

## **Removing the Leaven** **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**

Let me read three statements:

1. The church is a community of forgiven wicked people brought together by God to be His people within the world.
2. God expects His forgiven people in the church to show love and forgiveness to one another.
3. God expects His people to live pure lives reflecting the fact that He's saved them and they're His people

Do you agree with all three statements?

What happens when you have a situation where there's tension between those three statements? Which, if any, has priority? Does the requirement for purity in the church take precedence over the requirement for love and forgiveness? What happens when someone in the church lives an obviously impure life? What should the church do about it?

- Should the church say: Well, we're all forgiven. None of us is pure in God's sight, except through Jesus. Who are we to stand in judgment?
- Should the church say: Well, God expects us to forgive each other. Yes, this brother is being impure. But God wants me simply to forgive him.
- Should the church say: Well, God expects us to be a holy community. This sister living in an impure way is a blot on the whole church. She's damaging God's reputation in the wider community. We must do something about it.

It seems to me the Western church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century rarely opts for the third option. And yet, that's exactly the

option Paul recommends to the Corinthians

### **Church Discipline**

Look at the situation and what Paul says. Verse 1:

*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.*

### Connection with Previous Section

First, a preliminary question: Is this a totally new topic, or is it related to what Paul writes about their quarrels? On the surface, it looks like a totally new topic, doesn't it? But, there are several hints it's connected with the first four chapters.

- First, chapter 4 finished with the question:  
*Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and with a gentle spirit?*  
This issue, which immediately follows that statement, is evidence Paul may indeed have to come with a rod – if the Corinthians themselves don't fix up the situation.
- Secondly, the idea of the Corinthians boasting (v.6) and being proud or puffed up (v.2) is still in focus. That's also in the opening four chapters.

- Thirdly, there's some hint in these verses that the Corinthians may see their tolerance of this sexual immorality as evidence of their own perceived high spirituality. If this is the case, and not all agree with this, then it'd be further evidence they'd adopted worldly wisdom to judge what's spiritual.

Thus, while the surface issue changes from quarrelling to immorality, the underlying problem hasn't really changed. It's still the question of boasting about the wrong things and failing to see true spirituality's always tied to the cross.

#### The Difficulties in the Passage

Verses 1 to 5 throw up all sorts of problems as to exactly what Paul means. There are several points where we're not sure. For example, we aren't told what happened to the father.

- Is he still around? Is this woman sleeping with both father and son?
- Or is the father out of the scene – either through death or divorce or an overseas trip?

That one isn't all that important, but it illustrates how little we really know of the details here.

A more significant issue is: what's verse 3 mean – *even though I'm not physically present, I'm with you in spirit*?

- Is he just saying: "you're in my thoughts"?
- Is he saying: "although I'm absent physically, I've made my position clear and so you know what I think about it"?
- Is he saying: "because God's Spirit is with you and because I'm God's apostle, when you meet my own spirit is somehow present with you"?
- Is he saying: "I can somehow send my own spirit to

your meeting"? Something similar to the way some Melanesian shamans send their spirits on missions outside their own bodies?

- Is he saying something about the essential unity of the church because we're all part of Christ's body?

Another significant question is what Paul means in verse 5 when he tells them to *hand this man over to Satan*.

- Is it a formula whereby the man literally is handed over to Satan for Satan to do with him as he wills?
- Is it merely saying that, by being kicked out of the church, the man's more exposed to the realm of Satan's influence?
- Is it something in between?
- Is the man handed over to Satan for Satan to take his physical life?
- Or is the idea that the man's sinful nature is to be worked on by Satan?
- Is Satan thought of as voluntarily doing something that could lead to this man's ultimate salvation?

There are lots of questions.

Now, I'm not going to deal with all those issues – in fact, I'm not going to deal with any of them. People disagree about them all. Some are more important than others. Final certainty on exactly what Paul means isn't easy at this point. I could tell you what I think Paul means – but to do that properly would take more time than we have now. So, I want to focus on three things that are crystal clear – and which are the heart of what's happening.

#### Discipline for the Sake of the Man

**First**, this man's action is flagrantly wrong. Such sinful behaviour shouldn't be tolerated in the Christian comm-

unity. The reason they shouldn't tolerate this in the church becomes clear in the next paragraph. Instead of boasting about this situation and being proud, they should grieve. They should share Paul's dismay that someone professing membership in God's family could pursue unholiness in this way.

**Secondly**, Paul tells the church to discipline this man. They aren't to put up with his behaviour. They aren't to take the line:

Oh well, we're all forgiven sinners. I too have sin in my life. Let's just live and let live. Because we know how much God's forgiven us, we can also forgive others lots.

This man persists in sexual immorality and Paul tells the church to take action. Instead of boasting about how tolerant or spiritual they are, they should grieve and kick him out of their fellowship. Whatever *handing him over to Satan* means, at the very least it means removing him from their church fellowship.

**Thirdly**, the point of the exercise is the man's benefit. Paul says so at the end of verse 5: *so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord* – the day of judgment. Is the man a Christian? Paul doesn't say – probably because he doesn't know. The man's behaviour certainly suggests he isn't a Christian – but only God knows. If he isn't a Christian, which is the more loving action?

- To let him continue in the church, having him think he's a Christian on his way to heaven, while he's actually on the road to hell.
- Or to kick him out of the church, making very clear that all isn't right between him and God in the hope he'll come to his senses and repent.

On the other hand, if he is a Christian, which is the more loving thing to do?

- To allow him to continue in sexual immorality – an activity God tells us is enslaving in a way destructive to our very persons.
- Or to exercise discipline in the hope he'll thus become free of this damaging activity and thus live a better life for himself.

If we think sin doesn't matter, then we've bought the lie of this world. We aren't living by God's wisdom; instead, we're living under the world's wisdom.

Modern Western Christians are in danger at this very point – especially in the area of immorality. The world bombards us with its point of view all the time. The world keeps telling us immorality's a good thing – it's fun and enjoyable; it's self-fulfilling; everybody's doing it; even that it's good for your marriage. It's just like that in Corinth. God says it's all a lie. Immorality damages you at the core of your being. We'll come back to this in the second half of chapter 6.

The point is: whether the man's a Christian or not, it's to his own harm to let him continue this immoral relationship. The loving thing (though Paul doesn't use the word *love*) for the church to do is to try to stop him.

#### Discipline for the Sake of the Church

This is the best thing for the man. It's also the best thing for the church. Verse 6:

*Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch*

*without yeast – as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.*

Paul uses an illustration – the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. The Passover celebrated God's rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The story's in the first half of Exodus. The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted the seven days following Passover. During both the Passover meal and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the people weren't to eat anything with leaven in it. They had to remove all leaven from their houses.

- The reason given in Exodus was that, because they were in a hurry to leave Egypt, they didn't have time to allow the bread to rise (Ex.12:11).
- But leaven also came to symbolise evil. Just as leaven spreads through a whole batch of dough and causes certain results, so evil spreads through a whole group of people and causes certain results.

This is the thrust of Paul's question in verse 6. It's almost like a proverb:

A little leaven leavens the whole batch of dough.

One bad apple spoils the whole barrel.

By allowing the evil of this immorality to go unchecked in their midst, they risk infection of the entire church. By showing a tolerant attitude to this evil, so they're likely to develop a careless attitude to other evil. Then, instead of being God's holy and pure community in Corinth – an example of what God's salvation looks like – they'll just be like the rest of the pagan Corinthians. They'll look no different. In fact, they'll look even worse – for this man's

sin would be rejected by the average pagan in Corinth.

Paul clarifies his point in verse 7: *Our Passover lamb has been sacrificed*. Paul isn't referring to some young sheep sacrificed on the altar in Jerusalem. He's talking about Jesus, the One crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem. He's got back to God's wisdom: Christ crucified – the power of God and the wisdom of God. Who is Jesus? The Bible tells us:

- He's crucified at Passover.
- He's the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
- His perfect sacrifice of Himself sets us free from slavery to sin.
- He's the One who brings us back into right relationship with God.

So then, since the Passover lamb has been sacrificed, His people should move forward to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Evil should be removed. It should be replaced with purity. His people should look like what He's made them. This immoral man in their midst stops them looking like God's holy people.

Suppose you're learning the piano, but all you had to practise on was a four-year-old's toy piano that only had one octave and was out of tune. And suppose your piano teacher gave you a brand new grand piano – complete, perfectly in tune. Would you still practise on the out-of-tune toy one? What would your teacher think if you did?

That's something like what these Corinthians did – only it's worse.

- They'd been living wicked lives. They'd rebelled

against God. They were enslaved to sin – to lifestyles destructive to themselves. Finally, they'd face God's judgment.

- Then, they heard the gospel – the message of Christ crucified. They heard that Jesus was punished for their rebellion. They heard that God forgave them. They heard that Jesus set them free from slavery to sin. They thought that sounded good – and so they accepted the message and became Christians.
- But then, instead of living like people free from sin, they tolerate this guy sleeping with his step-mother. That was the lifestyle they'd been set free from.

It's like saying they wanted God's gift but they didn't want it. Supposedly they got rid of the leaven – but they now celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread with Leavened Bread.

That's not the way it should be. In becoming Christians, they're made a new batch without leaven. That's what God made them. So why are they adding leaven back into the mixture? They're destroying the temple of God – to go back to the imagery of 3:16-17. Instead, they should be becoming what God made them.

Right through the Bible, we see that God wants a holy people and works to that end. But since the Garden of Eden, there's always been the problem of human sin – of human unholiness; of humans living in rebellion to God. God's solution to this problem is Jesus' death on the cross.

- At the cross, God deals with the issue of the punishment for our sin – Jesus is punished for us. That means God can give us life instead of death.
- At the cross, God also sets us free from our slavery to sin. We're set free to live in harmony with God,

rather than rebellion against Him.

- At the cross, God brought us into His family and made us His people – His holy people; the sort of people who'll populate the perfection of heaven.

It's the second and third aspects Paul emphasises here. All that is God's gift. All that comes from God's mercy and grace. Paul says: now that God's done that in your life, live it out in practice. Become what you are. Become what God has made you.

Thus, they're to get rid of the evil things that characterised their lives before they became Christians – things like malice and wickedness. They're to get rid of impurity from their midst. And that means getting rid of this immoral man from their fellowship. They're to live as those set free from that former way of life.

As Gordon Fee puts it:

Christ has died for us not simply to give us passage to heaven but to re-create us in his own image, so that both individually and corporately we may express the character of God by the way we live in a world whose behaviour ... lacks the truth and purity of the gospel. It is extremely unfortunate when God's own people, as in this case, look more like their surroundings than they do their Lord himself.<sup>1</sup>

### Paul's Previous Instructions

Paul then turns to correct a previous misunderstanding the Corinthians seem to have. Verse 9:

*I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the*

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D.Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Michigan, Eerdmans, 1988) 219-220.

*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.*

We learn Paul wrote an earlier letter to them. We don't have that letter. Nor do we know the full details of it. We only have what Paul writes here. Thus, we learn that not all Paul's letters made it into the Bible. In 2 Corinthians, Paul mentions another letter he wrote to them that also isn't in the Bible.

In this previous letter, Paul told them *not to associate with sexually immoral people.*

- They, or some of them at least, interpreted this to include people outside the church.
- Paul, of course, didn't mean that at all. He meant people in the church – people who called themselves Christians – and who were sexually immoral.

Now, it's a bit difficult to work out exactly what's going on here – from the Corinthians' side.

- Were they really that silly to think Paul would say Christians couldn't associate with any immoral person? If that's what he meant, Christians would have to leave the world altogether – and the Corinthians don't seem to have done that.
- Further, were the Corinthians consistent? If they really thought Paul meant that, why have they still got this immoral person in their fellowship? And why do they boast about it? Did they really think

Paul says it's not OK to relate with non-Christian immoral people, but it was OK to associate with Christian immoral people?

It seems this also is part of the personal attack on Paul and his credibility.

But again – although we don't fully understand the exact circumstances in Corinth, Paul's meaning in these verses is quite clear. He says the church should take decisive action against those in the church who call themselves Christians and are sexually immoral. But it isn't just the sexually immoral is it? Look at the list he includes:

- The greedy
- The idolater
- The slanderer
- The drunkard
- The swindler

It isn't just that the sexually immoral person is to be excluded as if that's the only sin about which the church should concern itself. Sometimes the church has given that impression – especially the Western church which lives in a culture based on greed, and in which slander may be second-nature to many. But these other things are just as serious. They're just as destructive to individual Christians and the church as a whole. They're just as much the evil leaven that's not part of the new life God gave us. They too should be dealt with.

## Conclusion

In verses 12 and 13 Paul concludes this matter:

*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."*

Paul isn't interested in judging the outsider. To the outsider, Paul preaches the gospel. If they refuse to accept the gospel, then they'll face God's judgment. Paul can't do anything about their refusal except urge them to change their minds.

But, for the insider (the one who claims to be a Christian and to belong to the church) it's different. With the insider, there remains the responsibility of encouraging them to become what God's made them.

- If they refuse to put aside their sin...
- If they persist in following an ungodly lifestyle...
- If they show evidence of not becoming the child of God they claim to be...

then they're to be disciplined – for their own sake and for the sake of the whole church.