

Sinners in the Church

1 Corinthians 5

We are continuing our study of 1 Corinthians and find ourselves in chapter 5 this morning. This marks the beginning of a new problem in this letter. Paul spent 4 chapters addressing the first problem and chapter 5 is devoted to the next one. The question in this chapter is: How are you supposed to deal with sinful people in your church family?

The beautiful message of salvation is that God saves us in Christ while we are still sinners. That's really good news! We don't have to clean up our act in order to be saved. Cleaning up our act can't save us, only Christ can. He did everything we need for salvation in his life, death, and resurrection and when we turn to him in faith, all that he did becomes ours. So we are saved by God's grace through faith and this is a gift from God, not by our own righteous deeds.

That means when we become part of the church, we are far from perfect. We come with all kinds of sinful patterns that are part of our lives. There isn't a single person in the church that doesn't deal with areas of temptation and sin. And we shouldn't be afraid to admit that. We shouldn't pretend we have it all together when in fact, we don't. We clean up and look nice for church on Sunday, but we have to be aware that underneath we all struggle with different things. The church shouldn't pretend to be a place of perfect people, we should be known as a place where imperfect people can come for help and healing – fellow strugglers seeking the Lord and growing together.

So, if you look at it that way, the church is filled with sinful people, and we need to give each other grace and seek to help one another overcome temptation and sin. But at what point do you draw the line? Is there sinful behavior that is not allowable in the church? And if so, what are we supposed to do about it? That's the problem Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians 5. The church in Corinth was off track in how they were dealing with some sinful people and Paul brings some correction.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-2.

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. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Clearly, Paul considers the sinful behavior in this situation to have crossed over a line. It appears that there was a man who had a sexual relationship with a woman married to his father – probably not his mother, but likely a step-mother. It was a form of incest that was condemned by the Bible, but also by the culture. Even though Greco-Roman society was filled with sexual immorality, incest was not tolerated.

It appears this man's sinful behavior was ongoing and people in the church knew about it. He wasn't repentant; he continued in his sin and the church allowed it. Not only that, but Paul says the church was arrogant. It seems that they were proud of themselves for welcoming a sinful man among them that society had rejected. They must have felt they were better than the world around them because they showed acceptance. They may have thought they were showcasing Christian love and compassion by what they were doing.

So we have ongoing, obvious, serious sin by a man in the church that's unrepentant, and the church is not only tolerating him, but proud of it. The whole situation was troubling for Paul.

I can see the same thing happening in churches today. Some churches want to be known for embracing the people rejected by society. And in some ways that's great, Jesus did something similar. He was criticized by the religious leaders of his day for hanging out with sinners. He ministered to the rejects and those considered despicable. You may remember the woman caught in adultery, or the Samaritan woman at the well, or Zacchaeus and Matthew – the tax collectors who cheated their own people. Jesus seemed to go after such people and show them they had value, and we should do the same.

But Jesus went after them to invite them into something different – to set them free from their bondage to sin and immorality. When he invited them to follow him, he invited them to go a different direction. To the woman caught in adultery he said, "Go and sin no more." Zacchaeus ended up repaying those he cheated. Following Jesus meant turning away from the old way of life and moving forward into something new; not continuing to live in sin and follow that same old sinful

pattern. That was the way of death. Those who held on to their sinful way of life were not representing his kingdom. They represented the opposite of what Jesus was calling people into, which was life.

So for churches to reach out to the people society rejects is what Jesus was all about, but to tolerate those who continued to live in blatant wickedness and be proud of it is a major problem. That's what was happening in Corinth. Rather than being arrogant, Paul says they should mourn. "Remove this guy from the church!" And he spells that out in more detail in the next few verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.

³For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵you 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.

Paul describes the seriousness of removing the unrepentant man from the church. He's having them carry out his apostolic judgment against him as if he was right there doing it himself. He isn't there physically, but he is there in spirit, so he tells them to deliver the man to Satan – in other words, expel him from the fellowship of the church; abandon him to the devil. The NIV Study Bible says, "To expel him was to put him out in the devil's territory, severed from any connection with God's people." And the purpose for doing so was so that the man would be deeply troubled by being separated from the protection of God's people, and that he would repent and turn from his wickedness. The idea is that Satan is allowed to bring affliction upon him, which would bring him to repentance.

That's how they were to respond to the unrepentant man, not tolerate him. Not be proud for accepting him. Expel him from the church. Paul explains why this is important in the next few verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

⁶Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Let 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.

Paul uses the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread to help the people understand why they shouldn't tolerate the wicked man in the church. During the Feast of Unleavened Bread the people of Israel would remove all leaven, or yeast, from their homes to prepare to sacrifice and eat the Passover Lamb. This was part of the Passover celebration. The leaven symbolized evil or sin that would lead to death, and the Lamb symbolized Jesus who would save them from death.

So in these verses Paul is calling them to remove the sinful person from among them. If tolerated, his sin would influence the whole church, just like yeast in a batch of dough. Not necessarily because a bunch of people would start committing incest, but because if his sin was tolerated, others' sins would be tolerated as well. People would stop pursuing the freedom and new life that Christ had died to give them and continue to wallow in death. The church would become just another social gathering of worldly people trapped in darkness, rather than the light of the world. So Paul warns them to cleanse out the old leaven by removing the unrepentant person from among them.

He also reminds them that Christ, the Passover Lamb was sacrificed for sins, and the way to celebrate his sacrifice was to pursue righteousness together as a church family. We worship and honor Christ's sacrifice not by tolerating malice and evil in the church, but by feasting on sincerity and truth. That's why we don't treat sin lightly in our lives or in the church. To willingly tolerate ongoing sinful behavior is to dishonor Christ's sacrifice, but to turn from it and pursue righteousness is to celebrate it. That's why it was important for the church to expel the unrepentant man.

Paul closes this chapter by making sure it was clear that he was talking about what they should do with unrepentant people in the church, not those outside the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ 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. 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. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

So it is not our responsibility as Christians to disassociate from sinful people outside the church. If it was, we'd have to leave the planet. Our responsibility is to disassociate from people who claim to be Christians, but who live in sin and are known by their sinfulness. Though difficult to do, we need to remove them from the fellowship of the church, and the implication is we need to no longer engage in personal friendship as well, as if their behavior is acceptable.

The church needs to be a place where imperfect people can gather together to find help and healing, a place where we can be honest with one another and not pretend we don't struggle with sin, so we can help one another grow spiritually. But we can see in this chapter that sin needs to be taken seriously. We need to help one another fight against it, not turn a blind eye in toleration; not be proud of embracing those society has rejected for ongoing sin...

This is a principle the elders are aware of and church discipline is something we seek to practice, but it's something each of us should take to heart as well. What is your attitude about the sinful patterns you see in your life? Are you tolerating sin, or fighting against it? We all struggle with certain temptations and sins, but there's a big difference between struggling with them and tolerating them. The church is a family that should have open arms to fellow strugglers who want to help one another overcome sinful patterns for the honor of Christ. But we can't turn a blind eye when there's serious, ongoing sin that someone isn't fighting to overcome. Sin has to be dealt with for the honor and glory of Christ who laid down his life for our freedom and new life.