

1 CORINTHIANS 5

Leaven In The Church

INTRO: the opening phrase of this chapter, “it is actually reported” reminds us of Paul’s statement in 1.11, “I have been informed... by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you.” Having addressed their divisiveness, Paul now moves on to another matter that had been reported to him. However, there is a common thread that ties both issues together: the Corinthians’ pride and arrogance. Their pride had led them to rely on worldly wisdom rather than accepting the foolishness of God (2.14). Their pride had led some to reject Paul’s words and his work as God’s servant (4.18). Now, their pride was resulting in not only the toleration of, but the boasting of sin in their midst (5.2,6).

This chapter addresses the matter of sinners in the church. While we will look at the matter of “church discipline”, it is important to note that this is not Paul’s primary concern. In fact, you will note that Paul has nothing to say to the sinner. Paul’s main concern is the attitude of the church, their arrogance (vs. 2) and boasting (vs. 6). Thus, Paul addresses the attitude knowing proper action will result from proper thinking.

A final note that may explain Paul’s apparent lack of concern for the sinner and his harsh rebuke of the congregation. In vs. 9 Paul references a previous letter he had written to them, one that exhorted them to not “associate with immoral people.” It seems likely that this was not the first time Paul had addressed this situation in the church. Not only had the sinner not repented, but the church had done nothing about it! So, Paul addresses the matter again, focusing on the church’s attitude and lack of action.

VSS. 1-2, TWO SINS DESCRIBED

1. The immoral man (vs. 1).

- » Important note for users of the NASB, the Greek word translated as “immorality” is

porneia and specifically refers to immorality that is sexual in nature. Thus, the ESV, NIV, and NKJV all translate it as “sexual immorality” while the KJV uses the term “fornication”

- » Paul will further address the matter of sexual immorality in 6.12-20, but the sin addressed in chapter 5 is particularly shocking: a man is sleeping with his father’s wife! (Note: not his mother).
 - » Such behavior was specifically forbidden to God’s people in the Old Testament (see Lev. 18.8; 20.11), but it was also unheard of among the Gentiles! Cicero once remarked regarding the case of a woman marrying her son-in-law, “Oh! to think of the woman’s sin, unbelievable, unheard of in all experience save for this single instance!” (Loeb, I, 237).
- #### 2. The Immoral Church:
- » The church should have mourned over this sinful behavior. Such godly sorrow would have moved them to action, first by rebuking the sinner and seeking his repentance, but when that failed the sinner should have been removed from their midst.
 - » Sadly, this church had “become arrogant” and even boasted (vs. 6) in the matter. As hard as it is for us to imagine, it would seem that some in the Corinthian church were not simply tolerating sin in their midst, they were boasting of it!
 - As we will note in chapters 6 & 10, it would seem that a popular Corinthian slogan was “all things are lawful for me,” (see 6.12; 10.23). They had perverted the doctrine of freedom in Christ to one of justification for all manner of sin.
 - The pride and arrogance of the Corinthian saints is a recurring theme, show-

ing their attitude as being the root of their problems (see 4.6-7).

- “Whatever the actual relationship of their pride to the incest, it has blinded them both to the fallen brother’s true condition and to their own.” (Gordon Fee)

VSS. 3-5, NECESSARY ACTION

1. Paul was not there in body, but he knew exactly what should be done. Some have taken the expression “present in spirit” to mean Paul was in their assemblies in some “out of body” way. If that were true, why did he need to hear reports from Chloe’s house? It seems best to me that Paul was referencing the words he was giving them, the instructions that they should carry out. As another has put it, “Paul’s unseen directing influence,” (Exegetical Greek New Testament).
2. What they should do was straightforward. When they came together in the Lord’s name (so the ESV and NIV read), that is under His authority, following the directions of Paul (as delivered through the Spirit) they should “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.”
 - » Delivering him over to Satan would be to remove him from the fellowship of believers, the church, the realm of our Lord.
 - » “for the destruction of his flesh” is not the idea of physical punishment. Rather, as Paul often does he contrasts the flesh and spirit as the driving force of an individual (see 2.14-15). The goal of this discipline was that the sinner’s fleshly desires would be defeated.
 - » And once those fleshly desires were defeated, his spirit would be saved!

VSS. 6-8, THE THEOLOGICAL REASONING

1. Their boasting had to end, otherwise they would all be in peril. Because a “little leaven leavens the whole lump.” Paul could have

meant this in two ways: a) the sinner if not removed would lead others to sin similarly, b) their boasting in this matter would result in more evil coming into their own lives.

2. This section invokes the imagery of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Exodus 12.14ff). According to the Law, God’s people were to remove all leaven from their houses on the 1st day of the Feast, the same day that the Passover Lamb was slain (see Exodus 12.15). Paul’s point was that Christ, our Passover lamb, had already been slain, so why had the leaven not been removed?
3. Furthermore, the Feast of Unleavened Bread continued throughout the week following Passover. Paul applies this feast to our lives in Christ. The Feast was to be one of thankfulness and remembrance for God’s deliverance (see Exodus 12.17). So, the Corinthians should be celebrating with truth and sincerity, rather than the malice and wickedness that currently typified their relationship to God.
4. One lesson that cannot be ignored in this passage: the Lord’s church is to be typified by holy behavior! “The Christian church is not just the old society patched up. It is radically new (2 Cor. 5:17).” (Leon Morris in the Tyndale commentary)

VSS. 9-13, THE CHRISTIAN’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE IMMORAL

1. Paul concludes these thoughts with a clarification of sorts. His teaching on not associating with immoral people was limited to members of the church, not the world in general.
2. Note: Paul was not saying we should have no concerns with who we associate in the world. He will teach in other places that worldly companions can have a very bad affect on believers (see 15.33; 2Cor. 6.14-18).
3. But a Christian does have a role in “judging” the behavior of those in Christ. Other passages regarding judging others apply, so hypocritical judging is still condemned, but immoral behavior must be pointed out, repentance

must be urged and if that fails, fellowship must cease.

4. Application: it is very easy to focus on the sinfulness of the world and ignore the sin in our midst. While we do not ignore what is going on outside (we are trying to snatch others from the fire, after all), the world will continue on its way. It will be judged by God. So will our brethren, but in the meantime we can aid those who are straying by pointing out sin and encouraging repentance. Even more radical measures, such as withdrawal of fellowship, are ultimately for the good of the brother if he will destroy his fleshly desires and return to the Lord.

A FEW NOTES REGARDING CHURCH DISCIPLINE:

1. Withdrawal of fellowship is not where the process starts! Church discipline is not a means of ridding ourselves of nuisances. Rather, Christians are actively encouraging, teaching and even rebuking each other (1Thess. 5.14; Matt. 18.15-17). However, when repentance has been encouraged, but not heeded, it will become necessary to cease fellowship with one who continues in sin (2Thess. 3.6-7, 14-15).
2. The goal is always the salvation of the one who has sinned (Matt. 18.15; 1Cor 5.5).
3. The purity of the church must be maintained! The church is comprised of saved individuals, those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Thus, our conduct is to be holy, we are to be a pure bride for Christ (2Cor. 11.2). Thus, we should each look to his own conduct, encourage holy conduct in others, and when necessary remove ourselves from those who persist in unholiness.