

Study 6: 1st Corinthians Chapter 5

Introduction

Chapter 5 marks a turning point in the letter. Paul turns from one immaturity issue (marked by their factionalism) to some of the moral issues that have invaded the church. Dealing with the issues caused Paul much heartache (2:2:4), and he anguished over the letter as he gave instruction concerning the Corinthians.

Body of the Study

Paul's view of the crime

The treatment for the crime

How is the discipline administered?

What about those outside the church?

What things do we need to take action over?

How does Paul use the leaven example?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *What judgements does this chapter require that we make of others?*
- *How extensively should we implement discipline in the local congregation? Should we dis-fellowship everyone who sins?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 6 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 6: Chapter 5

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Paul's view of the crime

Paul is quite confrontational as he brings out the issue here. That is not to say that this should be the *normal* approach to handling such issues. We need to note the circumstances that Paul is about to present to them.

1. The issue was a moral issue, and not like the circumstances that he had discussed in Romans 14. There was a right and a wrong here! The action that Paul calls for in the chapter (dis-fellowshipping the man) is specifically to be applied in circumstances of morality. That does not mean that any other type of sin is acceptable to God – for it is not – for we have all sinned, and we continue to sin even though we are christians. Morality (immorality) issues cannot be tolerated in the church.
2. The issue was common knowledge. The context would suggest that whilst it was widely known in the church, it was also widely known in the community. The *reputation* of the church would suffer as a result, and the christians would be regarded by the people in the community as hypocrites.
3. Even the worldly Gentiles would not accept such a predicament. The Gentiles that Paul is specifically referring to here are the Romans, for the Greeks would have no problem accepting a marriage between a woman and her stepson.¹ To the Jews, such a relationship was specifically forbidden by Lev 18:7-8.
4. They were proud and boasting about it. It is enough that we commit sin, but we should *never* boast about it. Paul says that the only thing that he boasts about is the salvation that we have through the Christ (1:1:31; Gal 6:14;). Not only was there a man in the congregation who was in such a relationship, but the members of the congregation knew it, accepted it, and either boasted about it or accepted the boasting about it by the man. Whew!

Clearly, this is an example of the world having invaded the church. But more than just the immorality that was going on around them in the city invading the church, they had taken it to new heights!

The question arises as to whether the case of sexual immorality was in fact a marriage relationship between those involved, or whether the stepson was just in a *living together* (fornication) relationship. Paul's criticism is twofold – once for the act itself, and secondly for the acceptance of it amongst the brethren. Consequently, the brethren must have known that it was wrong and would not be accepted by the community at large. This would suggest that there wasn't a *marriage* (as such) by rather an illicit relationship going on. We are not told, but the father may have died, or divorced his wife, or alternately there was an open sexual relationship going on that involved all three of them. The woman is not mentioned at all, which would suggest that she was not a christian (or else she would have had to have had the same treatment given to her as the man involved). Paul's disgust with the situation, and his statement that the Gentiles wouldn't involve themselves in such, would suggest that the relationship was towards the more extreme end.

¹ Ramsay, William: Historical Commentary on First Corinthians, Chapter 11; ISBN 0-8254-3637-0
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The treatment for the crime

Rather than treating it as a crime and punishment, Paul treats it as a problem requiring treatment. “...*Such a one is to be delivered to Satan...*” (1:5:5). The reason, Paul says, is to save his spirit, even if it means the destruction of his flesh. The term “destruction of the flesh” should not be taken literally. What Paul is saying is that there might be some short term pain during the punishment, but it will be for the long term spiritual good.

The real issue is this: One cannot continue a life characterised by sin, and still be a member of God’s church. You have to make a choice. Either you are with God, and numbered with the Christians, or you are with Satan. The act of dis-fellowshipping is to force the decision.

Notice the wording that Paul uses as he instructs them in the action that they are to take:

“... ⁴ *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,* ⁵ *hand this man over to Satan, ...*” (1:5:4 NIV)

This was a specific act that the assembled church was to take. Jesus describes it (and the “counselling” action that needed to come before it) in Matt 18

“... ^{MT 18:15} *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector...”* (Matt 18:15-17 NIV)

Such immorality (and particularly the tolerance of it) will spread throughout the church if it is not stopped “...*purge out the leaven...a little leaven infects the whole lump...*” (1:5:6-7)

How is the discipline administered?

Paul has already said that it is to be taken before the assembled church, but what then? Other than a verbal warning and an embarrassment, what else is to happen? He gives us the answer.

“...*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...*” (1:5:11 NIV)

We must cut off the social contact that we have with such a person. Not even so much as to eat with them. They are to be treated as we might an *unclean* person, but we are still to regard them as a brother (2 Thess 3:14-15).

This raises an obvious question, as to how members of a family are to deal with such a person when they are all in the church? The answer is equally obvious when we understand that the disciplinary action is to *force a choice* – either quit the sin, or quit the church – you cannot do both. The discipline isn’t designed to put people out of their family (although there are some families who have actively cut-off some of their members because of their unacceptable behaviour – that is their prerogative, but it isn’t what Paul is talking about here).

The New Testament church weren’t just together on Sundays for worship, but had a lot of social interaction together (Acts 2:46, 4:32, 6:1). It was a *community*. People could not be regarded and accepted as members of the community if they were living a life of sin. The distinction between family members and community (church) members is fairly obvious, if not always clear cut.

“This action of the congregation has no impact on the sinner’s own relationship with God; it merely acknowledges that a change of relationship has already occurred and enjoins the individual member to act accordingly. In this case, the man’s well-known actions are *prima facie* evidence that he is not in fellowship with God, for fornicators have no inheritance in the kingdom

of God (1 Cor 6:9-11). There is, therefore, no basis for the extension of spiritual fellowship by other Christians to him.”²

What about those outside the church?

If we are not to keep company with sexually immoral people, then does that mean that we should avoid having interactions (and eating) with people like that in from outside the church? An obvious question that anyone would ask, if they didn't understand the reason for the action as a disciplinary one.

Paul had already instructed them (in the lost letter) not to associate with sexually immoral people (1:5:9). The Corinthians had totally ignored the instruction that Paul had given them, and hence the situation where he needs to write them a letter of stern rebuke.

The clear instruction that Paul gives is that he was “...*certainly not talking about the immoral people from outside of the church...*” if that were the case, “...*then you would have to go outside of the world...*” (1:5:10).

The world is full (and especially so in Corinth) of the types of people that Paul mentions here – sexually immoral – covetous – extortioners – idol worshippers – and to avoid them would mean living a life of isolation from the world. There are some religious groups who practice such things, but that was not the example that we have of the New Testament church. The NT church was interacting with the community at large, and trying to convert them and bring them to Christ.

But when we see things turn around and have the world invade the church, then things need to be corrected.

What things do we need to take action over?

Paul begins with a direct comparison of the things that he has listed against the worldly people – fornicators (sexually immoral) – covetous – idol worshippers – extortioners – but he then adds a couple of other things – revilers (slanderers) and drunkards.

There are several lists of *vices* in Paul's letters. Why does Paul here only list six (specifically) that would demand that the person be dis-fellowshipped? Does that mean that we don't need to take action over a brother who is openly and actively involved in another sin (for example lying)?

We do need to note that sin is sin, and no sin is acceptable to God. There are a couple of principles that we can glean out of this:

1. The man was openly involved in sin that he knew was wrong, was recognised by society as wrong, was recognised by the church as wrong, and yet he was not doing anything to stop. He was un-repentant about the sin. When a person is openly and un-repentantly involved in sin, then the church needs to act. The discipline needs to follow the counselling that Jesus discussed in Mt 18. Dis-fellowshipping is not the first step in discipline – it is the last!
2. The types of sin that Paul discusses here are moral sins. They cut to the heart of the man – who he is on the inside. And that is the real issue. How can a person who has changed his heart and been transformed by the renewing of his mind (Rom 12:1) do openly and unrepentantly the things that Paul describes here? That is not to say that other sins are tolerable, but many of them are the battles that we have to deal with throughout our lives.

² Jonas, James M: “Clean Out the Old Leaven” Florida College Lectures 1996, p 108
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

How does Paul use the leaven example?

A baker uses leaven (yeast) to make the bread rise. It causes gas in the bread which creates all the air holes that make the bread fluffy, and the cakes light.

The Law of Moses was laden with purification rites, which were to show that the Jews were a distinctive and sanctified people. The penalties for defiling things was harsh (for example, Paul was about to be stoned to death because the Jews thought that he had defiled the Temple by bringing a Gentile into it – Acts 21:27-31). The Jews were commanded to remove all of the leaven from their houses and their land before the feast of Passover (Ex 12:15). This ritual did not just get rid of most of it, but they systematically and thoroughly purged their houses so that they were clean.

The message is that they (as a community of Christians) were to be clean from sin in just the same way as the Jews would be free from leaven at Passover time. You don't need much sin before it spreads throughout the whole lump of dough. The Passover example is further brought out, as Christ has become the ultimate fulfilment of the Passover – as the antitype of it – when He was killed for us on the cross.

Paul further calls for purity, by pressing the leaven example further, that we should cast off malice and wickedness for the purity of sincerity and truth.

In exactly the same way then, the leaven – the sin that was in the church in Corinth – the incestuous man – was to be purged out so that the church would be pure, lest the sin infect the rest of the congregation as they became hard in their hearts to it (which apparently they had, or were becoming so, since they were accepting of it).