

Discipline for Immorality Within the Church

1 Corinthians 5

1 Corinthians 5: *"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! 2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 9 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."*

Background Notes:

The city of ancient Corinth was known for its loose living and immorality. But there was a situation of flagrant sin that had not been judged within the church at Corinth – and it was so serious that it was a sin that was *"not even named among the Gentiles."* In other words, even in pagan Corinth, such immorality was not practiced!

What was this sin? It was the sin of incest, that a man had a relationship with his father's wife. Apparently a Christian man in fellowship in the Corinthian church was sexually involved with his stepmother. Such a sin was prohibited in both the Old Testament Law as well as Roman law. In Leviticus 18:8 we read, *"Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife."* Leviticus 20:11 states that such a sin was punishable by death.

The fact that the phrase *"has his father's wife"* is used here, and not *"had his father's wife"* indicates an ongoing relationship and not a one-time event (v5). We are not told the whereabouts or attitude of the father in this situation. Amazingly, the Corinthian church was wrongly taking a tolerant attitude toward the whole situation, and had an arrogant attitude about it as well!

This is certainly a warning to many churches today that are willing to grant membership to just about any professing believer in order to swell their numbers. Discipline for immorality and other sins is woefully lacking in the church today.

In verse 2 the apostle Paul says that the church at Corinth should have been in grief over such a situation, and they should have been exercising discipline.

Doctrinal Points

1. Churches should put believers who continue in sin out of fellowship.

Verses 3-5: *“For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”*

The highest form of church discipline is removing from fellowship, or excommunication. The church does not punish physically, with such things as whipping or the death penalty. Admonitions and warnings should be given to members who are straying, but the last resort in church discipline is excommunication. This discipline is done to help, not hurt, offenders - just as good and loving parents must discipline their disobedient children.

So when Paul said that the man involved in sin was to be removed from their midst, he was talking about excommunication - placing outside of the communion or fellowship of the church. With his apostolic authority, Paul judged this case. He would have excommunicated the man himself if he were present at Corinth. Because he was not present, the church leaders at Corinth were to carry out the discipline.

The discipline was not to be done secretly. It was to be carried out publicly so that the congregation would know that the man had been disciplined, and be warned. The same is true today. The congregation should know when someone in the church is being disciplined and why. All the details of the sin need not be described, but the congregation should be informed as to the nature of the sin, whether it is immorality, fraud, lying, rebellion, etc. Public discipline warns the congregation, and stops rumors.

What did Paul mean when he said to *“deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”(v5)*? This is another way of describing what excommunication is all about. When a person is put out of the fellowship of the local church, he is put out into the realm of the world. 1 John 5:19 says that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. The world is Satan’s domain.

As a result, the sinner reaps what he sows. The sins of the flesh have their consequences - even death in some cases. But **God uses all of this as discipline with the intent that the sinner will repent and be restored** to fellowship in the church.

In the case of this Christian man at Corinth, there was no question about his salvation. The end of verse 5 makes this clear. It’s possible that he is the repentant sinner who is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:6-11, who is to be restored to fellowship: *This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary,*

you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one^[a] for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.” So the repentant sinner in 2 Corinthians 2 may be the same man who was involved in incest in 1 Corinthians 5.

The fact that there is no mention of discipline for the stepmother in this case is possibly because she was not a believer. The church does not discipline unbelievers. We leave that judgment in the hands of God (v13). But churches should put believers who continue in sin out of church fellowship.

2. Christians should not have fellowship with believers who continue in sin.

Verses 9-13: “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

We believe the “letter” mentioned in verse 9 is a previous letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians – a letter that is now lost. The fact that this letter was lost, and is not part of the Bible, means that it was not inspired Scripture. Every letter that the apostle wrote was not necessarily inspired. Only those letters that God, in His sovereign wisdom, chose to inspire Paul to write are included in the Bible.

That does not mean that the content of Paul’s other writings was untrue or not valuable. It’s just that those letters were not part of Holy Scripture. In this earlier letter that Paul had written to the Corinthians, he had told them not to associate with sexually immoral people. What Paul meant was not to have fellowship with believers who were involved in sexual immorality.

Apparently the Corinthian Christians had misunderstood Paul’s point here and had tried to cut off all association with **un**believers who were involved in immorality – but they were tolerating immorality within the church! Apparently they were thinking that they should continue to have fellowship with the man who was involved in incest because he was a Christian! Paul corrects this total misunderstanding in this chapter.

Many Christians need to understand what the Bible teaches here. The teachings in these verses are pretty straightforward. We are not to avoid unbelievers because of their sinful lifestyle. That would be impossible – you’d have to go to a different planet (v10)! In fact, we are to reach out to the sinful people of this world and share Christ with them. We leave the judgment of unbelievers (“outsiders”) up to God (v12-13).

However, if a person professes to be a believer and yet is continuing to live in sin and is unwilling to repent, that’s a

different matter. The local church is to judge such individuals. This chapter teaches that we are not to fellowship with that person - not even eat a meal together! If we do, whether we realize it or not, we are condoning the sin and the sinner. In addition, we would be showing disrespect for the church's decision, and causing a breakdown of the church's discipline.

Do we separate from Christians for every single sin? Of course not! We all sin, and we are to daily confess our sin to the Lord to maintain our fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9). But believers who are living a flagrantly sinful lifestyle, who are unwilling to repent of their sin – with these professing believers we are not to have fellowship. If they are true believers, this separation will cause them sorrow, and they will want to repent and be restored to fellowship.

Notice in verse 11 that the list of flagrant sins is not just immorality, but covetousness, idolatry, reviling (verbal abuse), and extortion. These are serious sins! Christians should not have fellowship with believers who continue in sin.

Practical Application

Let's clean out the old leaven!

Verses 6-8: *"Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."*

Our practical application comes right from verse 7: *"Therefore purge (or clean) out the old leaven."* Throughout the Bible, leaven (yeast) is a symbol of evil. Just as a little yeast spreads through a batch of dough, so sin spreads and affects the whole fellowship.

In these verses, Paul is showing the spiritual lessons in two closely connected feasts in the Old Testament – the Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The sacrifice of the Passover lamb typified and looked forward to Jesus Christ, our Passover Lamb, who was sacrificed for us. The Passover is a spiritual picture of salvation.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which directly follows the Passover, typifies separation from sin, which is so important in the believer's life and the life of the church.

Jewish people clean out their homes of all leaven in preparation for Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This is a picture of separation from sin. Thus we must clean all known sin out of our lives and churches, because sin will spread like yeast and corrupt the Body of Christ.

Let's be a holy people. We are "unleavened" as to our position in Christ (v7). Let's be unleavened as to our practice. Let's clean out the old leaven!