



1 Corinthians - Chapter Five

Summary of Chapter Five

This brief chapter deals with a specific instance of gross sexual immorality that Paul clearly states must be dealt with. However, Paul's tone tends to support the suggestion that lax morality and acceptance of such practice by arrogant leaders was rife. He admonishes those in the church for not making a stance against such behaviour for, by not doing so, they are seen to be condoning it.

Chapter five commences the exploration of two key questions in Paul's mind:

1. Where are the lines of morality and behaviour to be drawn, and how do we know?
2. What kind of discipline is appropriate in cases of severe misbehaviour?

III. 1 Corinthians 5:1-6:20 - A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling

Paul has heard not only of disunity in the Corinthian church but also of a bizarre case of sexual misconduct (5:1-13), of believers taking other believers before pagan courts (6:1-11), and of sexual immorality with prostitutes (6:12-20). In answer to these problems, Paul instructs the Corinthians on the meaning of Christian holiness and the significance of the final day.

III.a 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 - Incest, arrogance, and the need for discipline

Paul first tells the Corinthians that God has set certain boundaries to mark out his people as his own. The Corinthians need to maintain these boundaries by disciplining a man in their church involved in incest.

III.a.i 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 - Sexual Immorality Defiles the Church

Paul condemns an act of indecency that he has heard has been undertaken by a member of the church. He teaches that, by allowing such behaviour to go unpunished, the whole congregation is in danger as the sin will spread throughout the church like leaven in a batch of dough.

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife.

1 Corinthians 5:1

It is actually reported. The source of the information was probably Chloe's people: <<*For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters*>> (1 Corinthians 1:11).

Not found even among pagans. Greek and Roman society in the 1st Century may have seemed to have few moral values when it came to sexuality and sexual practice. Corinth, as a sea port, was rife with prostitution, and pagan temple worship often included sexual activities. However, there were moral boundaries within society itself and those who crossed those boundaries would do so at their own peril. Hence Paul's horror in this passage: the church in Corinth was openly tolerating a situation that no self-respecting pagan would have permitted.

Is living with his father's wife does not refer to his biological mother but his stepmother; otherwise Paul would have explicitly said so. Leviticus 18:8 <<*You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father*>> specifically forbids sexual relations between a man and his father's wife. God's people are to be distinguished from surrounding nations by following God's law rather than the customs of those nations: <<*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the Lord your God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 18:1-5). Ironically, the Corinthian Christians were more tolerant of flagrant sin, especially sexual immorality, than were the pagans among whom they lived.

Even before the law was given, the consequences for sleeping with a father's wife or concubine were dire for it was considered outrageous. This was the case with Jacob's eldest son Reuben, who slept with Bilhah, the mother of two of his brothers - Dan and Naphtali: <<*While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve*>> (Genesis 35:22). By doing so he would lose his right of inheritance as the first born son of Jacob: <<*Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigour, excelling in rank and excelling in power. Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up on to your father's bed; then you defiled it – you went up on to my couch!*>> (Genesis 49:3-4).

² And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you?

1 Corinthians 5:2

You are arrogant! Paul goes on to criticise their boasting in v.6. The arrogance may have arisen from the Corinthians' mistaken 'knowledge' that they are somehow free of normal moral constraints, something Paul refutes: <<'All things are lawful for me', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be dominated by anything>> (1 Corinthians 6:12), <<Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up>> (1 Corinthians 8:1), and: <<'All things are lawful', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful', but not all things build up>> (1 Corinthians 10:23). If so, they may have thought of this freedom as an implication of grace: <<And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), 'Let us do evil so that good may come'? Their condemnation is deserved!>> (Romans 3:8), <<What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?>> (Romans 6:1-2), <<What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!>> (Romans 6:15), and: <<For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ>> (Jude 4). It is also possible that Paul simply thinks of their characteristic arrogance: <<So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours>> (1 Corinthians 3:21), <<I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, 'Nothing beyond what is written', so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!>> (1 Corinthians 4:6-8), and: <<But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power>> (1 Corinthians 4:18-19), as doubly inappropriate in light of the shocking sin in their midst.

Rather have mourned would seem to indicate both a sadness at the sinful act that had been committed and the spiritual death of the perpetrator as he was removed from the community of believers.

Removed from among you indicates that the church had some sort of regulation as to who could participate in gatherings, with leaders having both the right and responsibility to exclude individuals whose behaviour and presence would be damaging to the community as a whole.

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

1 Corinthians 5:3-4

I am present in spirit, which is also translated as ‘my spirit is present’. This is a difficult phrase that probably means that the disciplinary power of the Holy Spirit, which Paul knew to be present in his own ministry, would also be manifested in their meeting, because of the Corinthian church’s connection with Paul. The apostle makes similar references to other churches: <<*For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ*>> (Colossians 2:5), and: <<*As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person, not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus. Paul is here inferring that the Holy Spirit within him is the same Spirit that is with them during their meetings and therefore there is a bond between them, even though he is absent. This is an indication of the spiritual unity that exists between believers even when they are physically apart.

⁵ you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:5

Hand this man over to Satan probably refers to removing him from the church, since those outside of the church are in Satan’s realm: <<*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please*>> (Luke 4:5-6), <<*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient*>> (Ephesians 2:1-2), and: <<*We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one*>> (1 John 5:19).

Destruction of the flesh. Although it is certainly not always the case: <<*As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him*>> (John 9:1-3), personal sin sometimes has grave physical consequences, as seen in the account of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, and certainly alluded to by Paul: <<*For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died*>> (1 Corinthians 11:29-30).

His spirit may be saved. The purpose of the discipline was not to punish the man for punishment’s sake but to effect his restoration to the church and the eventual salvation of the individual: <<*By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith; among them are Hymenæus and Alexander, whom I have turned over to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme*>> (1 Timothy 1:19b-20).

The day of the Lord is again a reference to the time when Jesus will return to judge both the church and those who have not believed in him.

This has nothing to do with going back on 'justification by faith'. As will become clear over the next two chapters, Paul knows that the fellowship of all who believe in Jesus as Christ and Lord can be badly damaged by behaviour which does not acknowledge him as such. In the present case, the offender will still be saved, but, like the person who has 'built' with the wrong material in chapter 3:10-15, this salvation, which will be given on the day of the Lord, will only be accomplished the other side of judgment on the present behaviour.

⁶ Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

1 Corinthians 5:6-7

Your boasting is not a good thing. Paul again attacks their arrogance as he has from the beginning of the letter. The Lord's brother goes further for he sees such behaviour as evil: <<*As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil*>> (James 4:16).

Clean out the old yeast is a euphemism for expulsion from the church as with the man caught in sexual immorality in the opening verses. This shows how seriously Paul takes the problem of immorality within a Christian congregation. In fact, he views any unrepented sin to be like a cancer that will quickly spread and destroy the body if it is not completely cut out at the earliest opportunity.

Yeast was uncommon in the ancient world and this should probably be translated as leaven, i.e. fermented dough, a little of which would be left from the previous week to be added to a new batch of dough. By analogy, when publicly known sin in the church is not subjected to church discipline, it will silently spread its destructive consequences throughout the whole fellowship: <<*A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough*>> (Galatians 5:9). Jesus had warned of the misleading teaching of Jewish leaders and the way that it could spread false practices and beliefs: <<*Jesus said to them, 'Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees'*>> (Matthew 16:6).

Some people in the church have mistakenly taken this to mean that raised bread cannot be used for the Lord's Supper, since he only broke and gave unleavened bread. God had ordained that the Hebrews should only make provision for unleavened bread during their hasty Exodus from Egypt, mainly because it was easier to make, quicker to cook and lighter to carry. The reason for Jesus breaking unleavened bread was simply that he was observing the statutes for the Passover meal.

For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. The Paschal Lamb was either a young goat or sheep that was sacrificed and eaten as the main part of the Passover meal: <<*Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb'*>> (Exodus 12:21), and: <<*On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb*

is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?'>> (Mark 14:12). In Egypt its blood was then painted on the door frame so that the Angel of Death would pass over that house and the occupants would remain unharmed. Refer also to the comments made on v.8.

⁸ Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1 Corinthians 5:8

Let us celebrate the festival. This is a reference to Jewish custom of celebrating the great festivals of God, especially the Passover that marked the birth of the Jewish nation and is now recognised as the birth of a new nation when Jesus became the Paschal lamb at the final Passover meal: <<*You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish*>> (1 Peter 1:18-19), which was an act of deliverance for all of mankind.

The ordinance from God was that his people should remove all leaven or yeast from their houses and eat only unleavened bread throughout the festival. Paul uses the analogy of yeast to represent sin, hence the phrase the yeast of malice and evil. This was something rife in the pagan world and also something that believers could easily be enticed back into if they were not watchful.

Since unleavened bread was broken by Jesus at the Last Supper, Paul can use the analogy well in referring to it as the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Paul could just as easily spoken of purity or holiness. In fact, the word used by Paul for sincerity actually means 'purity of motive'. The words also imply that at the heart of all impurity is a lie and believers are called to live according to truth: <<*Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'*>> (John 18:37).

III.a.ii 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 - Sexual Immorality Must Be Judged

Having identified the sin and its consequences, Paul now states quite clearly the actions that the church must take against the perpetrators of such sin. In order to protect the church and the reputation of the Gospel, those who commit such sins and remain unrepentant must be removed from the fellowship.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons — ¹⁰ not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world.

1 Corinthians 5:9-10

My letter refers to an otherwise unknown letter to the Corinthians, written prior to 1 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians there is an indication that a fourth letter was

also written to them by Paul. This first letter had clearly been misinterpreted in Corinth to indicate they should remove themselves from their local communities. Paul goes on to correct their misperception.

Had all four letters survived and been included in the canon of Scripture then what is now 1 Corinthians would have been 2 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians would have been 4 Corinthians.

Not to associate with sexually immoral persons is a reference to those within the church who are living immorally and does not apply to anyone outside of the faith. Paul goes on to say you would then need to go out of the world or live in isolation, which some people have done. Such isolation would then nullify the effect of living a godly life through Christ that is meant to be viewed by unbelievers as a pattern or model for them to seek and follow. This can only occur by believers actively engaging in the societies and communities they find themselves in.

¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one.

1 Corinthians 5:11

Not to associate with anyone is also addressed in: <<Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us>> (2 Thessalonians 3:6), and: <<Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed>> (2 Thessalonians 3:14). One purpose here, as in 2 Thessalonians, is redemptive with respect to the person committing the sin (v.5), and: <<Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers>> (2 Thessalonians 3:15). But another purpose is to avoid giving the appearance of approval of sinful conduct lest reproach be brought on the church and the Gospel.

¹² For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? ¹³ God will judge those outside. 'Drive out the wicked person from among you.'

1 Corinthians 5:12-13

For what have I to do with judging those outside? Paul does not feel it is his role to make judgements on those that have not been enlightened, for it is God who will judge those outside. However, for those who have received the Holy Spirit and understand the power of Christ, that is, those who are inside the church, it is those whom Paul is able to pass judgement on as their apostle. This is not judgement on their salvation and rewards but on their lifestyle choices. Jesus makes a clear distinction on the ability of believers and unbelievers to comprehend his message: <<And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables>> (Mark 4:11).

Since Paul is speaking of the responsibility of leaders to make disciplinary judgements on sinful behaviour, his teaching here does not contradict that of Jesus, who was addressing believers generally: *<<Do not judge, so that you may not be judged>>* (Matthew 7:1).

Drive out the wicked person from among you. As the newly constituted people of God: *<<Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God>>* (1 Corinthians 10:32), the Corinthians are to follow God's instructions to Israel for preserving its holiness when flagrant, unrepented sin is in its midst: *<<But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God – who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery – to turn you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst>>* (Deuteronomy 13:5), *<<The hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty, and afterwards the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst>>* (Deuteronomy 17:7), *<<then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst>>* (Deuteronomy 19:19), *<<Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid>>* (Deuteronomy 21:21), *<<If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbour's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst>>* (Deuteronomy 22:20-24), *<<If someone is caught kidnapping another Israelite, enslaving or selling the Israelite, then that kidnapper shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst>>* (Deuteronomy 24:7), and: *<<Now then, hand over those scoundrels in Gibeah, so that we may put them to death, and purge the evil from Israel.' But the Benjaminites would not listen to their kinsfolk, the Israelites>>* (Judges 20:13). In this case, they are to do so by excommunicating the man committing incest.