incest was occurring among them, and he responded to that report. First, he directly identified the problem and ordered action.

**5:1.** By saying, "**It is actually reported,**" Paul indicated his astonishment at the situation he was about to address. The original language of this passage conveys the idea that the news shocked and horrified Paul. He was appalled to hear that the church tolerated **sexual immorality** which even **pagans** found morally repulsive: **a man** [had] **his father's wife**. In the context of sexual immorality, the verb "to have" did not refer to occasional sexual liaisons, but to a continuing sexual relationship. The man may actually have lived with his father's wife as if she were his own wife.

Paul described the woman not as the man's "mother," but as **his father's wife**. This terminology probably identifies her as the man's stepmother rather than his biological mother. Paul did not indicate whether or not the man's father still lived, but if the father was alive the immorality was all the more severe (see Lev. 18:8; 20:11; Deut. 22:30; 27:20).

**5:2.** Paul continued to express his astonishment by focusing on the Corinthians' reaction: they were **proud** of their tolerance. Paul had already accused his readers of arrogance in theological matters (4:6,18,19), and blamed that pride for the divisions in the church (3:21-22). Here, he pointed to another way in which their pride had led to misconduct. They actually took pride in their willingness to accept the severely immoral man. Because the thing in which they took pride was so blatantly sinful, it exposed the error of their pride, and further supported his argument against the pride that had led to their divisions.

Instead of proudly accepting the man, the church should have been **filled with grief**. Paul desired his readers to experience great sorrow over their fellow's sin because that immorality was destructive both to the sinner and to the church. Sorrow over the sins of others appears as a proper response on a number of occasions in Scripture (Gen. 6:5-6; Dan. 9:4-19; Ezra 10:1; Matt. 23:37; Rom. 9:2-3).

The Corinthians blinded themselves to the imminent destruction this immorality threatened upon the church and upon their friend, just as they foolishly had boasted in human wisdom despite the divisions it caused (1:11-12,17,31). This lack of concern for the church seems to have permeated the Corinthians thoroughly, and appears as a unifying theme throughout the entire letter.

Paul also demanded that the Corinthians take proper corrective action. Without having to be told, his readers should have **put out** the immoral man from their **fellowship**. Excommunication was the only proper response to such a flagrant and severe sin (in the Old Testament, such sin was punishable by the deaths of the sinners [Lev. 20:11] and the exile of the entire nation from the land [Lev. 18:28]). Paul would remind them of the procedures and purposes of excommunication in the following verses (5:3-13). At this point, however, he declared in no uncertain terms the situation called for church discipline.

**5:3.** Evidently, some Corinthian believers hesitated to discipline their wayward brother so long as Paul was absent. To counter this strategy, Paul argued that he was present with them **in spirit**. He had already made his preliminary judgment. If the charges were true as reported, he supported removing the man from Christian fellowship. Paul's words sound harsh to our modern ears (compare 2 Thess. 3:6,14-15; 1 Tim.5:20), but they are in line with the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 18:15-17).

Moreover, Paul demonstrated a balanced outlook in other epistles (2 Cor. 2:6-8; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 4:32; Col 3:13; 2 Thess. 3:15). In 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, for instance, he strongly corrected the church's unforgiving refusal to restore a repentant brother. In the face of the Corinthians' tolerance (compare 2 Cor. 2:9), however, he encouraged the church temporarily to remove the man from the Christian community.

**5:4.** The procedures for church discipline for this public sin are straightforward. First, the right setting must be attained. Christian discipline is not to be performed in any manner the church desires. It is a solemn occasion when the church is officially **assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus** (compare Matt. 18:18-20). The apostle assured them that he also would be present **in spirit** (see 5:3), and that the Holy Spirit's displays of **power** would be evident as well (see 2:4-5; 4:19-20). Church discipline is too serious a matter to administer in an ordinary setting.

**5:5.** Second, the church must temporarily give the offender **over to Satan**. To do this is to exclude the wayward brother from the Christian community and to treat him "as a gentile or a tax collector" as Jesus instructed (Matt. 18:17), to deliver him into Satan's sphere of influence (John 12:31; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2). Paul used similar

terminology to describe other church discipline cases as well (1 Tim. 1:20). The purpose (**so that**) of this action is the destruction of **the sinful nature** (*sarx*). The NRSV and NASB translate *sarx* more literally as “flesh.” These translations are to be preferred because Paul contrasted the “flesh” with the man’s **spirit** later in this verse. In Scripture Satan occasionally receives permission from God to test and trouble believers by weakening their physical conditions (Job 2:4-6; 2 Cor. 12:7), so it is possible that Paul referred to this type of destruction here.

In cases of church discipline, the goal of the process is that the person’s **spirit** may be **saved on the day of the Lord**. Here Paul used an Old Testament term describing the day on which God destroys all of his enemies and blesses his people (Isa. 2:11-12,17; 13:6,9; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1,11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18,20; Obad. 1:15; Zeph 1:7,14; Mal. 4:5). The New Testament often uses this term for the second coming of Christ (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). Although a true believer under discipline may endure hardship, the goal of that hardship is repentance that leads to salvation on the day of final judgment. Discipline should ultimately be a redemptive act.

## A SUPPORTIVE ILLUSTRATION

Paul sought to persuade the Corinthians that his instructions were appropriate by appealing to the common experience of leaven and its effects. He then turned to the religious analogue of Passover celebration.

**5:6-7a.** As in the case of the divisions (1:10-4:21), Paul’s main concern here was for the church, which he was jealous to protect from corruption. Thus, even though the incestuous man had sparked the occasion for Paul’s rebuke, Paul insisted that the larger problem lay in the church itself. The church should have recognized its holy calling (1 Cor. 1:2) and realized that its toleration of such public sin transgressed that calling.

Paul had already identified pride as the source of this problem (5:2). Here he returned to that matter by directly asserting that the Corinthians’ **boasting was not good**. Their attitude of boastful tolerance of scandalous sin in the church opposed the truth that boasting is to be done only to the Lord’s glory (1 Cor. 1:31; 3:21; 4:7). This attitude also failed to understand common experience. They knew that only “a little leaven” (NASB) ferments the **whole batch of dough**. The sin of this one man would have had a deleterious effect on the entire church if it had remained unchecked. On the basis of this common knowledge, Paul insisted that they “clean out the old leaven” (NASB).

Leaven was not pure yeast, but a bit of old dough that had begun to ferment. The older the leaven was, the greater the possibility that it had become contaminated. Thus, when Paul compared the offending brother to leaven, he implied that the man was a corrupted piece of dough that could potentially infect the entire church if left

unchecked. Like leaven, he needed to be removed so that the community could become pure.

Instead, the church is to be **a new batch** without infectious impurity. As Paul pointed out, the church really is (**as you really are**) a pure, wholesome community of believers because it exists in Christ. Paul's command might be summarized, "You are pure, so start acting like it."

**5:7b-8.** The reason (**for**) for removing the leaven of the immoral person from the church is rooted in the significance of Christ's death. He is **our Passover**. As the lamb was slaughtered in the first Passover in the days of Moses (Exod. 12:21) and annually after that (Exod. 12:42; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:2-3), Christ **has been sacrificed** on the cross. His blood protects from the wrath of God like the blood spread on the entrances to Israelite homes in Egypt (Exod. 12:7). The Passover celebration anticipated the final atoning work of Christ's death (John 1:29,36; Rev. 5:6; 13:8).

Building on this connection, Paul reminded his readers that one aspect of the Passover celebration was the removal of all leaven from the home, and the baking of bread without leaven. The absence of leaven symbolized their hasty deliverance from the trials of Egypt (Exod. 12:33-34,39). In much the same way, Paul urged the Corinthians to remember that they had to remove the old leaven of immorality from their church because they lived in the age of Christ's Passover sacrifice. In this sense, the church is to **keep the Festival** of Passover every day without the old leaven of **malice and wickedness**. All evil should be resisted and removed whenever possible so that the people of God may metaphorically eat **bread** without leaven. Their lives are to consist of **sincerity and truth**. Immorality was unacceptable in the church because it introduced a corrupting influence among the people of God.

Paul said that the Christian life was to be **without** the leaven of **malice**. In all likelihood he referred to those who opposed him in Corinth (4:18), or to those who caused division (1:10-12). "Malice" clearly did not describe the church's attitude toward the incestuous man. At this point, Paul was still thinking in broad terms. Rather than just correcting a problem of immorality, he was purifying, unifying, and protecting the church. Everything he had said so far in the letter aimed at this goal. He saw the particular Corinthian problems as manifestations of deeper root problems such as bad theology and bad attitudes. Thus, he comfortably urged them to avoid malice, a root problem, even though it didn't pertain directly to the particular manifestation of that root problem which he happened to be addressing (proud tolerance of sexual immorality).

## A POINT OF CLARIFICATION

Paul clarified and reaffirmed a point he had made in an earlier letter: Christians should not associate with grossly sinful people in the church, such as the incestuous man who was the subject of the current controversy, but believers should not disassociate from all sinful people.

**5:9-10.** With the call to excommunication supported by the ceremony of Old Testament Passover, Paul clarified one aspect of his instruction that may have been easily misunderstood. He first referred to a previous letter in which he had written that believers were **not to associate with sexually immoral people** (5:9). This instruction could easily have been misunderstood (or purposefully twisted) to mean that believers should withdraw entirely from all immoral people. Paul ridiculed this misunderstanding of his earlier words by noting that avoiding all immoral people can only happen if Christians **leave this world**. Since Christians must minister to the world, they cannot possibly separate themselves from all who are **greedy and swindlers, or idolaters** — these people are the church’s very mission field (see Matt. 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32; 15:1-32).

Possibly, those in Corinth who opposed Paul used this misunderstanding to undermine Paul’s ministry and authority. They may have suggested that Paul called Christians to stay away from all sinners, and on that basis discounted all his teaching. Paul treated the Corinthians harshly for this misunderstanding because: 1) it stemmed from a wrong reading of his prior letter; 2) it had also led to wrongful pride (5:1) and corruption (5:6) in the church; and 3) it had allowed the church’s toleration of the incestuous man.

**5:11.** Lest there be any confusion, Paul explained that he did not have in mind the sexually immoral **people of this world** (i.e. unbelievers), but **anyone who calls himself a brother** (i.e. people in the visible church). Professing believers in the church may not truly be believers, even though they claim to be. If they fail to evidence new life in Christ, there may be sufficient reason to doubt their salvation altogether. To protect the church from the corrupting influence of these so-called brothers, followers of Christ must not **even eat** with anyone in the church who is **immoral or greedy, an idolater ... slanderer ... drunkard ... or a swindler**. As Paul was to write in this same letter, “**Bad company corrupts good character**” (15:33).

**5:12-13.** Paul concluded that he and the Corinthians had no right to **judge those outside the church**, those not submitted to the church’s governance. Such people make no pretense of being Christians, and **God** alone **will judge those outside the church**. Even so, the church must **judge those inside** the church. Those in the church submit themselves to the authorities of the body of Christ. Church discipline is a difficult and troubling process, and many try to avoid it altogether. Yet, the church must take action when its members flagrantly violate the ways of Christ. Consequently, as much as the Corinthian church did not want to take action, they had to **expel the wicked man**.

The phrase “**expel the wicked man from among you**” alludes to the legal language of Deuteronomy (Deut. 17:7; 17:12; 19:19; 21:21,22,24; 24:7). In all these occurrences of the phrase, the wicked are “expelled” or “purged” by being executed (sometimes for sexual crimes: Deut. 21:21,22,24). In Old Testament Israel God

ordained execution as the means by which the nation was to purify itself of severe wickedness.

Paul applied these standards of holiness to the church, God's New Testament people, but applied the Law somewhat differently by recommending excommunication rather than execution. Nevertheless, the fact that he used language typical of death sentences from the Old Testament reflects that he considered excommunication in the New Testament age to be quite serious. This form of church discipline should be reserved for the worst of circumstances.

## **APPLICATION**

Although we might like to think otherwise, our world is not so different from Paul's Corinth. Of course, not all of us will have to deal with sexual sins and church discipline situations like the ones in 1 Corinthians 5, but we can still apply many principles from this chapter to our lives.

First, we ought to keep close guard on our behavior. We must never engage in sexual immorality, such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, or other deviant behaviors. Knowing that we have been made new in Christ — being sanctified, justified, and called to be holy — we need to behave in ways consistent with our new identities and natures. Ceasing from immorality and sin, we must live righteously.

Second, Paul also revealed many details about the nature of the church in this chapter. He taught us that believers share a spiritual union with other believers, and that the actions of individuals affect the whole church. When these actions take the form of corruption, they run the risk of infecting the church. As a result, the church needs to stand guard against such wickedness, sometimes going so far as to discipline its members. Discipline of this type cannot be leveled by individuals, or even by groups within a church, but only by the gathered corporate body. When the church meets in such an assembly, it carries the authority and power of Jesus. The most extreme form of discipline is excommunication, in which the church hands a professed believer over to Satan in the hopes that the experience will ultimately be redemptive, working repentance in the one disciplined.

Third, not only should this chapter of Paul's letter inform our behavior and knowledge, but also our emotions. Like Paul, we should be shocked and appalled when churches tolerate, condone, or even take pride in heinous sins. Our proper response to terrible transgression should be grief — grief over the disrepute to which such sin subjects the church, and grief on behalf of the sinner who works toward his own destruction. We should greatly fear excommunication and the power of Satan to which it submits one, and because of this fear we should refrain from gross sin. When necessary, however, we should not fear to inflict excommunication. Realizing that God values the church so much that he commands us to put out those that jeopardize its

purity, we should grow to respect and love the church more. We should also develop a greater appreciation for the safety it provides us from Satan.

## DIGGING DEEPER

### Sexual immorality (5:1)

In Greek culture *porneia* (“sexual immorality” NIV) referred to prostitution, and was not necessarily frowned upon or considered immoral. Corinth in particular had a history of openly accepting it, as well as of accepting very loose and open sexual lifestyles. To live like a Corinthian (*korinthiazesthai*) was proverbial for living a dissolute life. In Hellenistic Judaism and the New Testament, however, *porneia* was always negative, and referred to all extra-marital and unnatural intercourse, including homosexuality.

### Yeast (5:6-8)

In ancient times yeast was scarce, and leaven was the popular alternative to yeast. Leaven was actually just an old piece of dough that had begun to ferment. When added to a new batch of dough, it spread its fermentation throughout the whole loaf, making the bread lighter. The longer the time period over which this process continued, the greater the danger grew that the dough would become spoiled and poisonous. When the dough became bad, it all had to be thrown away, and the process had to be begun again. Of course, the first batch of dough then had to be made without leaven. This is why Paul spoke of “*cleaning out*” (NASB) (*ekkathairo*) the “old leaven” (*zume*) (NASB) and replacing it with a **new batch**. Leaven by definition could never be “new” — only the batch could be new — and the older the leaven became, the more likely it was to be dangerous. The NASB translation is to be preferred to the NIV which translates “leaven” as “yeast” and inserts the words “without yeast” which do not appear in the Greek. Exodus 34:25 (see also Deut. 16:4) supports this idea, coupling the command to eliminate all leaven with the command not to keep any old meat.

## ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you feel if you found out that a friend of yours, perhaps someone you had led to Christ, had been carrying on a mutually consenting sexual relationship with one of his or her parents? Would you be shocked? Disgusted? Grieved? Or would you be proud that, as an enlightened Christian, you were open-minded enough to accept this person into your fellowship? Would you feel any differently if that person were involved in a homosexual relationship? An adulterous relationship? A sexual relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend? Why or why not?
2. Who should judge believers when they engage in gross immorality? Does your church have a process that it follows in disciplinary matters? What is that process?

What should be the ultimate goal of church discipline? Does your church have a process for restoring excommunicated members if and when they repent? How would you feel if you had to excommunicate a friend in your church?

3. In what way is an excommunicated church member “handed over to Satan”? What does this say about the church’s power to offer protection from Satan? Why and how do you think the church is able to offer such protection?
4. Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Why then did Paul instruct us to judge our brethren and submit them to church discipline?
5. What is the nature of our union with each other? How can it rightly be said that we are spiritually present where we are physically absent? Does this imply some type of omnipresence, which is a quality reserved to God alone?
6. How can the corruption of an individual spread throughout a church to defile everyone? Is this a function of the unity of the church, or is it simply a matter of influence? Explain your answer.
7. How does Christ’s death on the cross imply that we should live holy lives?
8. Paul called Christ our “Passover lamb.” What, if anything, does this say about the relationship between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament? Explain your answer.
9. Why must Christians not dissociate from wicked and sinful people who are not church members? How can we preach the gospel to the lost without judging them?
10. How does this chapter relate to the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians? How does it further Paul’s argument? What underlying ideas connect the material?