

Lessons from Corinth

Part 2: 1 Cor. 5:1-13

“What about ‘Judging’- Yes or No?”

¹ It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. ² You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. ³ For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴ In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ *I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of *dough*? ⁷ Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us celebrate 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 you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; ¹⁰ *I did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. ¹¹ But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? ¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 NAU¹

A superficial reading of this text quickly conjures up images of a judgmental, critical Christianity who shoot their wounded, “shun” those who do not “play by the rules.” Nothing could be further from the text and Paul’s (God’s) own heart. However, it is a text that takes sin seriously (5:1-2) and recognizes the very real consequences of sin to our life *together* as believers (5:6).

An often repeated mantra among believers today is, “We are **not** supposed to judge.” After all, Jesus seems to say as much (Matt. 7:1-5). Unfortunately, this mantra is often times used as a way to avoid personal responsibility: if I’m not to “judge” then I have no responsibility to address my brothers and sisters or to be accountable myself. All of this fits quite nicely into our postmodern world where “tolerance” is the premier cultural value. So, are we to “judge?”

What are to make of Paul’s (God’s) words here? A careful look at this text in context will prepare us to apply it today.

Sexual immorality is an ongoing concern for Paul and he addresses it repeatedly.² In fact, it seems that he has already challenged the Corinthian’s lack of standards in a previous letter (5:9). The specific behavior Paul addresses and condemns here is a form of incest, so abhorrent that even the Gentiles (non-Christians) think it terrible and refuse to practice it (5:1).³ And yet, the Corinthian believers are not only allowing one of their own to *continue to practice* this sin, they are quite proud of it (5:2)! This is the problem that Paul will respond to in 5:3-13.⁴

A couple introductory insights will help us to better understand Paul’s seemingly drastic solution (5:4-5). First, while the offense itself is serious, more serious is the fact that the Corinthians have done nothing about it (5:2). Paul says that “mourning” and the removal of this person from their church should have been their response; instead, they are arrogant and indifferent. Their lack of brokenness and grief over this state of affairs was a telltale sign of their failure to take sin seriously. Second, as distressing as is this particular sin, there is **no** evidence that the person committing this action is in any way repentant or willing to change. The text indicates that he is *presently, continually practicing* this sin, all the while claiming to be a believer and actively participating in the life of the believing community as though nothing were amiss. Because this person is unrepentant, Paul must take action of a “last resort” (5:3-5, 13). Third, this is the state of affairs that exists *after* Paul has addressed issues of immorality in his previous letter to them (5:9-11). They know better! They are not ignorant but arrogant and defiant. Fourth, this is not

about one person or faction in the church being critical, taking offense or having a “bad attitude” toward another or others. The oft quoted words of Jesus about “not judging” are important and relevant, especially when dealing with interpersonal relationships among believers. However, the issue at Corinth is more serious and of a different kind. So, while Jesus’ words on judging might help prepare the Corinthians to deal with their issue, more drastic action is necessary.⁵ The whole of the Corinthian church is involved. They are in danger. Their arrogance and unwillingness to deal with this situation is a “leaven” that will eventually ruin the whole loaf – they must act (5:6-7)!⁶ Finally, then, Paul’s response to the situation matches the seriousness of it. This is no “witch-hunt,” it is not arbitrary; rather it is a reasoned, principled response to an extremely seriousness matter.

Allot of ink has been spilled discussing Paul’s solution, especially what is meant by the “delivering over to Satan,” and the “destruction of his flesh so that his spirit may be saved”? Without getting too much into the weeds, a couple things seem to be true here.⁷ Paul’s goal is redemption; his actions are remedial. Paul’s intent and desire is for true repentance, a real change of heart and life that involves turning from this destructive behavior. There is no indication that the “destruction of the flesh” (5:5) is necessarily to be a final state of affairs for this person; repentance can mean restoration, “spirit be saved.”⁸ To “deliver over to Satan” is an expression used one other time by Paul (1 Timothy 1:20). It does not seem to be some sort of invocation or declaration, as though Paul actually addressed Satan and gave this person to him. Rather, it seems to be the expelling of this person from the fellowship of believers and putting him back into the domain or realm where Satan rules and dwells (1 John 5:18-19).⁹ In this sense, the person is to be “excommunicated” or excluded from the church with the hope that they will change and then can be welcomed back again.

Implications and Application

What is your initial reaction to Paul’s action? Some see it as harsh and lacking compassion. Others see the wisdom of it, but are more cynical, “they will simply go down the street to another church.”¹⁰ I would suggest that our own reaction says allot about who we are as the American church. How much of our attitude and posture toward sin is Biblical and how much is simply cultural? We must ask this honestly, because American culture has moved so rapidly away from any kind of Biblical norm and in that movement has impacted *our* attitudes toward sin. We are much closer to Corinth than we might think!

Paul’s overall approach and posture toward sin seems clear and we should share it (“grief” 5:2); yet his specific action in this instance should probably be seen as a “last resort” to deal with a particularly grievous situation. It might be helpful to draw in some additional texts to round out a Biblical attitude and response toward sin in the church.

Sin in the Church

Even a quick read of the NT shows that the early church was no utopia of “sinless perfection.” Part 3 of this series will address this more specifically (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11 in particular), however, a couple thoughts are in order.

What is our response to “hearing” of sin, moral failure or other kinds of sin among the believers with whom we fellowship? What should it be? We shouldn’t we shocked when we hear of sin in the church, BUT we should be grieved (5:2). And we should immediately check our own heart, before we think another thought (Gal. 6:1)!

Sin in the church offers us both an opportunity and a temptation. The temptation is to self-righteousness, “I’m better than them” or perhaps to unforgiveness or bitterness, “They acted like everything was right, what a betrayal.” Rather than make such self-justifying comparisons or

succumbing to a bitter attitude, we should begin by trembling with fear and by throwing ourselves again on God's mercy, "God give me YOU, so that I won't do anything to break your heart and cause the world to laugh at You, to mock You" (1 Cor. 10:12). I can take this negative and make it an opportunity to do a heart and life checkup of my own. Where am I vulnerable? Am I dealing with my stuff? Most importantly, am I cultivating a passionate relationship with Jesus that guards my heart and mind from sin (John 14:15)?

Another opportunity is to embrace redemption and restoration. Sin is tragic and unwarranted. There is no excuse for it and we are fully responsible to **not** sin (1 Cor. 10:13);¹¹ yet, when there is sin, God works with creative power to bring about good - this requires our cooperation. Are we available to be both uncompromising and yet appropriately compassionate with those who fail and sin?

Redemption is only possible when there is repentance. There can be no undoing of the sin until the sin stops! To miss this step is to gloss over sin and to find ourselves at work against God. Do we understand repentance? No simple, "I'm sorry" will do, rather there must be a thorough searching of the heart and life that leads to true ongoing change and transformation.

All of this raises the concern for church discipline and many are the practical and difficult matters accompanying any church discipline policy. Gordon Fee offers some helpful guidelines from this text which I would like to reproduce here, in part.¹²

- "...in this text church discipline is not the affair of one or a few." Because the scope of the sin took in the whole church and impacted the whole church, then the whole church necessarily was involved. In other words, the scope of the sin must have something to do with the kind of actions taken here and by whom.
- "...the ultimate reason for such discipline is remedial, not judgmental." While this goes without saying, the rush to judgment and the capability of harsh, critical actions against other Christians (shoot the wounded) means we must continually seek for God's heart and mind in all matters of this sort. Paul's injunction to the Galatians in Gal. 6:1 is the preparatory step and the ongoing posture: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted." NAU
- "...according to the rest of the passage, the problem was truly affecting the life of the whole community. Probably discipline of this kind should be reserved for such 'contaminating' sins." Here Fee shows how why this action was so drastic; the danger this unrepentant person posed to the whole was real and potentially lethal.¹³

What about judging? Fee summarizes, "The Pauline principle is simple: Free association outside the church, precisely because God, not the church judges those on the outside; but strict discipline within the church, because in its free association with the world it may not take on the character of the world in which it freely lives."¹⁴ Here is the ongoing tension the church as God's "saints," holy people, have always experienced in a fallen and sinful world.

Final Thoughts

In the end, the heart is the heart of the matter. No wonder Paul says we should "look to ourselves" in these things (Gal. 6:1)! It is out of our love for Jesus that we will truly hate sin the way He does and it is out of our love for Jesus (because of the mercy shown us), that we will be quick to show mercy to others. But we must be clear: unless there is true repentance, if sin is persisted in (like at Corinth), there must be an uncompromising tough love toward sin, herein lies the hope of restoration.

OK to Judge?

Hopefully, this has brought some clarity to the “judge not” mantra. Judge we must (1 Cor. 5:9-13), BUT only with the right heart and posture as outlined in Gal. 6:1, Matt. 7:1-5, etc. A judgmental heart and attitude expressed in gossiping, speaking from offense, criticalness and “back-biting” are of the very opposite spirit (Spirit!) from what Paul suggests in this passage.

We must take more seriously the implications of our actions toward the body of believers of which we are a part. Our lives impact them and unrepentant persisted sin has the power to tear apart and destroy God’s work (1 Cor. 3:16-17).¹⁵

NEXT? Part 3: “Brother, I’ll see you in court!” Really? How should we deal with one another in so called “secular” matters? What does our faith look like in the public arena? 1 Cor. 6:1-11.

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¹ I have quoted the New American Standard Update because it is a more “literal” translation and avoids some of the interpretive decisions of other versions.

² The Corinthians would have thought nothing out of order to be involved in many behaviors that we, because of our Biblical background, consider immoral.

³ Perhaps an equivalent today would be child sexual abuse which among even non-Christians is considered unacceptable.

⁴ Throughout the letter, we see a “problem-solution” format. Paul presents the problem as it has come to his attention and then offers the solution in the form of a principle followed by an imperative/command. In other words, he tells them why they are wrong and then what must be done about it. For more on the structure and overview of Corinthians, see Fee and Stuart, *How To Read the Bible Book by Book*.

⁵ Jesus intent in Matt. 7:1-5 seems directed toward interpersonal relationships *among* believers and Jesus’ criteria for working through these kinds of issues. The “judging” of Matt 7:1-5 is about an individual’s attitude of judgment toward another believer. Jesus’ words could prepare the Corinthians in their own hearts to deal rightly, but the issue at Corinth is bigger than a bad attitude or personal offence. Fee captures the difference between Jesus’ words and the situation at Corinth, “This (Corinth) is dealing with persistent wrongdoing of a kind wherein someone wants to have it both ways, to belong to the Christian community without leaving his/her former behavior behind. Such persistence demands discipline for the sake of both the person involved and the community.” Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 228.

⁶ Thus, showing the power of sin to undo the good that God is about; the leaven if left intact and not removed will inevitably and eventually sour the whole loaf.

⁷ I am indebted to Gordon Fee’s commentary for this discussion, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; he shows the grammatical options and discusses what others have thought about this difficult passage.

⁸ In a separate later situation at Corinth, when and where the person truly repents, Paul implores them to forgive and embrace the now forgiven offender (2 Cor. 2:5-8).

⁹ The NT seems to picture the world as consisting of two warring realms, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. To enter God’s kingdom is come under His rule and enjoy all of the benefits that this entails; to leave the kingdom of darkness is to escape its dominion and all the negatives associated with it. 1 John 5:18-19 is helpful. This, of course, does not mean that we are not impacted by a world dominated by spiritual darkness. That seems to be Paul’s point in “putting the unrepentant man out”: to be thrust out into that dark realm again without the resources and power of God is a terrifying prospect and would hopefully cause the unrepentant to reconsider, repent and return home.

¹⁰ Of course, they couldn’t do that in Corinth; this would have been a “church-wide” action, applying to all of the house churches in the city. Perhaps we can learn something about how this should apply to us – what would that look like if someone leaves our church for another while continue to practice sin?

¹¹ Some of you just fell off your chair (or fell off the past dogma you were taught). The Bible seems clear – sin is not inevitable, part of God’s plan or what He wants/wills. Read 1 John again, if you doubt. While Scripture does not advocate “sinless perfection,” nor does it allow for “sinning in thought word and deed every day.” Read Gal. 6:1 carefully, “IF anyone...” More in Part 3.

¹² See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 213-214.

¹³ If we balk at this, then we have yet to see the serious implications/consequences of sin to God, other believers and a watching world.

¹⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 227.

¹⁵ In 1 Cor. 3:16-17 the “you” is plural, meaning “you believers *together* are God’s temple/sanctuary.” Sin tears down this “residence where God lives” which is us, *together*. In a city filled with temples, the Corinthians would

have heard this message clearly – “you together are the place where God dwells and is seen; what you do, how you behave matters.”