

“God Judges Those Outside”

The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; Exodus 12:1-20

Reformed Christians consider church discipline to be one of the three marks of a true church. The reason for this insistence upon church discipline as a mark of the church is found in our passage, where Paul commands the Corinthians to remove (excommunicate) a man from their midst who was professing faith in Christ, while at the same time, openly engaging in an activity which even the pagans regard as shameful. While the church is to be a hospital for sinners, and while there should always be sufficient grace for anyone struggling with sin, those who insist upon living as a law unto themselves, and who harden their hearts and are unrepentant when confronted, must be removed from the church. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul does something quite unexpected. He cautions the Corinthians *not* to judge the pagans outside the church (the world)—because they don’t know any better. At the same time, he warns those who profess faith in Christ that once they trust in the Savior they cannot live as they did when they were pagans.

We have completed the first four chapters of our study of 1 Corinthians. We have looked closely at Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to leave behind the worldly wisdom of first century Corinth, and instead to begin evaluating things—including Paul’s ministry—in the light of the revelation of God’s wisdom in the cross of Jesus Christ. Having established the foundation of this church through the preaching of the gospel, and stating that the members of this church were the living temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul now moves on to discuss specific issues. As we saw last time, Paul speaks to the members of this church as his spiritual children, rebuking the immature among them and refusing to allow those still holding on to the wisdom of the world to divert him from his divinely-appointed mission.

In chapter 5, Paul now takes up a series of things going on in Corinth which had come to his attention and which are causing serious problems in the church. The first of these is the case of a man in the Corinthian church who is co-habiting with his father’s wife (his stepmother). Somehow word had gotten to Paul that this was going on, and that no one in the church was doing anything about it. As we work our way through Paul’s discussion of this deplorable situation, it is important to notice that Paul speaks much more sternly about the church’s lax attitude toward the issue, than he does about the guilt of the individual offender, who is never named even though presumably, everyone knew who this was. What Paul condemns in the passage is the conduct of the church—the elders have failed to discipline the offending party. The fact that Paul says nothing about the woman involved may very well mean that she is not a Christian, and not a member of the church, or else she too would be subject to discipline.¹

Paul is typically blunt and gets right to the point in verse 1.

P *“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife.”* It is easy to read between the lines and assume a fair bit of anger and disappointment on Paul’s part stemming from the fact that the responsibility for dealing with this issue has been avoided by the pastors and elders of the Corinthian church. The word translated sexual immorality is *porneia* and comes from the root (*porne*) “harlot.” By

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 83; Hays, First Corinthians, 80-81.

Paul's time, the term probably refers to any form of sexual immorality (in a moral sense) or sexual misconduct (in a legal sense).² The specific issue is that the man in question *has* his father's wife, which more than likely means that the woman in question is the man's step-mother.

The most likely scenario is that the man in question has seduced his father's wife or concubine, which implies—although Paul does not specifically state this fact—that the man's father had divorced the man's biological mother (or else the biological mother had died), and married someone younger, closer in age to the man in question. It is also possible that man's biological father had died, and then the son took his widowed step-mother as his own wife (or concubine).³ In either case, it is clear that the nature of the man's relationship with his step-mother was widely known throughout the church and regarded as utterly scandalous even by the pagans. Yet the Corinthians did nothing.

The behavior of the man in question was so offensive that this kind of relationship was probably condemned by Roman law, and certainly by the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:8, 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; 27:20). Taking your father's wife was specifically condemned by Cicero in a passage from *Pro Cluentio*.⁴ This was not something that fell into a gray area. Even the pagans rejected regarded such conduct as reprehensible. And if the Greeks were offended, then this was really offensive!

There is a significant theological point made here which we may easily overlook because of the scandal involved. One scholar points out that “the word *ethne*, translated by . . . most English versions as ‘pagans’ is Paul’s normal word for ‘Gentiles’ (i.e. ‘Non-Jews’). His use of this term offers a fascinating hint that he thinks of the Gentile converts at Corinth as Gentiles no longer (cf. 12:2, 13; Gal. 3:28). Now that they are in Christ, they belong to the covenant people of God, and their behavior should reflect this new status.”⁵ Paul doesn’t speak of Gentile converts as “Gentiles.” They *were* Gentiles (pagans), *now* they are Christians. Paul’s point is that Christians must make a break with their pagan past.

And what was the attitude of the Corinthians toward this? Paul tells us in verse 2. “*And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*” The Corinthians are proud, literally “puffed up.” They are pleased with their own spiritual and material condition despite the fact that this was going on in their midst! Instead of being filled with grief and removing the offending party from the church, they glibly tolerate this man’s behavior. The Corinthians should be in a state of grief (literally “mourning”) because of the need to excise one of the members of their body like one removes a gangrenous limb.⁶ Instead, they are proud of their accomplishments and high-standing in the community (royal, rich and without need—1 Corinthians 4:8) and see no need to take action. But Paul will not allow the Corinthians to ignore this matter and do nothing.

In verse 3, Paul writes, “*For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have*

² Hays, First Corinthians, 81.

³ Morris discusses all of the possibilities in, 1 Corinthians, 83.

⁴ Cited in Hays, First Corinthians, 81.

⁵ Hays, First Corinthians, 81.

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 83.

already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.” Even though Paul cannot be present with the Corinthians in person, he is certainly present with them in spirit. His attitude toward the situation stands in sharp contrast to theirs. Those elders present in Corinth have done nothing. Yet, the one who is absent (Paul) is taking action. Paul has already passed judgment on the matter, even though he does not name the offender (or the woman) by name.⁷

In verses 4-5, Paul writes “*When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*” However we understand the grammatical structure of the sentence—which is very difficult—one thing is clear; Paul solemnly commands the Corinthians to remove this man from the fellowship, i.e. to excommunicate him. But this is not a mere judicial procedure. There are grave spiritual consequences of this action. Paul’s point is that once outside the safety of the church, the man in question is delivered over to the consequences of his sin and will now dwell in that sphere of life where Satan dominates.⁸ Throughout Paul’s writings, Satan is depicted as the destroyer (2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10) and like a doomed animal, awaits his final and appointed end. The consequence of this act of excommunication is that the man’s “flesh” might be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord, i.e., on the day of judgment.

Obviously, the destruction of the man’s flesh is a difficult concept. While a number of possibilities have been suggested—the destruction of the man’s “lower nature” (but how does handing someone over to Satan have a purifying effect?), or that the destruction of the flesh might refer to someone suffering from the weighty effects of excommunication, so that they put to death the flesh and return to the church, while still others think this is a reference to physical destruction and even death (cf. The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). It seems to me best to say that the excommunicated person is allowed to suffer all of the consequences of their actions, physical, emotional and spiritual, so that they will be convicted of their sin so that they repent and then are saved on the day of judgment.⁹

But it is vital to notice that even after the man is excommunicated, Paul expects that the man will be saved on the day of judgment. This supports the idea that church discipline will ideally, if not inevitably, lead to the person’s restoration, which of course, presupposes repentance, restitution, and the forgiveness of the offender’s sin. This is in-line with Paul’s instructions to the Galatians (6:1): “*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*” Church discipline must be exercised firmly, but incrementally and pastorally, with the goal of seeing the disciplined party saved on the day of judgment—i.e. that the party repents and is restored. That church which does not exercise discipline, is a church which is being unfaithful to the Lord of the church. That church which exercises church discipline as a retributive punishment to merely shame (or embarrass) the sinner, is also not faithfully practicing church discipline. The goal is always restoration, and there is nothing as joyous as a sinner repenting.

Paul insists that the prescribed action—excommunication—must take place. As he puts it in verse 6: “*Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*” Paul is concerned

⁷ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 84.

⁸ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 85.

⁹ Hays, First Corinthians, 86.

that unless something is done about this man's sin, the consequences of both his sin, as well as the church's failure to deal with this matter, will spread throughout the entire church with horrible consequences. Apparently, even the pagans were watching, waiting to see what happened.

But all the while this poison is spreading throughout the church the Corinthians are still boasting. As Paul sees it, the issue is not merely that the Corinthians did nothing about this man's sin, but that they did nothing about a heinous sin, all the while boasting about their success. Using a common parable/figure of speech with both a cultural and a biblical basis, Paul now warns the Corinthians that even a small amount of yeast will work its way throughout the whole batch of dough. The Corinthian church is to be God's temple in Corinth, but cannot serve this function effectively with this going on in their midst.¹⁰

While Paul's reference might be to the Corinthian's boasting—i.e., that it is their pride which will spread throughout the church—more than likely something much more serious is in view. To allow this man to remain in the Corinthian church is to allow this horrible situation to impact the entire church. Not only is toleration of one man's scandalous sin in view, but even worse, the failure to discipline this man will also affect the reputation of the entire church and the credibility of the gospel it proclaims. If the Corinthian church fails to excommunicate this man, not only does the man's evil actions go unpunished but he will not be pressured to repent. In not protecting the church from evil, the entire church will be impacted. If the church does not exercise discipline, the signal is sent that no immoral conduct will be regarded as beyond the pale, and the Corinthian church will become just another mainline liberal Protestant church!

This is why Paul urges them: "*Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*" Simply put, Paul is urging this congregation to get rid of the yeast (the sin of this particular individual) before it permeates the whole congregation. The reason for Paul's confident assertion that this congregation is a new lump (i.e., not yet fully permeated with yeast) is spelled out in the second half of the verse. Christ has died for the Corinthian believers, removing the guilt of their sins. Paul's point is probably that Jesus Christ's death is to the Christian what the Passover was to the Jews.

By seeing Paul's words in this light, the redemptive historical implications become quite obvious. As recounted in our Old Testament lesson from Exodus 12, Israel was delivered from Egypt and all of its pagan influences on the night of the Passover. When celebrating the Passover, all yeast was removed from the house, a sign which pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ removing the guilt and power of sin, as well as symbolically demonstrating Israel's rejection of paganism. The point is a powerful one—because Christ has delivered the Corinthians from slavery to sin through his death upon the cross, all yeast (sin) must be removed from their lives. The application is obvious. While we are all sinners, and therefore forbidden from self-righteously judging others, the fact remains that all public and scandalous sins must be dealt with accordingly, either through the repentance of the sinner, or the removal of the sinner from the congregation should they refuse to repent and be restored.

Paul goes on to say, "*Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*" For the Christian, the Christian life is a continual festival (the "let us keep," meaning something continuous). There is also an implied reference to the Lord's Supper here as well. This fits both the context (the Passover typology), and situation,

¹⁰ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 214-215.

namely that the man who is expelled would presumably have been barred from the Lord's table.¹¹ This act, called "silent censure" is usually the first step of church discipline.

The important point here is that the sins of malice (the strife which lead to factionalism) and the wickedness which led to a man taking his father's wife in a scandalous manner, are those things typified by old yeast. These are the things the Corinthians are to remove, so as to live in integrity and truth, as a new loaf, "bread without yeast." Once justified before God because of the merits of Christ, received through faith, Christians are to strive to live lives of gratitude before God. The Corinthians, apparently, understand the gospel. But they don't seem very interested in living like Christians and not like pagans. This is the yeast (the consequence) of their immaturity and their love of pagan wisdom.

We also learn that Paul had already written to the Corinthians earlier to address some of these issues, and the Corinthians have, apparently, badly misunderstood his prior letter. Therefore, Paul addresses this misunderstanding directly. *"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world."* Paul has already told this congregation that they are not to associate (meaning "to be mixed up with")¹² with people who are sexually immoral—that is, with people who live by a Greco-Roman sexual ethic, rather than a biblical sexual ethic. Greco-Roman culture was characterized by what Christians consider to be sexual promiscuity. Men kept mistresses. Homosexuality was wide-spread. Many pagan religions were tied to temple prostitution. Then, as now, sexual promiscuity is the fruit of paganism—fertility rites, union with the divine, goddess worship, etc. Paganism provides the excuse to sin against nature.

The application for us should be obvious. We too live in a highly sexualized culture in which homosexuality is not only tolerated, but is now seen as a noble challenge to our Puritan past—actually "Victorian" past. Sex before or outside of marriage is commonplace, and pornography is available in every home via the internet. Throughout the Scriptures we are called to live according a biblical sexual ethic, which teaches that homosexuality is not only a sin against God's law, but also against nature (which is why the guilt attached to it is so deep), that Christians must abstain from sexual relations until marriage, that adultery is not only a sin but highly destructive, and that pornography is a Pandora's box to a host of sins, addictions and psychological trauma. Christians endured this high sexualized environment in Corinth while challenging pagans with the claims of Christ, even as we must do the same today.

Obviously, one of the reasons why this letter is so direct (and even sarcastic in the previous chapter) is because Paul has already told the congregation that its members should not be made up of people who still live and think like pagans. They have not only failed to heed Paul's words, they have badly misunderstood his instructions. Some in the congregation have misunderstood Paul to be saying that they must have no contact whatsoever with any immoral persons (greedy, swindlers or idolaters) in addition to those who are sexually immoral. Sadly, many Christians think this way today. If, as Paul says, he meant that Christians must avoid conduct with all immoral people, then they would have to leave the world because all people are immoral! Paul is not telling us to avoid non-Christians. He is telling us not to think and act like non-Christians once we become Christians.

¹¹ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 218.

¹² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 88.

In fact, Paul's clarification is spelled out in verse 11. *"But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one."* All of the items on this list are taken from so-called "exclusion texts" in the Book of Deuteronomy. That conduct God expected of the covenant community in the Old Testament, he still expects of his covenant people in the new.¹³ In other words, what Paul meant is that a Christian must not be mixed up with people who profess to be believers, but who still live like pagans. Paul is not talking about avoiding people who are struggling with sin. He is talking about people who continually self-justify their sinful conduct, and who show no signs of being concerned that what they do is an offense to God. There is no repentance. No godly sorrow.

Paul is also clear that Christians must avoid the appearance of evil, hence they cannot even eat (associate directly) with those who profess faith in Christ but continue to be sexually immoral (who engage in adultery or fornication), greedy (dishonest gain), idolaters (syncretists), slanders (liars), drunkards or swindlers (those who seize what isn't there). Some have taken the reference to eating to refer to the Lord's Supper. Paul is more than likely referring to table fellowship, which meant much more in the ancient world than it does in ours. To eat with someone in their home was to establish a bond with them. And yet, Paul does not forbid Christians from eating in non-Christian homes (1 Corinthians 10:27). Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. But Paul forbids Christians from direct and public association with people in the church who profess to be Christians but who still live as pagans.

Indeed, as Paul goes on to say in verses 12-13. *"For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.'"* It is not Paul's place, nor ours, to judge those outside the church. God will take care of non-Christians. But the Corinthians (and we) are commanded to judge those within the church according to their life and doctrine, yet not in a self-righteous, "holier than thou attitude." The bruised reed and smoldering wick—those who are weak in the faith and who struggle with their sins—must be nurtured and comforted with the promises of the gospel. But those who claim to be Christians, but who live like pagans in complete indifference to the law of God, are to be expelled from the church unless they repent. Paul's words are not directed to struggling sinners, but to those who profess faith in Christ but then live as they please. The church cannot tolerate this kind of evil in its midst because it undermines the proclamation of the gospel.¹⁴ Christ died to save us from both the guilt of sin and its power.

What should we take with us from this passage of Scripture?

First, Paul tells us not to judge those outside the church. God judges those outside the covenant community. Since we are sinners who are saved by grace, and since all that we have is a gift from a gracious God, who are we to judge those who are not Christians? That said, it is our duty to continually confront non-Christians with the claims of Christ and of the gospel. While we are not to judge them, we are commanded to evangelize them.

Second, Christ's church must be a disciplined church. If the truth were told, church discipline is that one area of church life which keeps ministers and elders up at night. Despite the difficulties associated with it, Christ commands it of us. An undisciplined church is not a true church. A church which practices

¹³ Hays, First Corinthians, 88.

¹⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 90.

discipline with a stern self-righteousness is not a hospital for sinners. Again, the issue is not that there are sinners in the church. This is where sinners belong. Beloved, the wonderful news is that Christ's death avails for you and turns aside God's wrath so that you need never fear God's judgment. But since the cross is the revelation of the wisdom and power of God, we undermine the credibility of that gospel we love so much when we overlook those things which bring scandal to Christ's church, and when we fail to discipline those who claim to trust Christ, but act like the cross has no power whatsoever to break sin's hold upon us.

Leave those outside the church to God—he judges those outside. But let us build a church which is a haven and a hospital for sinners, yet which at the same time refuses to allow anything to bring shame to the cause of Christ and his gospel.